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Challenging Orthodoxies:
The Work of Faith Among Migrant Day Laborers in Orange County, CA

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In Anthropology

by

Timothy Hartshorn

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Leo R. Chavez, Chair
Associate Professor Angela C. Jenks
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2023

DEDICATION

To

Sarah Elizabeth Stanley

for not letting go

… *But, bless us, we didn't.*

(Mary Oliver)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We do not have our meanings alone. This dissertation carries more traces and currents of influence than I can hope to account for. Here are but a few notables.

To start, I would like to express my sincerest thanks to my Dissertation Committee Chair, Professor Leo Chavez. Professor Chavez's groundbreaking work on migrant labor, health, family, and citizenship (among other subjects), as well as immigration politics, media, and, most recently, emotions, has set the course for generations of young scholars, my own included. As a mentor, Professor Chavez has always been rigorous and open, willing to guide me along the winding path of a project that evolved, at turns, gradually and by sudden leaps. I cannot thank him enough for his patience and support, not to mention his generous expertise.

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To close, I thank my parents, Peter and Cristina, for their tireless dedication and support. I owe everything to them. When I was alone, when I felt like giving in, when I wasn't sure of where to go next, they were there for me—every step of the way. There is also the matter of the example they set for me, as intellectuals and citizens. As the child of strong social advocates, one a writer and the other, a scientist, I have found a middle course in Anthropology. I can only hope it has allowed me to make good on the wonderful example my parents continue to set for me. Finally, I thank my life partner, who has inspired me, encouraged me, and put up with me throughout this process. (Our lovely cat, Pepita, also took on this emotional burden.) Sarah, you're the best.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Challenging Orthodoxies:
The work of faith among migrant day laborers in Orange County, CA

By

Timothy Hartshorn

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

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Professor Leo R. Chavez, Chair

The following dissertation explores the intersections of religion and daily life among Latino migrant day laborers in Santa Ana, California. Drawing from three years of ethnographic fieldwork, including participant-observation and interviews, conducted in a retail parking lot, this study illuminates the struggle for faith among individuals denied traditional forms of economic, social, and institutional stability. The men on whom the dissertation focuses—migrants from Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador—must live and believe without steady employment, housing, familial networks, basic legal rights and, significantly, membership in churches. Their expressions of faith reveal a drive not merely for divine guidance, but for the foundational terms of faith itself.

For these migrant workers, faith is more than mere adherence to doctrine or passive acceptance of God's Word. It is a dynamic and precarious negotiation: a conversation both deeply personal and irreducibly social, practiced and disciplined amidst near total instability. The workers' narratives of faith—including the most rapturous and sublime experiences—reflect the empirical and deeply human realities of their terrestrial lives. These stories shed light on their identities as racialized migrants, as exploited workers, and as men. They touch on themes of family, history, memory, life, death, and mourning, all within the context of Southern California today.

The spiritual journeys of these laborers are grounded in Southern California's socio-historical landscape, itself unstable and prone to sudden shocks, shifts, and upheavals. Touching on the history of land, development, and culture in the region, coupled with insights into U.S.-Mexico border migration, this study gestures outward to macro-level phenomena through the particularities of lived experience.

"Challenging Orthodoxies" evokes both obstacle and action. It underscores the intricate ways in which faith, both social and personal, collective and euphoric, plays out in the lives of those to whom community and, in many cases, personhood are routinely denied. Highlighting the resilience, agency, and redemption of migrant day laborers as they found and find the paths of spiritual voice, the dissertation tracks the interplay between understanding and obscurity, discipline and prophecy, light and dark.

PRELUDE

"Experiments. The things that happen to me,
that's experiments. Life gives me experiments."

- Ismael Allende

It was in San Francisco that Ismael first felt sick in his heart. He felt the numbness in his arm. He felt his face turning white. His body was shaking for over a minute, he says. He is careful to note the length of each stage of his death.

"Fue menos de un minuto," he says, "I think maybe it was less than a minute, when I been walking there." His voice lowers with a measured, pensive urgency, receding into a pregnant pause. He holds out his hand with his palm facing downward and outward, as if to caution me, as if I might lose the rhythm, fall out of time with his speech. *Now, let me tell you.* Under the muted light, the skin of his knuckles looks sheer and bunched, like wet paper.

"And then," he flicks his wrist and waves his arm to the side, "I feel something pulling to me, man, and I don't see no more my body and then I saw only, far away, a very tiny light and everything dark."

We are sitting in his 1997 Volvo 850 and he is telling me the story of the time he lost his soul. In the cabin, the pine scent of an air freshener mixes with the musk of old clothes and weed. He looks through the windshield as he talks, staring at the BODY WORKS sign outside. It is dusk, and the garish purple of the building facade is offset by the darkening clouds above. The gym will be open for

another four hours, and the after-work crowd has begun to materialize: those who come straight from the job, who change from their suits to their sweats in their cars, or else strut to the lobby in their blouses, button-downs and slacks, shaking the office languor from their bones.

The days are growing longer. The late sun menaces, hinting at the dry months to come. It will be a short spring and a difficult summer. It is February 2020. He has felt tired lately, he told me a half hour earlier. He told me this as I was reviewing the questions I had prepared for our interview, dimly aware that the interview had already begun, the facts drifting in from odd corners.

He has felt sick but with no sore throat, no runny nose, no fever, he told me. The symptoms hit during a job in Victorville and have lingered for almost three weeks.

"I feel like on drugs," he told me. "I feel lazy, like I'm not gonna eat. I just want to sleep, I don' want do nothing, I feel very poor." The pills he bought from a *botánica* only made things worse, and he's since switched to tequila.

"The body needs alcohol," he said, "I drank, ah, tequila. And then I feel better. Like the virus don't grow up fast."

Tightening his beanie over the silver curls tucked behind his ears, he looks back to me now from the gym sign, glancing down at my notebook, then studying my face. He is roughly clean-shaven, his chin and neck dusted gray with stubble. He has hazel eyes and an aquiline nose and thin, pale cheeks. The others call him "la muñeca," and mutter that he is weird and a liar. But I have asked him to share.

I prompt him in my wooden Spanish and he answers in his wavering English. After the pinprick of light, he found himself surrounded by still, silent people, "people like zombies." This was two minutes. Then, a second tug, harder this time, and a yellow sky and beautiful joyous people and "trees with fruit, and the fruit grows fast, and falls down and grows fast again." This paradise lasted only a minute, half the time he had spent in hell. It ended with rapture.

"I don' know what it looks like," he searches for the word, "looks, looks like a wall… the people looks like, ah, they building like a *wall*, but with the rocks. Wall of rocks, man. Oh, it's amazing."

At the center of the wall, he says, was the sun, anchoring the yellow sky.

He smiles and shakes his head as he says this.

I will not understand.

I cannot understand.

What, then, to make of all this? The images would astound were I not accustomed to his visionary flair, the Blakean rigor with which he presented the odd or uncanny and deftly fitted it to his imaginative universe. We have spoken in this way about that moment before. He introduced his death into our first conversation, and into most conversations after. The theme of soul loss was more than a personal matter. It suited his occultist curiosity. One morning, while I was discussing a case of wage theft in Rancho Cucamonga with one of the other workers, he approached me with a suggestion for my project. If I installed cameras in hospital rooms, I could document the souls leaving the bodies of the dying. I mentioned that it might be tough to gain access. Whether to the souls or to the hospital, I didn't specify. He didn't ask.

Ismael went to the hospital in San Francisco, where the doctors could find nothing wrong. He had returned to life, it seemed, as quickly and confusingly as he had left it. The same cannot be said of his earthly travels, which remain unresolved.

"I wanted to learn English," he told me that same morning, after our exchange about the hospital rooms and departing souls, "to learn another people, to know different things… "

I asked if he wanted to return.

"Oh yeah," he had said. "I want to come back to my country, man."

I should say something about why I am here, in his car, why I am jotting down notes about the zombies and the trees with fruit and the mix of air freshener and weed. About why, and how, I have grown accustomed to these things. Suffice it to say that I am not after medical advice, nor am I in search of hidden psychic knowledge. My reasons for speaking to him are more obviously practical and maddeningly less pragmatic. Specifically, I speak to him in the service of a doctoral dissertation in Anthropology from the University of California, Irvine.

Originally, when starting out, I had envisioned a document structured by the staunchly empiricist triad of labor, land, and movement in Southern California. I had been struck by day laborers such as Ismael for the basic ironies their presence on the street seemed to typify—how overexposure will, for instance, lead to blindness, the heightened glare blowing out the details. The men could not have been more present, more visible, more public. Nor could they have been more obscure. They were obscure on *la esquina*, the corner. They were obscure in the kitchens and the gardens of the local bourgeoise. They were obscure, one told me, until they dared linger after a job, waiting for a ride, and suddenly there were eyes on them from every window, a police car crawling by three times in the space of 10 minutes. I wanted to learn something about the landscape in which such cognitive dissonance gained material traction, became a physical reality.

In the end, the irony proved a closed circle, a kind of rhetorical paralysis. The men, for the most part, agreed with me. They found little to add beyond the odd anecdote, offered more out of politeness than political zeal. I suppose I should have expected this. It doesn't take a Doctor of Philosophy to register the pain of a life so precarious, so unjust, nor to tease out its rudimentary patterns. It takes a certain kind of menace to keep asking.

What they did want to talk about was God, how He appears, how He sounds, how He fills the heart with warmth. It was Ismael who first encouraged me, through his curious example, to regard this fervor as something beyond mere coping; as less a response to certain tragic conditions than the

condition of response and tragedy *per se*. Reality persisted, but now as a matter of faith. By this I mean an "open-eyed" faith (to borrow a phrase from the philosopher Cora Diamond) in what is immanently real, in the stuff of meaning itself. "It strikes me," Ludwig Wittgenstein once noted, himself elaborating Søren Kierkegaard, "that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference… a way of living, or a way of assessing life." (Wittgenstein 1984, 64) Faith does not assume, in the first, a set of symbols to be read, but a fidelity to reading. Call it a style of reading, a method to be practiced and learned. ("Instruction in a religious faith" Wittgenstein continues, "would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience" (ibid.).) All that we need is before us.

The focus of the dissertation, then, gravitated toward an old philosophical chestnut, one so endlessly repeated that today it strikes the ear with the force of mantra or cliché. Call it "the struggle for faith," but with one (say, anthropological) condition: the struggle is not merely for God's Word, but for the terms of faith itself. This is a struggle for reality. I am less interested in God than in the conditions of God, the language of *Verbum* as it sounds at its loudest and clearest pitch. And this does have something to do with labor, land, and movement. It still says something about California.

Ismael came to California in 1990, when he was twenty-one years old. He first felt sick in his heart when he was twenty-two, just months after his crossing. He would later move to Seattle and then back down to the Golden State, specifically, to Santa Ana, where he lived out of his car. It was there that we met, while I was conducting fieldwork with a group of day laborers ("jornaleros," in Spanish) in a local retail parking lot. I had been visiting the site intermittently for months, memorizing the names and faces of regulars, the names of their parents and their children, of their home states in Mexico and their hometowns in Guatemala and El Salvador and of the foods they most missed, while

sharing certain features of my own life which they found compelling: that my mother is an immigrant, that I grew up on the opposite coast, where it snows in the winter and where the ocean is black-green and white and belches green spume, and that, in spite of my being a *güero*, I had worked with my hands for a living. I could talk about edging a road verge and deadheading a rosebush, about why a Toro ZTR runs better on hills than a Kubota. These things bemused them, coming from me.

Ismeal was rather less bemused when we first met, at a monthly "day laborer outreach" event I had been asked to lead by members of a local non-profit. The outreach program was a recent initiative by the organization, which had gained notoriety for its ritualistic "water drop" events, during which volunteers would plant full gallon jugs in the desert south of Route 94 for incoming crossers. The result of this initiative (something between "littering" and "abetting illegals" among its critics, "benevolence" and "revolution" for its admirers) had been an ongoing cold war with U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The jugs were often found emptied and smashed in. Sometimes, during those atmospheric stretches in the desert just before a storm or an earthquake, when everyone is put on edge, they were found riddled with bullet holes.

Day laborer outreach had proven less dramatic. In the parking lot, where ennui was as great a challenge as anything, the power and pain of the border seemed eerily distant. Death moved slow in this place, over years of crushing seasonal work that dried up as suddenly as it had flooded in. The morning I met Ismael was slow and sudden as any. It was December 7th, 2019. It was 8:00 AM. At my anxious direction, a group of sleep-deprived volunteers—most members of the "Chicanx Allianza" at a local community college, a few others fellow graduate students—passed out granola bars and bottled water to the men, smiling and asking how they had been, if there had been work, if there had been trouble. We passed out colored flyers for pro bono legal services, community health clinics, English classes at the civic center. We passed out wallet sized "Conoce Sus Derechos" cards. I was making for a nearby *frutero*, hoping to replenish our supply of oranges, when he intercepted me.

He needed a place to shower. "My skin feel like, like a itching," he said, flapping the bottom of his t-shirt. I suggested the Body Works. Another of the workers, also homeless, paid for a monthly pass to use the locker rooms and the Wi-Fi. I explained this to him and he nodded and smiled and did not pursue the issue further. My response was not the correct one, not answerable to his current arrangement, as cosmological, I would learn, as it was corporeal. He was a particular man, particular in these kinds of matters, in the ways that he cared for himself.

We exchanged introductions. The phrase "antropología cultural" elicited a look of vague recognition. He repeated the words after me, feeling their heavy, trochaic rhythm in his mouth. I knew the feeling, that odd pattern on the tongue.

"Porque creo que es, es muy importante," I concluded a rehearsed summary of my research, "que la gente entienda las luchas que ustedes soportan, los… los desafíos que enfrentan."

"Oh, yeah, man." He turned to me. "It's very difficult. And you gotta think about the, your health, you know, because I—" he stopped and leaned towards me, "I get sick in my heart. I still, now, sick in my heart and, and, when I come here?"

He placed his hand on my shoulder. "When I first come here, to this place? I die, man."

I showed him one of the flyers, for a local clinic. It was ten dollars for a check-up, twenty-five for vision and dental. Looking back, it seems an absurd response. But any response would have been absurd. I asked him what his symptoms were. He repeated that he had died.

For months after, I visited him, most often in the evenings, when he had returned from work. He would smoke a joint and we would sit at the edge of a mulch bed and talk about how to shingle a roof or strip drywall or the right way to install shower tiles, about his lonely childhood in Michoacán, about his sister still in México and his friends in San Francisco and the sickness in his heart. We would talk about his conversations with God.

"You have to, to keep the focus," he said, "then you start to hearing Him."

I nodded. “Voy a practicar.”

This, while maintaining an antipodal routine some nine miles south on Route 55, where the roads widen and ring around spotless lawns studded with groves of eucalyptus, palm, and evergreen. Ismael often worked this land, Mexican land, as did the other laborers, digging ditches, laying brick, resurfacing swimming pools. Today, the old ranches are gone, replaced by tract housing developments with names like “Elmwood Hills” and “Casa Pacifica.” Gated entrances line the boulevards for miles before giving way to the university campus, a rolling complex of brutalist towers and halls crowned by patches of strelitzias and fig trees and more eucalyptus. It is pleasant and pretty and an easy place to do good work and establish fresh habits. My habits were poor but I did good work, generally after midnight, over a glass of wine and with my laptop closed and an open book on my desk. I would read and pause to think about the men, who knew the Bible better than I did any of the volumes in my room (Augustine, Vico, Kierkegaard, Benjamin, and Wittgenstein, among other favorites), and who would be waking in just a few hours.

For four years, this is how it went. Days were spent waiting for nights. Otherwise, I floated in and out of silent, sterile rooms furnished with whiteboards and metal bookshelves backlit by the California sun, shifted in my chair to avoid cramping, offered thoughts on Karl Marx and Franz Boas when the silence grew unbearable. Merciful faculty and students, also troubled by the quiet and the calm, helped me arrange a clutter of grievances, obsessions, and conjectures into something called “my project.” It proved an awkward totem. I forced its odd edges into the tight sections of grant proposals, imagined showing it off to eminent scholars at conferences I never attended. Ismael, though racked by the issues to which I had committed myself—the flexible and fragmented geography (to speak in anthropologese) of Alta California, the fickle economy and fluid demands of informal day

labor—had little to say on these subjects. His priorities were stronger than mine. The essays that follow owe to the charity of his vision, which found in my wandering inqueries a space for genuine voice.

Call these essays "images of voice." The phrase is William Wordsworth's, more recently reclaimed by John Hollander (1981). At its most literal, it is an acute periphrasis of "echo." Brought into the thicket of modern rhetoric, the figure suggests a relationship between light and sound, space and time. For Hollander, the echo may sound louder than its source, just as the shadow may outstrip its object, becoming a "subject" in its own right. Language assumes a mournful quality, a spectral redemption. The life of voice, we might say, (borrowing an Emersonian theme from Stanley Cavell) is free to imagine death. This is voice's fate. It is voice's hope.

The essays that follow amount to a reading of this fate, this hope. How to read the echoes and shadows of God's Word as they sign in a moribund world? How to pass this reading on to another, who will pass it on to others still, and so forth? The image of voice turns or, to use the Greek, *tropes* against and toward the world, taking and giving of life.[i] At issue is less the substance of the turn—the converted message of revelation—than its conditions, the "internal relations" activated, like neural pathways, though changing circuitry. A crucifix for sale in a market invites a different way of seeing than, say, the image of La Virgen impressed on the tilma of St. Juan Diego at *la Basilica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe,* or the figure of Guadalupe emerging from the hollowed trunk of a Monterey cypress, as Gloria Anzaldúa once claimed to have witnessed.

By what power does Ismael turn? His peers? The God who blesses the street corned? My response proceeds in two parts. The first will, I hope, provide a more evocative attempt at what might be called "context" than those "theoretical" and "historical" background chapters common to most

ethnographies. It is a tour through pictures of meaning, grounds for understanding God, men, labor, death, California: contexts grating at the edges. It is a field of charged fragments, image-fragments of myth.

The second part lives in the space between the life of images and the writing of life: biography. I focus on the lives of three men, specifically. Two of these men, Abelardo and Edwin, count on the help of close friends (Héctor and Martín, respectively) to register the trace of the divine. The third man is Ismael, who keeps things to himself and God. Wandering the path of light in the dark, he dictates his steps alone.

I close with a standing gesture to the ground of the path itself, to its depth and durability, the death and life in its soil. I look, as I often do, to Wittgenstein, for whom meaning in this life so often amounts to a habit of turning through pictures, with scrupulous but gentle touch, testing the forms that flash across their objects. What matters is the "weight" of pictures: how they come to stand as the ground in which ideas "take root."[ii] There is gravity, sedimentation, stratigraphy. Certain pictures pivot on others—those, for instance, most precious to religion or science. A flock of birds overhead may signal a change in season or in fortune, depending on the *weltbild* for which it is recovered.

A friend of mine, helping me think through the problem of how we lay the ground of our own justifications, the deep grammar of our cultural life, reminded me of this: the power is in the process, the *grounding*. The grounds are alive and electric. The roots are not so deep as we think; they extend laterally, "wire themselves up underground," as Richard Powers writes in his modern epic, *The Overstory* ("There are brains down there, ones our own brains aren't shaped to see. Root plasticity, solving problems and making decisions. Fungal synapses" (2018, 453) The ideas have their own ideas: an elaborate and self-proliferating circuitry. As for the grounds themselves, they are unstable. The layered

rock will compact, erode, subduct. The tension between frames of reference is less ideological than tectonic. I spent four years with day laborers in Santa Ana, tapping the roots, gauging the tremors. I watched as these men found and lost their bearings across the shifting pressure, the haywire physics of the place. The "subterranean shocks" of images (as Walter Benjamin quotes Jacques Rivière in an essay on Baudelaire (1996, 320)) are as liable to bar expression as to give it life.[iii]

Cursed is the ground because of you; *through painful toil you will eat food from it.* Still, we have a trace of authority, a mandate to care and maintain. The grounds must be remade, redressed, returned. I have mentioned the turn of the trope. There is also the turn of the *verse,* from the Latin *vertere*, "to turn," and born of an archaic analogy to plowing, turning from one line in the soil to the next. The image of cultivation (which also has something to do with "culture")[iv] evokes the pain and repair of the turn. "Some must work in fields," writes Henry David Thoreau, "if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable-maker one day" (1996, 214). Little wonder that two concepts indigenous to cultural life—"conversion" and "conversation"—share a common etymology: *con*, meaning "with," and *vertere.*[v] The turn of the spade in the soil, like that of the trope, signals loss and redemption. It signals repetition and division; a process of picking up, putting down, moving on, moving the earth underfoot.

Say this. We're far gone from Eden. When I hit bedrock, and my spade is turned, I come up against my limits. I feel God in the metallic sting that runs the length of my arm. I can only till and toil so much. Through flood or freezing or penetrating roots, He will soften the hard earth when the time comes. The time has not yet come. So I project my life upon the grounds of my life, dig as far as I can; so I stop and wait. I let the Word mark me.

PART I:
OPTICS

> Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse–these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.
>
> - Walter Benjamin, *Passagen-werk* (2002, 460)

1.

The man in the painting has never posed before. You can see it. Perhaps at the suggestion of the artist, he has folded his arms across his stomach. His fingers are hidden under the rough, lively wrinkles of his sleeves. Two bulging brown thumbs stretch up from the crooks of his elbows to his armpits. His feet are subtly disproportionate, their size granting him the illusion of height. He looms over the viewer. He stares into the frame. He looks hesitant. He doesn't quite know how to look.

The stark, texturized brush strokes of the portrait collapse depth without sacrificing presence. This is the kind of thing an art critic would say. I think it is true. The blue, gray, and tan patches build out his polo shirt, the sinews of his forearms, his gently parted hair, the sagging jeans which collect at his ankles, hugging his massive boots. These features are resolutely *his*. There is a life, irreducible to paint or politics or God, at the heart of this. A man who is good with his hands, unused to being paid to keep still. I read the exhibit label.

John Sonsini (b. 1950)

Emiliano, 2017
Oil on canvas

John Sonsini began painting Los Angeles day laborers in 2001. A native of Rome, New York raised—as American felicity would have it—in an Italian household, he describes his Spanish as "poor" at that time, 20 years ago (today it is "in a terminal condition of 'improving'"). His first attempts at hiring new sitters on the street corners of Chinatown proved quixotic. "Very often fellas would return to my studio," he reflects in a recent interview, "thinking that they were going to help me paint a room" (Sonsini 2016, 13). He recalls introducing himself as an *artista* rather than a *pintor*, a habit which left groups of confused workers under the impression that he was some sort of song and dance man. Sonsini's humor regarding these early struggles (consonant with those of many young ethnographers in the field) is admirable. His temperament has been to his benefit. He has since painted hundreds of day laborers. His portraits have been exhibited at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, the Whitney, and the National Portrait Gallery. They feature in the permanent collections at the Broad, LACMA, the Smithsonian, the Guggenheim, Fundación AMMA in Mexico City, and, among other feathers in his cap, the Long Beach Museum of Art, where I first saw them.

That was in 2021, well after I had completed my official (by university standards) "fieldwork" and slowed my visits to the men at the parking lot. I found Sonsini's portraits uncanny for reasons beyond their familiar subject matter. The paintings confirmed what had been troubling me in recent months, what had disturbed both the editorial travail of reviewing notes and transcripts and the long walks I took to escape this self-imposed drudgery. What flickered at the edge of the page, what filtered through the leaves and the smog, was this: a luminous irony, an irony of Southern California. It was a figure I have come to know well, a trope of the dance of light; stark and diffuse. It has no origin. It is a substitute for origins, carrying a trace of darkness. The images that haunt the land and the people here are apt to seem both outsized and insufficient, to hint at the world they obscure

It is significant that Sonsini's growth into his characteristic style, like that of so many gay artists of his generation, entangled with the rise of photography into the stratum of high art. The male gaze could now be turned upon the male body to reveal glamour, playfulness, and nerve previously inhibited. Like most rebellions worth staging, this was a matter less of rejecting the old ways than of recovering them anew, by sharp juxtaposition, transposing the shock. "I was a Catholic boy," Robert Mapplethorpe once reflected in an interview with the BBC, "I went to church every Sunday. The way I arrange things is very Catholic. It's always been that way when I put things together. Very symmetrical" (quoted in Didion 1995, 6). It was a fearful symmetry: of innocence and experience, formal sensibility and forbidden desire, the lure of crucifixion—above all, the play of light and dark. "Apollonian and Dionysiac at once," the philosopher Arthur Danto called Mapplethorpe's chiaroscuro, suggestive of tragedy in its contained dissonance (Danto 2020). The lighted image becomes an epitaph. The theater of "fashion" works in close proximity to death.

In his early 30s, Sonsini began collecting prints from the Athletic Model Guild, a wellspring of hunky bodybuilders and beefcake wrestlers posed nude in black and white. After much cajoling, he secured an apprenticeship with Bob Mizer, the gnomic founder of AMG and a pioneer of homoerotic portraiture. For half a decade following Mizer's death and the Guild's closure in the mid-1990s, Sonsini exclusively painted his partner, Gabriel Barajas. Today, the couple divides their time between Los Angeles and Querétaro, Mexico. It was Barajas, himself a Mexican immigrant, who first suggested that Sonsini try day laborers as sitters, and who advised him to open with "soy un pintor" (Sonsini, 2016).

Photography's vexed claim to the real, its melancholic sense of the tangible, experience in the flesh, suffuses Sonsini's portraits. His Old World sensibilities, honed through his East Coast upbringing, inform an approach to casual recognition beautifully at odds with the terrain.

> … for many years I didn't drive in LA so it was natural to meet guys on the street. If you're prone to that sort of random experience (as I am) then the streets of Los Angeles are a great place to compose paintings. I guess it's because of all the space, all the vast areas of

> uninterrupted sunlight, that seeing people on the street is like seeing people on a stage. So, seeing a few guys standing side by side on a street corner, well, the image was already right there and looked like a fully formed painting. (Sonsini 2016, 12)

I too, am prone to that sort of random experience, the sort which can only be had on foot. Walking down the boulevards, one grasps Southern California as a landscape of exposure. The valleys deepen in the sun. Life is governed by the aperture and the shutter speed, the ideal pose, the perfect shot. "The light," David Lynch once wrote of Los Angeles, "is inspiring and energizing. Even with smog, there's something about that light that's not harsh, but bright and smooth… It was the light that brought everybody to L.A. to make films in the early days" (Lynch 2007, 31-32). Interesting that the man who put these words to paper should have made the films that he did. The early days of Hollywood were set towards marketing a climate in which subtropical radiance was neither symbolic effect nor divine revelation; it was simply the reality. This made darkness—often framed in full light—all the more terrifying. Under such conditions, authentic human connection can quickly come to seem mythological, as ectoplasmic as it is impressive. The sun threatens to burn and to blind. Exposure will destroy what it has made.

Yet it was not photography to which Sonsini turned when he brought workers into his studio. Perhaps this is a good moment review certain aspects common to portraiture in its various media. There is the ambiguous relationship between artist and sitter. There is the stress between intimacy and publicity, the conflicting demands for biography and documentary, individual likeness and social role. There is the "low," economical, historically middle-class art pitched to the extremes of poverty and luxury. These tensions are alive in Sonsini's portraits, tenderly ambivalent. The "natural" blush of California sun is reproduced in the studio with genuine color. The rough paradox of the street corner, at once public and overlooked, plays on its reversal: the private work of art produced for an

international consumer audience. The workers themselves suggest "quick observation matched with formal staging", as the photography critic Max Kozloff once wrote of Diane Arbus (Kozloff 2007, 259). They are neither incidental nor iconic.

Like day laborers vying for work from strangers, sitters of portraits are often prompted to "make face" (to use Erving Goffman's phrase) as they pose. Not so with Sonsini. His portraits give off vulnerability, receptiveness, an inner life both naked and unassuming. What he resists in photography is the cult of the instantaneous, the mimetic exchange made mechanical, automatic. He spends hours with his subjects. With those who pose for multiple portraits (and there are a number), he has developed what sociologists would call "consociate" relationships, patterns of remedial intimacy and care, mitigating yet inconclusive. "There's a sense in which our life narratives will barely overlap," writes Eve Sedgwick of such arrangements, albeit in a different context, "There's another sense in which they slide up more intimately alongside one another as the present fullness of a becoming whose arc may extend no further, whom we each must learn best to apprehend, fulfill, and bear company" (2003, 149).

Sedgewick, writing on queer friendship and solidarity, is careful to note the difficult affinity of the accretive and reparative "depressive position" with paranoia, in all of its obsessive, envious, and hateful possibilities. There is still the threat of a skeptical encounter, suspicions over "true" intentions and feelings. In the case of Sonsini, the threat seems especially great in the finished painting, which signals a rupture in the arc, the end of the original bond.

All the space, all the vast areas of uninterrupted sunlight… people on the street like people on a stage… the image already right there like a fully formed painting. A painting at once complete and not yet begun.[vi] There is order and distress in the image. To be created, it must be reproduced. Darkness and distance haunt the light of expression. Sonsini's portraits gesture to a bond already broken. You will never know the

workers. You're wrenched from your life by a gaze that meets you just as it recedes from view. The camera bulb flashes. The angel looks over its shoulder, borne ahead by the wind.

Those versed in "critical theory" will be familiar with these figures. They come to us from Walter Benjamin, from whom I take my epigraph. Unlike his friend Theodor Adorno, who had escaped the Nazis for Los Angeles, Benjamin never made it to America. His suicide at the Spanish border, in 1940, en route to the United States and in the face of repatriation to France, is yet one more testament to the ambivalence of crossing that marked his tortured life. Death, the great myths tell us, is both passage and paralysis. Little wonder that Benjamin made such a point of associating mortality with his favorite form of art. "We come to ourselves," the critic Eduardo Cadava writes in a book devoted to Benjamin's thoughts on photography, "through these memories of a mourning yet to come… the photograph tells us we will die, one day we will no longer be here, or rather, we will only be here the way we have always been here, as images… what survives in a photograph is also the survival of the dead" (2018, 8).

The secret message, the light of the forgotten history, is already touched by darkness. The trick is to keep moving, keep looking, to wander the city of words. Benjamin writes amidst fragments: the allegorical icon, the fractured myth, the photographic image—a collection of ruins. Eternity persists in synecdoche. Perhaps I am foolish to connect the totalizing force of Benjamin's "Messianic flash" with Sedgwick's "present fullness." Surely, apocalypse and depression are different. What they hold in common is, if nothing else, a humane swerve from the narrative line, destructive and insatiable. Ruins can be redeemed and moments, fulfilled—if only for a moment.

To receive the world, even to love it, we must be willing to move forward, to let it go. To let things go, we must be prepared to receive them. This is the shinning lesson from my conversations

with a man who survived his own death, as with his *compañeros*, as they sorted out their bonds with one another, their relationships with God. It lights my writing here.

Their names are Ismael, Abelardo, Héctor, Edwin, and Martin.

2.

The parking lot runs roughly 1000 feet wide and 500 feet long. There are four entrances, two off the main boulevard, two more off the quiet and featureless streets on either side. The Build Pro Emporium is opposite the boulevard, a blank concrete fortress attesting to the Southern California dream of unshakable corporate convenience. At one end of the building, shadowed by the wrought iron fence of the garden center, stacked pallets and fertilizer sacks evoke the sandbag walls of a military training ground. Here, there are parking spaces but no cars. There are parked semi-trailers which never move. There is the minivan where the homeless woman lives with her dog. The sun has burned and speckled her skin the color of silty clay. She has sharp gray eyes and gray black hair. Her dog has gray black hair and black eyes and a dark red tongue that hangs from the side of its mouth. I give her water when I visit. She gives it to the dog.

At the opposite end of the lot is the Body Works, jutting out from a loading zone. Gymgoers in track suits compression shorts pop in their earbuds and make for the entrance. Workers pile lumber, plywood, and refrigerators into pickup trucks. Years ago, spurred by a perverse fascination with social decay, I spent a period of weeks watching from my car to see if any member of one group would dare acknowledge the other. They never did.

Moving past the front entrance, around to the back of the building, you'll find stacks of old gym mats by the dumpsters. It is shady and calm. You can hear the birds sing. Some of the laborers sleep here.

The entrances are "*oficinas*." This how one of the men put it to me. A different group of workers waits for work at each one. Sometimes, fights break out and someone switches groups. Sometimes, the landscaping crews come in and trim the trees and a whole group migrates for shade. Sometimes, there are men like Ismael, who lives in his car and drifts between groups, lonely and bored with this place.

On the far side of the lot, by the boulevard, there is a Golden Griddle and a Pollo Sabroso. The Golden Griddle is full of teenagers and screaming children. I have never seen a worker go there. At the opposite end of the lot, the sunburnt man with the crooked spine sits by his shopping cart in front of the Pollo Sabroso. My friend Micaela, a nursing student, worries that he might disappear one day, as men like him sometimes do. He leans on his cart as we give him fruit and granola bars. His name is Wayne. He has a soft, sweet voice that rolls through broad California vowels. *Aw, thanks you guys.*

The workers go to Pollo Sabroso. For many, this will be their one meal of the day. I've learned some of their orders. The three-piece with a cherry coke for Juan, the queso blanco burrito for Edgar, the two-piece with a side of corn for Carlos. I jot these things down in my notebook to no apparent end.

"Maybe they pay you," Ismael says. "You go there and you say to them, *yeah, man, you know, I know what, what the guys, they eating*—"

We are standing outside his car, watching people come and go from the restaurant. I see Wayne asleep under a tree. I see a crow dive behind an agave and pop back out with a bag of chips in its beak. It flips the bag over the curb and the chips spill out by the wheel of an old sedan. The bird looks young, fluffed around the neck. It eats hurriedly.

"That's not what I'm here for," I chuckle.

He is watching the crow. "Yeah, no, but, that's the way you do, man. You gotta know what the people, they want to know."

"I think people should know more about you guys here. Todo lo que te enfrentas."

He looks at me and shrugs, glancing at the ground. "Yeah man, but what we need to know, them, is the work. Because there is no work here."

It is late February. We're nearing the end of the down stretch. The work dries up around the holidays and explodes after tax season. This is the bargain the laborers make. Big jobs, better pay in the spring and summer than employment in factories or farms. Enough to get through the winter if they save. But there is always the anxiety, the fear that the rhythms will change, that spring will fail to make good on its promise.

"Y, también sobre el dolor en el corazón," I say. "About the pain in the heart. They should know que pasa con eso."

This gets his attention.

"Oh yeah, man," he says, locking eyes with me. "And for that," he says, "the thing is, uh, when this can help to the people, because the people, a lotta people, they don know. But—" he pauses. "But, if they are starting to feel like the arm… "

He taps on his forearm, his fingers playing on his veins.

"Ah, sí," I say, "the tingling. El sensación de… "

"Yeah, they getting sick, but you can, um, how do say this word? Cause it's not sleep. Es, ah, entumido."

"Numb?"

"Mmm?"

"Numbness? ¿Cuándo no puedes sentir, eh… nada en su brazo?

"Yeah something like that. It's a, how you say?"

"Numb."

"Numb," He repeats, pronouncing it "*nom*." "Es like a similar, like a… "

"¿Cuándo tenga la anestesia? Esté numb."

"Ah! Okay, yeah. Yeah, like a numb feeling. But this, the, your arm, the left, the left arm feel some, when you feel that, be careful—

"Sí, claro. Es un síntoma."

"—es symptom. That's *numb*." He repeats the word, testing its possibilities. It occurs to me while listening to him how close the Spanish *entumido* sounds to "entombed." It occurs to me that the Spanish verb for bury or entomb is *enterrar*, a word which, years ago, in a memorable faux pas, I confused with *entrar*, meaning "enter."

Perhaps this is what is lost in the English "numb": a sense of space, of inside and out, of their confusion at the level of the skin. "A woman… working in the fields, touching the wheat, feels not only the wheat but her fingers touching," writes the critic Elaine Scarry, "if a thorn cuts through the skin of the woman's finger, she feels not the thorn but her body hurting her." This was Ismael's warning to me. It is, at the level of our most basic phenomenology, the body—not the world—that *hurts*.

"Also," he goes on, "when, when you right away start to feel like you want to vomit, be careful! It's no good! Cause it's not normal because you eat, and you don' feel, when you start to feeling like, uh, you want to vomit, it's not right! Something wrong with the, with the heart."

I look back to the Pollo Sabroso. A murder of crows now mobs the sedan. Wayne is awake, watching as more birds gather in the palms.

"Yeah, it's happened to me," he says, "so I have to explain the, uh, what's to you. You can write, you can read it, explain all these things, it's very important!"

I turn back to him and see that he is now staring at the crows. I tell him that he is right. It is important. I thank him for the chance to write it down.

"Yeah," he announces, looking to me, his voice lowering, "when it happens to you, don't scare, yeah, relax, say okay, I'm going to check it out, this, I'm gon' do this, because if you feel bad and, eh, scared, *oh you getting worse*.

3.

A July 2017 report from the Public Policy Institute of California begins, "Day Laborers who search for temporary employment on street corners, in front of home improvement stores, and at city-sponsored worker centers have captured the attention of city officials, policymakers, and many others in California" (Gonzalez 2007, 1). Sentences like this are meant to be skimmed, not read, and their reading risks pedantry. Yet, moving through "Day Labor in the Golden State"—a review of worker demographics, job conditions, average wages, local ordinances on loitering and solicitation, and the like—one gets the sense that a certain dramatic lead has been buried. "Captured the attention," despite its magniloquence, still carries a hint of pathos. Taken one way, down an ironic spiral, the phrase gestures to the difficulty of capturing anyone's attention in California at all. Mudslides and fires

snuff out whole towns in the hills, tent cities crowd the paved riverbeds and vanish overnight, roadside carnage shades into the aesthetic of morning routine. The beat goes on. Throngs of weather-beaten men waving at cars like seasoned hitchhikers, desperate to pick up and go, seem very much part of the ecology. The occasional flare-up of NIMBY unrest notwithstanding, day laborers are more often ignored than scrutinized. This is at the heart of their plight: they pass off as natural, no less a feature of the hodgepodge landscape than Chinese Fan Palms or Spanish colonials.

Wherever there is ignorance, of course, scrutiny follows close behind. Empire has always worked on the nerves as a stiff cocktail of nostalgic and paranoid styles which sets the polis spinning when the music stops and the lights turn on. "The uncanniness of the ordinary," as the philosopher Stanley Cavell called it, increasingly shows through in times of decline, eliciting absurd violence. Once, outside a Lowe's in Encinitas, I saw a man built like a professional wrestler set down a stack of fiberboard planks to explode at a nearby *frutero*. "You need a fucking permit to be here, okay? Comprendo?" The accused nodded blankly from under his *sombrero*, a *melón dulce* in one hand and a carving knife in the other. I moved to intervene, but a lot attendant beat me to it and guided the giant back to his truck. "My manager says it's a don't ask, don't tell kinda thing with these guys," he told me afterward, motioning first to the vendor, then to a group of *jornaleros* by the street. "Whatever's good for business."

I am approaching a mythology of California. Not a monolith, mind you, but a field of genres, figures, tropes, and other consoling designs set in conflict. As Joan Didion (. [2003] 2011) recounts in a beautiful historical memoir, Anglo Californians are prone to forget the changes they have wrought while lamenting those which—brought on by further movement, new migrations—pass before their eyes. The children of railroad tycoons bemoaned the rise of subdivisions on what was once family

land. The children of yeoman farmers resent the rise of Walmart and McDonald's. Those who settled in bedroom communities after the Second World War feared for their children as the boom years waned and the government jobs dried up.

Today, what the anthropologist Leo Chavez calls "the Latino Threat Narrative" (according to which U.S. Latinos "are part of an invading force from south of the border that is bent on reconquering the land that was formerly theirs" (Chavez 2013, 3)) heightens the amnesia and the paradox. What stands in the way of a delusory past made present—the latest iteration of the way things have always been—is not, in fact, a wave of new arrivals, but settled patterns of history. Carey McWilliams, the left-wing journalist who wrote *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* and later defended the Latino youth charged in the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, foretold this as early as 1949. "The Spanish-Mexican influence cannot be 'beaten out of the land,'" he wrote in *North From Mexico*, "Like the Indians, the Mexicans were 'here first.' It is most misleading, therefore, to assume that they occupy a relation to the majority element which is like that, say of Poles in Detroit or Italians in New York" (McWilliams [1948] 1990, 62).

As with any origin story, the California narrative achieves a theological pitch. "The American wants to persuade not only the world," the philosopher and native Californian Josiah Royce once claimed, "but himself that he is doing God service in a peaceable spirit, even when he violently takes what he has determined to get" (Royce 1948, 119). Royce's words were published in 1885, long after he had left his birthplace of Grass Valley, on the western foothills of the Sierras, for Harvard University. They appear in his classic of amateur history, *California: A Study of American Character*, a book at once transparently personal and coolly academic, a book amidst worlds. "Nowhere else," writes Royce of his native land, "were we ever before so long forced by circumstances to live at the

mercy of a very wayward chance, and to give to even our most legitimate business a dangerously speculative character" (3). The upshot of this caution is a California irony. "A general sense of social irresponsibility," Royce closes *California*, "is, even today, the average Californian's easiest failing… And yet, as we have seen, the whole lesson of his early history, rightly read, is a lesson in reverence for the relations of life." And, a paragraph later—the last of the book—"*It is the State, the Social Order, that is divine. We are all but dust, save as this social order gives us life*" (393).

California the private adventure, California the commune, the colony, the island on the land, the dust of our making and return. A mythology up to this sublime self-negation (Royce is fond of the word "confess") must work both in ruin and in rapture, inversion and conversion—the turning of words between revelation and conspiracy. In the case of Southern California, in the case of Orange County, this turning has something to do with walking and with driving. It has something to do with living in Newport Beach and living in Santa Ana, and how one goes (if one goes) between the two. It has to do with light—with the day, and with the dark which registers the shock of the light, which regiments its course, its time, its labor. It has to do with time, with memory and hope. It has to do with images, with how they stack up, how we respond to their creation, their display, their "reproduction."

I leave you with these thoughts. "Capture the attention of" is a soft periphrasis of "captivate." In Southern California, it is migrant workers who are the captives—and how the rest of us "attend" to this fact is a matter of what might be called the politics of the visual. The eye, as Saint Augustine was among the first to appreciate, is an expressionist organ, powerful in its desires as in its denials, its openings and closures. That these optical effects have turned dystopian in a geography where shopping centers, housing developments, and glitzy corporate blocks crowd out the city square is,

perhaps, unsurprising. Those who lead "modern" lives here see little and are rarely seen, shuttling from their offices to their cars to their gated neighborhoods. In this place "where everything is possible and nothing is real," as the geographer Edward Soja wrote of Orange County, the workers must resist the stifling impulse of time into pure potential. They must live in the space of the odd moment, the shadow flashing up with the strength of a sudden memory. This is, at least, one way of looking at things.

4.

I pull into the parking lot at five past noon. The entrance is lined with workers soliciting jobs. I recognize most of their faces. Several, I've come to know well. But there is a car behind me and there is another thing I know well enough: the men are looking for work, not company.

I park by the Golden Griddle. Stepping out of my car, I look back to the entrance. I count twenty-two workers, eleven at the entrance, seven more sitting on the mulch bed behind the feathergrass, four more under the palm trees, playing cards on a makeshift table made from composite board and 5-gallon buckets. They sit on old lawn chairs. I don't see Ismael's car.

At the store entrance, a teenager sweating through his patchy beard and button-down shirt asks me if I'm registered to vote. I tell him I don't live here. He looks ready to cry.

"Estoy registrado en Irvine."

"Oh, okay, no problem, man." He pauses. "Thank you, sir."

Walking past the self-checkout stands, I bump into Ismael. I'm struck by how out of place he looks, by how unprepared I was to find him here. I've never seen a worker inside the store. He stands before a shelf lined with cacti and succulents. He doesn't seem surprised to see me. I tell him that I'm buying some water. I'll be right out.

He nods. “Okay, man.”

“Estas buscando algo?”

“If I am looking?… cómo?”

“Yea. For something in the store.”

“Oh,” he responds, “no.”

He makes for the exit empty-handed.

“Can I help you find anything, hun?”

A clerk approaches and looks from me to Ismael’s silhouette drifting through the automatic doors. She tells me they’re out of water.

I drive 10 minutes to the grocery store and wait in line for another 10 minutes. A man in a trucker hat argues with the salesclerk over an expired coupon. In front of me, a mother strains to unload a crinkled heap of snacks and drinks from her cart. Her daughter is spinning in place with her arms outstretched, asking if they can go home after this. Tripping over herself, she knocks a magazine off the rack. A headshot of Kobe Bryant stares out at us from the cover: “1978-2020: The Death of a Legend.” I pluck it from the floor and hold it out to her.

“¿Quieres esto?”

She stares at me.

“¡Romina!” Her mother snaps, short of breath, “síguete haciendo el chistosito. Vámonos.”

“Just the water?” the clerk asks me.

I buy a KitKat and gum. As I lift the package of water from the conveyor belt, the plastic stretches and tears.

Walking outside, I watch as a pair of bottles pop out of the package and roll beneath a parked car.

I drive off with a sense of relief and inexplicable dread at the prospect of buying water again.

The boulevard is lined with auto shops and beauty salons and furniture outlets and insurance agencies, their names spelled out in bold capital letters on the storefronts and atop pylon signs that tilt with the palms. The windows are crowded with slogans and phone numbers. Featured deals are emblazoned in a mix of English and Spanish. The deals themselves are a commercial sundry, marketed less to selective consumer needs than to fluid and composite lives. "50% OFF ALL PARTY SUPPLIES" a sign in one window reads, and, below it, "PRODUCTOS BOTANICAS."

Soon, the stores give way to rows of modest houses tucked behind soiled stone walls and abundant gardens—lemon trees, banana leaves, cascading bougainvillea.

Soon, the gardens recede into gas stations and the freeway bridges loom and I am back at the Build Pro Emporium.

Ismael doesn't ask what took so long. He thanks me for the water. I ask him what happened to the guy from Victorville, who promised him more work.

"No me llamó. I don' think he has any money."

"Ay. Él trabaja en un restaurante durante la semana, ¿verdad?"

"Yeah, in the restaurant. He work there."

"Got it. ¿Y tú teléfono? Do you have service now?"

"Oh, yeah, I buy a card. So we can talk now."

We talk about the job in Victorville, an inground pool. They finished excavation last week. The next step is assembly. Best to finish it all in one day: ground supports, side supports, pressure

pads, bottom rails, top rails, cinder blocks. Nine, ten, eleven hours, he says. It's late March. The days are long enough.

He says the *patrón* is moving too slow. They're over a week behind. He rushes them on the job site. They haggle over water breaks.

A small man wearing a sombrero passes by pushing an ice cream cart.

"No te he visto antes," Ismael says.

"I'm usually over there." The *paletero* points to the far end of the lot, by the Body Works.

I ask Ismael if he wants anything.

"No, but you, you get something for you."

"No he almorzado. I might go to Pollo Sabroso."

The man smiles at us. "Tende cuidado, caballeros" He pushes off towards the main entrance, to the men playing cards.

5.

Years ago, in an application for a National Science Foundation fellowship, I produced the following sentence: "Consigned to the status of the marginal, the obscure, the 'illegal,' day laborers are also the exposed." This is research grant language, as overdetermined as it is indeterminate. When the NSF mercifully rejected my pitch, I revised it to include this breathless paragraph.

> In the 1950s and 60s, Orange County ranchers solicited property investment from an increasingly mobile upper-middle class by master-planning a "post-suburban" landscape of business districts, shopping centers, and gated communities connected by freeways. Today, the accelerated mobility of people, objects, ideas, and capital across this fragmented geography reproduces a "hyperreality" of intense "space-time compression" and extravagant cosmopolitanism. *Jornaleros* represent the underside of this dynamic spatial reorganization. It is their movement, which begins with border-crossing and carries on through various forms displacement at the hands of landords, law enforcement, and the informal economy itself, that sustains the rapid-fire pace of post-suburban production and consumption. The post-

> suburban collapse of traditional public/private and core/peripheral binaries manifests in the contingently closed and open landscape of the informal migrant labor economy, which abruptly weaves in and out of construction projects, gated communities, historic barrios, parking lot hiring sites, and the cars and trucks of employers.

This is more to the point. Shadow and sun build out the land unevenly, at odd angles. In Orange County, you will not find day laborers on the *esquinas* of boutique cities such as Newport Beach or Dana Point or San Juan Capistrano. The Day Worker Center in Laguna Beach (of which I am now the executive director) was founded in 1995 by municipal leaders to keep would-be troublemakers off the streets and under control. (A dust lot with picnic tables and a small office, the Center is tucked in a shady crook of Laguna Canyon, out of sight from the beach.) The bulk of the county's *jornaleros* are confined to Santa Ana, a city of some 332,610 people—three fourths of whom are Latino—with a median income of $72,406. It is there that the cars pass them by. It is there that they wait among the agaves and the palms, chasing down trucks and moving vans. The trucks hurtle south to the beachside mansions. They race inland to the hills, where new developments crop up by the month, just behind the latest speculation and just ahead of the fires.

Were I to write that grant again. I would call that "hyperreality" for what it is: an industry religion. It is a faith of the advertising copy, of a mimetic world with no origin, a pictographic riddle that Southern Californians like to spell out for themselves. Their lives depend on it, in fact—for no one is actually *from* here, no one is really "Southern Californian." This premise is, itself, the first image, the riddle's opening threshold. The suburbs sin against history. An endless present aspires to glittering future. It is a testament to the California mind that this myth can coexist with such truculent nostalgia as Didion describes.

This is Los Angeles as the far shore of modernity: aspirational, apotheotic. For Max Adorno and Max Horkheimer, hammering out their "negative dialectics" among the rustling palms of Pacific Palisades (where other German exiles, including Brecht and Schönberg, had also landed in the 40s), the City of Angels seemed the final failure of the Enlightenment, the *coup de grâce* of the culture industry.[vii] Adorno pushed the paradox of light to its darkest, most satirical edge. He suggested a "convergence" between the relentless "culture industries" of Los Angeles and the Weimar Republic.[viii] Propaganda, in his view, had triumphed, blinding the populace and blacking out the alternatives. Whatever its wisdom, this comment persists today through its mood, the repressed anxiety that still marks the place. Eden remade as an industrial ambition, the cult of consumer happiness, glossy images so baldly fetishistic, so sure of their fantastic contents, that one forsakes the need for reality—mention of these things will unsettle the Southern Californian.

The Reluctant Metropolis. The Mirage Factory. City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles. The image becomes a terrible charm. There is nothing for the image to picture; nothing, that is, save for another image. "Reproduction" overwhelms and pacifies. Pictures layer and obscure nostalgia, peaking to the future. Their non-stop "circulation" distorts the life of the land. What counts as "reality" proceeds as a kind of mirror maze. This is California the "*hysterical* land" as Jean Baudrillard put it: "Sex, beach, and mountains. Sex and beach, beach and mountains… Everything is destined to reappear as simulation. Landscapes as photography… You wonder whether the world itself isn't here to serve as advertising copy in some other world" (1989, 32).

Among the faux marble columns, the mission revivals, the Edenic grandeur, making a home becomes an oddly prospective matter. "Daily life here has an inertia that people believe in." This is D.J. Waldie (2005, 11), working through the spare lyricism of Lakewood, a post-war bedroom community labelled "Tomorrow's City Today" by its mid-century boosters. Waldie's Baudrillardian comment, "Every map is a fiction. Every map offers choices" (47) is both critique and prophecy.[ix]

The numbered fragments of his "suburban memoir" stand as subdivisions in prose. They order a vision of seamless replacement, endless representation: the developer's blueprint, the concrete foundations, the real estate photograph of the model home "heavily retouched" to include a streetlight.

These are the signs that sequence the ineffable. Waldie's title is tellingly laconic: *Holy Land.*

> *The streets in my city are a fraction of a larger grid, anchored to one in Los Angeles. That grid was laid out in September 1781.*
>
> *The Los Angeles grid is a copy of one carried from Mexico City to an anonymous stretch of river bank by Colonel Felipe de Neve, governor of California.*
>
> *The grid the Spanish colonel carried to the nonexistent Los Angeles in 1781 originally came from a book in the Archive of the Indies in Seville: The book prescribed the exact orientation of the streets, the houses, and the public places for all the colonial settlements in the Spanish Americas.*
>
> *That grid came from God.*
>
> \- D.J. Waldie, Holy Land (22)

Were I to write that grant again, I would not claim that "day laborers *represent*." "Refract" is a better term, a term I borrow from the Chilean critic Adriana Valdés, from an essay titled "Señales de vida en un campo minado (la situación chilena y la hipótesis de un arte refractario)" (1983). *Signs of Life in a Mined Field (The Chilean Situation and the Hypothesis of a Refractory Art.* Valdés is writing on the fate of art in the wake of Pinochet: its negation and its deviance, rupture and collage attesting to the unresolved past, the flickering life of the forgotten, the dismembered, and the dead.

There is more. For "represent the underside," I would substitute "refract the frayed edges." The latter phrase comes from Valdés's colleague and fellow Chilean, Nelly Richard, who documents the ravaging of traditional Latin American narrative forms—chief among them *testimonio*—by the powers of dictatorship and the free market. After Pinochet, there could be no more stories of resistance and national pride in the traditional sense. The more subversive art, the pastiche of the 1980s and 90s, "did not seek to fill gaps in identity with consoling words," so much as "expose—in

those gaps—the absence of a whole, the lack itself" (1994, 15). Rather than close the book on the violence, the art declaimed the torn and yellowed pages. It acted out a stubborn sort of melancholy, refusing to bury the victims.

Call it an open gesture of mourning. Fingering through the odd patterns of this ethos of the gap, a "scaffolding" of margins, Richard suggests the influence of Walter Benjamin, diffuse as always. In the "rapid-fire pace of post-suburban production and consumption" Benjamin would have found "a kind of transmission that is a catastrophe." He feared industrialization, as he did the Nazis, as he did their shared rhetoric of literalism and dull metaphor: a rhetoric of replacement. Transcendence must come by other means. The flash of scattered parts beckons to a whole we cannot grasp.

The flash comes from God.

6.

Edward Soja writes of "iconic Orange County, where every day seems just like yesterday but where the ever-present Now-ness of tomorrowland makes the Then hard to find" (Soja 1996, 238). This is clever but incomplete, an iconography less of the total county than of its southern region: "South County," a place ideally inert. This is where the wide roads wind through the sloping hills, past the golf courses, the beaming office parks, coastal resorts, mansions on the bluffs. "North County" is a different story.

The story starts at the 405, the infallible border between the sex-beach-mountains of Newport Beach and San Clemente and the historic downtowns of Orange, Fullerton, and Yorba Linda. The North County cities are older. Anaheim, Orange, and Santa Ana were all founded in 1888. Fullerton, in 1904. Brea, in 1917. Placentia and La Habra, in the 1920s. Unlike the converted ranches of South County, grazing pastures made garden cities by way of a master blueprint, these places are a result of

a "prow-growth attitude," as the historian Lisa McGirr calls it, a "planned sprawl" that yielded "free-enterprise cities" developed ad hoc through endless, slapdash tract development. Where there once were oil fields and orange groves, neighborhoods now chaotically spill out from the downtowns, interspersed with billboards and strip malls full of laundromats, insurance agencies, and family restaurants. Against the ideal of South County, here is a land of the material. This is how the myth of Orange County runs.

In the center of North County is Santa Ana, called "Santana" by townies, themselves known as "Santaneros." Local historians are quick to remind outsiders that it was not always so, that the city was majority white until 1980s (the so-called "decade of the Latino"), when suburban flight tipped the demographic scale. For Soja, Santa Ana is the grinding engine of the South County sublime. "The county's choice pool of cheap labor," he calls it, "a prime stopover site for thousands of undocumented immigrants who cross over the Mexican border just one county away" (247). Comments such as this speak to the problem Marxists encounter in "the culture of the poor." They speak to the problems anthropologists encounter in "culture," with its assumptions of uniformity and its penchant for, as Lila Abu-Lughod (1996) wrote, "making other." Ideas, even rapturous flights, might live amidst the cheap labor, might "stop over" in Santa Ana themselves.

"There are saints everywhere in Santa Ana," the sociologist Jonathan E. Calvillo writes in his aptly-titled *The Saints of Santa Ana,* "In front yards, on street corners, and at restaurant counters… traversing geographic boundaries to reach their current homes" (Calvillo 2020, 25). I'm inclined to respond that Santa Ana's *santos* do not stop there. Having crossed over from Mexico, they can hardly afford to keep to the city limits. "Sacralization is an everyday reality," writes Calvillo (ibid.). This reality flashes and settles in places even less stable, more out of the way and in between: the curbsides, the loading zones, the truck beds where men sleep under plastic tarps and soiled blankets, the tedious gardens of wealthy gringos who seem always to be out of town.

7.

Walking to Ismael's car, I hear a familiar voice call out to me.

"Hey! Timoteo!"

It's Abelardo. He is slouched against a rolled-up blanket in the bed of a pickup truck with his earbuds in. I ask him what he's listening to.

"La Pasión de Cristo."

"En serio?"

He hands me his phone. On the screen, a porcine and patently evil man wearing a heaping black ringlet wig and heavy eyeshadow sneers at Jesus.

"Es Herod," he says.

The camera angle shifts. Herod is wearing a patterned tunic and a massive silver chain. Giant rings protrude from his fingers like bulging gold warts. He is laughing at Jesus.

Abelardo explains that Herod has just asked Jesus to perform a miracle. Jesus refuses, he tells me, because he knows that Herod is not a believer.

"¿Pero ves a este güey? ¿Este… ? Espera…" He grabs his phone back and drags his finger along the screen, searching.

He searches for well over a minute, giving me a chance to scout Ismael's car, parked some 50 feet away. The driver's and front passenger's seat are empty. Heaped plastic bags shroud the rear window.

"Mira," he says, holding out his phone. The video is paused on a still frame of a soldier adorned in a golden headdress. "This guy," he says, "he is a believer. El cree en Jesucristo."

Jesus turned water into wine "solo cuando su madre le pidió," he tells me. "Porque Jesús era humilde. Solo llevaba un manto y sandalias. A pesar de que él era el verdadero rey..."

… only when his mother asked. Because he was humble. He only wore a cloak and sandals. Even though he was the true king…

Trailing off, he looks over my shoulder and shouts. "Oye! ¿Qué pasó, cerote?"

It is Ismael. I tell him Abelardo has been teaching me about Jesus.

"Si!," Abelardo says. "Porque él era el verdadero mesías." He looks to me. "Y sabes qué? Incluso su padre lo sabía. Su padre se lo dijo a su madre. ¿Cuándo nació?" He quotes from the Gospel of John, "Él dijo, 'El que viene después de mí está delante de mí, porque es el hijo de Dios.'"

And you know what? Even his father knew. His father told his mother, when he was born.

> *This is the one I spoke about when I said, "He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."*
>
> \- *John 1:15*

"You know the thing about Jesus?," Ismael hops onto the truck bed next to Abelardo. "He was a like a god, but also, he was born from, from the woman. So he was like a man, like you, me."

"Era un milagro," Abelardo mutters, leaning back into the blanket and closing his eyes.

He was a miracle.

"Yeah," Ismeal continues, "Pero, you know, you know what he teach? Is how to talking to God. Because the people, he show them how to listen. Because when you listening, you can hear God speaking to you."

Abelardo opens his eyes and sits up. "Sí, y tienes que escuchar porque si no escuchas, te conviertes en una mierda."

Yeah, and you have to listen because if you don't listen, you become a piece of shit.

Ismael laughs.

"Me robaron la billetera," Abelardo announces suddenly, staring out from the truck bed. "Diablos."

The men mugged him in the middle of the night last week, he tells us, while he was sleeping on the gym mats. They took his wallet, his backpack, and his extra pair of shoes. He points to the main entrance, where the others are waiting for work. It was "esos malditos" who did it, he says.

Ismael nods. "Pinches malditos. Yeah." He looks at me. "Bad people, man."

"Mira, Timoteo," Abelardo says, "fíjate en esto." He passes me his phone once more. The movie is paused on a dark still frame. "Pones play," he says.

It could be a moment from any fantasy film, a night among stone walls lit by torches and fires burning in stone pits in the dirt: a night tinted sepia. In the dirt courtyard faceless crowds cloaked in long gowns and robes murmur and mingle. As with Jesus and Herod, the action chafes against subtlety, animate in basic devices. Two children emerge from the crowd playing ball. One throws the ball too far. The camera pans out to follow the ball as the second child gives chase, revealing a bearded and bloodied man slumped against a wall beside a foreboding bundle of sticks. The children are pallid with cropped black hair and sunken eyes and pause their game to crouch down and inspect the man. He snaps at them to leave him alone. They accost him, slapping and grabbing at his robe. They bite at his arm and he screams.

"Judas," Abelardo says. "Él está maldito." He pauses. "A veces me siento maldito, porque soy un pecador."

He is cursed. Sometimes I feel cursed, because I am a sinner.

Ismael nods. "Yeah man, he lose his soul." He turns to me. "You know about the, when you are cursed? Tienes que ir ah, the doctor, but not like in the hospital. The natural doctor."

"Necesito una mujer!" Abelardo snaps.

I need a woman.

I tell him he should watch "algo más reafirmante." He responds that *Passion of the Christ* "es muy chungón," but I am still thinking of natural doctors and of how people shape their ideas of purity and danger and something occurs to me.

"Abelardo, sabes la película *Apacalypto*?"

He shakes his head.

"No importa." I shrug. "I was just wondering."

8.

Another myth. It is my sense that day laborers, so often decried as "un-American," have been made an allegorical sign of a perfectly American self-defeat. I am speaking, here, of the death of certain tortured ideals. Among these defunct dreams are the middle class and the good union job, the democratic gift of public life and the liberal advent of a public sphere, and a savage entrepreneurial spirit, one prone—like Emerson's transparent eyeball—to flights of self-creation which skirt the grounds of collective accord. That day laborers give a symbolic face to this collapse comes through in their adaptation to the myths of American life. These include those of the American academy.

A search for "Day Laborers" in Google Scholar yields an exhaustive catalogue. There is "day laborers and occupational stress," "day laborers and psychological duress," "day laborers and life satisfaction," "day laborers and workplace injury." Day laborers and machismo, alcoholism, HIV, sexual solicitation, police harassment, clinical care, and condom use are also covered. Day laborers in Los Angeles, day laborers in New York, day laborers in the American Southwest. With few exceptions, the articles listed were published in the last 20 years, most in the last 10. 2016 saw the first monograph

devoted to day labor exclusively: *Jornalero: Being a Day Laborer in the USA* by the anthropologist Juan Thomas Ordóñez. In 2019, two more such monographs appeared: *Daily Labors: Marketing Identity and Bodies on a New York City Street Corner* by sociologist Carolyn Pinedo-Turnovsky and *The Fight for Time: Migrant Day Laborers and the Politics of Precarity* by Paul Apostolidis, a political scientist.

At this point, I should report a pair of facts. The first is as follows. Of the men with whom I sat on curbs and in busted lawn chairs, on upturned 10-gallon buckets, atop truck beds in the shade of the palms; with whom I waited for the contractors' trucks, the moving vans, the rich *mujeres* with the succulent gardens; with whom I sat and waited for the call from those developers who hadn't paid up, or for the call from that friend from Michoacán or Guerrero who knew people in Oxnard or Pomona or Jurupa Valley, or for the Santa Ana winds to whip down from the hills, or for the first trumpet's blare—not one used the phrase "day laborer." Not one called himself a "*jornalero*." Instead, I met *jardineros, plomeros, drywalleros*. I met a man who specialized in bathroom tiling. I met a man who wore Dickies coveralls regardless of the temperature, who drifted to his truck once an hour to pop open the hood. I met a man who had studied archaeology at the Benito Juarez Autonomous University of Oaxaca.

Here is the second fact. Of the myriad and perpetually multiplying academic articles on "day labor," not one, to my knowledge, calls the term itself into question. The Day Laborer—self-evident to the point of elemental—seems to have settled into the final vocabulary of social analysis. A useful heuristic, no doubt, one in line with certain "material" features of reality. But, then, so are most myths.

I have called this myth allegorical. This is not allegory in the Medieval or Victorian sense. The "day laborer" is not attached to a concept in a rigid hierarchical order, but to a *situation*, such as one finds in Kafka.[x] "*La situación*," Ordóñez calls it, "the combination of structural and intimate constraints that day laborers must navigate in day-to-day life, the petty violence of everyday existence" (Ordóñez

2015, 12). As with Kafkian personae, the figure assigned this condition has been emptied of all significance save that provided by his job—a job which, he seems numbly aware, will kill him.

9.

"Sobreviviendo, gracias a dios."

Edwin takes a long sip of water.

"Dios te bendiga."

Surviving, thank God. God bless you.

I nod and tell him it's no problem, as I always do. The water is cheap. I ask if he's had time to call the community legal aid number I gave him.

He shakes his head. "Dime, Timoteo," he says. "Dime algo de la Biblia."

Tell me, tell me something from the Bible.

I remind him that I'm not a *padre*. He shakes his head.

"Si, yo se. Pero dime algo. Tu favorito."

I know. But tell me something. Your favorite.

I translate Ephesians 4:2. "Sean completamente humildes y gentiles; sean pacientes, soportándoos unos a otros en amor." *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.* It is a safe choice, safely extracted from the shadow of the preceding verse. ("As a prisoner for the Lord," reads Ephesians 4:1, "then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.")

"Es una chulada," he smiles and rubs his stomach. He says this often.

"Las mujeres no tienen paciencia," Martin interjects.

Women don't have patience.

I tell him the pandemic has put a lot of relationships under stress. He tells me his wife wants him home earlier. She complains when his breath smells like *cerveza*. He asks me if I've married my girlfriend yet.

"¿Y conoces la historia," Edwin interrupts, "de cómo Eva fue hecha de la costilla de Adán?" He rubs his side. "¿Sabes que significa costilla?"

"Yeah." I nod. "Yo sé lo que significa. Rib. God made her from his rib"

It is after 6:00 PM. The hazy sun blackens the clouds and the palms. Edwin takes another drink and the shadow of the bottle in his hand arcs across the pavement, over the 24-pack of Arrowhead water I have placed by the curb. It sweeps across the light refracting through the water and plastic.

Edwin is heavyset, with a strong, gray-stubbled face. He is 64 years old. Like Martin, some two decades his junior, he came here from El Salvador as a young man. Like Martin, he doesn't speak much of his home. In this way, he is different from the Mexicans.

"Es importante tomar agua," I mutter. "Mantenerse hidratado. Drink enough for the heat."

"Si," Edwin nods. "Limpia la sangre."

It cleans the blood.

Abelardo is sleeping under a bush. Juan Carlos approaches, followed by a man I don't recognize, and nudges Abelardo's foot and asks him if he wants to go smoke.

I reach into the package and hand each of the men a water.

"Hola, Timoteo!" Abelardo chirps, rubbing his eyes and passing his bottle to Edwin. He giggles.

I tell him he should drink more *agua*.

"No toma agua," he says. "Solo tomo cerveza!"

I don't drink water. I only drink beer!

Martin snorts and calls him *baboso*. I tell him that water is good for the heart and the blood. "Y por el estómago y el hígado, también," I say.

"Eres vacunado?" Martin turns to me.

Are you vaccinated?

I tell him that I am and his eyes narrow. He asks me how I know it is safe.

"Pues, creo que cada uno puede hacer su propia elección," I clear my throat, pausing. "Mi madre es bióloga," I lamely answer. "Ella me enseñó la ciencia."

Everyone can make their own choice… My mother is a biologist. She taught me the science.

"Es que aquí ha muerto mucha gente." Emilio states blankly. "En todas partes, en todos los lados, personas están muriendo." He pauses. "Han desaparecidas. Los médicos dicen que han muerto."

A lot of people have died here… Everywhere, people are dying. They have disappeared. The doctors say they are dead.

In *Salvador*, a journalistic essay based on a two week visit to the country in 1982, at the height of violence, Joan Didion notes that "*Desaparecer*, or 'disappear,' is in Spanish both an intransitive and a transitive verb, and this flexibility has been adopted by those speaking English in El Salvador, as in *John Sullivan was disappeared from the Sheraton; the government disappeared the student*s, there being no equivalent situation, and so no equivalent word, in English-speaking cultures" ([1983] 1994, 57). This comment occurs to me as Edwin speaks.

Martin tells me that his uncle died last month. He was old and had diabetes, he says, but the *pinche* doctor marked down the cause of death as COVID. He tells me that anyone could see that his uncle was in poor health. "Pero quieren aumentar los números," he says.

They want to boost the numbers.

"Se siente como si tuvieras gripe, ¿verdad?" Juan Carlos asks.

I tell him it's just for one day. Two at the most. You feel normal after that.

"Eres un pastor?" the other man asks me. I shake my head and explain why I am here. *Antropología cultural.* His name is Diego. He asks me what I want to find out. I tell him I'm not sure .

"Las cosas están cambiando," I say.

Things are changing.

Juan Carlos gestures to Diego. "Él acaba de llegar. He just com here. From Tejas."

Diego stares at me. "¿Podría tal vez guiarnos en una oración, señor? You say a prayer for us?

I repeat that *no soy un pastor* but no one responds and I feel the comment weighing on the still air. I help Abelardo up from the ground and we stand in a circle as I say the one prayer in Spanish I know.

Dios te salve, María.
Llena eres de gracia,
El Señor es contigo.
Bendita tú eres entre todas las mujeres.
Y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesús.
Santa María, Madre de Dios,
ruega por nosotros pecadores,
ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte.
Amén.

10.

Ismael eats rice cakes, bananas, mixed nuts and berries. He drinks Hornitos and smokes *mota* in the morning to wake up and at night to calm down. He buys the nuts from the *botánica.* They are good for the heart, he says. Better to eat all natural. Raw ingredients. Don't use too much salt, so much

sugar, thick sauces with fat. These things will make you feel worse, make you feel bad in your mind. He has learned this from God.

When I arrived at the lot, around 3:00, his car was parked in the shade of a buckeye. Trash bags and blankets shrouded the rearview window. Approaching from the driver's side, I found him reclined behind the wheel with his eyes closed, with Juan Carlos in the passenger's seat beside him. Juan Carlos is a tall, ageless man with a jet mustache and white stubble and bad cauliflower ear bent outward by the brim of the Lawn Doctor hat that he wears every day. Like Ismael, he drifts between *oficinas*, and, like Ismael, he is known as a liar. Back in Guadalajara, he went to jail for drugs, he told me once. His daughter died during his prison term. He didn't say how. Recently, he'd lost part of his finger in a forklift accident. The contractor drove him to a clinic, where they cleaned and wrapped his hand. He was given $500 for his troubles and his silence. This much was true. He showed me the cash and the bandaged stump.

I apologized for interrupting.

"No worries, man."

Ismael mentioned that he'd gotten my text, "sobre the interview," but had forgotten to respond. He'd been feeling sick.

"But we gotta talk, man, about the health and keeping your body right," he said, digging through the back seat for empty zip lock bags filled with dried fruit.

Juan Carlos stepped out of the car. Nodding in the direction of the Pollo Sabroso, he asked if either of us wanted anything. I asked about his finger. He said the *patrón* had promised him more money but now wasn't responding to his texts.

"Ay, qué pena." I said as he walked away. "Lo siento."

"Yeah man. Fuck this guy."

11.

Consider the three books on day labor which I have mentioned. These texts perform old rituals of The Social. The sociologist expounds its reproduction. The anthropologist evokes its blight. The political scientist envisions its metamorphosis. These strike me as roughly Christian gestures, mingling genres of confessional, testimony, prophecy, prayer, and dogmatic. The Anglo Protestant emphasis on ordinary life—both sanctified and rationalized—shades into the Spanish Catholic ethos of most social theory associated with the word "liberation." We're given new images of sublime suffering, renewed covenants between naked power and pain and a world which must, in the end, prove meaningful.

Pinedo-Turnovsky, for her part, writes in the name of perseverance and community. The men portrayed in her words are strong enough to embrace immediately useful stereotypes (of Mexican men as humble and hardworking, for instance) in one arm while supporting their fellow laborers—in solidarity against bigoted oppression—with the other. Not so for Ordóñez, who makes himself a witness to unspeakable suffering. In his dark postmodern Romance, "Labor problems, employer abuse, state repression, and estrangement and isolation from friends and family come together in a single sphere of experience and give rise to a particular version of reality where exaggeration, fear, rumor, hearsay, and threats set the pace for everyday life" (2015, 13). This is an apocalyptic litany, the apostolic poor caught between virtue and vice. Social disorder and moral decay—the old standbys—beckon judgment.

A "single sphere" and a "particular vision" are oddly definitive vagaries, all that much odder in their application: to describe a nebulous and volatile—anything but unified—existence. Ordóñez writes against ambiguity, against enigma, against his own observations: "I suppose I risk painting a stereotypical picture of the undocumented day laborer by creating faceless individuals that seem like

ideal types of migrants" 17-18).[xi] For Pinedo-Turnovsky, the ideal is equally strong, but obverse. On the street corners of Brooklyn, she finds "a burgeoning and visible reminder of a vibrant informal economy and a strong immigrant metropolis" (2019, 5). The contest with Ordóñez to which this image builds is a struggle over the figure of the day laborer itself.

Apostolidis is alone among the three authors in naming this figure. His *Fight for Time* sets itself on "thematically theorizing [the] processes by which day labor takes shape as a *synecdoche* for widely encompassing social conditions." This is an ambitious rhetorical claim. Apostolidis addresses its stakes with the smartest characterization of day labor I've yet found.

> Think for a moment about what the phrase "day laborer" connotes regarding the kind of person who works in day labor jobs and the nature of such work. Unlike most other categorical descriptors of workers—say, "car washers" or "electricians," or "attorneys" or "elder care providers"—the idea of a day labor includes no qualitative definition of any skill or task. Nor does it involve any sense of an industrial context, such as even the vague term "farmworker" conveys, or any information about the types of materials or people from which or with whom the person works. Rather the single, definitive context in the notion of a day laborer is a quantum of time; work's substantive content is a matter of sheer indifference. The phrase "day laborer" also implies a temporality of work that is not only exceedingly limited in duration but also variable and its rhythms. Each new day job is likely to feel different in this way from the one yesterday. (2019, 73)

Like the rest of us, day laborers are "out of time," though more acutely so. They are both excluded and condemned as the "empty homogenous time" of capitalism runs aground on the frictive, fluctuating time that drives informal work. Time lost, time gained, time splintered and condensed. Apostolidis wants to "prioritize the fragmentary." His search for partial and disparate themes accounts for "the ways that precaritized time intrepidly undermines people's very abilities to think, feel, and act in the temporally contiguous ways that narrative analysis presupposes."

This certainly sounds a lot like Walter Benjamin. Sure enough, page two of *Fight for Time* includes the following passing remark: "As Walter Benjamin advised, it is often amid ruins strewn

across revealingly disordered landscapes by societies bent on progress that theorists can discern the telltale marks of domination and the stirrings of hope" (2). Yet the book that follows this comment is oddly proleptic. The sense of the synecdochic part as a fragment of the lost whole, the myth that lingers only as a spectral presence, falters under a social pressure (clearly felt by Apostolidis) to come up with solutions. The upshot of Apostolidis's synecdochic perspective is nothing short of anti-capitalist pedagogy. The "popular education culture percolating among day laborers today" might yield "generative themes" applicable to "precaritization writ large" (30). This is a commendable trajectory. But it extends synecdoche too far—to the point of extended metaphor. And this puts tremendous pressure on day laborers themselves.

12.

Ismael wants to go to San Francisco soon. It's easier to walk there, up and down the hills.

"When I have money, I'm going there," he says.

He lived there for three years, in the early 1990s. "Justo después del terremoto," he reminds me.

Just after the earthquake.

The city was still shaken when he arrived. The memories were live, unsettled, wounds healing into scars. The bridge collapsing, buildings crumpling like paper houses onto the street. His friend saw the streets crack open, pouring fire.

I don't bring up his death. I mention that it's nice and cool up there. He tells me there are days when you only see the sun once or twice, here or there, between the clouds.

I tell him that I last visited five years ago for a conference. I stayed with friends who were renting out a bungalow in Oakland for cheap. They were the only household on their block without

children, the only household that was white. The climate in Oakland was like the climate in Los Angeles, eerily cloudless, the sea breeze laced with smog. San Francisco felt like Boston.

"O, sí," he nods, "el clima es muy agradable en Oakland." He pauses. "I think it is something with the wind."

"Sí," I say, "something with the wind y las montañas también, but I don't know exactly."

He tells me he still has friends up there. He thinks there is *más trabajo allá*. That's what someone told him.

He mutters something I don't catch, something about Cesar Chavez Street. "¿Pero viste la gente?" he asks me, "the people, you saw them in the street, when you was there? When they looking for work?"

"Oh, sí," I say, "vi la gente en la calle. I saw them, los jornaleros" I pause. "But I was there many years ago."

He looks to the entrance. The *paletero* has parked his ice cream cart at the curbside and now laughs with the men playing cards.

"And you still want to talk with me, man?"

"Oh, sí, definitivamente. For sure. Si todavía estás disponible."

"Sí, yo puedo," he says, "but, I don' understand what you want to talking about. More about the work?"

"Bueno, yeah, work, but also tu vida." I am repeating myself, the rehearsed summary again, "tus experiencias, creencias, desafíos, lo que te importa. Eso tipo de cosa."

"Sí, sí," he nods. "I can talk about those things. ¿Podrías hablar mañana?"

"Yeah, for sure. ¿En la mañana?

"No," he says, "en la tarde. Como a la cinco." He tells me he will call if he is still at work.

13.

I am at the Getty, waiting for a friend who is running late and—though I don't know it yet—will soon cancel on me. Someone is always running late in Los Angeles. To be late is to keep to the time of the city, a time manically regulated by congested traffic and loose customs. Sometimes, both parties are delayed and, by a kind of Hegelian synthesis, the tension of blown plans evaporates into casual good fortune. A new frontier of time, West Coast time, is breached. Not today. Today, my East coast instincts have failed me, have left me to wait. I drift in and out of wings and pavilions, downstairs from a gallery of Old Masters into a room full of Baroque Italian furniture, before landing at the temporary exhibits. There are two.

The first, "Códice Maya de México: The Oldest Book of the Americas" is set in a dimly lit room with high ceilings: the architectural stylings of a crypt. A maze of red gallery walls beams with bold, explanatory captions ("Around 900 years ago… " one begins, and another, "The first astronomers… "). LCD panels cycle through footage of archaeological dig sites. Lexigraphs light up when large plastic buttons are pressed. A swarm of children has set upon the buttons, and the resultant light show (jaguar, bird, spirit, and human heads, evocative hands, and other icons, harder to discern in the blink of an instant) spells out the babble of a monstrous ignorance. I leave before seeing the codex.

"Visualizing the Virgin Mary" is less crowded. There are no screens or buttons or labyrinthine walls. The captions are written in small, legible fonts. There is a Flemish Mary from the early 1460s, a pale blonde mother holding a pale blond child, adorned with a golden crown and a royal blue robe, and surrounded by the golden flames of the sun. There is a Spanish Virgen de Guadalupe dated to 1779, a votive figure with silver skin and straightly parted hair the dark brown of both the Spaniard and the Nahua Indian. Around her image, saints, prophets, and angels pose among seven miniature

scenes of the Lady's appearances before Juan Diego, the Chichimec peasant to whom, it is said, she spoke in Nahuatl and who, the legend runs, she provided a bed of Castilian roses. Like the Flemish Mary, La Virgen stands atop a crescent moon. The moon floats over a church in Mexico City, the city where Juan Diego first heard her call out his name, atop the Hill of Tepeyac.

On the far wall of the gallery is a silver photograph of a man looking out over a dusty hill. His back is to the camera. His shirt is draped over his neck, revealing his wide, gleaming shoulders. A massive tattoo of Guadalupe runs the length of his spine, from the shirt down to his belt. According to the placard, the photograph was taken in Tijuana. "Immigrants frequently appeal to the Virgin in their prayers," the caption reads, "so seeing the well-known image may provide some comfort to those making the perilous and arduous journey." Above this description is a quote from the photographer, Graciele Iturbide: "Yo prefiero fotografiar al hombre en una manera más dignificado, independientemente de las injusticias." *I prefer to photograph the man in a more dignified manner, independently of the injustices.*

Dusk will fall soon. I wander from the courtyard down to the Central Garden, designed in the mid-1990s by Robert Irwin, an installation artist and member of California's "light and space" movement. Irwin once described his feat as "a sculpture in the form of a garden aspiring to be art." I am interested in the work of such aspiration, more in its troubles than in its triumphs. Irwin's phenomenological reductions, his experiments with optical illusion, geometrical edge, perceptual abstraction, must run with the change of the seasons. Narrow, obsessive control—an art set on managing the folds of consciousness itself—lives in the cosmic cycle.

The garden is overtly performative: a sloping, Escherine complex of gravel paths and stone walls built into the natural grade of the hill. It boasts a rolling lawn, a crown of flowering "trees" made

from rebar poles curved into "bowers" and heaped with begonia, over 500 species of succulents, shrubs and grass, and a babbling "stream" that flows down, unperturbed, into the main reflecting pool. "Pool" proves a rather loose term in this context, for what the river runs into is in fact an amphitheatrical basin adorned with circular azalea beds—a man-made archipelago of concentric rings just above the water level that function as the garden's gravitational center. Past the far edge of the pool, away from the begonias, the hills of Brentwood fade into the Pacific.

> *Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,*
> *And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,*
> *And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,*
> *The surface glittered out of heart of light,*
> *And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.*
> *Then a cloud passed, and the pool was empty.*
>
> \- T.S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton" ([1943] 1971, 36-41)

In the modern sensibility, Eden cannot return undisturbed. It must be forged through paradox: light and substance, surface and heart, the mystical lotus and the concrete pool. It is prone to appear in a flash, ethereal and pressurized as cloud cover. There is this, too, that we have learned from the Fall: "gardens are about both pleasure and power." This is not T.S. Eliot, but the sociologist Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo, author of a remarkable book titled *Paradise Transplanted: Migration and the Making of California Gardens*. California gardens, Hondagneu-Sotelo reminds us, are landscapes of migration, studded with immigrant plants and worked by immigrant hands. Immigrants are less the "uprooted" and "transplanted" than "transplanters." Human "cultures of nature" shift with the earthen course of human movement, enriching its soil. This is so for the suburban gardens of Los Angeles sprawl, for the community gardens of the barrio, and for Liu Fang Yuan, the Suzhou-style botanical garden at the Huntington Library, these being the subjects of *Paradise Transplanted*. It is so for the Getty.

Hondagneu-Sotelo's book is a disruptive archive, an album set against the popular garden media that "whet domestic garden yearnings with glossy photographs and with copy showcasing

'spectacular backyard wonderlands' and 'garden masterpieces'" (2014, 85). ("The invisibility of garden labor, Hondagneu-Sotelo notes elsewhere "is reproduced in garden books and magazines" (11)) These are images of catastrophic transmission, the kind Adorno bemoaned. The Frankfurt scholars would have found a saving grace in the community gardens in downtown Los Angeles, where, we are told, "*mujeres* weed, water, and cook… *creating new homeland tableaus*" (118).

This leads me to a familiar idea: that the transcendent has a history, that the heart of light flashes in worn hands, that this must be eternity enough.

I sit on a stone wall with my back to the pool, facing the metal bowers and the grassy slope. It is evening. Purple shadows shiver and soften the landscape, smudging the acute stone angles, mingling the boughs with the night air.

It is October. The changing light no longer beckons to the coming dusk but to the changing season. The perennials must be deadheaded, the dead leaves, raked and blown. I imagine obscure figures working the grounds, trimming the hedges, pulling the weeds, turning the mulch with the changing light. I hear the raking, the clipping, the trowel in the soil. I wonder what those hands might feel in the earth, what memories might stir, like worn, gentle fingers, in the purple hills behind me, blessed hills shading into the sea.

14.

He wants to go back to Seattle, where the people are more relaxed, he told me. He likes the fog and the rain.

He tells me he's been having transmission problems. Last week, he brought his car to a friend of a friend, who works as a mechanic down the street. It's too old to fix, he says. They don't make the parts anymore. Next month, another friend will be coming up from Guerrero in a better car. This friend had papers. They'll drive north together.

We talk about his sickness and his health and find ourselves back at his death. The hospital where they found nothing wrong.

"So, we almost like the cars," he says. "You know the cars, it's, for a mechanic, is more difficult find what's wrong when the car keep running, but when keep running it start to, to get the fail!"

We laugh. I tell him I once had a car that kept stalling. I brought it to tres mecánicos diferentes, but with no luck. The test drive was always clean.

"Yeah, man!" He went on, "and then it start to, to go again, and then like *that!* Oh, it's horrible! The more headache for the mechanic. Also for the doctors. It's same thing. They can find me, nothing."

I think about my old car. One night, on the Pacific Coast Highway, it refused to accelerate while I was driving to Long Beach. There had been an accident on the 405, stalling traffic on the 22 as far back as Orange. It was gray and drizzling. By the time I reached Seal Beach, the prospect of an open road had become so singularly attractive that I took the first exit. This was lucky. When the engine blew out, I was able to guide the car onto a side street, where I could park and curse at the dashboard. I don't know what would have happened if I had stayed on the freeway.

It took me three hours to get a tow to a garage down the street. They called the next morning. It was the transmission. A design flaw, multiple models affected. Ford was in the middle of a lawsuit. It would cost $7,500 to replace, more than I had paid for the car, and with no assurance that the replacement would work any better. I sold the car for scraps.

I didn't tell this part to Ismael. There are risks in this kind of talk, in stretching a metaphor too far.

15.

This is, as will already be apparent, an account of men. It is an account, to borrow a phrase from Eve Sedgwick, *between men,* of the words men share, among themselves and their God. It will be apparent that I am one of these men. It will be apparent that my words here comprise an amalgam of mythical and critical styles. The words are strewn about the world: exiled and semi-nomadic, luminously encrypted, charged fragments. This is a myth. The criticism might run as follows. How to position oneself in this fix? How to work traumatic memories into prophetic repair?

The critique must be internal to the myth, a myth perpetually rewritten, turned upon and "othered" from itself. One word for this writing is allegory (from the Greek *allos*, meaning "other" and *agoreuo*, meaning "speak"). As critics after Benjamin have elaborated, the distance of allegorical sign from theological ideal suggests a crisis. It will come as little surprise that many of these critics are writing on Latin America. Against the obliterating power of authoritarian rule and the marketplace, the charged icons of allegory flash—like photographs—the image of what has been lost, the void left by God.[xii] An "allegorical way seeing" means tracing the light in the dark.

Benjamin's most famous icon, his truest to the allegorical mood, is the "Angel of History." This is the angel inspired by Paul Klee's minimalist paragon, "Angelus Novus," the angel borne ahead by the winds of time into a catastrophic future, looking back upon the hope that lights the past as glimmering ruins. The angel is a myth-fragment set against mythology. It patently refuses to speak.

"An angel is a messenger, but the image is the message here," writes Geoffrey Hartman of this peculiarly modern talisman, "Stasis and stare predominate: the mouth itself stares" ([1980] 2007, 76). The features are boxy and childlike. Klee's painting "has very little image to it" (79), and what there is seems clumsy and obscure. "The signifying limbs of that angel," says Hartman, "are scrolls, didactic yet impotent" (ibid.). The "image of the image-in-exile" (77) is a mute palimpsest, an icon with no referent. Denied speech, it can only echo, shadow, trope.

For the deeply Hebraic Hartman, the angel represents "the pathos… of the Jew who is not allowed voice or image except in the form of commentary and quotation" (78). Criticism becomes midrash, "haunted by an archaic debt, by the eccentric riches of allegorical exegesis in all its curiously learned, or enthusiastic and insubordinate, modes" (85). I have mentioned the drift of these modes into Latin America, where they take on less strictly Biblical forms. The angel as a composite of lines and grotesque features is still too singular here, too symbolically enclosed. Criticism must work not merely to salvage or recapture. It must remake from the near complete wreckage of a past way of life.

Perhaps this what Gloria Anzaldúa ([1987] 2012) finds in the gaping maw of the Olmec serpent. The serpent is a frozen symbol of painful turning—the shamanic path of catharsis. After the Aztec wars and the Hispanic conquests, this mouth, too, has been silenced, *made other*. Anzaldúa works after its recovery, the redemption of the serpent as a *daemon* or ambivalent prophet: like the angel, neither wholly of this world or that, evocative of the speech it forecloses. She feels fangs in her mouth, crowing her "wild tongue." She is swallowed and dismembered by the Serpent Mother, *Coatlicue* in a shamanic ritual of poetic rebirth. At night, she hears *Cibuacoatl*, the Serpent Woman who roams the empty streets in a white dress, howling and weeping "as if demented" ([1987] 2012, 57).

It is significant that Anzaldúa sees *Cibuacoatl* as the predecessor of La Llorona, the ghostly mother wailing for her children, the children who (because, diverging accounts tell us, they were illegitimate, or starving, or because her husband loved them more than her) she drowned in the Rio

Grande. The weeping woman is an allegorical obstacle in the way of neat divides between love and mourning, catastrophe and hope. Her negative and dispersed presence, signaled by her echoic cries for what she has lost, discloses only "*fragmented* and *incomplete* genealogies." I quote Luis D. León (2004, 15), here, from his sprawling *La Llorona's Children: Religion, Life, and Death in the U.S.–Mexican Borderlands*. "La Llorona's children are deceased but vivid actors," writes León, "who motivate and perform religious improvisation and change—a religious poetics" (21). The children, in this case, are the fractured lives and beliefs of borderlands religion. Repair in this case is not a matter of recovery. The lost children can't be called home. They must be given new inhabitation, built from the shards of a former habitat, of lost holdings divided and defaced.

> *Like every woman who maters to me, I have had to search for her in the rubble of history.*
>
> - Sandra Cisneros, "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" (1997)

Like Anzaldúa and so many Chicana feminists after her, León names La Llorona as the third mother of the Chicana trinity, along with Guadalupe and "La Malinche" (the latter being the translator and concubine of Hernán Cortés, whose gifts for survival have earned her national infamy and a cult following among Chicana *feministas*). If La Llorona is a mediating spirit, she assumes this role problematically, paradoxically. In Genesis 1:2, the Spirit hovers over the void, facing the dark waters, ready to give them face, to let them the light of reflection. La Llorona is a void unto herself: she must light her way in the darkness of her making.

Light in the Dark/Luz en Lo Oscuro. This is the title of Anzaldúa's posthumous opus, her final, emblematic borderland. It is a figure of waking in dreaming, life in death. So is it a calling to language in a world where expression seems hopelessly remote, where words work only to blind. It is the spectral light of La Llorona. It is the light of the Aztec moon goddess and the chief symbolic resource of Anzaldúa's mature philosophy: *Coyolxāuhqui*. It was *Coyolxāuhqui* who attempted to murder her

mother, *Cōātlīcue*, at the foot of *Coatepec*, the Serpent Mountain. It was *Coyolxāuhqui* who was decapitated by her brother *Huītzilōpōchtli*, the hummingbird. At *Cōātlīcue's* wishes, *Huītzilōpōchtli* cast *Coyolxāuhqui's* head into the night sky, where it became the moon. He threw her body down the mountain, where it shattered into a thousand pieces, inaugurating the practice of human sacrifice. So began the height of Aztec civilization. *Huītzilōpōchtli* became the sun, guiding the Aztecs into the Flowery War and the birth of a new state, his light dimly reflected by his sister in the night sky.

> *La Llorona's wailing in the night for her lost children has an echoing note in the wailing or mourning rites performed by women as they bade their sons, brothers and husbands goodbye before they left to go to the 'flowery wars.' Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman's feeble protest when she has no other recourse.*
>
> - Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* ([1987] 2012, 55)

"Her face is travelling; travailing… it cannot fix itself as mortal or immortal; it is eloquently mute… the mother's voice is featured, visualized, through the silent sound of images that try at once to render and to still that voice." Geoffrey Hartman (1981, 152) wrote these words on Moneta, the lunar goddess of memory in John Keats' "The Fall of Hyperion." They might have been said of *Coyolxāuhqui*. Like Moneta, she is a wordless riddle, a stilled icon of change. She is, like Moneta, "white light… moonlight, reflected light—not the sunlight of primary experience, but the light of experience reflected on in conscious apprehension."[xiii] The moon daughter is hot and cold with grief, blinded and alight. Hers is a mother tongue still capable of wounding, of moving from estrangement—the light into which we are ripped as children—into pure otherness, a *noche oscura*.

Perhaps this is where criticism lives: "on strange figures, on imaginative otherness."[xiv] Perhaps this is where the turn of the verse achieves its strongest expression: a border and a bridge. "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression," Emmanuel Levinas wrote in a well-cited passage "in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it… this also means: to be taught… it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain."

The experience of the shock, of spectral cries overflowing, signals the life of language, language pushing past itself: conversion. This is as much a theological as a literary claim. Can it be made anthropological?

In response to an earlier draft of this discussion, one more steeped in European philosophy, a mentor and friend of mine wrote this: "You do invoke these 'mother' images, alongside Anzaldúa, which almost misses the mark. The overall impression is that the men are the ones with the ideas worth engaging (active), while the women are the ones with the symbolism worth absorbing (passive)." This is a challenge as honest as it is difficult. Allow me to explain. Reading the comment, I immediately thought of the photograph in the Getty, the man with the tattoo of la Virgen on his back. I thought of Abelardo praising Guadalupe, "nuestra madre tierra." *Our Mother Earth*. I thought of Ismael explaining what a *curandero* had told him after his soul had returned: his heart problems started in the womb, a result of his mother's distress at his father's abuse. I thought of these lines from Octavio Paz:

> *… wake me up,*
> *I've already been born:*
> *life and death*
> *make a pact with you, lady of night,*
> *tower of clarity, queen of dawn,*
> *lunar virgin, mother of mother sea,*
> *body of the world, house of death,*
> *I've been falling endlessly since my birth,*
> *I fall in myself without touching bottom,*
> *gather me in your eyes, collect*
> *my scattered dust and reconcile my ashes,*
> *bind these unjointed bones, blow over*
> *my being, bury me deep in your earth,*
> *and let your silence bring peace to thought*
> *that rages against itself…*
>
> - "Piedra del sol," translated by Eliot Weinberger

Female "symbols worth absorbing" are general in the religious landscape of Mexico and Central America. The trouble, as I have said, and as Anzaldúa well knew, is in moving from image to action, from myth to critique. León knew this too. In *La Llorona's Children*, he rewrites the wailing mother as "'El Lloron,' or 'the weeping man,' a penitent figure who repents and weeps for the cultural sins of machismo and seeks acceptance and love" (2004, 95). This is a man sympathetic to Guadalupe, a man who partakes of the Passion, who cries the tears of the crucified Jesus. He is a figure of what bell hooks called "men who love": "men… not ashamed to express their love of God openly and to shed ecstatic tears… the sensitive, soulful, shy men… looked down upon by the patriarchy" (2002, 162). In Mexico, such men might be called *mandilónes*, referring to a *mandil*, or apron, and meaning "henpecked." Yet it is not so simple. The labels are vague. The roles men assume are prone to shift with the territory.

The anthropologist Matthew Gutmann observed as much while researching "the meanings of macho" in Mexico City during the 1990s. Adding to the *macho/mandilón* divide the newer labels of *ni macho, ni mandilón* ("neither macho nor mandilón") and men who have sex with men, Gutmann concluded that "No man today in Santo Domingo fits neatly into any of the four categories, even at specific moments, much less throughout the course of his life" ([1996] 2007, 238). As with most good ethnography, theory and data align here in the geometry of method. "My approach," wrote Gutmann, "has been to study men and women who typical *because* they are enigmatic" (5). Later, in a chapter on fatherhood, he continued: "guided by Margaret Mead's method of the 'negative insistence and the 'anthropological veto,' I began looking less for consistent patterns of fathering and more for differences and 'exceptions'" (51).

Call this approach allegorical. There is no ideal "type" under which certain tokens may neatly fall. There are only "exceptions," disparate icons, negative power, the chance for provisional repair.

What count as "ethnographic facts" are, in fact, interruptions—like mournful cries or a silent embrace, interventions in the narrative line. These are moments of conversion. They prompt our conversation.

To assume this logic for one's own, to fashion one's faith in the image of the weeping and loving Lloron, or to seek comfort in totalizing symbols (the virgin mother, the macho man, Golden California)? It will be clear that this is a choice equally of humanity as of divinity. It will be clear that it is hardly a choice at all, closer to a question of faith. And *this*, I have said, is a matter of perspective, of mooring images and unstable grounds. With Abelardo, Edwin, Héctor, Martin, and Ismael, I test those grounds.

PART II:

LISTENING

ABELARDO

Esta manía de saberme ángel,
Sin edad,
Sin muerte en que vivirme,
Sin piedad por mi nombre
Ni por mis huesos que lloran vagando.

- Alejandra Pizarnik, "Exilio"[1] (1996, 1-5)

1.

I met Abelardo one morning in the early winter of 2019. It had rained heavily the night before and the curbsides were flooded and clogged with branches and palm husks and swollen plastic bags. The pollen and dirt had been washed from the trucks where some of the men slept, exposing the dents and the rusting wheel wells. I saw him pulling a frond out from one of the wells and onto the mulch bed, talking loudly to no one in particular. What first struck me was his voice, thin but rhythmic—the voice of a child. "Ese maldito…" he said, dragging the frond behind a bush. "A la verga."

There was also the matter of his figure. He wasn't much taller than 5 feet. He wore a baseball hat, a t-shirt, sagging pants. From a distance, one might have mistaken him for a teenage boy.

One afternoon, I saw one of the other men grab him by his backpack and spin him around like a plaything. I thought to jump in but heard them laughing together.

[1] "This mania of knowing I am an angel,/Without age,/Without a death in which to live,/Without pity for my name/Nor for my bones which roam around crying." (Alejandra Pizarnik, "Exile," translated by Frank Graziano and María Rosa Fort)

The men called him "la hormiga." The ant.

When he came here, to California, he was very much still a child. He had left home almost two decades earlier, at age 16. "Porque me quería secuestra," he told me once, "Creyeron que tengo dinero. ¿Sabes que significa secuestra?"

I nodded. "Sí, secuestra, kidnap. They wanted your money."

He was from Guatemala, the only *guatemalteco* I met at the lot. He had flat, broad indigenous features darkened brown by the sun. Over the months and years, he taught me a number of words in Q'eqchi', all of which I now forget save for *b'anyox* (pronounced "ban-ti-osh"), meaning thank you.

His older brother was able to stay, he told me. But he was "más chiquito," more vulnerable.

When he left, his mother told him to marry an American girl.

He travelled to the D.F. on La Bestia, then took another train to the border. He entered into the U.S. in the trunk of a van that was stopped by border patrol in the early hours of the morning. The passengers were made to sit in a line on the side of the road, at which point he broke free and scrambled into the depthless black of the desert. When the sun rose, a local *ranchero* found him and asked if he was Mexican. He said that he was and the *ranchero* asked him which state. He answered "Oaxaca" and the *ranchero* pressed him on where in Oaxaca. The *ranchero* noted his accent and called him a liar.

"Debes haber tenido mucho miedo," I said.

"Sí, tuve mucho," he nodded, accepting my awkward phrasing. "Lloré. Porque pensé que iba a perder el dinero, mi padre me lo dejó, me prestó el dinero."

I was very scared. I cried. I thought I would lose the money my father gave me.

The *ranchero* asked him for one hundred dollars in exchange for a safe trip up to Phoenix. When they arrived, the man placed the money back in his hand and muttered, "no la cagues."

Don't fuck this up.

He had many parables like this, allegories divorced from the realm of ideas save for a sweep of moral certitude that came and went like the wind.

Here is another. In Phoenix, he met a couple who drove him the six hours to Los Angeles. I asked him why they did so. "Eran santos," he said. "Good people, like you."

There is something else about Abelardo. He drank. By this, I mean that he was, by prevailing cultural and medical standards, an addict. I mean that his eyes were red around the edges and that his eyelids drooped and that he laughed at odd moments. I mean that I never saw him sober, nor did I ever find him so *bien a verga* that casual conversation proved impossible. As with most people in his position (I have known quite a few), what had once served as an escape from certain material facts of life now reached to the level of biorhythm. His drinking was—like the bad air and the nerves—irrevocably, insidiously part of him.

At some point between winter and summer of 2019, he stopped sleeping on the discarded gym mats behind the Body Works and began sleeping in the park. At some point in 2020, he moved from the park to the back of Héctor's truck, where he had a pillow and a tarp for shelter. It was around this time that he stopped taking hard drugs. It was Héctor's idea. Héctor had just quit drinking.

2.

Abelardo was born in Alta Verapaz in 1987, a pivotal time in the history of Guatemala. The period of state-sanctioned genocide known as "La Violencia" had peaked earlier in the decade, and guerilla resistance was faltering. With the army in more or less total control of the country, the predictable shows of liberal benevolence had begun. Vinicio Cerezo had been democratically elected president in 1986. In August of the following year, two months after Abelardo was born, Cerezo signed the Esquipulas II Accord, also known as the Central American Peace Accord. It would be one of many such documents to come, small steps towards "progress" understood in terms of publicity rather than reform. There was the Oslo Accord, the Mexico Accord, the Querétaro Agreement, and the Framework Agreement for the Resumption of Negotiations between the Government of Guatemala and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). The final chapter in this legislative exercise, the 1996 Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace, came at the heels of the Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights, the Agreement on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Agreement on Socio-economic Aspects and the Agrarian Situation, and the Agreement on the Basis for the Legal Integration of the URNG, among other provisos.

"The fronts had lost popular support definitively by the late 1980s," historian Deborah T. Levenson writes of the guerillas, "and the 1996 Peace Accords ended an armed struggle that was already over" (2013, 39). Read one way, the Accords marked a narrative shift familiar to the story of Latin America in the late 20th century: from local dictatorship to domination by the global market, "neofascism" to "neoliberalism," the violence of endless war to that of endless "development." But Levenson is after something subtler, something beyond the kind of "out of the frying pan" twist fashionable among academic critics. Her sensibility is not ironic but tragic. With the Peace Accords, a faltering romantic spirit was dealt its final blow. A total sphere of existence turned to dust.

> … what ended with the Peace Accords was more than the civil war. A way of knowing the world and acting within it had been shattered… The ability to give voice, the "euphoria of ethical activism," the existence of a sense of historical purpose on a grand scale, and the vivacity and hope that animated the popular movement had prevented people from succumbing to fear for generations; then, abruptly, all that life was lost and death emerged exultant… what could have been memories of deaths that serve to secure revolutionary victory now elicited despair and anger because so many died in vain. (22-23)

What makes Levenson's *Adiós Niño: The Gangs of Guatemala City and the Politics of Death* so devastating and, by way of this devastation, so relevant to Abelardo (though he did not grow up in "Guate," as locals call the city, and was not a member of a gang) is evident in the structure of the title itself. Before it is a study of gangs or politics or death, it is a study of youth, of young lives bade farewell. It is a history of a national *zeitgeist*.

When Levenson visited Guatemala City in 1988, she met a generation of young people not so different than their peers in the United States. Local *mareros*, most in their teens, willingly shared their tastes in music (predominantly British rock, including Led Zeppelin and Jethro Tull) and clothing (Levi's, Nike, and Reebok had become synonymous with urban youth). They spoke about their adoring mothers and abusive fathers, about love and sex (including gay sex) and friendship. They bragged about robbing from "los burgueses" (the bourgeois), a loose expression of their radical heritage. These children, Levenson explains, "came out of the generative environment of the revolutionary and popular urban movement, a milieu that included an anti-capitalist discourse that emphasized morality of class solidarity and social equality" (73). Though apolitical, the *mareros* of the 1980s still "had a measure of critical consciousness" (ibid.) that aligned them with the struggle of the poor. Levenson recalls them as "calm, well spoken, and thoughtful… Concerned with love and acceptance, they did not want to be misunderstood by us or the media, and they were usually eager to talk" (61). They were, in other words, legibly adolescent, as much in their unshakable ideals as in their

contradictory behavior. They *were* often selfish, there *was* sexual abuse, and they *did*, in many cases, steal from the poor. But they believed.

By the time Abelardo came of age, just after the signing of the Peace Accords, matters had changed. This was also the time at which Levenson returned to Guatemala City, now indurate with silence: "the youth with whom I spoke in the late 1990s and 2000s did not look to talk, much less interpret. It would be an understatement to say that the language of class had disappeared among the postwar mareros" (90). Levenson's rhetoric here shades close to the Kafkaesque despair which Ordóñez injects into his day laborer ideal. The ordered universe of concepts distorts into conspiracy: a conspiring *situación*. As Levenson writes of the post-war *cuidad*:

> Without some community in which to develop a collective understanding of how mistrust, uncertainties, anger, hopelessness, and fear are grounded in specific events and people, all these sensations became unspecific and even more overwhelming because they seemed to have no roots outside a blur called 'the situation' that was out of their control. (46)

Talk had ceded to silence and life, to death. The new youth in the new gangs exemplified what Levenson calls "necroliving," a term all the more perverse for its stark literalism, its refusal of paradox. "Postwar mareros," Levenson explains, "control life through their power to take it away… Murder becomes 'natural death,' the normal way to die. Making the living dead starts to seem to be what humans do to one another, by their very nature" (7). The formation of this world was the formation of Abelardo's youth. It is the world that tried to kill him, that continues to threaten.

It follows that a life of death should haunt those who live it, that the mark of death should be hard to shake off, that the ghosts should be quick to return. Abelardo was, certainly, traumatized. He had escaped the gangs but not the terror, not the bursts of panic in the night. For some, the story might end here, at damnation. Not for Abelardo.

He read his suffering through that of another young man, a man born into poverty, exile, and wandering and marked for death.

> *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*
>
> \- *Galatians 2:20*

3.

Three moments come immediately to mind. The first is this. It was the late summer of 2021 and we were sitting on the curb of a traffic island—specifically, an island set in the middle of a major intersection where the on and off ramps to the freeway ran (through an infrastructural contortion typical of Southern California) parallel into a major boulevard. Sometimes men sold flowers here and sometimes people waved signs for Jesus and sometimes Abelardo came with his own sign and panhandled. His sign read HAVE A NICE DAY.

He had fallen from his bike and hurt his leg. This is why he couldn't work, why he needed to beg. I learned this when he asked about my friend, Micaela, who had often come with me to the parking lot to pass out water and food. She had since completed her MSN at UC Irvine and moved to San Diego.

"¡Ah, enfermera!" He lifted his shaking hand to his heart and closed his eyes and smiled. "Yo necesito una enfermera. Por mi corazón."

I need a nurse. For my heart.

I chuckled and told him he'd find a nice girl. He reached to his opposite arm and pulled up his sleeve, revealing a small dark injection site.

"¡Acabo de ver a un enfermero!" he said. "Me clavó una aguja en el brazo."

I just saw a nurse. She stuck a needle in my arm.

He had called Héctor when he fell. His friend had found him hobbled on the side of the road under the wreck of a bicycle and driven him to the community clinic. One of the nurses was young and pretty and the other was old and mean and had abandoned him, he said, in a room with no windows.

"Pasaron mi a través de un tubo." He mimed the passage of his body through a CT scan with his hand. "Una radiografía."

They told him it was a sprain and instructed him to rest. They asked if he was vaccinated. He told them he was not and "luego me la dieron."

Then they gave it to me.

I told him that he'd need a second shot to be fully protected.

"¡No!" He made a shivering motion with his arms and shoulders. "Porque me enfermó. Estuve temblando. Salió mi color."

It made me sick. I was shaking. I grew pale.

I mentioned that this meant the vaccine was working but he shook his head and said he wouldn't do it again. I told him I liked his sign. He said that a man had come by and given him the cardboard and a marker to write his message.

"Fue gabacho, y me trajo el cartón y lo cortó por la mitad allí."

It was a white guy, and he brought me the cardboard and cut it in half over there.

He pointed to one of the warehouses on the opposite side of the intersection.

Looking back to the road, he closed his eyes and announced that there are many people like this, "gente que viene aquí y no me importa quienes son, si son gabachos, güeros, latinos, lo que sea, vienen aquí para ayudarme." He told me that I was one of these people, *people who come and I don't care if they're white, Latino, or whatever, they come to help*, and gestured to a second sign—the other half of the cardboard—set on the concrete behind him. It featured the same message, followed by a smiley face.

"Toma ese," he instructed me, "y deseamos a todos que tengan un buen día."

Take that, and we'll wish everyone a nice day.

The light at the intersection had turned red. I held up the sign for the drivers to see. A woman in a sedan glanced at us and smiled before looking back to the light. I noticed a rosary dangling from her rearview mirror.

"Hey, lady!" Abelardo shouted, pointing to the rosary, but she devoutly stared ahead. She stared for well over a minute, until the light turned green.

"Debe ser católica," I said.

"¡Sí!," he chirped, still looking at the street, registering her departure, "para que Dios esté siempre con ella."

So that God is always with her.

Turning back to me, he pulled a string necklace out from under his shirt. A fabric patch of cloth embroidered with a golden cross was attached to the string.

"Mira esto. Es una…," he paused. "Como seguridad." He reached behind his neck to reveal an identical patch on the opposite end of the string. "Es escapulario. Porque tiene los dos. Es lo que te cuida."

Check this out. It's a… For safety. It's a scapular. Because it has both patches. It takes care of you."

A *mujer* had given it to him after he helped her load some "cositas" into her car at the Builders Pro. She had called him "mi amor" and had said that he reminded her of her son.

He turned the cloth patch over in his hands. "Te protege. No es una placa de oro, pero no me importa."

It protects you. It's not a gold plate, but I don't care.

It was at this point that he remembered he needed to call his mother.

The second moment came earlier, in July. It made sense only later, after my notes had settled into a nagging, migratory presence, drifting from my desk to my kitchen table to my couch, from this drawer to that, from the sleeve of my backpack to the back seat of my car. By this time also, my reading had come, through a kind of weak Christian mimesis, to center on the letter G—not as in God but as in Galeano, Goizueta, Gustavo Gutiérrez.

Here is how it went. I was sitting with Héctor in the bed of his truck when Abelardo appeared from behind a line of cars and called out my name, waving his phone in the air. He had something to show me.

What he wanted to show me was an app called "Verso del Día." On the screen of his phone was a Bible verse set over a stock image of a shimmering lake. Today's verse was a favorite of his, Marcos 4:24: "También les decía: Cuidaos de lo que oís. Con la medida con que midáis, se os medirá, y aún más se os dará."

And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you."

He told me that listening "es lo más importante." If you listened closely, you could hear God in the plants, in the soil, in the air. I asked Héctor what he thought of this.

"Sí, escuchar," he nodded, "es lo más importante."

I took this chance to pose a question which had troubling me. I repeat that it was July 2021. The stay-at-home order had been lifted six months earlier. Mask mandates had assumed the terminal status of "guidelines" contingent upon "common sense." The jobs had yet to come back to the parking lot, but the church groups had. They were back at it, organizing prayer circles in exchange for tortillas and chips with salsa. The evangelical preacher was back at it too, belting drab prophecies into his microphone. (I say "drab" not because the prophecies were vulgar—although they were—but because they were too late. The plague had already come.)

My question was this. Must one go to church to have faith in God?

"Sí," Abelardo nodded, "respeto la iglesia." Noting the package of water in the truck bed, he abruptly went on, "la cosa más importante es cuando tienes una agua, dale una agua."

He set down his bag and pulled out a beer and continued. "Sí," he cracked the tab, "es necesario visitar el templo de dios. Jesús es humilde. Nació en las naturales. No tuvo zapatos y es perfecto. Llevó sandalias."

Respect the church. When you have water, give water. Visit the temple of God. Jesus is humble. He was born in nature. He wore sandals, not shoes. He was perfect.

These were fragments of myth, a myth fractured and ruined by the work of centuries, retrievable only in silence, by listening.

I jumped down from the truck and handed him his phone. I pointed to his sneakers and to my and Héctor's boots and asked if we were sinners for our footwear.

"!Ay, Timoteo!" he sniggered before growing serious and looking me in the eye.

"¿Sabes la cosa que no comprendo?," he asked. "Las mujeres que van a la iglesia y se maquillan. No es humilde. Tratan de ir a la iglesia como una fiesta cada domingo. ¿Por qué necesitas llevar ropa bonita para escuchar la palabra de Dios?"

You know what I don't understand? The women who go to church and put on makeup. It's not humble. They go to church like every Sunday is a party. Why do you need to wear nice clothes to hear the word of God?

His complaint was peculiar. The other men joked and grumbled about beautiful houses that no one seemed to live in, about rich kids speeding down the coast in custom cars. They caviled about modern "American" women, Chicanas who didn't want to marry or have kids. I had never heard anyone take issue with women who dressed for church.

"¡No es humilde!," he announced, pulling down a set of chairs from the truck. "¡Se maquillan! ¡Ponen maquillaje!"

It's not humble! They put on makeup! They put makeup on!

He unfolded one of the chairs for me. "Nosotros son pecadores porque se sacó sus zapatos," he said as I sat. "Jesús es amor. No tiene culpa. Hacía un milagro. Nos dio todo." He paused. His voice cracked as he whispered, "y qué? En frente de su madre. Lloro."

We are sinners, for he took off his shoes. Jesus is love. He is not to blame. He performed a miracle. He gave us everything, and what? In front of his mother, he wept.

Shifting in the nylon straps of the chair, I thought of the famous image from John 19:26, of Jesus crying out from the cross, "Woman, behold, your son!" I thought of the figure of the witness (of such currency, so ideally marketable, in anthropology over the past decade), of the witness as a figure of care. I thought of the women putting on their makeup and their Sunday dresses, calling down the hall for their children to hurry up, straightening the children's collars and fixing their buttons on the way out the door. I thought about listening, "lo más importante."

This was before I knew that Abelardo called his mother every week, before I learned what she had told him when he left.

As for the third moment, it was September of that same year, a lazy Saturday afternoon. I found Abelardo sitting in the shade with Martín and Edwin. None of them had gotten work. I mentioned to Abelardo that I hadn't seen him recently and he told me he had been working in a factory "de Corona" during the week. I asked how he was getting all the way to Corona. He laughed and said that he walked to the factory, just down the street. He was packaging bottles.

I had been talking to Edwin about his brother, who was having legal trouble, when Abelardo interrupted, waving his phone at me.

"¡Oye Tim, mira esto!"

He showed me a picture of a young girl wearing a backpack. She was outside, in front of a crowd of other children, already a half step towards joining them. The lower half of her face was covered by a mask. You could see by her eyes that she was smiling.

"Fue esta mañana," he said. "Hoy era su primer día de escuela. First day of school."

He told me he didn't think it was necessary to "poner mascaras a los niños, por la respiración," but I assured him there was no risk. I asked him to remind me how old she was.

"Tiene cinco años," he said. "Five years."

"¡Oh!" I exclaimed "¡Así que realmente era su primer día de escuela! ¡Felicidades!"

"!Sí!" he laughed. "Está en kínder."

I asked if he had sent the picture to his mother. He shook his head.

"I send her pictures when I have more money," he stated blankly in English.

4.

Héctor was quiet. He knew how to listen. He would listen and Abelardo would talk. This is how it went.

He seemed to live at the blurred edge of patience, where curiosity shades into resignation. He paid attention to the details—of Abelardo's stories as of mine—without the expectation that they lead anywhere. He was prone to nod in agreement. "Yes, very slow," he would say when I voiced my concern over the lack of jobs, or noted that this winter, in particular, seemed to be crawling by. When I said there were problems with immigration policy in this country, he made a thumbs down. "Sí, hay problemas." I said that I hoped Biden would win the election. "I love Biden," he responded.

"De los males, el menor," I said.

"Sí," he said, "el menor."

He had glassy eyes and a round, stubbled face and curly hair that burst out from under his hat. He was heavyset and his spine was curved and he had powerful, sloping shoulders. They called him "el búfalo."

"They're really cute together," a volunteer once said to me of the two men at an outreach event. We were passing out water, oranges, and handouts on avoiding wage theft. Héctor had offered a string of "thank yous" and Abelardo had asked the volunteer if she had a boyfriend. I told her their nicknames as we walked off.

"¡Vaya!," she laughed, "¡Que lindo!"

When Abelardo forgot his phone in the bathroom at the Northgate Market, it was Héctor who drove him back to look for it. When they couldn't find the phone, it was Héctor drove him to Walmart so that he could buy a new one. When Abelardo felt sick in his stomach, Héctor drove him to the San Clemente, "porque el aire, en la playa, te hace bien."

The air on the beach does you good.

When the other men made fun of Abelardo, mocking the sneakers I had given him, the two relocated to the far entrance. They stayed there, by the Body Works, away from the main group.

"Nos hemos separado de los demás," Héctor told me, gesturing to the men across the parking lot, then pointing to Abelardo. "Ellos son malos para él. Hay mala gente, hay mala gente. Bad people."

The men had said the sneakers made him look like *Tribilín*.

"Sí, Goofy," I said. "In English, se llama Goofy."

"No son zapatos Tribilín," Abelardo snapped. "Son Converse."

He showed me an image on his phone to prove his point. It was an animated GIF of a scene from a classic Disney cartoon, one of those made in the 40s. Goofy and Donald walked in lockstep, each with a mop over his shoulder and bucket in his hand.

"No me veo así," he said.

I don't look like that.

It occurred to me that this was the new phone, the phone he had bought earlier that week. New phone and new shoes. I told him the others were jealous. Thank God for Héctor, I added.

"!Sí!" he giggled, looking to his friend. "Es mi rey!"

Héctor blushed and shook his head, "no, no… "

"¡Sí, en serio! Es mi compañero," Abelardo continued, "Somos compañeros, Tim."

I asked him how his family was. He told me he couldn't call his mother this week because of "lo que pasa con mi phone."

"Es mi culpa," he said, looking back down at the screen, the GIF still open.

He is my king. We're buddies. It's my fault.

5.

It is March 6th, 2020. It is 5:20 PM. Ismael is charging his phone in the cab of a truck that belongs to someone named Diego who isn't here right now and who won't be back, I'm told, until late tonight. Abelardo is perched on the panel of the truck bed. He is wearing a Ferrari hat and a shirt with the words "BEST DAD EVER" spelled out across the chest. I ask him how its going at the Chinese restaurant. He tells me he quit. They lowered his pay to 10 dollars an hour for a 10-hour shift.

"Porque lo que pasaron es que me quieren pagar diez la hora," he says. Diez la hora, y entro a las once y salgo a las nueve." He yawns and shrugs, "con chinos, es así."

Ten an hour, and I go in at eleven and leave at nine… with Chinese, it's like that.

"Son malditos," Ismael chimes in.

They're devils.

I ask what they paid him before.

"Mínimo, trece," he says. "Thirteen, mínimo, en la cocina."

I mention that they could get fined for paying so little. He tells me they worked him harder than the other staff. They made him do all the dishes, scrub the kitchen down by himself.

"Yo solito," he says. "Y el dishwasher. Todo el trabajo, querían que yo hago. Limpiar el baño, limpiar todo."

"¿Todo de," Ismael interjects, "de fregaban, los cabrones?"

"Sí."

"¡Hijos de puta!"

All of the scrubbing, the bastards? Sons of bitches!

He giggles and counts off his jobs on his fingers: "limpiaba el restaurante primero, luego el dishwasher, el baño, tuve que cambiar la bolsa de basura, y, al final, tengo que mopear, y si no hay, no hay trabajo, tengo que limpiar las máquinas, todo. No me dejan chance de, de respirar."

I cleaned the restaurant, the dishwasher, the bathroom. I took out the trash. I mopped. If there is no work, I have to clean the machines. Everything.

They don't give me a chance to breathe.

He quit two days ago. He quit after pouring himself a soda and being told that it would come out of his salary, now three dollars below the California minimum wage.

"Y luego agarré una soda," he tells us. "Me dijo, me dijo el chino, *no tienes que agarrar una soda*. ¿Qué?" He scoffs, reenacting the exchange. "Agarré la soda, *paff*, lo tiré en frente. Agarré mi mandil. Quita tu mandil, muy bien."

And then I grabbed a soda. He told me, the Chinese guy told me, you don't get to have a soda. What? I grabbed the soda, paff, threw it in front of him. I grabbed my apron. Take your apron, very good.

Ismael is cracking up. Abelardo scoffs, "¡Ay, sí, por una soda! ¡Está llorando por una soda! Y en frente de ellos, *¡poom!* lo abrí."

Oh yeah, for a soda! He's crying for a soda! And in front of them, poom! I threw it open.

I chuckle and shake my head. It is an equivocal gesture, noncommittal, a nod to basic moral laws in conflict.

Blessed are you who are poor

Woe to you who laugh now

The racism is troubling because it is banal; its calculus, simple to understand. I imagine Abelardo slamming his drink into the trash, ripping off his apron and handing it to "el chino." Something about the image troubles me, an aesthetic thread running through its layers of violence and pain. What troubles me is the image itself, how easily it comes, how readily it sticks in the mind. It is a scene from a TV sitcom.

> On the street, color is part of the game and learning to be racist "American style" is essential for survival… Jornaleros… find themselves in a racialized world of exclusion, sharing and vying for the urban spaces they inhabit with other racially scripted minorities… Particular takes on what characterizes *morenos*, *chinos*, and *árabes* show the effects of urban segregation, where migrants must live in dangerous neighborhoods and are separated into ethnic niches… Racial segregation is thus structurally imposed by the conditions of relative marginality of the various groups, who internalize the difference and develop a high degree of self-segregation.
>
> - Juan Thomas Ordóñez, *Jornalero* (2015, 17, 115-16, 136)

He tells us that he demanded a ride home from his *patrón*, who refused, saying he didn't have time.

"Okay, then," he continues his reenactment. "Me tienes que llevar o si no, un Uber, uh huh, o taxi. Uber o taxi, if you no have time."

You have to take me, or else an Uber, uh huh, or taxi. Uber or taxi, if you don't have time

Ismael looks to me, still laughing. "Culeros, we call them culeros. Bad people. You know, what the Chinese do? They cry also for the, when you cut the lemons? Throw, throw away the rest, you know, the, the skin? They cry you, man. *Oh no, you can't throw away this!*—like that."

"!Sí!," Abelardo says, "y cuando no hay trabajo, como las tres de la tarde, no hay trabajo, tienes que hacer algo, tienes que limpiar la machina, o tienes que hacer algo, limpiar el piso. Tienes que inventarle algo para que no te quedes así, parado. Y el patrón dime, *hey, hagas eso! hagas eso!"*

Yes! And when there is no work, like three in the afternoon, you have to do something, you have to clean the machine, or you have to clean the floor. You have to invent something so you don't stay like that, standing still. And the boss tells me, hey, do that! Do that!"

Ismael snorts and tells us he's going back to his car to get something to eat. I ask Abelardo if he has been eating lately. He says Diego has *una estufa* in his truck that they use to make breakfast.

We talk about another bad winter coming to a close, about the seasonal drought of work that starts at Thanksgiving and ends after Tax Day. I realize I don't know how long he has been coming here. He tells me three years. I ask if this winter has been worse than usual. He nods, "mas peor como las otras."

Worse than the others.

"¿Ah, de veras? ¿Por qué?"

He shrugs and stares at the ground. "¿Es que yo me separé cómo debería decirlo… de mama de mi niña"

It's that I broke up—how should I say it… from the mother of my child.

He tells me that she went to Mexico for the holidays "y se fue con otro muchacho, y con mi niña."

She went with another man, and with my girl.

If he goes off to work in a factory or on a farm, he tells me, he might never see his daughter again.

"Y, ya, cuando encuentro poquito dinero," he tells me, "I give it to her, and voy a ver mi niña… un poco,"

I point to his shirt. "Como dice tu camisa," I say. "El mejor papá del mundo."

And, now, when a get a bit of money, I give it to her, I'll see my daughter… a little bit

It's like your shirt says. Best dad in the world.

6.

I want to go back to Levenson and the "necrolife" of Guatemalan youth today. I should note that "necroliving" derives from "necropolitics," a term coined by the Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe (2019). I should note that Mbembe associates politics with death, and, less obviously, death with race. I should note the presence of Michel Foucault (2003) in this formulation, as it was Foucault who, in a set of lectures titled "Society Must Be Defended," identified "the right to make live and let die" as a slogan for modern power, and accounted for the lines between who is "made" and who is "let" in terms of "racism." The exercise of this right—what Foucault called "biopower" and "biopolitics"—remains at the core of much scholarly literature. Suffice it to say that this is positive, "productive" power, a power of managing and regulating populations, a power that unsettles, complicates, and, in the end, buttresses the old sovereign model of individual punishment: the

monarch's call "to take life or let live." As politics, writes Mbembe, biopower "presupposes the distribution of human species into groups, the subdivision of the population into subgroups, and the establishment of a biological caesura between the ones and the others." Those made to live and those let to die: a separation of races.

Foucault wrote about the Nazis ("this is a society which has generalized biopower in absolute sense, but which has also generalized the sovereign right to kill… the classic, archaic mechanism that gave the State the right of life and death over its citizens, and the new mechanism organized around discipline and regulation… coincide exactly" (260)). Mbembe casts a wider net. He traces the roots of modern terror back to slavery and colonialism, up through the internment camp, the slum, the prison, the occupied territory. I should note that "necropolitics" is not so much a challenge as a complement to "biopolitics," the other side of the coin.

I should note that many scholars today see the refugee and the migrant as victims of necropolitics, as caught in a global complex of displacement and confinement that amounts to human trafficking (lest this seem hyperbole, I remind you that many migrants are kidnapped and trafficked). I should note, with some hesitance, that I see this in Abelardo.

Mbembe writes of the "maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (2019, 92). Death, it turns out, has a history. It marks the world, footprints in the soil. Under the most perverse conditions, the most intense cruelty, living seems a contingency of dying—an effect. Biography indexes morbidity. En route to one such index, I think of June 27, 1954, of the CIA-sponsored coup d'état that deposed democratically elected *presidente* Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán (whose habit of granting land to peasants threatened the United

Fruit Company) and instated forty years of military dictatorship in Guatemala. I think of the "Prevention Through Deterrence" policies adopted by the U.S. government in the early 1990s, to funnel crossers into the most hostile stretches of the Sonora. I think of the drug wars and of the cartels, and of the *mareros* themselves, so many trained in the arts of terror by the U.S. Special Forces in El Salvador, and, later, as asylum-seekers in crime-ridden Pico-Union, by the California prison system. I think of January 10, 2023: Los Angeles County declaring a state of emergency over the homelessness crisis.

There is something else. Mbembe, like most philosophers in his tradition (a Gallic tradition at war with its German inheritance) is rewriting Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. What he finds troubling in Hegel is the valor of death: the idea of consciousness as a work of death, a willingness to die expressed as the "negation" of nature, including one's own "animal state." Death betokens mastery. Mastry signals bondage and rebellion, the slave who looks upon his works and sees that it is *he* who has transformed the natural world, who has negated the givenness of things, including his master. So Mbembe can write: "Spirit attains its truth only by finding itself in absolute dismemberment. Politics is therefore death that lives a human life" (69).

Mbembe also writes this: "Allowing oneself to be affected by others—or to be defenselessly exposed to another existence—constitutes the first step toward that form of recognition that will not be contained in the master-slave paradigm" (175). His inspiration here, a line of Black "decolonial" thought running through Senghor, Césaire, Fanon, Wynter, Glissant, and Paul Gilroy, presents a vital and timely intervention; but it is not Abelardo's. Recognition, *allowing the Other to mark me*, is not, for Mbembe, an expression of God's love in the Christian sense. This would be the expression of love as of suffering: the rapture and the ruin of the crucified Jesus.

I do not want to stray into the provincial terrain of Hegel's reading of the Bible, nor—any further—into that of Mbembe's reading of Hegel. Suffice it to say that the Passion might be read, with some Romantic flair, as a "death that lives a human life." The synthesis of Father and Son as Truth, the Truth of Spirit, bespeaks a spectacle of dismemberment: the Crucifixion. Yet this is a death more vexed than politics will allow, a dying that refuses the reductions of death.

Say this. Insofar as Christ's death on the cross is "absolute," it is an "absolute paradox," to quote Søren Kierkegaard, a limit turned upon itself. Death as the limit of life is offset, disturbed, confounded at its own horizons: the persistence of infinity. The Crucifixion is no lurid concession to power. It is emphatically shamanic, a ritual *sparagmos* (as the Dionysian cults called their ecstatic mangling) suggestive of rebirth. It works in the sort of homeopathic magic that Anzaldúa unearths in *Coyolxāuhqui*. The scattered parts—the blood, tears, and limbs, the cries and the reflected light—refuse morbid designs.

7.

"The fundamental and indispensable ground of human freedom," writes the theologian Roberto S. Goizueta, "is the historical expression of otherness, difference, or particularity in confrontation with the totalitarian structures of identity; the tortured visage of Jesus, bearing the marks of violence and yet capable of rending the heavens with the cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' is such an expression" (1996, 274). I want to say something about "freedom," as about "otherness" and "totality," about their tortured dialogue in the figure of Christ, about their relation to death. What I am after is not a concept but a ground of conduct: an ethics. In this sense, I also follow

the path of Goizueta, who writes against abstraction, against rationalism and aestheticism, towards a popular Hispanic Christianity—the form and content of God's Word expressed, inseparably, in the lives of the poor.

Say that liberation, returning to the theme, is immanent in otherness. Say that otherness is obscure and, at the same time, basic to totality. This might be called the irony of resistance. It is also the irony of Jesus on the Cross. The Passion sees the paradox of Christ, between his life and his works, his mortality and divinity, pushed to its logical edge. The figure of Christ turns against himself, wavers in his faith, voices his doubt to the very figure of his doubt: the God with whom he is, vexedly, selfsame. As G.K. Chesterton writes in his seminal *Orthodoxy*, "The world shook and the sun was wiped out of heaven… at the cry from the cross: the cry which confessed that God was forsaken of God… in which God seemed for an instant to be an atheist" (1908, 257). Old and New Testaments collude as Jesus echoes Job. It is here that pain and promise break bread. Blessing and curse order their affinities in prayer. More powerful than the God of wrath or the God of benevolence is the God of suffering, for He is the God of freedom.

Here is Goizueta again.

> At the moment when Jesus asserts that, despite all attempts to destroy him (even, so it seems, by God), he remains a person, a human subject—at that moment, he has already conquered death. His otherness resides, above all, in his capacity to *resist* the violent attempt to deny that otherness. The crucified Jesus does not give in but remains a person, a subject to the end, some*one* who, despite all attempts to reduce him to mere inanimate matter, continues to suffer, to feel, and thus to live… The Latino community's persistent cry, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" echoes Jesus' cry on the cross and, in so doing, represents the oppressed community's refusal to accept death as the final word. (1996, 274)

Comments such as these take us some way in understanding the more speculative tenets of liberation theology—such as when the eminent Argentine-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel pronounces: "the divine is other than all systems" (2003, 98). Understood this way, God is pure "externality," external even (as the Crucifixion shows) to Himself. His love ruptures consoling

totalitarianisms (call them "fetishes," false idols to be smashed). For Dussel, this metaphysics of love, or *agape* structures our relations to one another, as humans fallen to Earth. The cry of pain, the protest, the rebellion, says Dussel, channeling Emmanuel Levinas, are "messages, words, revelation, or metaphoric apocalypsis, for they take us beyond the spoken word toward the one who speaks as a distinct exteriority" (124). The message shocks the system with eschatological force.

Dussel is prone to describe this method of transcendence, of opening oneself to crisis so as to glimpse one's world from without, as "analectic." This is a rejoinder to more popular "dialectic," which he sees as insufficient to the theological demands of authentic revolution. The Greek *ana* signifies, in this case, "beyond," just as *dia* signifies "through." The root *legein* gestures, in both cases, to matters of speech.[2] The result, a notion of "speech beyond speech"—words "other" to the total vernacular, the edifice of culture—is clear enough, but classical language is too delicately ambivalent, too natively oracular, for things to end here. Just as "dialectic" is the etymological twin of "dialogue," "analectic" suggests "analogue." I have said that analectic refers to a movement "beyond" speech, beyond words, logic, a total system of being. Analogic means the opposite: "according to or upon" the system of words, by the rules of *logos*, *lexis*, *legein*.

Saint Thomas Aquinas described the existence of God in terms of analogy and negativity. The semblance of the divine in terrestrial creatures, things, and qualities, he thought, equally affirmed God's distance, opening a *via remontionis*—the way of *apophasis*, ironic commentary, oblique reference to the "external" and "beyond." History and faith—the "act" of the message and the answering spirit—converge in a familiar space: between literal and figurative speech, "the resolvable strangeness

[2] It is from *legein* that we get the more famous *logos* (referring, depending on the philosopher, to logic, reason, verbal order, the totality of being) and *lexis*, denoting, pace Aristotle, the words of a language.

or the unresolvable otherness," as Geoffrey Hartman would say.

Here is Dussel, reversing the Thomist paradox, "It is the human being that turns toward the other as exteriority, but with a specific analogous unity" (113). The result is precarious: human expression amidst redemption and confinement. The paraphrase or translation endemic to our life in language risks turning violent, foreclosing imaginative patience, signaling death. The danger must be worked out in the resonance of each word as it sounds.

> It is impossible to decode that word (in its entirety) because its message remits me to a referent that is not a mere ontic meaning (something), but a metaphysical meaning (someone, the other). (*It cannot be decoded entirely, but it can be decoded analogously, by approximation*.) It situates this decoding not at the level of rational interpretation but at the level of acceptance of its meaning because the speaker says it (hence it is a historical act and one entailing the risk of faith).
>
> - Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* (124)

Say this. Aberlardo allowed his mother, his daughter, the woman who called him "mi amor" and gave him the scapular to *mark* him. This was an active gesture on his part, a stroke of imaginative power, the power of recognition. One word for this power is love.

The words crackling over the phone, the photograph of the girl turning from the camera, the cross woven on a patch of cloth—these are pictures of meaning. That they cohere in their aspects (like flashes of pain or pleasure or rapture across a human face) signals agreement not on certain facts of the world but in a shared form of life. To be marked is akin to being read, to receiving instruction, acknowledging the claim of the world on you, testing your convictions against this claim.[xv]

Say this too. The agreement is vexed from the start. It turns between strange and other, analogic and analectic styles. The power of love demands a work of mourning. The turned word of

faith reasserts our separateness as it beckons to our community. Nowhere are we so close and so far from God, from each other, as in our soulful expression.

Not so in the Chinese restaurant, where the capillary "microphysics of power" that Foucault spent a career elaborating strangles and holds. "Totalitarian structures" predominate, a death-world split by race.

8.

Héctor has lived in Los Angeles and Costa Mesa. He left Los Angeles "por los homeless" and Costa Mesa "por las racistas." He was living in a crowded apartment in Santa Ana before deciding to save money by sleeping in his truck. He has "conexiones" and works more than the others: *construcción*, *jardinería*, *carpintería* (his specialty) and *pintura* (his favorite). He makes $700 a week painting houses.

He is building a house for his sister and his mother in Mexico. He will move there when he has sent back enough; when the dream house is finished. He has another sister who lives in South Carolina, who married a *gringo* and bought a house for $150,000. His mother and sisters, he says, are "jublidas," retired.

"Y todavía estás aquí trabajando," I say. "You're still hard at work."

"Sí, todavía estoy trabando," he says, "I want… finish de construir my house en México."

I ask him when he plans to finish.

"Maybe two, three years," he says, stopping to think. "Two or three years, I finish."

Héctor has to register his *camioneta* as a commercial vehicle due to the rack affixed to the bed. He tells me Farmers Insurance offers the best rates. He has used their coverage for three years.

The truck is a 2004 Ford F-150. He bought it last fall, after his Dodge Ram was totaled in an accident. It cost him $11,000. This month, he will have to pay $270 for a ticket. A police officer found him asleep in the Ford in a parking lot in Orange. He escaped a DUI but was cited for public intoxication.

Two years ago, he tells me, he slammed into a curb while driving drunk. I ask if that was also in the Dodge.

"Sí," he says, "el Dodge Ram. Lo mismo."

"Ese camión estaba maldito," I joke.

That truck is cursed.

"No," he shakes his head. "Is my fault."

Weeks later, I will check in about the citation. He will run to the car to show me the ticket. He has paid $100 and will pay the remaining $175 over the next month. He doesn't feel like fighting in court.

Years later, on that same slow Saturday afternoon when I talk to Edwin about his brother's troubles and Abelardo shows me the picture of his daughter on her first day of school, Martin will tell me that Héctor used to get mad when he drank. "It's good that he quit," he said. "Se ponía como una fiera. He used to be yelling at everybody."

9.

"¿Qué pedo?" Someone yells out to us from the cab of a truck parked by the entrance.

"¿Quién es ese?" I ask.

"Un pedo" Ismael says.

Abelardo cackles and shouts back to the truck. "¿Qué pedo, güey?"

I've been talking to them about the English lessons I teach to the day workers at Laguna Beach, where there is a designated hiring center, the last of its kind in the county. There used to be another site in Costa Mesa but it closed.

"Porque son racistas," Abelardo says.

Because they are racist.

Ismael is thumbing through one of the Oxford English-Spanish Picture dictionaries I have brought with me. Drifting from the curb, he jumps into the bed of the truck parked nearby and starts reading.

Abelardo tells me he's been to the Laguna site before. He didn't like the numbering system they use to assign workers to jobs. He didn't like the other men, who wouldn't play cards with him, or the staff member who told him he couldn't smoke *mota*. He says he heard *la migra* showed up there once.

"¿Qué pedo?" The voice calls out again. I see Héctor walking towards us. He points to the dent in Ismael's car and asks me what you call that in English.

"Dent" he repeats after me, struggling with the "t."

"Sí," Ismael cuts in, looking up from his reading. "como un golpe."

I add that it's a bit confusing "porque la palabra es un sustantivo y un verbo. A noun and a verb." I explain that "puedes *dent* tu coche y, también, puede haber un *dent* en tu coche." I tell them it's like "plant" or "water" or "weed."

Héctor nods, trying out the word. "Dent, dent, dent."

"Someone, a guy, hit the, the bumper it last week," Ismael says, "while it was parked. While I was at a job."

The security guard saw it happen and wrote down the license plate of the car for the police. "He is good guy," Héctor nods, "Es Mexicano."

The last security guard, he says, was a "bad guy," *un guatemalteco* who threatened them when they strayed too far from the mulch bed. The guard once accused Héctor of breaking into a car. The car, it turned out, was Ismael's. Héctor was knocking on the window to wake its owner, asleep inside, for dinner at Pollo Loco.

"No quería ser parte de su misma gente," Héctor says. "¿Me entiendes? "No quería ser parte de su misma raza. He no wanna, o sea, no wanna be… the same like us."

He didn't want to be part of his own people. Do you understand? He didn't want to be part of his own race.

I mention that another of the guys told me about *ese tipo* a few months ago.

"Sí," he continues, "y la policía vino y le dijo que detuviera. Le dijeron que le darían una cita. ¿Me entiendes? The police tell him stop. But he no. Es el racismo, racismo entre los Latinos."

"Latinos que quieren ser gabachos," Ismael laughs. "He want to be a white guy."

"Pero también en México," Héctor says, "hay racismo. En todos los lugares."

I nod and mention *que es muy difícil ser indígena* in parts of Mexico.

Héctor lights up. "¡Sí! Yo soy indignó," he points to his chest, "soy Maya."

Abelardo asks if he speaks Mayan. He says he learned a little bit from his grandmother. His mother wanted him to speak Spanish. His father, he says, *es Cubano*.

"Creo que todos son iguales," he goes on. "Todos son humanos." He continues, pointing to me, "because you have a lot of money, I no have a lot of money, but I think we are all the same."

I laugh and share the amount of my graduate student stipend. I tell him *yo no soy rico*.

"Hay muchas racistas en Arizona," Abelardo announces.

"Sí, Arizona" Héctor agrees, "Y también no quise vivir en ese otro lugar, que es más barato pero hay mucho racismo…"

I also did not want to live in that other place, which is cheaper but there is a lot of racism…

"Arizona," Abelardo says.

"Texas?" I ask.

"Sí," he nods at me. "Texas. Ése. Cerca de la frontera. Hay mucho racismo allá. Bad people there, bad people." Something occurs to him and he pauses and points to Abelardo. "Nos encontramos con uno de ellos aquí, un gabacho que nos gritó."

We encountered a racist here, a white guy who yelled at us.

"Él nos gritó," Nicolas says, "he say, *oye, fuck you, motherfucker, go back a México*."

"Era muy alto." Remy laughs, holding up his hand to show the man's height. "Pero, él" he proudly gestures back to Nicolas, "él gritó de vuelta."

He yelled back.

"Sí, dije, a la verga, hijo de puta," Nicolas says. "I yell to him. Motherfucker."

10.

Fieldnotes 9/24/2020

I get to the lot around 3:30. I see that there are a number of guys waiting at the mulch bed by entrance #1. I circle the lot, noting that there is no one at entrance #2, before parking several lanes away from entrance #1 to see if I can recognize anyone. Several of the men are sitting against the trees with their backs turned to me. I think I recognize Pablo's tan hat.

Getting the water out of the trunk, I walk over to the bed and greet the men who are facing outward, towards the lot. One has a shaved head and the other is a bit bigger, with cropped black hair and a beard. I recognize them but do not know their names. Walking up the hill, I see Abelardo lying down against a tree to my left. Pablo and Víctor

are further to the right, along with an older white-bearded guy who I recognize and another guy (younger, a bit bulky, with a beard) who I haven't seen before. It was Pablo's hat after all.

Abelardo immediately greets me without getting up. He's sipping on a beer and obviously drunk. Víctor tells me that he (Abelardo) had an accident last week. I turn to Abelardo.

"¿Verdad? ¿Tuviste un accidente aquí? ¿Estabas en su carro o que?"

"Sí," he says, before muttering something that I don't understand.

"Se cayo," Víctor clarifies, pointing down at the soil. "He fell down there"

Abelardo says that he had been drinking beer and "fumando."

"¡Ten cuidado!" I say. "Y tenías que ir al hospital?"

He nods. Pablo tells me that they called an ambulance but quickly changes the subject. He wants to talk about politics.

"Se acercan la elección," he says.

"¿La elección? O, sí, para presidente. Sí, sí, es muy importante."

"¿Cuál es tu partido? ¿A qué estás apoyando?"

"Espero que Biden gane. Creo que Trump es horrible para este país. Es racista, es estúpido."

"TIMOTEO—" Abelardo calls out from the opposite end of the group. He asks me a question that I can't make out. I see him holding out what looks like a grinder.

"Oh, no gracias." I laugh. "Gracias, pero no gracias. Estoy bien."

The guys laugh. One of them asks Abelardo about his daughter.

"El tiene hija," Víctor says to me, pointing to Abelardo. "He has a daughter."

"Sí, lo sé." I gesture to Abelardo. "¡Abelardo! ¿Cómo está su hija?"

"No la ha visto en diez años," the old guy with the beard mutters. "He don' know what she looks like."

The rest of the group laughs.

"Pero ella vive aquí, ¿verdad?" I ask him, "En Santa Ana, ¿sí?"

"Ellas se mudaron a Monterey," he responds.

"Oh, sí? She moved? Cuando?"

He mumbles something else about Monterey that I don't quite catch. I turn back to Víctor and Pablo.

"¿Y qué quieres hacer después de la escuela?" Víctor asks, "You want to be a lawyer, or what?… "

11.

Abelardo's favorite story in the Bible is The Wedding at Cana. This makes sense. A mother who asks a tremendous favor of her son, of a son who is, at first, hesitant, only to fulfill his mother's wishes in the form of a miracle—this is a story written for Abelardo. It is a story of love, celebration and family. The wedding is a moment of joy on earth that signals to the sublime, a symbol of covenant. It is a story of libation. The water turned to wine is benevolent. Jesus saves the party.

We would sit and he would recount the story to me, declaiming verses from memory. I would ask him why it was his favorite and he would answer with a favorite line. "Porque Jesús le dijo," he would say, "a su madre dijo, ¿Qué tienes conmigo, mujer? Aún no ha venido mi hora."

"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

He would gleefully reveal that Jesus was wrong, that he did not understand his power as his *madre*, *María* did.

Biblical scholars are quick to clarify that Jesus addresses his mother as "woman" (from the Greek *γύναι*) as a measure of respect, not brusqueness. He will only name her as such once more in his life, in a verse I have already quoted: *Woman, behold your son*. The mother is invoked at the beginning and the end of the son's public service, intervening in his power and his pain, marking the "hour" of

salvation. This is the woman prefigured in Genesis 3:15, whose progeny, God says, will crush the head of the snake. It is the woman of Revelation 12, the famous image of the Virgin Mother "clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head," who cries out from the pangs of labor as a seven-headed dragon threatens, poised to snatch away her newborn child.

This is also, for many Mexicans and Central Americans, the woman who appeared before Juan Digeo atop the Hill of Tepeyec: Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. "Our Lady of Guadalupe affirms the liberating power of the cross as the place where we experience the resurrection," writes Goizueta, "By participating in the Guadalupe story, we affirm our dignity as persons in the face of crucifixion and dehumanization… That which has been defiled and deformed will itself become the symbol of a new birth, as Jesus himself did on the cross and as Mary did on Tepeyac" (1996, 285-86).

The symbol of La Virgen, embedded in the material history of Spanish colonization, "makes the resurrection a transformative reality in the present" (281). She is a living symbol of community—for some, but not for all. Chicana feminists have often taken issue with the stringent chastity, indicative of patriarchal rule, projected onto Guadalupe by Marian veneration. They have sought to reclaim her for Latinidad, for *indigenismo*, for women.

I will not trouble with speculation. Suffice it to say that Abelardo likely would not have found much good in Sandra Cisneros' "Guadalupe the Sex Goddess" or Alma Lopez's "Our Lady," which shows a model posed in a revealing two-piece outfit made from roses and a cloak comprised of the dismembered *Coyolxāuhqui*. His comments on the women who wear makeup to church are testament enough to the traditional mother: loving yet severe, asexual, formidable, there when you need her most. Yet there is another element of feminist theology—more pastoral than postmodern, less libidinal than "ontological," concerned with the ground of being—on which his faith finds stable footing. It is what Ada María Isasi-Díaz, the eminent founder of "*mujerista*" theology, calls "lo cotidiano": the quotidian.

"Lo cotidiano," writes Isasi-Díaz, "constitutes the immediate space of our lives." It is "the principal horizon of the poor and the oppressed." It is "mainly made up of women, who know reality in a unique way because they transform it when they manage to survive by somehow providing shelter, food, clothing, medicines for themselves and their families." This language might strike some as dated (were she writing today, rather than in 2002, Isasi-Díaz might have discussed "invisible" and "affective" labor, not to mention the shakiness of gender itself). Its implication is still radical. It is women whose ordinary suffering, whose routine humiliation and persistence, whose everyday obscurity is closest to the pathos of the Gospels. Women are the prime movers of change.

"¿Sabes que a mí no me gusta?" Abelardo said to me once. "Cuando lo crucifican."

You know what I don't like? When they crucify him.

His voice lowered and he closed his eyes and quoted fragments from the Passion: "Llegaron a un lugar llamado Gólgota, lugar de la calavera… Le golpeaban en la cabeza, y le escupían… En vez de darle agua le dieron vinagro." He improvised in the mode of Christ to God from the cross: "Si eres el rey de tierra, sálvame… Soy pecador… Yo di mi vida para ti… Perdóname maestro. Padre, perdónalos, porque no saben lo que hacen.

They came to a place called Golgotha, which means "the place of the skull… They struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him… Instead of giving him water they gave him vinegar… If you are the king of the earth, save me… I am a sinner… I gave my life to you… Forgive me father. Father, forgive them, for the know not what they do.

This, too, makes sense. The greatest of Christ's miracles has none of the charm of his first. It is true: the pain of the Crucifixion, of God forsaking Himself, opens a space for transformative

suffering. It also closes a door to joy, to the innocence of youth. The water turns bitter. The mother no longer advises her son, no longer instructs but weeps.

12.

Marisol from *la iglesia* came to the parking lot last night and dropped off clothes. She is a saint, Abelardo says.

"¿Crees en los ángeles?" I ask.

Do you believe in angels?

"Si," he says, "yo creo en los ángeles, y el espíritu santo."

Yes, I believe in angels, and the Holy Spirit."

"¿Y que es el espíritu santo?"

And what is the Holy Spirit?

He looks around at the sky and the ground. "Es lo que está aquí, se presenta aquí. Cuando das agua porque tienes agua. Cuando eso es todo lo que tienes y lo das. Ese es el espíritu. Es actuar. El espíritu es actuar."

It's what is here, what's presented here. When you give water because you have water. When that's all you have and give it. That is the spirit. It's acting. The spirit is acting.""

"Ah, okay," I nod, mishearing him, "así que, está presente. Está en todos los lados."

Okay. It's present. So, it's everywhere.

He nods. "Es una paloma. Paloma que cae sobre nosotros."

It's a dove. A dove that falls on us.

"Y, ¿dónde cao?"

Where does it fall?

"!Aqui está!" he exclaims, pointing at the soil of the mulch bed. "No es necesario de ir a la iglesia," he continues. "Porque Dios está aquí."

You don't need to go to church. Because God is here.

"Así que, ¿es posible expresar tu fe en cualquier lugar?"

So it's possible to express your faith anywhere?

"Sí, es dar agua. Venir aquí y dárselo a la gente." He pauses, momentarily losing his train of thought. "La gente. !Actuar!"

Yes, it is giving water. To come here and give it to the people. The people. Acting!

> *And the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*
>
> \- *Luke 3:22*

I scribble "actuar" in my notebook in bold letters. Later, once at home, I will include this addendum:

> *Conversio (convert, converse) stands as the sign of a relation. The fraught communion of word and Word, itself, communes; relations relate to yet more relations. (To use the terms of Peirce's Trinitarian framework: as the relation between sign and object, the (holy) "interpretant" always, itself, stands in as a further sign, representing a further object by way of yet another interpretant.) The call for God's Love, as realized by the Holy Spirit, is not, then, a teleological return to the beginning (as in literalist and Hegelian readings of the Bible) but a practice iterantly realized as graciously, terribly partial. "Does it harm our relation to God if we realize the futility of understanding his relation to the world?… such a realization need not be harmful (and may well be therapeutic)… theological explanation takes a horizontal rather than a vertical form." (Richard Rorty)."*[xvi]

This is Abelardo's theology. The holy spirit is a dove that fell from the wings of heaven, that brushes the air and the leaves and the earth and most of all the electrical current of our nerves. It is a way of happening, a W.H. Auuden once wrote of poetry, the turn of the word that marks us. This is the Word made flesh. It is action. It is love

He tells me that a man had a heart attack here, just before Marisol showed up. He was old and bleeding from his head. No one would help him. Marisol had called 911.

A familiar song is playing on his phone. I ask him who the band is.

"!Maná!" he exclaims.

I ask him if he knows "En el muelle de San Blas" It is a sad song, I say, about a woman waiting for her husband to come home from sea.

"Ah, sí, se vuelve loca, está loca." Héctor nods. We are sitting in lawn chairs, under the shade of a tree on the mulch bed.

"Sí," I say, "está esperando—"

"Sí, está loca—"

"—por su marido."

"—Sí, se fue al mar."

"Lo encontraré." Abelardo starts searching on his phone. "Es esto?"

I recognize the opening chords. "!Sí! Es esto."

I blankly repeat that I like the song even though it's sad. The men nod and we are silent as the vocals ring out from the phone and into the soft, California breeze that blows off the hills.

EDWIN

Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.

- 1 Corinthians 12:1

We are not fighting men or churches, but seeking to displace dead forms and creeds and wild fanaticisms with living, practical Christianity.

- William J. Seymour

1.

"Hola Mateo," he said, rubbing his stomach under his t-shirt, then rubbing the lip of his shirt on his chin. "Dime," he paused, glancing up to me from the curb. "Dime, Mateo, ¿que piensas de las mujeres?"

Tell me. What do you think of women?

I had swallowed the first syllable of my name while introducing myself. "Timoteo" had sounded through the flat summer air as "Moteo," leaving him to improvise.

Each time I approached him thereafter (as he sat on the curb, or on the soiled office chair by the south entrance, or on the mulch under the carob tree, his back against the trunk) he would say *hola, Mateo* and I would correct him. He would nod and chuckle and stare at the ground under his bare feet and ask me if I was married yet.

"Timoteo, no Mateo," he would mutter, smiling, "Timoteo, Mateo, no Mateo, Timoteo."

This sort of exchange—where address turns equivocal—reminds one of the power of the name. A name gives or takes. A good name is an inheritance. A bad name is a rebellion. Good or bad, the name under heaven realigns the discursive filaments, centers the I and the Thou. Edwin has been called many things: a thief, a fighter, *un borracho*, *el gordito*, "Dino," *hijo de puta, hijo de Dios*.

He was wide at both the shoulders and the waist. He wore soiled t-shirts and a featureless baseball cap and shapeless pants tight at the hips and loose at the ankles. He was large, his body suggestive of a power which had since abandoned him. He was 65 years old. Most afternoons, he would kick off his shoes and his socks, as much an affirmation as a surrender: there would be no work today.

Once, in the dead of summer, on an afternoon when the palms stood tall and the shrubs wilted and shimmering puddles of heat spotted the asphalt, I noted that the real "Mateo" was an apostle. "No soy Mateo," I said, "Él es demasiado ilustre para mí. He's too *famoso*, *distinguido*. I'm not like him."

"Timoteo era un santo," he responded blankly. "Tus padres te pusieron el nombre de un santo."

Timothy was a saint. Your parents named you after a saint.

He learned, over time, to associate that particular saint—and not the other one—with me. This was the first step in our dialogue. *Me llamo Timoteo.*

"Mateo, o quiero decir Timoteo," he would say, knocking his forehead with his knuckles. He spoke in fluid conflict with himself, in long breathless spurts: the speech of incantation and oracle, a speech bordering on tongues. "No Mateo, Timoteo. Cuéntame algo de la Biblia, Timoteo"

Tell me something from the Bible.

It might have been the alcohol or the heat or the *cristal (*which, I knew from others, he used to suppress his hunger) that prompted his prolonged, rhythmic bursts. It might have been despair. Whatever it was, we learned to speak in this way. I soon got into the habit of arriving at the parking

lot with images and parables in mind—if not from Genesis or Exodus, then from the Gospels, and if not from the Gospels, then from Daniel or Revelation or the Apocalypse of Isaiah.

The words already ran through him, down the capillary runnels of his mind to his calloused fingers and toes, which he curled and wiggled with zeal of a man possessed. All he needed was a signal, a bid to jump into this Biblical undercurrent—to speak. He did not deliver the verses verbatim. The river of his language rose and fell, rushed into swirling eddies, carried the silt and debris of his life in its folds.

Daniel was his *favorito*, "porque Nabucodonosor fue convertido," he said.

Because Nebuchadnezzar was converted.

"O, *es una chulada*," he would say, "lo de Nabucodonosor." He used this phrase habitually (it roughly translates to "oh, it's cool" or "oh, it's really something"), so much so that I assumed that the phrase was, like him, of Salvadoran origin. I had known him for months when Juan Carlos corrected me.

"Ha vivido aquí tanto tiempo," he said, "habla como un Mexicáno"

He's lived here for so long, he talks like a Mexican.

"Sí, pero, ya, espera," he shook his head. "Porque el rey Nabucodonosor calentó su horno y le dijo a la gente que necesitaban adorar ese ídolo o serían quemados. Y este hombre…"

King Nebuchadnezzar heated his furnace and told the people that they needed to worship the idol or they would be burned. And this man…

It was an insufferably hot afternoon. It was 12:45 PM. It was July 2021. He sat in the office chair under the carob tree as I squatted in the dirt, diverting a procession of ants with a stick.

He shook his head again, "No recuerdo su nombre, est hombre. Había tres hombres. Y los llevó a su trono y les preguntó, ¿Es cierto que no sirves a mi imagen? Y dijeron que sí, porque tenemos la palabra de Dios."

I don't remember his name, this guy. There were three men. And he took them to his throne and asked them, "Is it true that you do not serve my image?" And they said, "Yes, because we have the word of God."

He looked up to the sky, then down to me and the ants.

"Me entiendes?"

I nodded.

"Y el rey," he went on, "les dijo a sus soldados que hicieran el horno siete veces más caliente y que los dejaran quemar. Y, sí, *es una chulada*, lo que pasó con Nabucodonosor y el horno. Pero cuando entraron al horno, solo los soldados se quemaron."

And the king told his soldiers to make the oven seven times hotter and let them burn. But when they went into the oven, only the soldiers were burned.

"Y el rey vio la luz de Dios…" Looking back to the sky, he held his hands aloft, "y dijo, O, perdóname, Dios. ¡O, te adoraré! Porque ya sentía miedo de Dios."

And the king saw the light of God, and he said, "Oh, forgive me, God. Oh, I will adore you! Because I was afraid of God."

2.

I start with Daniel because Daniel is where it all started for him. It was his *favorito*—not the first book of *la Biblia* that he read, he told me, but the first that he understood. It was, this narrative of prophecy and empire, his *voz interior* made stunningly visible in text. It hinted at a sibylline power

within. It gave off a mystical edge, a brush with the *a priori*. Among the reasons for this, I would learn, was the following: it is a book as simple as it is ambivalent.

I'll start with the simple. There is, first and foremost, the moral of the story—the dominion of God over history, history being the domain of kings. This is already apparent in the first part of Daniel, the prose narrative of the court tales at Babylon. The hubristic Nebuchadnezzar, the degenerate Belshazzar, and the insipid Darius each flounder and fall before the fact of divine creation. The Israelites unharmed by the fiery furnace, the writing on the wall, the lions with mouths closed shut: these are neither miracles nor plagues. They are mere documents, empirical evidence of God's will.

The theme of simplicity—and, with it, the trope of dominion —carries through to the prophetic visions of the book's second, more overtly "apocalyptic" part, which tighten the screws of analogy. In Daniel 7, in which the four winds of heaven summon four beasts from the sea, the lion is Babylon, the bear is Medea, the leopard is Persia, and the horned monster is Greece (specifically, Macedonia). In Daniel 8, the vision at Susa before the Ulai River, the ram is Persia and the goat is Greece; the goat's broken first horn, out of which four new horns grow, is Alexander the Great, whose death beckoned the division of Greece among four generals; and the "little horn" that emerges from one of these four is the voracious Antiochus Epiphanes, who persecuted the Jews.

Say this. What stands out in both Jewish and Christian readings of Daniel is their particularity, their lack of interpretive wiggle room.[xvii] As the language trends oracular, the images are yet more exacting. Here, then, is the ambivalence. In a book about God's power over history, the names and dates turn out to be important after all. There is something at stake in their "correct" identification.

The Book of Daniel was, itself, composed around 165 B.C., in the immediate aftermath of Antiochus' rule, with the Maccabean Revolt still raging. This moment of Jewish resistance is felt in the pages of both the court tales and the visions. Their message is, I have said, decidedly simple: to

keep one's faith, even under threat of annihilation. To ensure the strength of this message, the Daniel authors relied on a blatant rhetorical trick. Identifying Daniel as a Jewish intellectual taken captive by Babylonian forces at the turn of the 6th century B.C., they assembled prophecies which had already been born out. In the time of the book, Babylon has yet to fall, Persia has yet to rise, Alexander has yet to ride on Issus and Gaugamela, Antiochus has yet to sacrifice a swine at the image of Moses in Judea. Yet all of these things—the lineage from lion to bear to leopard to horned monster, the gorging of the ram by the goat, the splitting of the goat's horns—had, in fact, happened by the time of the authors' writing. The prophecies are infallible because they were written in retrospect.

In Daniel, as in any book of the Bible, we are not dealing with poetic analysis in the modern sense—not asking whether the image of a flower tilts toward vitality or transience, rejuvenation or eternity, love or sacred longing. At stake is more than mere rhetoric. The text invites *hypostasis*, a claim to the substantive objects of its signs. We have been set up, by the ram and the goat, by the lion, bear, leopard, and horned monster, to expect precise historical analogy. The authors of Daniel aligned the prophet's reported visions with historical events as far as they could. Confronted with their speculation, we do the same. But this demand for precision—for history—is just what makes room for interpretation, "a margin of free play."

I borrow this phrase from Paul Ricœur, specifically, from Ricœur's preface to André LaCocque's *The Book of Daniel*. Ricœur, being the sort of philosopher inclined toward interpretive paradox, is a good reader for Daniel. Glossing LaCocque, he describes a "historical-critical method… which leads the exegete to surpass his historicism" ([1979] 2018, xxi). Daniel's entrenched allegory wavers between the rough march of empire and the eternal fact of ideal. The mandate to read the figure *right*, to finalize historical analogy, proves roundly utopian. To search for concrete answers is to participate in a process of reading which is transcendent, aspirational, arcane—anything but concrete. The text of Daniel, says Ricœur, "aims at particular situations, but *only* across a process of

symbolization which does not limit itself to concealing them, but which also tends to typify them" (ibid.). To "typify" (Ricœur is thinking of Max Weber here) is to idealize, to render a symbol inexhaustible, infinitely suggestive. The analogical mode "proposed" by the text invites endless new connections. Daniel's story and visions coalesce as a Rorschach Test of spiritual crisis.

The crisis is internal to the text. Like any crisis, it makes a demand of history, a demand that history account for itself. In the end, this is a plea for eternity. Daniel honors the fragments of trauma with flashes of redemption. It is a good book for someone like Edwin, someone who—given all that life has thrown at him—has the energy neither for endless questions nor final answers. What Edwin wants is a good story, not as an escape from the world, but as a measure of the real.

3.

One of the men, Javier, is having trouble *con su esposa,* Martín tells me. She smells his breath when he comes home.

"Es que, viene aquí a trabajar," Martín snorts, "Si no hay trabajo y se toma una cerveza, está bien, pero él viene aquí para trabajar."

The thing is, he comes here to work. If there is no work, and he has a beer, fine, but he comes here to work.

"Pinche vieja," Edwin mutters.

Edwin and I are sitting on the curb. Martín stands before us and scans the lot, as if Javier might appear from behind a car, or as if a different story, more salacious and vindicating, might come into view. Martín is in his late 40s, a touch closer in age to Edwin than to me. He is diminutive but handsome, clean-shaven, with dark skin and jet hair set in an immutable slick back. Like Edwin, he is Salvadoran. Like Edwin, he is *evangélico.*

He has come straight from work, and wears a plaid button-down tucked into his jeans with the sleeves rolled up. He is not like the others. *Tiene su propio negocio.* He has his own subcontracting business, but stops by the lot to hire workers, to pick up extra work, or to drink and *echar el cuento*. The *cuento*, in most cases, centers on women, God, or some tortured combination of the two.

"Ella quiere demasiado," he continues, "Quiere más dinero para gastar en ropa, para ir de compras con sus amigas."

She wants too much. She wants more money to spend on clothes, to go shopping with her friends.

He pauses, registering the implications of his comment.

"Entiendo que la amistad es importante," he clarifies, "como dice en la Biblia, pero las mujeres, cuando se juntan con sus amigas, hablan y causan problemas. Le meten malas ideas en la cabeza"

I understand that friendship is important, like it says in the Bible, but women, when they get together with their friends, they talk and cause trouble. They put bad ideas in her head.

He asks if I am married.

"Tiene novia!" Edwin cuts in, jostling my shoulder. "Girlfriend!"

"O, ¿sí?" Martín presses, "but you want to get married?"

Edwin cackles, pointing to me. "Sí, se va a casar."

He's getting married.

Martín smirks. "¿Dónde te vas a casar? ¿En una iglesia?"

Where are you going to get married? A church?

"Católico," Edwin speaks for me. "Es católico."

"Católico," Martín repeats.

I fear we're on the verge of a debate or, worse yet, a spurt of proselytizing, but the conversation keeps the point of order. *Lo que pienso de las mujeres.*

"No puedes divorciarte si eres católico," Martín grins. "Lo sabes, ¿verdad?"

You can't get divorced if you're Catholic. You know that, right?

I laugh, more with relief than anything, and ask how many times he's been married.

"¿Cuántas veces yo?" Martín smiles. "Solo una. Veintitrés años. Twenty-three years, I been with my wife."

He tells me he has three daughters, ages thirteen, fifteen, and sixteen.

"Está cañón," I laugh again. "That's a lot."

He shakes his head. "Ah, ¿sí? ¿Tres? No, eso no es tanto."

Oh, yeah, three? No, that's not that many.

He says that he met his wife too late, after years of *jodiendo* ("fucking around") and living in sin. She is ten years younger than he is.

"Una buena familia tiene más que eso," he says. "Para una familia, necesitas cinco o seis hijos. Niños y niñas."

A good family has more than that. For a family, you need five or six children. Boys and girls.

He pauses. "Yo soy uno de siete."

I'm one of seven.

"Ocho," Edwin says. "Soy uno de ocho."

I'm one of eight.

Only two of the eight live here, *en los Estados Unidos,* he tells us. *Mi hermana y yo.* The sister lives in Texas. His two younger brothers, he says, are dead. He does not mention the others.

"Y dime, Timoteo," he continues, reaching for a beer from the Styrofoam cooler set between us, "¿Qué piensas de todo esto con la vacuna? Porque la gente está muriendo por todas partes."

What do you think of all this with the vaccine? Because people are dying everywhere.

"Sí, la vacuna está matando gente," Martín cuts in. ¿Has visto al doctor en la tele? ¿Cómo se llama… ?"

Yeah the vaccine is killing people. Have you seen the doctor on TV? What's his name…

"Fauci," I say.

"Sí, Fauci," he nods, "es un diablo."

There is a long pause. I say that I don't know much about devils and check my phone for the time. It is 3:25 PM. I've been with them for two hours.

"Mi esposa y mis hijas no están vacunadas," Martín affirms, as if one of us had asked.

My wife and daughters are not vaccinated.

"No," he continues, "¿y sabes por qué?" He stares at me. "Porque no lo necesitas."

No, and do you know why? Because you don't need it.

He continues to stare. His expression severe yet also soft, threatening a smile.

Once again, he responds to a phantom question. "Sabes," he says, "mi esposa se contagió del COVID."

You know, my wife got COVID.

Edwin, who has been watching a pair of young men try and fail to jump a sports car, suddenly turns to me and plunges his hand into the cooler. For once, I accept his offer. Cracking open a beer, I tell Martín *lo siento mucho al escuchar eso.* I'm sorry to hear it.

"Sí," he nods, "se hizo una prueba y todo, le metieron la cosita por la nariz," he mimes the act of swabbing his nostril, "y salió positiva. Y yo estaba justo allí, acostado a su lado en la cama, y no sentí nada."

Yeah, she took a test and everything, they stuck the thing up her nose, and it came out positive. And I was right there, lying next to her on the bed, and I didn't feel a thing.

He places his hand on his heart. "Por mi fe."

Because of my faith.

4.

How fitting that they should have wound up here, in Southern California. Flash back some 115 years, to February 1906, to William J. Seymour, a Black Holiness preacher with one working eye (the other had blinded by a bout of smallpox that he blamed on his hesitance to join the ministry) and a mandate from God, arriving in Los Angeles on a segregated rail car. Seymour was travelling from Houston, where he had studied for a period of weeks under the tutelage of Charles Fox Parham, a faith healer himself forced west by public outcry in his native Kansas. The cause of the outcry was this: Parham believed, and rabidly proselytized, that speaking in tongues was physical evidence of baptism by the Holy Spirit.

For Seymour, this notion was exciting, but its source proved intolerable. (An avowed white supremacist, Parham believed in British Israelism, blamed Noah's flood on miscegenation, and made Seymour take class from the hallway.) Glossolalia, thought Seymour, should cut across social distinctions of every nonbiblical kind, not merely different languages. This was the new world order. The future beckoned in the golden West.

Enter the Azusa Street Revival, a multiracial faith meeting held in downtown Los Angeles from 1906 to 1909. This was Seymour's church. During this time, the pastor's reputation grew. It was said that fire stormed and swirled about the Azusa Street Mission, that a woman had rhapsodized in in five languages—Spanish, French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Hindustani—of which she had no prior knowledge. Seymour's emphasis on being "born again" by way of the "spiritual gifts" named in Acts 2:1-4 and 1 Corinthians 12-14 gained particular traction among local Black and Latino communities.

> … a Mexican American day worker was the first person touched by the power of the Holy Spirit at the Azusa Mission after three black women from the Bonnie Brae prayer group went over to the mission to clean it. After a spirited conversation about holy living with one of the black women, the Latino youth fell to knees and burst into tears.
>
> - Gastón Espinosa,
> *Latino Pentecostals in America* (2014, 35)

Gastón Espinosa notes that "The Pentacostal focus on divine healing, the supernatural, and miraculous tapped into similar preexisting beliefs in the Latino community" (41) Writing on the recent rise of Evangelical faiths (especially Pentecostalism) among U.S. Latinos, Luis D. León (2004) finds this convergence intensified. Seymour, trained in the arts of charismatic faith healing, placed an importance on the body—trancing, dancing, speaking in tongues—still resonant with Latinos today, for whom "the sin of the flesh" carries more than a residual whiff of Spanish Catholic oppression.

The redemption of the body, the shock of spirit in muscle and bone, eases the pressure of narrative ideal. The exegetical demands of scripture, however cryptic, are *to be felt*. The spirit resists abstraction. The spirit will come out in tongues. According to Espinosa, "Seymour's desire to convert a dying and lost world to faith in Jesus Christ was the engine that drove his ministry and Pentacostal vision" (32). According to León, this desire lives on. It lives on in Los Angeles, the place of its collective awakening. With Edwin in mind, I quote León at length.

> The seeming rigidity of fundamentalist *evangélico* ethics allures (post)moderns of all classes who find themselves lost in a world of moral relativism and confusion: *los evangélicos* give simple and plausible answers to profound existential questions. The rigidity appeals also to immigrants who are suffering the anomie and trauma of displacement, and perhaps suffering from the ravages of war in their home countries, and to the young women and men who suffer the ravages of poverty and gang warfare in inner cities across America. *Evangélicos* appear to offer entry into the lower North American middle class. (2004, 235)

It would be easy and, I think, correct to say that Martín has taken advantage of this "offer" and gained at least partial "entry." He has a family, a house, a business, a church. Edwin has none of these things, and by no metric could he be considered "middle class." Yet there is something jarring about León's

claim that outstrips old themes of class conflict and mobility. The language of class as an organizing force slips into "profound existential questions." The "simple and the plausible" do not merely distinguish the middle-class *weltgeist* from that of a gangster. At stake is meaningfulness itself—the line between sanity and madness. This is a line that Edwin must hold.

5.

León's literary image of "(post)moderns of all classes who find themselves lost in a world of moral relativism and confusion" is helpful to a point. In Southern California the mirror maze, the place of simulation, illusion, and disaffection, "simple" narratives may prove restorative. But this is one myth, and it has its limits. Do the "ravages of war" and "the ravages of poverty and gang warfare" not suggest fear over "confusion"? In any case, they are hardly "relativistic." Here, I want to say something about the work of eternity and analogy—such as one finds in Daniel—in a complex and definitive world, a world hostile to ideals, even "(post)modern" ideals of paradox and doubt. The world is Edwin's, and it begins in El Salvador.

The story of faith in El Salvador is not that of Genesis or Exodus or the Gospels. It is not open-ended, not recursive, not allegorical. It is neither simple nor ambivalent. As with any nation still—even decades later—reeling from civil war, there is complexity: the quagmire of ethnic conflict, splintered and broken families, mass wealth inequality, disputes over land, disputes over water, the sort of general disquiet that one senses in the air as a sign of repressed trauma and lingering enmity. These matters are nuanced, just as they are decisive. A place as famous as El Salvador for corruption and atrocity carries a heavy burden of consequence. The uncounted bodies, defaced and "disappeared," are real, as are the fields stained with blood, the illegal firearms, the siphoned funds, the bribed judges, the police and military officers running drugs across the Guatemalan border to

Ahuachapán and Santa Ana. As always, there is rumor and innuendo. But no narrative adornment can dislodge the facts as they are.

On the theme of religion, we may look to the most prominent figure of Christian faith in El Salvador, the nation's foremost martyr: Archbishop Óscar Romero. Romero's "conversion," as it is often called, reflects a pattern of subtle magnitude. It reduces to parable only at the cost of subtlety. An orthodox conservate into his 50s, the priest was moved, in the late 1970s, toward a liberatory passion that made him a national hero and led to his infamous murder. This progress was humble and pragmatic. Romero changed his position in response to a changing world. The 1977 assassination of his friend, the Jesuit priest Father Rutilio Grande, left him shaken. His friendships with the Jesuits Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (whose "political theology" and "new Christology" he had once deemed excessively "material") blossomed amidst waves of state violence. Yet Romero never fully assimilated the liberation theology of which he had been so critical in his early years. He never endorsed Marxism. He never wavered in his faith that liberation was (like poverty), in the first, a matter not of labor or capital but of the soul. On March 23rd, Romero delivered a sermon pleading with his country's military to stop the violence in the name of Christ. The following day, he was shot and killed by a sniper while holding Mass at a hospital. It is hard to conjure an image more tortured or decisive than this.

To conclude: it may be that the simple is a balm for the complex. But complexity entails, for most of us at least, more than a narrative void. There are material facts on the ground. These sources of confusion are tangible and irrevocable. A simple answer will not do, will not hold on its own. Simplicity, I have said, culminates in ambivalence. The rules have been set, but not the play. If simplicity tempers complexity, then ambivalence eases finality. The building wreckage of history calls for new analogies, new senses of its scattered parts. These senses may obscure or overwhelm. They may boil over into tongues.

6.

I ask Edwin about these *tres mujeres*: la Virgin de Guadalupe, la Llorona, la Malinche.

"Porque no están en la Biblia," I say.

He shakes his head. "Sí, está bien creer en esas cosas," he clears his throat. "Pero pondrás celoso a Dios."

Yeah, it's fine to believe in those things, but you will make God jealous.

I nod and jot this down in my notes.

"Ya sabes, como dice en Daniel, había tres hombres…" He shakes his head and spits. "Maldición. Lo busqué en la Biblia, pero olvidé sus nombres, estos tres hombres. Eran judíos.

You know, as it says in Daniel, there were three men… Shit. I looked it up in the Bible, but I forgot their names, these three men. They were Jews.

"No tengo mi Biblia conmigo ahorita," he grunts, scanning the ground to confirm that his Bible is not, in fact, at hand. The office chair is gone and he sits atop a ten-gallon bucket. He inspects the agaves and the space between his Styrofoam cooler and the package of water I have brought. No Bible.

This interlude is brief. Picking up where he left off, he looks back to me, the light restored in his eyes. "Y ya sabes, Timoteo, no Mateo," he chuckles, "un día, el rey, Nabucodonosor, hizo una gran imagen de oro. Y le dijo a la gente que se inclinara ante él. Y la gente dijo, okay"

And you know, one day, the king, Nebuchadnezzar, made a great golden image. And he told the people to bow down to it. And the people said, okay.

From his seat atop the bucket, he bends over his stomach to mime a bow.

"Y lo hicieron," he says.

And they did.

He continues with the familiar story, the story of the false idol, of the fiery furnace, the men who did not burn. It soon grows clear that my audience is, at best, auxiliary. He stares off into the distance, into the endless cars and palms, glancing back at me only to express his delight: "o, *es una chulada*, Timoteo." He speaks with the muscular rhetoric of recitation, of phrases strengthened through perpetual use. Were it not for his repetition, his improvisation (the lions of Daniel 6 finding their way into the furnace of Daniel 3), his dramatic effects, one could close one's eyes and believe, with good reason, that he was quoting directly from scripture.

Following his gaze, I see that there is nothing but cars and palms and distance to stare at. There is no one loading a semi, no one crouched under the hood of a pickup truck, staring into the abyss of a blown engine. There are no poor souls anchored to shopping carts piled with blankets and cans. There are no crows or stray cats, no flocks of parrots overhead. There are, as far as I can tell, no other workers. It is 3:40 PM, August, the dog days of summer: days of cloudless and breathless heat.

Seizing on a pause in his exposition, I return to the three mothers. Why do people believe in these things? Why, if they are so patently false idols?

"Porque," he says, "ideología."

Ideology.

The word is natural to the mood of our conversation, a mood of devoutness and distrust. "We begin to treat our adversary's views as ideologies," the Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim once wrote, "only when we no longer consider them as calculated lies and when we sense in his total behavior an unreliability." *It's fine to believe in those things.* It is not a matter of bearing false witness. What stands in question is a total picture of the world, a ground of truth itself.

"Si, porque," he goes on, methodically, "la Virgen, es algo… la Virgen, la Llorona, hizo esas cosas la gente. Y la palabra de dios hizo la tierra y formó al hombre del polvo de la tierra. Entonces, estas cosas son ídolos."

Yeah, because la Virgen is something… la Virgen, la Llorona, people made these things. And God's Word made the earth and formed Man from the dust of the earth. So these things are idols.

He gazes off again and starts on the story of Genesis.

"¿Por qué te escondes?" He says, performing God's reproach of Adam. "¿Por qué te escondes? ¿Comiste la fruta?"

"Why do you hide? Did you eat the fruit?"

"Y Adán le dijo a Dios," he looks to me, "bueno, la mujer me lo dio."

And Adam said to God, "well, the woman gave it to me."

His voice for God is a pantomime of divine rage. His Adam is softer but more poignant. It suggests human bitterness, the ire of experience.

Switching back to God, he shifts his weight atop the bucket and points his finger at the ground. "Y Dios le dijo al hombre, ¡maldita será la tierra por tu culpa! ¡Por cuanto le hiciste caso a tu mujer!"

And God said to the Man, "The earth will be cursed because of you! For you listened to your Wife!"

He glances back to me, now keen to ensure that he has my full attention. "Y porque lo había formado de la tierra, le dijo, ¡de polvo eres, y al polvo volverás!"

And because He had formed him from the earth, He said, from dust you are, and to dust you will return!

The moment seems as good as any to pose a penetrating question. It is a question I will later regret, while reviewing my notes, reflecting on its presumption.

I ask if those who believe in la Virgin, la Llorona, la Malinche are *pecadores*: sinners.

He shakes his head. "¿Has visto una imagen de la Tierra?"

Have you seen a picture of Earth?

Sensing my confusion, he clarifies, "una imagen de la Tierra. Tomada desde el espacio."

A picture of Earth. Taken from outer space.

"Sí, puedes ver el mundo entero," he makes a circling gesture with his finger. "Es una mota en el universo. No somos nada. Fue creado, todo, por la palabra de Dios. Él puede destruirnos, pero no lo hace. Él formó la tierra. Nos dio luz."

Yes, you can see the whole world. It's a speck in the universe. We are nothing. Everything was created by the word of God. He can destroy us, but He does not. He shaped the Earth. He gave us light.

Smiling, he closes his eyes. "Y no estaba solo. Como dice la Biblia…" He furrows his brow, "hagamos al hombre de la tierra. A nuestra imagen lo crearemos."

He wasn't alone. As the Bible says… Let us make man from the earth. We will create him in our image.

When Martín arrives around 4:15, Edwin sends him back to his car for *su Biblia*. Martín hands the Bible to Edwin, who passes it to me.

"Léenos tu verso favorito, Timoteo," he says.

Read us your favorite verse.

It is a small leatherbound book with the words "Biblia Latinoamericana" embossed in gold on the cover. The onion skin pages are darkened but sharp at the edges. The margins are free of notes. It is a book which has been treated with care, scanned, browsed, perused by gentle touch over the years. It suggests the sort of reverence that only a common object, worthless in the market, can inspire in its keeper.

I flip through Genesis and land on Chapter 18, Abraham's meeting with the angels who come to prophesize the birth of Isaac. I read 18:4: "Que se traiga un poco de agua, y lávense los pies; y reclínense bajo un árbol."

Let now a little water be fetched, and wash your feet, and recline yourselves under the tree.

I gesture to Edwin and joke that Martín might be willing to wash his feet. "Traje el agua," I say. *I brought the water.*

Martín giggles and shakes his head. "Necesita una novia para eso." *He needs a girlfriend for that.*

Adopting a harder, vaguely paternal smile, he nods approvingly at me and turns to Edwin, "Lee bien en español, ¿verdad?"

He reads well in Spanish, doesn't he?

I hand him the Bible and mention that we have been speaking about Genesis.

"Cuando Dios creó al hombre del polvo," Edwin says.

When God created Man from dust.

Martín nods to Edwin and motions to his side, "¿Le contaste cómo Eva fue creada de la costilla de Adán?"

Did you tell him about how Eve was created from Adam's rib?

"Me entiendes?" he turns to me, "sabes que significa la costilla?"

I confirm that I do, that the word is "rib" in English. He asks if I think that women are *pecadores.*

"En el diseño de Dios," he says, "las mujeres son creadas para servir y someterse a los hombres."

In God's design, women are created to serve and submit to men.

I ask if there is no other way to read those words. "Como una alegoría," I suggest, "sobre el crecimiento, el deseo, la pérdida de la inocencia." *Like an allegory, about growing up, desire, the loss of innocence.*

"Pero no," Martín insists, "así lo dice la Biblia!"

But it says so in the Bible.

"Pero sí," Edwin jumps in, "esta imagen del crecimiento es importante en la Biblia."

This image of growth is important in the Bible.

He launches into Nebuchadnezzar's second dream, from Daniel 4, the dream of the great tree that reached to the sky and sheltered the birds and the beasts in the field before it was felled and cast in metal.

"En la Biblia," he says, looking off again, "dice que el árbol creció de *todo*, lo bueno y malo… desde la tierra."

In the Bible, it says that the tree grew from everything, the good and the bad… from the earth.

Martín nods. "Es lo mismo en el Apocalipsis."

It's the same in Revelation.

I assume he is speaking about the Tree of Life, the vivid archetype of unity, innocence, and redemption of which Nebuchadnezzar's dream is only a pale shadow.[xviii] I am wrong.

"Lo que pasa en el Apocalipsis," Martín says to me, "es que, como puede ver, aún no ha sucedido. Pero está llegando, está sucediendo."

What's happening in Revelation is that, as you can see, it hasn't happened yet. But it's coming, it's happening.

He pauses and restarts. "Lo que sucede en el Apocalipsis," he says, "es que es como un niño."

What happens in Revelation is that it's like a child.

He lowers his hand, his palm facing the ground to indicate the height of a child. "Va a crecer. Está empezando a caminar, como un niño aprende a caminar."

It's going to grow. It's starting to walk, like a child learns to walk.

I'm tempted to bring matters back to Genesis, but refrain. Instead, I ask a simple question, one I will not regret. What is the way of God?

The best way to follow Him on this Earth?

How to proceed?

Martín mentions *dar*, giving. He has been bringing Edwin and Abelardo clothes, he tells me. He tells me that it's not much, that he doesn't have that much to give, that it is his obligation as a Christian, "como hombre," he says. *As a man.*

Pointing to the boulevard, he tells me that the men with nice cars and big houses will have nothing when *todo termine*, when it's all over

"Sí, ser recto," Edwin mutters, staring at the cars and the palms, then looking back at us. Ser recto, derecho en el camino de la vida, el camino hacia Dios."

Yes, be upright. Be right, straight ahead on the path of life, the path towards God.

7.

"This whole Latinos for Trump thing," a low-level political operative once told me outside the Santa Ana City Hall, "is, respectfully, a crisis."

The operative, who wore a navy blazer a half size too large with a windowpane check and a pocket square, leaned against the railing and checked his watch and talked at length about Latinos in Border Patrol and Latinos in ICE. He talked about "family values" and "upward mobility." In passing, less as an afterthought than as a fact so fundamental it was scarcely worth his breath, he also mentioned "the church."

"This prosperity gospel crap," he said, examining his watch, "It's insidious."

By the rules of his own vernacular, the language game of electoral strategy, he was not wrong. Evangelicals, never mind Pentecostals, shade deep red in the spectrum of our national politics. They have, in fact, become something of a mythic anathema to those who vote Democrat. Evangelicals, so runs the logic, are provincial folk, backwards and hateful. Evangelicals are fascist. They are primitive

people, beset by a disease of literal mindedness which blinds them to reality. They think the world is 6,000 years old.

The U.S. demographic variously labelled "Hispanic," "Non-White Hispanic," and "Latino" (and, more recently, "Latinx") is not exempt from this myth. The boom of *evangelicalismo* across this demographic has rattled pollsters. The expansion of charismatic Christian faiths throughout Latin America over the past two decades, and among its northbound emigrants, has grated against the dominant progressive ethos. For those inclined towards communal growth and government regulation, talk of individual responsibility, discipline, and salvation seems a bane to democracy. A roundly capitalist vision, it kills collective action at the root.

As always, it is more complex. Consider Central America. Over the years, there has been much discussion of "Pentecostalism as a neoliberal solution" (borrowing Levenson's phrase) to the ravages of war in countries such as Guatemala, Nicaragua, and, indeed, El Salvador. This much is true: the Catholic liberation movements never did take hold as their advocates had hoped. In the fallout of war, there could be no more peasant revolts because the peasants themselves had disbanded. The violence had forced *campesinos* from farms to urban factories. In cities transformed by the global market, the working poor arrived at different ideas of success, aspirations predicated on individual calling and economic return.

This is also true. Romero and the Jesuits were always far outnumbered. Catholicism remained, in the war years, the religion of the elite, the ruling class, the *hacienda*. In the 1980s and 90s, the prospect of a "new world order" to be realized through personal strength and virtue would have seemed, for many Salvadorans, long overdue. The dream of private integrity was safer, more manageable and rewarding, than that of class revolt. With organized rebellion increasingly the purview of violent gangs, Evangelical calls for moral rectitude and "traditional" familial hierarchies proved edifying. This was so among *mareros* looking to be "born again," as it was among family members hoping to save their

young boys (and, less often, girls) from the "necrolife" of the streets. Here, Timothy H. Wadkin's recent book, *The Rise of Pentecostalism in Modern El Salvador* (2017) is instructive. The book's subtitle is this: "From the Blood of the Martyrs to the Baptism of the Spirit."

Wadkin belongs to a generation of scholars who give Evangelicalism its academic due. Today, 34% of Salvadorans are Evangelical. It is not a fad or frivolity. It is not going away. Romero's "preferential option for the poor" has been reformed in the post-war years, born again as the "preferential option of the spirit." "In vast numbers, Salvadorans were walking away from their traditional moorings in Catholicism," writes Wadkins, recalling a loud procession of Evangelicals bursting upon his silent observance at Oscar Robero's crypt, "A huge, multifaceted enthusiastic awakening of what can be called 'Spirit-filled' Christianity was taking place" (2017,).

The subject of Wadkin's book is "This spirit-filled Evangelical renaissance *and its connection to modernization processes in El Salvador*… the country's tumultuous transition into a capitalistic and globalized postmodern country" (2017). Another recent monograph, *Evangelicalism and Masculinity: Faith and Gender in El Salvador* by Jose Leonardo Santo (2012), follows a similar contextualizing impulse. Among men in El Salvador, Santo finds, the drinking, domestic violence, and promiscuity stereotypical of *machismo* are, in many cases, successfully beaten back and washed away by the cleansing waves of conversion. Yet these waves run in the steadfast channels of rediscovered "tradition." These are the banks of the absolute, the bedrock of "the literal." The "modern" and reborn image of manhood bespeaks a "modern" and reborn patriarchy. Woman, now fixed as the vehicle of sin, is made subordinate, domestic, the pale image of her master, Man.

To say that all religions have their pros and cons, or, with sharper irony, that any real progress seems hopeless, as old problems take on new forms, is to miss the point. The point is methodological, an approach to the very idea of religion. What Wadkin and Santo demonstrate (sometimes against their own theorizing) is practical Christianity itself, the weight of each step as one strives to walk with

God. The terrain is, as it always is, historical—social, cultural, "existential."[xix] What counts as charity, or liberation, or transgression is a matter of participation in both terrestrial and divine worlds. The muddle of experience dictates the practice of faith. In the end, spirit must live a human life.

8.

There was a preacher who came to the lot most Saturday mornings with a portable PA system and trumpeted the language of apocalypse into his microphone. Over time, one grew accustomed to the blare of certain menacing words among the sound of engines and back-up alarms and parrots squawking overhead. Among the most common of these words, so pronounced that even the non-Spanish speaker could readily pick them out, were *pecado* ("sin"), *pecadores* ("sinners"), *infierno* ("hell"), *niños* ("children"), *borrachos* ("drunks"), *rey* ("king"), *masturbación*, and the similarly cognate *prostitutas*, *homosexuales*, and, less often, *transexuales*. Transmitted by this litany was that "special disdain," as James Joyce called it, exclusive to the sermon. The preacher's voice was pinched but resonant, the voice of a man on fire. His language was insurgent, catastrophic, American. It was the vernacular of midwestern Evangelicalism—or, at least, of the religion's public persona, a militant front in the culture wars.

The lot was neither public nor private enough. It was not culturally war-torn. It was not culturally cohesive. It was, in short, a poor choice for a charismatic movement. Had his words merely fallen on deaf ears, the preacher could have, I suppose, fashioned himself a prophet, could have convinced himself of a world not yet ready for his wisdom. ("My time is not yet come" has long been rhetorical trump card among subversives, no less so for Friederich Nietzsche than for Jesus Christ.) But the world *was* ready for him—ready enough, at least, to brush aside his vatic invectives. The men heard him, agreed with him, for the most part, more in principle than in practice, and let him asseverate

for as long as he liked. They never spoke to him, rarely acknowledged his presence, and shared their thoughts on his words only when asked.

I said he seemed *un poco intenso* and they shrugged. I said he seemed *listisimo* for karaoke night and they shrugged. Abelardo laughed.

"Soy la neta en karaoke," he said.

One morning, I arrived to find the preacher absorbed in his normal routine while a truck blasted mariachi some fifty feet away. A worker lounged in the driver's seat of the truck, the brim of his hat slanted down over his face. He did not look up. The preacher did not look over. Each kept to his own rhythm, leaving the world to the engines, the parrots, the beeping alarms.

Certain Saturdays, once or twice a month, a group of women visited from La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Inmaculada Concepción. The eldest of the women, Leticia, distributed tortillas from an assortment of woven *tortilleros* in the back of her minivan. It was $3.00 cash for a tortilla with cheese and a side of *arroz y frijoles*. The other women passed out cups of water. A can of Coke was $1.00.

On the morning of the blasting mariachi (my notes tell me it was 8/12/2021), the preacher put down his microphone around 10:15 and wandered across the parking lot to buy a tortilla. Several minutes later, the man in the truck turned off his music and did the same. He exchanged a nod with the preacher and laughed with Leticia over some indecipherable joke. The preacher ate quickly, keeping an eye on his sound system, before going back to the microphone and resuming his tirade: "¡Ay de aquellos que no escuchan! Por tanto, arrepiéntete. Pues si no, vendré a ti pronto, y pelearé con la espada de mi boca."

Woe to those who do not listen! Therefore, repent. For if not, I will come to you soon, and I will fight with the sword of my mouth.

There was another group, this one from Templo de la Resurrección Calvario. La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora was Catholic. El Templo was Evangelical. Its members also brought food, but at a different price. They invited the men to stand in a circle and pray. Those who prayed were fed.

I asked Martin and Edwin if they wanted to join. Edwin continued to sit and stare and said nothing.

"Es que solo hablan de trago todo el tiempo" Martín shrugged. "¿Sabes qué significa trago? Es, como, bebida… like what you drinking alcohol."

I nodded. He gestured to the prayer circle.

"Llaman a todos los compas aquí borrachitos." He pointed down to the case of Bud Light tactfully positioned by our feet, under the leaf of a hulking agave. "Si me tomo una birria, pues me tomo una birria y sé de mi pecado. Me arrepiento de mi pecado. Pero no me gusta cómo vienen aquí y llaman a todos borrachos."

They just talk about booze all the time. They call the guys here drunks. If I have a beer, well, I have a beer and I know my sin. I repent for my sin. But I don't like how they come here and call everyone drunks.

He shrugged again. "No está correcto."

"No está chivo," Edwin grumbled.

It's not right

I asked if the preacher had been here today. Edwin saw him earlier but he left when the church group came. I asked if he was from a different church.

"¿Ese hombre?" Martin raised his brow. "No creo que pertenezca a una iglesia."

I don't think he belongs to a church.

9.

For a period of two weeks in September, there was a young man of slight build with a shaved head and razor bumps on his cheeks and large square-framed glasses who lived out of his car. This in itself was not unusual. There were many people living in their cars at the lot. That he had jury-rigged his car with duct tape was also not, in the abstract, a noteworthy detail. There were many cars with improvised repairs. What was strange was this: the cryptic pattern of the tape. There were horizontal strips along each door, grids across the rear windows, a massive X across the hood.

"It's because of the signals," he told me, "from the phone tower. I can't sleep."

"The signals" had been coming in through his skin. He showed me his forearm, riddled with scabs and X's drawn in pen and two more strips of tape, cut thin and secured at the wrist like silver bracelets. The scabs were small and irregular and he confirmed that had been picking at pimples and hairs. I checked for signs of slitting but saw none. Recalling long nights I had spent with certain despondent friends as a teenager, I told him crushing ice with his hands might help if the pain and the pressure was too much. That helps sometimes, I told him. They sold ice at the ARCO.

His name was Richard. He was twenty-four years old. "That's when it starts in men," my friend Micaela, a nursing student, said. "It runs in families. His mother must be freaking the fuck out right now. She can see it happening."

His mother lived in Guadalajara. He came here to stay with his sister and work.

I gave him information for the community clinic.

"They're not gonna mess with you."

"Nice." He smiled, "I need some blood work done."

Edwin would offer him a beer, knowing he did not drink. He spoke to him in Spanish about the heat, women and work, knowing full well that the young man lived alone in the dark of his car

and did not run after the contractors' trucks with the others. No one mentioned the duct tape or the scabs. Finally, I asked.

"Está alucinando," Edwin said, staring off into the distance. "Está demasiado preocupado con sus propias fantasías." He pointed to Richard's car. "Porque este tipo de cosas son ídolos."

He's tripping. He's too preoccupied with his own fantasies. Because these kinds of things are idols.

Recalling an earlier conversation, I asked if he was also concerned about the signals from the cell towers.

"O claro," he scoffed, "claro, porque los diablos en el gobierno van a intentar controlar nuestras mentes, sí, con las señales, y van a tratar de controlarnos con las vacunas. Porque son unos diablos de mierda."

Yeah, because the devils in the government are going to try to control our minds, yes, with signals, and they are going to try to control us with vaccines. Because they are fucking devils.

"Son como serpientes," he went on, still staring at Richard's car, "porque así lo dice la Biblia. Sí, *es una chulada*, Mateo, porque habrá cuatro bestias que surgirán del mar, un león con alas, un oso con huesos en la boca, un leopardo con cuatro cabezas y cuatro alas de ave, y luego un—como un dragón, un monstruo con muchos cuernos."

He turned to me. "Y Timoteo, quise decir Mateo, estas bestias representan a los reyes."

They are like snakes, because the Bible says so. Because there's going to be four beasts that will come out of the sea, a lion with wings, a bear with bones in its mouth, a leopard with four heads and four bird wings, and then a dragon, a monster with many horns. And these beasts represent the kings.

"Y, Mateo, no—" he chuckled. "Timoteo. Perdón, Timoteo. Luego surgirá una bestia con los aspectos de todos estos monstruos, los cuatro—"

He held up four fingers. "Y se verá como un leopardo, pero tendrá pies como los de un oso y una boca como la de un león. Y, *whoosh,* que surge del mar y pronuncia blasfemias. *Es un chulada*, este

historia. El dragón le da poder a la bestia para tirarle guerra a los santos, y ahí viene Jesús pa' pelear contra la bestia, que es símbolo de los reyes."

Then a beast with features of all these monsters, the four, will arise, and it will look like a leopard, but it will have feet like a bear's and a mouth like a lion's. And, whoosh, rising out of the sea and saying profanities. The dragon gives power to the beast to wage war on the saints, and here comes Jesus to fight against the beast, which is a symbol of the kings.

After two weeks, the car with the tape disappeared, and Richard with it. Hector said his sister had come to bring him back to Mexico.

"Está huyendo del diablo," Edwin chuckled.

He's running from the devil.

10.

"¿Conocias a José?"

The name doesn't ring a bell.

"Falleció. En septiembre," he says, adjusting his hat.

I tell him I'm very sorry to hear that. He says that José was married to a "pinche bruja" who wanted all of his money. When José would go out to buy beer "ella lo putearía." She would cuss him out so badly that he would leave his house and come to the lot to drink and drive home after she'd gone to bed.

"Fíjate, te voy a mostrar."

Look, I'll show you.

Lifting himself from the curb with some effort, he stumbles onto the dirt and picks up his backpack. Unzipping the front pocket, he pulls out what looks like a postcard and hands it to me.

On the front of the card is an image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, set in a mandorla patterned with triangular rays of light and framed by a wreath of roses. On the back is an image a man. He has a round face, like Edwin, but a fuller mustache and a mop of gray hair. He is turned towards the camera from a seated position, as if someone had called out his name, causing him to smile.

José Antonio Gutiérrez
7 de marzo de 1953 - 15 de septiembre de 2021

"El que cree en mí, aunque muera, vivirá."
Juan 11:25

Oh amada Virgen de Guadalupe, rosa mística, intercede por nosotros ante tu Hijo y obtén por nosotros las gracias que te pedimos. En los momentos de angustia defiéndenos de las fuerzas de nuestros enemigos, y a la hora de nuestra muerte recibe nuestra alma en el Cielo. Amén.

He died from drinking, Edwin tells me, from the stress of work and a bad woman. He takes the card from my hand and flips it over, flicking the picture of La Virgen with his finger.

"Su esposa es católica."

His wife is Catholic

The following week, Martín will tell me that José was also a Catholic.

"Por eso no divorció," he says.

That's why he didn't get divorced.

11.

He came here when he was 27. He was born Evangelical but lost his faith during a period of "problemas" which I will not detail here. What matters, to him, is that he got it back.

"Even those raised in *evangélico* churches," writes León, "can mark their date of first spiritual conversion, becoming 'born again.' The stories of *evangélicos* include more than one single conversion Rather, each narrative involves periods of lapse, or 'backsliding,' and periods of return… Some don't return at all, and some don't 'backslide' completely." There is a tension, here, between the generosity of spirit and its private, Emersonian life. *You're always welcome back, but you, and you alone, must find the spirit in you.*

You must find a simple answer that still lets you breathe.

You must let eternity speak from the rubble, amidst the dizzying signs.

The day he told me all this, about his *problemas* and being born again, was the same day he abruptly blurted out, "Sabes, Timoteo, no siempre he vivido en la calle."

You know, I have not always lived on the street.

They evicted him, he said. He couldn't pay rent. At this point in our dialogue, something happened that had never happened before. He started to sob, lightly at first, then loudly, forcefully, without a care for who saw. He blew his nose in his sleeve.

I sat beside him on the curb and told him I would help him look for a place when things got better, "cuando la economía mejore." *When the economy improved.*

"No," he spat, "es que no pude pagar después de que ella me dejó."

It's that I couldn't pay after she left me.

"¿Quién te dejó?"

Who left you?

"Mi esposa," he sobbed, "mi esposa murió el año pasado."

My wife, my wife died last year.

We sat on the curb and stared into the palms and the cars and the distance and waited for Martín to pull in.

ISMAEL

The best witness, the only true witness in reality, according to the specialists, is one who has not survived, who has gone to the end of the experience and is dead. But neither the historians nor the sociologists have so far resolved this contradiction: how to invite these true witnesses, the dead, to their conferences? How can they be made to speak?

- Jorge Semprún, *Le Mort qu'il faut*,
  translated by Geoffrey Hartman ()

I gave up before birth, it is not possible otherwise, but birth there had to be, it was he, I was inside, that's how I see it, it was he who wailed, he who saw the light, I didn't wail, I didn't see the light, it's impossible I should have a voice, impossible I should have thoughts, and I speak and think, I do the impossible… I'll tell the tale, the tale of his death, the end of his life and his death… he'll come to a place and drop, why there and not elsewhere, drop and sleep, badly because of me, he'll get up and go on, badly because of me, he can't stay still any more, because of me, he can't go on any more, because of me, there's nothing left in his head, I'll feed it all it needs.

- Samuel Beckett, "Fizzle 4" ([1974] 1995. 174-175)

Come, little green snake. Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent. The soul uses everything to further its own making.

- Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* ([1987] 2012. 68)

First Movement

1.

A few weeks after his death, Ismael felt the pain in his heart again. He was on the subway when his arm went numb.

"Yeah, I went inside the BART," he tells me, "when I start to feel sick, and then, oh, I have to get outta here right away in the, the next stop, I have to get outta here and get something sweet."

His tone is excited, escalating. It gives the sense of a man with little time for the mass of details he has inherited, who would rather leave certain stones unturned than delay his progress towards a transcendent horizon. Where he had been going on the BART, what the next stop had been—these are quaint particulars, features of the narrative scenery more obstructive than edifying.

I ask why something sweet.

"Yeah," he responds in stride, "like a piece of cake or something, some hard candies, something like that. And then I went to walk there and then I sit a little, take a rest and don' feel sick. And I try to get something sweet. Then I saw, he saw me, a man, and then he start to talk to me about the natural doctors. Cause he, he told me, *you very sick*…"

He glances through the windshield. We are sitting in his car, an hour into our interview. It is 8:12 PM. Night has washed out the last traces of dusk, and the pink and yellow walls of the Body Works lobby glare at us through the row of glass doors. Inside, a girl in sweats slumps in a plastic yellow chair shaped like a giant hand, flicking at her phone.

"¿Fue un extranjero?" I ask.

"¿Fue… cómo?" He turns to face me, shifting his weight in the driver's seat, one forearm on the steering wheel, the other tensed against the headrest.

"You didn't know this guy?"

"No I don' know who…" he pauses. "This, the man I never seen my life. This was the first time when I saw him in my life, so he give me the address from, from a doctor…"

I pause to jot down a note. Our conversation reminds me of an encounter from earlier in the week. It was late afternoon and I was sitting under the carob tree with Edwin and Martín, discussing The Book of Revelation, when a man appeared literally out of nowhere. One moment, he was simply there, standing on the sidewalk flat-footed, as if he had been waiting for us to notice him. He might have been whisked down from the mountains by the wind. His skin was burnt and bitten red. His hair was swept with grease.

What was strange about his appearance was that it was not strange at all—no stranger, certainly, than a Jehovah's Witness with a photographic memory and a taste for Etruscan ruins, or an evangelist going on about the day of judgement as mariachi blared in the background, or a car wrapped in duct tape to repel "the signals." Strange is a relative term. It thrives amidst the familiar (from which it is *estranged*, to which it is *extraneous*). In this case, the man had a backpack full of what I assumed were drugs but turned out to be cleaning fluid in unmarked plastic bottles. He was selling it cheap. Martín told him no gracias and he zipped up the bag and walked off. I asked Martín if he'd seen the man before and he said no. Edwin said nothing but plucked a seed pod from the carob and turned it in his fingers and soon there was nothing to say. We went back to Revelation.

"And then," Ismael tells me now, "I want to look at the doctor, there, in San Francisco, but he told me, no, no you need to somebody else because you, you have to go to New York—"

"¿A Nueva York?"

"Yeah, to contact with the, the guy who knows exactly—"

He pulls a paper napkin from his cupholder and sneezes into it.

"He can help you to discover what's going with you. Cuz, ah…"

He sneezes again. "It's, for the natural doctor, it's no easy to say to you, oh, if you sick, oh, you can a fix your problem with this—no, mhm."

He blows his nose into the napkin. "Yeah, man," he says, now plugging the napkin into single nostril, "they have to studying to you. For one week they studying physically, how is my body. I have to explain everything, how I grow up, how my parents, when I was a boy, because they need to discovering. So for that you have to, to talk, explain everything since when you a boy."

He tells me he took the train to New York. I imagine his route, golden hills to golden fields to frozen lakes into the jaws of the city. I think of the railroad, a monstrous white ambition. I think of the mass grave of Chinese workers, the uncounted bodies, memorialized only by the flattened terrain and the tunnels carved by dynamite. I think of these things as Ismael folds the napkin in half, then in half once more, as he slides it into a plastic bag tied to the rear grab handle. The bag is labelled "basura" with marker and scotch tape, a small token of control.

2.

"Entonces, ¿dirías que eres religioso?"

"¿Religioso? ¿Cómo?"

"Religious? Are you religious?"

"I'm not gon' to the church. Yeah. But I believe in God."

"Yeah, right, okay… I don't judge one way or another."

"No?"

"No, no, I'm not a… "

"Yeah. Fanático."

"Yeah, I'm not a fanatic, I'm not a priest—"

"No, you don' practice no religion?"

"Um, no, o sea, creo en Dios, pero no—"

"Yeah, you don' practice. You don' practice no religion, yeah."

"Yeah. No mucho. Y, tu, también—"

"Yeah, I'm like that."

"Pero, es importante creer… to believe in something, right?

"O, sí," he says, "porque sí existe. God exist, man, y, ah, I think it's better to have to discover yourself, man—"

He closes his eyes and lifts his hand to his face, rubbing his fingers across his brow and pinching the bridge of his nose. He reaches down to his belt and unclips a carabiner that jangles with an absurd mass of keys. He turns the ignition to ACCESSORY and flicks on the lights.

"You want, like this man, the lights?"

The lines on his face are gray with stubble and loose twinkling hairs, streaking like dark pencil marks from the corners of his eyes to his jaw. I see the pouches under his eyes. His liquid stare. He sees me too.

I tell him I don't want him to drain his battery.

"Yeah, okay, because I think God," he nods and turns back the key, switching off the lights, "is not like the Bible, the religion, are talking about it."

What the Bible is not talking about, I learn, is this. There is one God, the "Creator God," about whom we "know nothing." Jesus Christ was a god, "but he don' get us, he come only to explain a little bit… about this life, that we have to love each other and like that." The Creator God has no body, and was not created. He is the God of nature.

"The natural, nobody creates," he smiles and leans back in his seat, "The natural, all the time exists, all the time will be exist. Don' have body, no, this is natural, this is talking about."

"El culto a la naturaleza y el culto a los muertos," I mumble, having nothing else to say, "Aquí es donde comienza la mayoría de las religiones." *The worship of nature and the worship of the dead. This is where most religion starts*. It is a quote from James George Frazer.

"Oh yeah, man," He nods. "Yeah, it's like that. Also the, what's the name, the guys, they're a tribe, right here in United States, and I don' know what—"

"¿Son indígenas?"

"Yeah, indígenas, but they believe in God, but that kinda God. They say, because we feel part from all the natural. Yeah, they, they have that kind of philosophy. Also, in Seattle, the, the chief, in Seattle? They have same thing, uh, philosophy, like that… "

He trails off and looks at me, as if I might bolster or confirm his theory. I think back to college, to a dated encyclopedia titled *American Indian Mythology* I found in the library stacks and naively indulged. The image of a raven soaring over flooded terrain, searching for land, occurs to me, but the association ends here.

"Yeah, but the kinda God, the creator God?," he sits up his chair and stares at me, "We don' know nothing about him. And—but now? I know a lotta things from him."

What he knows, he tells me, he knows straight from the source. The Creator God was once a human, with brothers, sisters, a mother and father. That a God who is uncreated should have parents seems not to trouble him. The plot pivots on the God's own parenthood. He was sterile, Ismael tells me, at least as far as humans were concerned. At first, he could produce only spirits.

"But," he looks out the windshield, searching for the word, then back to me, "He live, uh, many… I don' know if you can call a few millions? Womans? He get pregnant woman."

He pauses to scratch his nose. There is everything and nothing left to ask. I ask what happened next.

"Yeah, man, because that womans was a prostitute," he resumes, "And, you know, but I hear He, God say, will be, again, one guy, will be him, like him, like a *gay god*. And he is the first human to get his body, um, genital body, so he start the first guy to, um—how you say desarrollar?

His voice slows and drops at the phrase "gay god." He pronounces "genital" "hen-ee-tal." I tell him the word is "development." He leans back in his seat.

"Development?" He nods, "Development, yeah, his body."

He nods with affirmative finality. The glow from the streetlights filters into the car and dulls the space between us. I sense we're nearing a threshold of language: not a vertical limit, where words shiver and flare in the face of eternity, such as poets are prone to encounter, but a horizontal edge, a caliginous border. We're shading onto a ground of expression where the terrain offers no easy movement, where I'll have trouble finding my feet. One word for this trouble is madness.

To put it in terms of philosophy: the trouble is more of Wittgenstein than of Freud, trouble of obscure patterns expressed through familiar criteria, of clouded intention, interpretive impasse. It is more Beckettian, a problem not of "private language" but imaginative exile, inward epiphany.[xx]

Say this. Who is mad, who is exiled, who is given over to imagination, who turns the rules against the game—these are matters of perspective. They are matters of faith.

He tells me that no one believes him. He tells me that God believes him. It was God who told him these things, who returned his faith with truth.

I ask if the gay god is one of God's children. I ask if this god is a man or a spirit, if he is an angel, if he was born of a prostitute.

"Yeah, he is a god," he responds, "like the Creator God make him, not like with the prostitute."

He clears his throat. "So we have to follow him in how, how to make, because he can flying, but when he says flying, is no like, ah, grow up wings. No, he's only his mind, flying like to the sky, he say he put the mind like this, it's starting to *poom*, go. And then also, he can, he can burn with something—if you get something, he can burn, and *no more*."

"*Prometheus?,*" I write in my notes, "*Apocalypse, Aztec Suns*"

"And God," he says, "He tell me, we go, man, in the future. And He say, when this planet—because the planet start grow up more and more and more and more and more, more big, He say when make a very huge volcano in the middle of the ocean, there are explosion."

He holds his hands out, miming the cosmic bang.

We're interrupted by a knock on his window. A spectral figure waves through the glass.

Ismael pops open his door. It is Abelardo. He's looking for *mota*. Ismael says he smoked the last of his with Juan Carlos yesterday and doesn't know when he'll get more.

"Chinga la verga," Abelardo mutters, squinting past Ismael and noticing me for the first time. "Hola Timoteo!"

I ask him if there is no one else around and he tells me that he'll talk to his *camello* tomorrow.

"A dealer?," I ask, surprised. "¿Por mota?"

He nods. "Él va al dispensario por mí. He go to the, the store, cause he has a *licensia*. You can no buy weed if you don' have a license."

Ismael tells Abelardo he'll see him later but leaves the door open, letting the cool night air wash in. It is 9:15. The gym lobby is empty now. A half hour earlier, the girl in the hand-shaped chair slid her phone into the pocket of her sweats and slumped out the door, disappearing into a minivan.

"Yeah, and then it start to create another sun," he says to me, lowering his voice, "but little by little it starting getting, ah, meteorites? And *it's too far away* donde—he say that the lava start to, grow,

the, meteorites start to getting more and more lava and more big and more meteorites and more, start to grow up like that."

He pauses, his eyes directed through windshield, over the Body Works sign to the night sky. "But he say when, when it's ready, the sun? This planet start to travelling, around the universe. Yeah, so we, we don' see no more the sun and the earth go away."

What to make of all this? Weeks passed in the wake of our interview. Weeks of annotation and transcription narrowed to a dull end. I felt waves of despair, rivers of silence rushing the gaps in his words. To be clear, I could make plenty of his words, with one stipulation: that I take them as a fellow fallen mortal, another human on earth, even as a writer. Not as an anthropologist. In that role, I found nothing solid at all. The silence washed through my "professional" vision with the strength of a deluge.

I suppose this is a natural mood for anthropology. I suppose the enterprise is casually tragic. The discipline has long struggled with old problems of induction and ideal: the allure of finding what one already knows, the call to drive one's bias upon the world and receive it as natural law, or else drown in obscurity. But my concern was different. I was not so concerned, to use Wittgenstein's terms, with "language games" as objects of comparison[xxi]—not with the confusion that arises by judging one form of life by the standards of another. What troubled me was more basic, a feature of language *überhaupt*: its infinite openness. This is an insatiable openness, a hunger for answers to questions of which we can scarcely make sense.

We might call these questions riddles.

"The questioning expressed in great riddles is *anyone's*," writes the philosopher Cora Diamond, "the possibility of such questions belongs to language itself and not to any particular language game"

(Diamond 1991, 287). I should note that Diamond is concerned, here, with words such as "God," "knowledge," and "revelation," and that she views these terms as "grammatical" in the sense of Wittgenstein, as showing something about the workings of "language itself." I should note her dictum that "To be a great riddle is to 'allude' to a language whose full transparency to us is ruled out" (282). I should note that she is defending St. Anslem, working through the grammar of his famous proof of God: "that than which nothing greater can be conceived." The crux of the defense is this.

> Reality may surprise us, not only by showing us what *is* the case, when we had not suspected it was, but also by showing us something beyond what we had ever taken to be possible, beyond anything we had thought of at all. Our conception of what is possible might be altered by reality to include something not merely beyond anything we had imagined, but beyond anything we *could* imagine, given our finite capacity to imagine things. (279-280)

Diamond is wonderfully gentle with Anslem. She respects his conviction, takes him at his word, accepts his proof as suitable to his requirements, however obscure they might be—even to him. "I can know *that* something is the solution without knowing *how* it is," she writes in his defense, "just as I can be told what the solution is without being told how it is, in the case of an ordinary riddle" (283). Knowing God is, in this sense, analogous to knowing that 53 is the next prime number after 47 without grasping the mathematical rule by which one arrives at this answer (because, perhaps, one has relied on trial and error, or because one has simply been told this is so). It is analogous to Luke 24, where Jesus reveals himself as the fulfilment of scripture, ushering in centuries of exegesis.

"Where we can only expect the solution from some sort of revelation," writes Wittgenstein, "there isn't even a problem. A revelation doesn't correspond to any question" (1975, 172). I think of God's appearance to Ismael in similar terms, as I do of Ismael's words to me. The way forward entails a backward glance: description thickening into context, inferential webs, the question itself.

A form has flashed before my eyes, has sounded in my ears, with the strength of whatever we might count as "truth."

Now I must work in the shadows, the echoes, convening their doubts, tracing out their infinite suggestion.

3.

"Sabes quien fue Harold Lloyd?"

It is an odd question to hear over the phone. The whiteness of the name, its mid-century ring, catches me off guard. We've been talking about Trump and Biden, about the "Illuminatis" poisoning the air, about the natural doctors in New York and, here, suddenly —through the crackle of wind on his end of the line—is Harold Lloyd.

I tell him I don't know.

"Harold Lloyd, he was a guy, almost like a Charlie Chaplin."

"Ah, okay."

"Yeah, because, I was watching a lotta movies of this guy," he says. "Yes, watching, and also here in the YouTube. Yeah, I watching how he died and why don't make no more movies."

I pry myself from the bulky and disfigured couch left to me by the previous tenant of my apartment. The "living room" of the unit, if you can call it that, is windowless but for a screen door facing north and shrouded by pines. It receives an absurd lack of sunlight. The couch smells like cats.

I sit down at my desk and type "Harold Lloyd" into Google.

"And I watching all these things about his life," Ismael goes on, "You know what man, I think they got very bad doctors, because he died with cancer. Yeah, but, you know what happened? The doctor told him, like maybe you got only like a six months with life."

Lloyd is not handsome like Chaplin. He has the long, soft face of a trickster; a pointed, inquisitive nose—a monolithic perch for a pair of round, horn-rimmed frames. His boyish cheeks are

flattened by lily-white makeup. His thin lips are bolded the shades of dark wine. A cartoonish straw boater sits titled on his head. A clown cosplaying as a gondolier.

"You know what happened with Harold Lloyd?" Ismael presses, "Three weeks later he died. By worries! The illness, by worries!—is how… "

The wind disrupts our connection. I hear him laughing through the static. "That kinda doctor is stupid! Somebody, if they sick, there is nothing worse to explain everything is gonna happen, like that! Very bad, say, oh maybe you got only six months with life. Then the people, they kill it. That's why I don't like."

According to Wikipedia, Harold Lloyd was severely burned in 1919, a victim of his own comedy. At a photoshoot, he lit what he thought was a prop bomb (but was, in fact, a real explosive designed for use in action scenes) with his cigarette. His hand was mangled and his face and chest were severely burned. "I thought I would surely be so disabled that I would never be able to work again," Lloyd is quoted as saying in a 1930 interview, "I didn't suppose that I would have one five-hundredth of what I have now. Still I thought, 'Life is worth while. Just to be alive.' I still think so" (Wikipedia 2023).

The "Death" section of the Wikipedia page is brief. "Lloyd died of prostate cancer on March 8, 1971," it reads, "at the age of 77, in his Greenacres home in Beverly Hills, California" (ibid.). There is no mention of a clumsy doctor.

He had called me earlier in the day and left a voicemail: "Hey Tim, how are you, man? I miss to talking to you, man. Call me, yeah, when you get the chance." This was the first I'd heard from him in over four months. It is July 2020. We'd had no contact since he had left town for Seattle. I suppose

I had expected him to call. Certain facts would have otherwise remained too neatly conspiratorial, the plot too insidiously closed.

Here are some of the facts. The first documented case of COVID-19 in the U.S. was confirmed from samples taken in Washington State. That was on January 20th. On February 10th, Ismael showed me a bag of pills containing "ingredientes naturales" and told me he felt sick. On February 29th, we sat in his car discussing the advantages of tequila over those pills. We discussed the time he lost his soul and the time he nearly lost it again on the BART and the natural God of the Seattle tribe whose name he couldn't remember. Also on February 29th, the first U.S. death from COVID was reported: a man in his 50s, hospitalized with pneumonia in the Seattle Metropolitan Area. On March 17th, Moderna started vaccine trials at a Seattle research facility. Ismael arrived in the city that evening. I had asked him to text me when he made it.

You know how they do," he asks me now, "the natural doctors? When you sick, they never say to you, *you have only two months or four months with life*. No. They never say to you that."

I ask him what they say.

"Oh, the natural doctors," he says, "oh, they say to you, *you are, you sick, but you will be okay. You have to do this, this, this, this, this and you will be okay. Make your mind different, and then you can, you don't have negative worries.* The problem is when the doctors put in your mind negative worries, they kill."

"Sí," I say, "es un pronóstico negativo."

"Yeah but when you they put your mind positive thinking, oh man, you go up and you, and you will go up fast with your illness and you go better."

The previous tenant of my apartment is a political science student who recently flew to Taiwan for research. Taiwan is bad for the virus, Ismael tells me, "too close to China," and sunlight is bad for

the heart "if it's too much, all the time." I don't mention the cat musk, but I do ask about Seattle. He tells me the weather is better up there. The rain is cool and cleansing.

"Yeah, man, the positive thinking," he says now, "because when I be sick in my heart also, when I feel sick I never get scared, never cry. No, uh-uh. You feel like I don't have nothing, como si, like if I am feeling, como si estuviera vacío… how you say that?"

"Empty. Like you feel empty."

"Em— cómo?"

"Como las letras," I pronounce the letters in English, "'M' y 'T'"

"Sí, when I'm feeling like that, like the, the em—?" His voice snaps through the line. "*Paph!* Right away you can go, try to do exercises, like that."

I think of the great Spanish mystics who also felt this way. In the void, the spirit fortifies. I mention this to him. The bare soul becomes God's canvas. *Para venir a poseerlo todo, no quieras poseer algo en nada.*

There is a pause. "Sí, yeah," he responds, "because the santos, they be talking to God like that, from the empty."

"Yeah, Y, creo qué… " I finish my thought in English, "there are a lot of problems because the doctors, they don't have, um, the right words, right? To explain—"

I hear crackling. He is laughing again. "No, they don't have!"

4.

Those despairing weeks following our interview on February 29th ran into the period when everything changed. I remember it well. I remember the day Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson tested positive for the virus in Australia, the same day the National Basketball Association suspended its

activities mid-season—in fact, mid-game. The game was between the Dallas Mavericks and the Denver Nuggets. I remember watching footage of Mark Cuban, the billionaire owner of the Mavericks, sitting in the stands and gawking at his phone as the news came in. For a brief moment, there was a problem that could not be bought or sold, a force so seemingly disinterested in human affairs and so productive of human death that it could only be described as alien.

I remember receiving an announcement from the University of California, Irvine that campus would be practicing "social distancing" and, two days later, an email stating that the University would be going "fully remote," just in time for final exams. I remember being told by a faculty member to stock up on non-perishable food, and finding Albertsons well stocked with canned goods but out of toilet paper (along with paper towels, paper napkins, wet wipes, and any other conceivable alternative). It was also at this time that the woman who would later become—through circuitous circumstance—my life partner abruptly told me that she needed to go home to Arizona, a statement that did not so much throw our relationship into question as clarify its terminus. The last time I saw Ismael was on March 14th, the day I found Abelardo watching *The Passion of the Christ* in the bed of a pickup truck and he told us that he had been robbed. We stayed until Abelardo fell asleep, and it was then, as we drifted from the truck to the curb, that he told me he was leaving in two days. I told him I was having trouble with a girl. He assured me it would work out. As with most things, he was right.

The weightless confinement that followed was at once torment and therapy. Isolation worked as a release valve on the pressure of earthly concerns. One morning, in an ambivalent mood, I created a Microsoft Word document and typed out the following.

4/3/2020

This kinda God… nobody creates… all the time exists, all the time will be exist.

Aztec cosmology begins with the self-creation of Ōmeteōtl, the supreme cosmic force, from a void of nothingness.

He got also family… But he can't create human, he create only spirits

Ōmeteōtl is a dual god with male and female aspects: Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl. Ōmeteōtl produced four male offspring: Quetzalcoatl (the eagle-serpent god of knowledge, light, and wind, who presides over the West), Huitzilopochtli (the left-handed hummingbird god of the sun and war, who presides over the South), Xipe Totec (the god of vegetation and agriculture, of gold, metallurgy, and resurrection from the dead, who presides over the East), and Tezcatlipoca (the jaguar god of the night, obsidian, sorcery, and deceit, who presides over the North). The fight among these progeny for the role of the sun—a cycling eternal return known as the Five Suns—is well-known. Tezcatlipoca, for instance, ushered in the first world by stealing the sun and affixing it to his belt, then creating a race of giant people who he could not sustain.

God say, will be, again, one guy, will be Him … like a gay god. And he is the first human to get his body, um, genital body, so he start the first guy to… developing his body… flying to the sky

Tezcatlipoca was the first Sun. He has been described as nonbinary, intersex, bisexual, and fecund. He is often depicted as a fierce male warrior who emanates feminine sexuality. In one image of the god, two flower glyphs strung together by an umbilical cord pour out from his mouth. "Tezcatlipoca seemingly vomits up sex and fertility," writes the historian Peter Sigal (2011, 109). Sigal notes that Tezcatlipoca impersonators, known as xpitla, covered their genitalia with large body suits, providing a template of sexual ambiguity onto which male and female qualities could be projected: erotic flowery adornments, flute-playing evocative of fellatio.

He's only his mind, flying like to the sky, he say he put the mind like this, it's starting to poom, go. And then also, he can, he can burn with something—if you get something, he can burn, and no more… when this planet—because the planet start grow up more and more and more and more and more, more big, He say when make a very huge volcano in the middle of the ocean, there are explosion… and then it start to create another sun… but little by little it starting getting, ah, meteorites? And it's too far away donde—he say that the lava start to, grow, the, meteorites start to getting more and more and more lava and more big and more meteorites and more big, start to grow up like that. But he say when, when it's ready, the sun? This planet start to travelling, around the universe

The reign of Tezcatlipoca—the First Sun—ended when Quetzalcoatl knocked him from the sky with a great stick, transforming him into a jaguar. The reign of Quetzalcoatl—the Second Sun—ended when the Jaguar knocked him from the sky, transforming him into a hurricane that ravaged the earth, turning people into monkeys. The reign of Tlaloc—the god of rain and the Third Sun—ended with a great storm of fire and meteors impelled by jealous wrath. By one account, it was Tlaloc who was jealous and caused the storm, as Tezcatlipoca had made

off with his lover, Xochiquetzal. In another story, it was Quetzalcoatl who poured fire from the skies—a fire so hot that it burned out Tlaloc's sun.

Two months later, George Floyd was murdered, at the age of 46, by a Minneapolis police officer. The protests erupted in Minneapolis and in New York and Los Angeles, in Memphis and Seattle and Atlanta and Dallas and Miami and many other cities which news cameras made the urban tableaus of a 24-hour mythology. By day, these were places of communion, empowerment, collective consciousness, the fruits of grassroots politics as, per the prevailing sentiment, only America could produce. Officers took off their hats to speak calmly to protestors about why they "took this job," about how they would "be better," their mission to protect and serve, or to kneel with protestors for moments of silence. There were families and college students and celebrities in the crowds, people in t-shirts and sneakers, most dutifully wearing masks. By night, the masks came off, replaced by balaclavas. The "good" protestors had gone home to the suburbs. The cities were hellscapes of broken glass and cars on fire. Reports came in that it was FBI plants who were causing the damage, the standard play for "demonizing" protestors. Rumors spread that it was Antifa, or the Proud Boys, or the Boogaloo Bois, or insurance fraud.

Whoever it was, the fetish of violence provided a firm counterbalance to the sunlit masses. A complete picture of apocalypse, innocence and terror, had been achieved. In a Protestant nation as obsessed with individual ethic and calling as with impending doom, the result was contradictory. The images were posted and reposted online, becoming the stuff of personal narrative, private fixation, the rudiments of digital "self-branding." There was a climate of conspiracy, of accusation and pronouncement. True community was hard to come by. So was singular vision.

I watched the clips and the images over dull afternoons grayed by the marine layer of clouds that creeps in each summer from the coast. I read the headlines and the bylines and, when I had the

stomach for them, the articles. "Some of the tropes are familiar," read an op-ed from *The New York Times,* "but we haven't seen this movie before. No one knows how dark things could get" (Goldberg 2020). This may have been factually true, but it was false to the spirit of the time. Rising darkness is scarcely an occasion for rhetorical temperance. It was a time of judgment, omen, prophecy. To quote Mariann Budde, the diocesan bishop of St. John's Episcopal Church, Lafayette Square, where the President of the United States had, following a trail of tear dust, rubber bullets, and flashbangs, held an upside-down Bible aloft and posed for the cameras, "This is a crucible moment" (Budde 2020).

I thought of Ismael, living in this moment as few others did, or could, or would ever want to. He was not a member of any church. He followed no established doctrine or creed, belonged to no denomination, sect, or cult. He bordered on that insidious American ideal, projected onto the wealthy but more likely to burden the poor: an institution unto himself. His was a collector's authority, built from the fragments at hand—the rags, the refuse, the ruins. I could have transcribed our conversation ten times over, filling in the gaps with a different myth each time: Catholic icons, indigenous gods, even (as I would learn) Harold Lloyd. This is just the point. His vision was singular by virtue of its untraceable breadth. It suggested a tremendous, inward labor, a strenuous outward expansion, a work of hearing God's word in the crowd.

"All these demented particulars," writes Samuel Beckett ([1938] 2011, 13). The particulars rebel against narrative *in essentia.* The details keep changing, the perspective shifts without warning, from intimate to synoptic, evading synopsis and intimation with each new turn. The personal details refuse simple abstraction, decline the muzzling whole. Even "the personal" seems too absolute as a concept, insufficient to a fragmentary life. "The force of the fragment surprises" says Geoffrey Hartman, "because it comes from outside, even when that outside is within us" (2015, 128). This is

an image of epiphany: the flash of recovered memory and sublime encounter, the sudden blow and the body of light, glancing touch with the gods. The contingent and the absolute meet in euphoric violence as God, randomly, from out of nowhere, intervenes in the world: an uncanny reminder that He has been here all along (Jeremiah 23:24: "Do you not know that I am everywhere in heaven and on earth?"). God's voice reminds us of our making. It shudders through the bedrock of the unconscious, wrests forth the outside within, inviting a tenuous dialogue. This is the fragment as an image of language. It is an image of metaphor.[xxii]

Hartman once argued that any theory of "witnessing" will be moot from the start. The words themselves matter. They are facts of the world, spoken and written into traumatic existence. The entrance of philosophical style is liable to cough up vague questions of "authenticity," dispensing with the narrative particulars. "The action we follow," writes Hartman, thinking of Holocaust testimonies, "is less a plot that goes from climax to climax, from salient point to salient point, than a self-evolving sequence, more supple and associative… the flux and reflux of consciousness, as witnesses grapple with what has escaped or overwhelmed memory. Memory itself is remembered" (95, 96) The image, here, two sides of a split consciousness let to break bread, invokes the healing and catastrophic powers of *metafora*—the uncanny face in the mirror, the monster within—peaked to metamorphosis.

What God provided Ismael was an expanding ground of expression, a frontier of trope and image where the roots of ideas take differently. If this place is mournful, if it is ruinous, it is so because it is alive. There is no Eden, no Axis Mundi, only the scattered signals from root to root, through living dust. It is a place in crisis, as God is his witness.

Second Movement

1.

What Ismael had suffered from in San Francisco (and was, perhaps, still contending with) was *susto*, described in various Latin American traditions as the loss of soul or a vital force. *Susto* is sometimes described as a loss of *tonalli*, a spiritual energy associated with the Aztec Dual god, *Ōmeteōtl*, and said to be located in the head, where it builds intelligence, character, and will. *Ōmeteōtl* is the origin of cosmic energy, the god of balance between chaos and order, light and darkness, male and female. *Susto* suggests imbalance, asymmetry, displacement.

Over the years, *susto* has garnered attention from psychologists, clinicians, and anthropologists, who offer a basic portrait. It is triggered by a stressful event; it is a psychological, physiological, and cultural affliction; symptoms are similar to those of anxiety and depression, including loss of appetite, drowsiness, insomnia, and feelings of loneliness and personal failure. The most extensive study to date is *Susto: A Folk Illness* (1984), a robust and interdisciplinary overview which finds that victims of *susto* have, in many instances, failed to fulfil their social roles. Soul loss serves as an escape-hatch from expectation and convention, a path to withdrawal.

All this bears a surface resemblance to what the sociologist Talcott Parsons (1951) once termed "the sick role": illness as a "sanctioned deviance" granting one the right to remove oneself from society and—in good industrial fashion—the responsibility to follow the quickest path of return. Parsons claimed that illness has "positive functional significance" (1951, 469). Susto is, in a faintly positivist sense, functionally sound. It may, with a credible air of determinism, be called a "mechanism" or a "process." But the structure upheld by the function outstrips any modern liberal institution. One may be judged ill by one's inability to work only insofar as this signals one's fallenness from the total cosmic

order; a fall that entails leaving part of oneself—one's soul—behind. "Rights" and "responsibilities" are rather beside the point.

> Good health is equated with systemic harmony, or homeostasis. In a healthy body, balance is characterized by the even distribution of "hot" and "cold" humors. Anything that would disturb that distribution should be avoided… The steps taken to restore balance vary according to the imbalance perceived. They usually require administration of herbs, foods, or other substances to neutralize the imbalance: purgatives to unclog offending organs or orifices, and the use of a live chicken, turkey, or other instrument, which they brush over the patient to "sweep out" an intrusive substance and absorb it.
>
> - Arthur J. Rubel, Carl W. O'Nell, and Rolando Collado Ardón, *Susto: A Folk Illness* (1984, 31-32)

By the logic of an illness such as *susto*, the afflicted and the affliction are not so distinct. It is not so resolutely the case that "Disease enters and leaves a man as through a door" (1989, 33). This is the French physician and philosopher Georges Canguilhem, writing on the modern paradigm of sickness, the model of germs, as contrasted against a "pre-modern" vision in which there are no doors; only scales and calibration weights, pendulums, cycling calendars and armillary spheres. "Nature, *within* man as well as *without*," writes Canguilhem of this classical apparatus, "is harmony and equilibrium" (40, emphasis added). Weather events, bodily fluids, madness, morals and the gods are intricately scaffolded.

The default example of this model—the one on which Canguilhem relies—is the Hippocratic system of the humors. In the second century A.D., the Greek polymath Galen revised Hippocrates' original categories of blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm to align with four "temperaments" (sanguine, choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic), four "quality" profiles (hot/moist, hot/dry, cold/dry, cold/moist), the four elements of air, fire, earth, and water, and the four seasons. Galen further aligned the brain, heart, and liver with Plato's tripartite soul, made up of *logos* (logic), *thumos* (spirit), and *epithumia* (appetite).[xxiii] In a striking case of cultural parallelism, Aztec cosmology presents a kindred

arrangement. Head, heart, and liver correspond to *tonalli* (energy, growth, will), *teyolia* (emotion, memory, knowledge), and *ihiyotl* (love, hatred, desire), as to the upper-, middle- and underworlds of the universe, themselves linked by the boughs, trunks, and roots of four giant trees.

I have mentioned the belief—still diffusedly widespread—in *susto* as loss of *tonalli*. I ask you now to read this belief in light of another comment by Canguilhem on the ancient model: "Disease is a generalized reaction to bring out a cure; the organism develops a disease to get well" (41). Whether responding to the Greeks or the Aztecs, one could easily replace "organism," here, with "shaman."

The ancient Nahua shamans, working in the dual tradition of *Ōmeteōtl*, were trained in the art of balancing primordial opposites (hot and cold, good and evil, life-giving and life-taking forces) without end, towards no clear victory or compromise. This was an art of perpetual metamorphosis, of "oppositional worldview," as Anzaldúa puts it, "a tension that exists when two forces encounter each other headlong and are not reconciled but teeter on the edge of chaos" (2015, 31)

Anzaldúa honors the shaman's refusal to distinguish between so-called "natural," "cultural," and "psychological" pathologies, as well as "internal" and "external" factors. Spirit/world, hot/cold, past/present, time/eternity, English /Spanish, Mexican/American, and man/woman, among others, play across the same cosmic axis. Soul loss equally threatens in nightmares, earthquakes, and bigotry. Healing, too, works towards balance across multiple fields of significance. Consider *curanderisma*, the borderland practice of "folk healing" often called upon for cases of *susto*. The *curandera* holds a fistful of *sábila* in one hand and signs the cross with the other.

There is more than a touch of the shamanic to Ismael's case, but the power of death and return works differently in California. It runs through faulty wiring, tangled filaments. It risks the short circuit, the sudden blackout of despair.

2.

Ismael's preferred kind of work is remodeling. Landscaping is drudgery. Construction is close to torture.

"I do different things," he tells me, "that's why I like remodeling jobs."

There is a long pause. We've just started our interview and time is moving slowly. Questions about work are no better suited to the rhythms of the hour—the sky darkening blue, the curved fang of the moon slitting the red clouds—than work itself.

"I don't like jobs that keeping me doing," he says, "all the time, do same thing, same thing, same thing."

"Sí, la repetición—"

"Oh, kill me."

I laugh. "Sí, drives you crazy, ¿verdad?"

Cringing at my turn of phrase, I flip the page of my notebook. Ismael seems unbothered, ambivalent to the ritual of nerves I have been performing since we started: questions abandoned and rephrased, the relentless clicking of a pen, stilted nods of the head, a conscious rotation of positive interjections ("sí," "verdad," "claro," "¿o, de veras?" "¡que interesante!" and the dependably blank "guau.") filling gaps in conversation.

He grabs a napkin from his cupholder and starts wiping a smudge on his windshield. I stare at the Body Works. The waiting room is empty. No one comes in or out.

I mention that we spoke about his "creencias," his beliefs, last week.

He lights up. "¡Oh, ah! Las creencias."

"Yeah. Like, por ejemplo, la comida—"

He talks over me. "Well, I think, experiment—"

"—la religión..."

"Experiments," he continues, "I think the things that happen to me, that's experiments. Life gives me experiments."

It is a peculiar phrase, ambivalent but decisive. Things happen to us, and things are given to us. How we sort out the semantics is a matter of thinking through choice and fate, of asking when a gift is a burden and when, a blessing. It is a matter of contract—in this case, of a covenant between a man and his God, his imagination and his world, his life and his death. As with all agreements of this kind, ongoing negotiations, dialogues after purity, accord is reached by interruption: God intervening in the world.

"¿Podría hablar un poco más sobre eso?," I ask him, "What do you mean con experimentos? ¿Qué tipo de experimentos?"

"Ay, pues," he thinks for a moment, "es que, estoy mal en mi corazón. I'm sick in my heart."

I ask if his sickness is an experiment.

He nods, "well that's, when I ah, I very get sick the first time my spirit go out."

He has been turning a lighter in his fingers. I wait for him to flick the sparkwheel, to center the gloom of the car on the flame, but he refrains, deliberately rotating the plastic cylinder between his thumb and forefinger. Seconds pass. He tosses the lighter into the cupholder.

"When I told you," he looks to me, "that I feel, I feel the hell and the heaven too—I think it's the heaven what I saw." He pauses. "The very happy people, the beautiful people, and the sky looks like a some kinda yellow and the, I saw lotta trees with fruit, and the fruit grow fast and fall down and grow fast again, like that. And then I saw, like, I don' know what look like, looks like *a wall*. Because, ah, I saw like, ah, right here you saw a lotta rocks?"

He glances around the car, as if looking for a rock, as if the solidity of stone in his hand would prove the truth of his story. "Yeah," he says, "but the people looks like, ah, they make a, they building

like a wall, but with the rocks. Wall of rocks, man. Oh, it's amazing. But, by this, in the middle, it's the sun."

I mutter something about Plato and the cave. *Acostumbrándose a esta luz*, regaining one's sight in the glare of the sun, I say. This is what the Greeks called *sabiduría*: wisdom.

"Sí," he says, "but the sun, that's gon' changing too. All the time, the sun is not gonna be here like this. Se va a quemar. Is gonna explode. And then a new sun."

I jot this down in my notes. "*Form in motion. Form is motion.*"

"Yeah," he goes on, deliberately, scratching his chin, "I don' think that it was more than five minutes, when I been there, because when I start to get sick, and then when I start to feeling and shaking my body like that for, was maybe, more than a minute."

His tone is subdued, flatter than usual. He scratches at the surface of memory. There is no poetic license, no narrative advantage to retrospect. His words side with the particular. He strains to the concrete.

"And then," he says, when I go, when I get out my spirit, yeah, it was also another minute, because I was very confused but no, no eh scared, but very confused because say, this, I died? Oh no. I was very… and I don' know how explain."

"*Timekeeping*," I write. "*Time… narrative… experience.*" Something in the details, in the elliptical gaps, troubles me. The trouble is not with external reference. It is not with verisimilitude—a matter, I think, best left to him and his God. It is something internal to the story, a problem of narrative physics. The image of counting out the seconds of one's death "in real time" is only weakly comprehensible.

"I try to look somebody," he keeps going, "but, ah, I think maybe it was less than a minute when I been walking there and then when I feel something pull at to me, and I don't see no more my body, and then I saw only, ah, far away a very tiny light and everything dark, man. And start to saw

the people, like, ah zombies y I saw, two minutes and I stay there and the people there, looks like nobody talks to each other, keep, keep quiet. And then I feel it up again, like a something pull at me, *pfoom!*—but like that, fast. Then I, saw the, something yellow, and then starting the, the beautiful place where I told you. And then was another minute there too."

I tell him there are some lines from Octavio Paz that sound a bit like this. I can't remember them now. He has heard of Paz.

"Mejor que Platón" I say.

He nods politely. "And then I feel again—"

He sucks in air, making a "whoosh" sound. "Like that, like a something pull at me. And then I feel something in my eyes, like a, like a burn my eyes. Then I look like this and I was right here again."

"Guau."

"Yeah, because the, it's energy, they say, of travel in…" He trails off. "I don' know how many thousand times on the electricity and the light. You know, the electricity and the light, they driving three hundred thousand miles per second."

"Yeah, claro, the speed of…"

"Yeah, but this one, no, is—I don' know how many times more fast."

"Guau. Increíble."

"Yup. Yeah, Tim."

> … great river landscapes, trees, thick green and russet foliage, amber-colored earth, all bathed in an otherworldly light… A dawning age, a world of paradisiac meanings… But there is also another sort of vision: deserts, rocks, thirst, panting, the dagger-eye of the sun: the landscape

> of damnation… circular hells; hells of garish, clashing colors, a pullulation of forms and monsters, temptations… Hell: *petrification.* The image of heaven is a vision of freedom: *levitation, dissolution of the self.* Light versus stone.
>
> - Octavio Paz, *Corriente Alterna* (*Alternating Current*) (1973, 90)

3.

Wittgenstein writes of our "wanting to ask about experiences belonging to a sense organ we don't yet possess." "Our being given a new sense," he goes on, "I would call revelation" (1972, 175). This is revelation understood in the humble, grammatical sense—the sense of Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich: not a fact to be proved but a fact of proof itself, of the limits and prospects of knowledge. "Revelation," says Cora Diamond, quoting Wittgenstein's remark, "because it is not a discovery in a space, describable in advance, but a discovery of a space" (1991, 278).

Allow me to shift from the space to the discovery, from the contents of revelation to the fact of its occurrence. What Ismael experienced in death suggests a space outside space, the border of eternity—and, for that reason, a space against space, the threat of suffocation, dismemberment, implosion. Also important is this. Ismael was made, by a cruel world, to open himself to the shock of God's voice in a life already structured by shock, rupture, and disquiet. And he was made to welcome the dogmatic character of revelation (the curious authority, bordering on autonomy, that characterizes words of faith) apart from the organic life of religious tradition, such as regular churchgoers are prone to inherit. All he had was his collection of ghosts.

Sometimes, Ismael conveyed God's wisdom to me with the tenor of an encyclopedist. Sometimes, in a rhapsodic pitch. His language tested and tipped the balance between point and line, part and whole, ecstasy and custom, adjusting to his needs. The needs themselves were ambivalent.

His struggle is not just for God's Word, but for terms of struggle itself.

4.

> I hear the snake warn me, "You're leaking energy, and parts of your spirit have gone missing. Get back the missing pieces of your soul."
>
> - Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* (2015, 271)

I have said that *susto* suggests volatility: a space in denial of the coordinate plane, of unified perspective, offering no chance to sit still, no room to breathe. This leads me to a dream of death, a scene of devourment too visceral for Jonah or the dark night of the soul. It is closer to the pre-Abrahamic rites of *katabasis* and *sparagmos*—Orphic descent and dismemberment by the Dionysian cults. It is close to human sacrifice. It is a scene of "Entering the Serpent" worlds apart from Eden. The serpent, in this case, is Cōātlīcue, the Aztec serpent-mother.

> *Voy cagándome de miedo, buscando lugares acuevados*… My resistance, my refusal to know some truth about myself brings on that paralysis, depression—brings on the Coatlicue state…
>
> Sweating, with a headache, unwilling to communicate, frightened by sudden noises, *estoy asustada*. In the Mexican culture it is called *susto*, the soul frightened out of the body. The afflicted one is allowed to rest and recuperate, to withdraw into the "underworld" without drawing condemnation…
>
> I descend into *miktlan*, the underworld. In the "place of the dead" I wallow, sinking deeper and deeper. When I reach bottom, something forces me to push up, walk toward the mirror, confront the face in the mirror. But I dig in my heels and resist. I don't want to see what's behind Coatlicue's eyes, her hollow sockets. (Anzaldúa [1987] 2012, 70)

This is Gloria Anzaldúa, reworking the psychoanalytic "shadow," the mercurial "blind spot" of the unconscious, prone to appear in dreams and visions, into the mirror eyes of Cōātlīcue. As the poet and critic John Hollander notes in his marvelous posthumous lectures, *The Substance of Shadow*, shadow and mirror are twins (2016). The poetic thickening of *umbra* into *imago* casts an obscure reflection: a daemonic other. For Anzaldúa, this mirror light is the spectral light of the moon, of the

wailing woman, the serpent woman—the flash across the smoking fragment of rock. "During the dark side of the moon," she writes, "something in the mirror catches my gaze… there in the black obsidian mirror of the Nahuas is yet another face, a stranger's face" ([1987] 2012, 66). This is the face of the daemon, known as the *tona* or *nahualli* in Nahua traditions, and Hispanicized as "nagual." Anzaldúa's *naguala* is *la víbora*: the snake.

> … *I don't want to see what's behind Coatlicue's eyes, her hollow sockets*. I can't confront her face to face; I must take small sips of her face through the corners of my eyes, chip away at the ice a sliver at a time.
>
> Behind the ice mask I see my own eyes. They will not look at me. *Miro que estoy encabronada, miro la resistencia*—resistance to knowing, to letting go, to that deep ocean where once I dived into death. (70)

Anzaldúa is not, by any honest judgment, "postmodern." She works in the tradition of the Nahuas, grounding their flowers and song in more hostile terrain: the borderlands. She works in the tradition of *nahualli*, which refers both to Aztec shamans and the animal (or, very occasionally, vegetable) counterparts Aztec children are assigned shortly after birth. Another word for these counterparts is *tona*, which points to the source of the bond. In Aztec cosmovision, not only humans but also animals and plants possess *tonalli*. They join through its power, the power of heat, of the sun, of daytime, of growth into self-conscious life as registered in a cyclical calendar called the *tōnalpōhualli* ("the count of the *tonalli*).

In *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (2014), the philosopher James Maffie notes that Aztec time is "concrete," "plural," and "relational." It does not exist in the abstract; it does not keep to a single count; it is not a substance. There are, instead, many distinct quanta (days, nights, thirteen-day weeks, twenty-day months, for instance), which turn out to be distinct qualia—all tender and vital and prolific, twisting and braiding like vines. "Tonalli-energy-charged burdens," writes Maffie, each with its own "character or personality" (2014, 419-420). *Tonalli* is the power of the day,

the energy of sun and heat, as recorded in the *tōnalpōhualli.* I remind you of the association between *tonalli* and *susto.* To lose one's *tonalli*, then, may be to run out of time, aground from time's current.

The intricacies of the *tōnalpōhualli* ensure that every new child has a unique *tonalli*, yet this most "individualized" (as Philippe Descola (2003, 2019) calls it) of Aztec life forces is hardly "individual" in the Anglo-Germanic sense—the sense of the doctrine of the self. *Tonalli* is not a "private" property. It is not a prisoner of muscle and skin, nor a divine gift to be enjoyed by a chosen few, nor a natural, Emersonian right to visionary genius. It might vacate and return. "Tonalli," writes Descola, "may temporarily leave the body (at times of drunkenness, sickness, dreaming, or sexual intercourse) or abandon it forever, which is a symptom of imminent death, for life without *tonalli* is possible for only a short space of time" (209). In sleep, it is said, our *tonalli* leaves our bodies to join those of our *tona.* In waking life, only *nahualli*-shamans may embody their *tona.*[xxiv]

So what of Anzaldúa? Like Ismael, she must make the old cosmologies new. She must attune shamanic power to the hurt of a world after the Hispano and Anglo conquests, after the Mexican American War, after Operation Wetback. The shamanic spirit tilts across borderlines equally humoral and historical. Matters are exponentially more complicated, yet, fundamentally, the same. AnaLouise Keating, among Anzaldúa's most scrupulous and generative readers, claims that "We redefine the other as part of ourselves by acknowledging our own otherness," and *this,* through "painful rebirth" (1996, 75). Language is, as the storytellers know, elementally social, in need of a conversation partner, an audience, a world of response. The other kindles the power of metaphor. The other makes speech possible, even in a hostile or indifferent tongue. "Those activities of Coatlicue states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life," Anzaldúa writes, "are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself" ([1987] 2012, 68).[xxv] Divided against itself, consciousness splits open room for voice, for the god within.

To borrow some terms from Stanley Cavell (1988): this picture of voice suggests our partial ownership over our words, our willingness to be read, to measure our questions and commitments against a language at turns illuminating and obscure; and to assimilate that obscurity, to feel it as a source of power, the darkness necessary for—internal to—light. Rather than interpret God, rather than make God's words his own, Ismael allows God to read him. He accepts God's incentive to a game of understanding, to play along, to conform, to improvise, to test the rules for himself. But it is not easy.

5.

"You have to practice by yourself," he tells me, "and with your mind, and asking, and discovering God, and asking why do this, why this, why it happened?"

I nod, scribbling in my notebook.

"But," he leans in, "you know what? When you do that, right away He answer to you? No! You need to ask Him a lotta times, because you—but, later, you start feeling in your mind, like a somebody answer you. Yeah, yeah, I pay attention…"

"Así que, ¿cómo—?"

"Oh yeah, man," he interjects, "because, ah, nobody else can give to you right answer, and then He explain to you what happened in the galaxy, what happened in this planet, what happened here, what happened here, why this, ooooh man!"

It is March 14th. This will be our last conversation in person. After weeks of searching, he's found a mechanic willing to give him good news, a *gringo* who's said that his car looks "okay enough" to get to Seattle. "Drive slow," the *gringo* had said, "and watch out for hills."

He'd told me this an hour earlier, after we'd drifted from the truck where Abelardo was asleep, *The Passion of the Christ* still playing on his phone. I sat on a shaded curbside, cramming down the rice cake he'd given me. He always offered and I never accepted. But today felt different.

The wafer was crisp and gluey. I had made a note of this, and had made a note of the phrase "watch out for hills." As mechanical advice, it had an oddly folkloric ring, an oracular echo. In a place known for its hazardous terrain—earthquakes, mudslides, cliffs falling into the sea—the words seemed acutely threatening.

I asked him if there were hills. He told me the land was flat until you hit a place called Shasta.

"You know," he tells me now, "the first time, when I speak with God, you know how many days I been, no sleep, no eat—"

"¿Cuántos días?"

"—and I just walking like a zombie, man, but very concentrated in my mind, believe me, I don' feel, sleep, nothing. I don' feel!—yes, I feeling like, for nine days."

"Nine days?"

"Nine days!"

"Sin comer?"

"Yeah, no eat, no sleep, no drink water. Just only talking, talking with God," he laughs, "talking, talking!"

He looks over to the main entrance, where the others are playing cards on their particle board table. They are sitting in lawn chairs in the shade and standing in circles with their arms crossed and waving down cars to little avail.

"Yeah. Mhm. But if I explain to the, the other guys here…" He giggles. "Maybe, they don't believe me. They say you fucking crazy!"

We are sitting some 500 feet from the men, at the slowest of the parking lot entrances. It's just us here. A murder of crows flocks between us and the men, pecking around a row of pickup trucks. There are the men, then the crows, then us. A local chain of being. I tell him it's their loss, if they want to think he's nuts.

I tell him it's hard for people to listen these days, with everyone so stressed.

"¡Sí!," he nods, "Porque te enferma. The stress, it make you like a zombie, man."

"Claro. Definitely." I clear my throat. "Y, así que, cuando hablas con Dios, ¿cómo le explicas tu situación?"

"¿O, la situación de lo mía?"

"Sí, de tuyo. Your situation."

"O, mi situación. Dice que todo lo que me pasa es por algo. Dice que cada uno, ah, we have to suffer, but that suffer, ah, we don' have to scared about the suffer. He say is, we need for survival in the universe. He say, is like a… I don' know if you pay attention to the plants."

I tell him that I know a bit about plants but more about birds. He tells me that birds are important because you can hear them sing and see them fly and this will tell you about the seasons. But the closest you can come to feeling them is by finding a lost feather on the ground. Plants, you can grasp in your hand.

"If you go to the desert," he says, "o somewhere else where you can find a plant, that plant is very strong, if you try to broke, o you try to, ah, take it out—"

I nod.

"Yeah, but what happen if you go, and the plant have everything, have nice water, nice dirt? You can broke easy. You can, easy. Why? Because is not strong enough."

The metaphor is so squarely didactic, so redolent of the Biblical, that it takes me a moment to remember its source. He is speaking from experience: the yucca, bursage, and agave of the Sonoran.

"So, the suffer make you strong," he says, "give you energy. And then, I saw also with, the same with the people, because in, in my hometown, there are people very poor, like me…"

He tells me there are people in his pueblo much poorer than him, people who eat meat once a year and survive on tortillas with salt, people who wake up at three or four in the morning in the biting cold and who piled on whatever layers of clothes they can find and walk up the mountain to get firewood to sell in town.

He tells me about his father, who walked up the mountain each morning and came home drunk each night. He tells me he felt the strong bodies of the suffering men after they had descended from the foothills and set up the traffic cones as goalposts for fútbol, and he would give chase, pressing his shoulders and shins into theirs. When he left home, he left this strength behind.

"So all this is a suffer," he says. "And, then, when I come here, I saw guys, they eat very well, they have money. And don't feel his body—you feel his body is very soft, not strong like these guys."

I look to the far end of the lot, where the loading dock meets the Body Works. It had always seemed a contrast of parabolic clarity, but the parable occurs to me only now. I think of the soft curves of gym muscles. I think of the hard, battered bodies of the workers. I think of George Orwell, writing on the "noble" and ageless bodies of coal miners in the industrial north of England: "He knows your muscles are not the same as his."

"So this way God explain me," he says, "He say, don' worry about that, the, suffer, but," he whispers, "He say, He say, is more bad for the people who have money. When they go to die, oh man, people suffer, because, when you die, oh!"

He has been staring at the hood of his car, dented and stained with bird droppings. He turns to me now. His voice raises. He talks fast then slow.

"You remember everything," he spits out, "where you come from, your name, everything, so don' change nothing! Stuff, you remember how, kinda stuff, the life you have, so—"

He looks back to the bird droppings. "So, the king, the people who have money to grow up, start to remember everything, how was his life here. And for life there, after the dying, they have nothing, because, it's almost like, ah, when you die man, it's almost like a taking to you, go to drop to the desert, you have nothing.

He looks back to me. "It's stay like that. You start to remember how was your life."

6.

She both remembers her personal history and 'forgets' herself and her world. What happens in the moment of revelation, to play on a theme from T.S. Eliot, happens simultaneously to all the moments which precede it. Ismael's death, his *susto*, was as much a result of his violent world as a protest against it.

What the Anthropologists say.

"Our puzzlement must be not only about *why* people think gods and spirits are real but about *how* they become and are real for them" (2022, 184). This is the anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, submitting a vote against disciplinary convention. For decades, ethnography—still, today, a prose artifact made for the archive, a stylized catalog of people, places, practices, processes, parts and the like—shied away from the shuddering grounds of consciousness, those "furious dreams, rivers of bitter certainty," as Pablo Neruda ([1959] 1986, 117) once called them. Even the most sublime of human moments were refracted into the communal trappings of structure, function, and symbol. (For Bronislaw Malinowski, religion was a matter of emotional regulation; for A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, a means to blunt individual ambition; for Clifford Geertz, a metric of exchange between metaphysics

and common life; etc.) These collectivist pictures are, no doubt, time-honored paradigms for a reason. Rapture, beatitude, speaking in tongues, seeing visions, hearing voices, and, indeed, dying and coming back to life will, as all behavior does, resonate in the collective. Such tumults jolt the social organism (to use an old metaphor), altering or powering its functions. But the point of contact—the nerve ending that registers the shock—is, still, irreducibly, a "someone," a body minding the world. Luhrmann's work on the "voice-hearing" linked to schizophrenia, shamanism, and charismatic Christianity recovers mind for culture.

"People explicitly understood this process of recognizing God in their minds," Luhrmann writes of the "Vineyard" Evangelicals with whom she studied, "as a skill they needed to learn by repeatedly carrying on inner voice 'conversations' with God during prayer and being attentive to the mental events that could count as God's response" (2022, 51). The resonance with Ismael is clear. Yet the great Emersonian assumption on which charisma rests, that of a world stable enough for us to look inward—to pursue our private callings—is denied to him. (One might argue that his exploitation keeps the assumption alive for others.) The Vineyard mantra, "Everyone Gets to Play," gives up the game. There is a game; there are rules to be followed. Among the faithful, the ground is stable enough. They may walk toward the light.

"Following a rule," says Wittgenstein, "is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so" ([1953] 2009, §206). In a seminal essay, the scholar of Islam Talal Asad (1993) traces this thought back to the exemplar of Saint Augustine. For Augustine, religion is not a matter of metaphysical fireworks. It is social, practical, rooted in *disciplina*. Even revelation, says Asad, comes through rigorous preparation, training, instruction. Criteria of rectitude, instruments of discipline, authorizing "discourses" and "grammars" of faith "mediate" (to use the semiotic term) between person and God, subject and object, mind and world. As Asad's fellow anthropologist of religion, James Faubion (2001, 25-30), has written, conversion is more than mere change of mind. "Mind" means nothing here. We're

referring to a "systematic" shift in disposition, habit, character: not an "experience" in the passive sense, but the progress of lessons drilled in, of muscle memory.

What shifted in Ismeal's death? What bearing can he find on such volatile grounds?

What Augustine says

Allow me a digression. I have mentioned Saint Augustine, who was born in Thagaste (in the Roman province of Numidia) in 354 A.D., and educated in Roman Madauros and Carthage. This was as volatile a ground as any: life at the edges of an empire in decline. What the critic Mikhail Bakhtin called "heteroglossia," "the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies schools, circles, and so forth, all given a bodily form" (2010, 219), and associated with Dostoevsky's Russia applies equally here. As Justo L. González writes in a delightful little book titled *The Mestizo Augustine*, "Inasmuch as he is an African, he also reflects the mestizo reality of the region, where even before the arrival of the Romans there was a mixture and clash of views and traditions that were Berber or Libyan with others of Punic or Carthaginian origin. And on the Roman side, it is best not to speak of a Roman culture, but rather of a Greco-Roman one, for the *Romanitas* Augustine knew was to a great degree also Greek" (2016, 17-18). As a young man, Augustine was denied the concentrated discipline on which he later placed such stress. The groundwork for his conversion—in 386 A.D., at the age of 31, while he was living in Milan—came through disparate sources: Latin courses in rhetoric, a brush with Manichaeism, a lifelong struggle with Neoplatonism, conflicts with Donatists and Pelagianists, travels across North Africa into the heart of Rome. His conversion was, like Ismael's, both progressive and scattered, until the pivotal shock.

About this shock. In Book VIII of *Confessiones*, the book of *conversio*, Augustine struggles to press from knowledge into faith. Of God's Truth, he needs no further convincing, yet, still, he yearns for God's presence ("not greater certainty about you, but a more steadfast abiding in you" (1998, 145)). In typically Augustinian fashion, the struggle persists not without—as against an animistic spirit or devil—but within, as between two poles of divided self: lust (for sex) and love (of God). The famous drama of the Milanese garden, in the shade of that conspicuous fig tree, pivots on this conflict between flesh and soul, which also charts the course—radically counter-Platonic —from intellect to will.

Weeping and pleading for deliverance, Augustine finds he cannot *will his will* (into communion with God) as he can his body (even to such extremes as clawing out his hair and battering his head). It is at this point that the protagonist of *Confessiones* hears an anonymous, childlike voice singing from a nearby house: "tolle lege, tolle lege." *Take up and read.* In a sudden and, initially, rather astonishing show of conviction, Augustine takes these words as a divine command, snatching up his Bible and opening it blindly. The verses that first catch his eye, Romans 13:13-14, fill him with the light of God.[3] Will and act, at last, coincide: "and now indeed I stood there, no longer… entertaining any worldly hope, for you had converted me to yourself" (1998, 169).

Yet there is more than a trace of "worldliness" in Augustine's turn to God. In Book VIII, conversions are delicately spun together. Prior to his own conversion—the verse that turns him to God—Augustine is visited by Ponticianus, a high imperial official, who regales him with the story of two former colleagues, members of the court at Trier, abruptly forsaking the empire and abandoning themselves to God. The occasion of their conversion? Their discovery of *The Life of Antony* in a

[3] "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh"

servant's quarters. It is here that Augustine's rhetorical magic shines through. *The Life of Antony*, itself, recounts a conversion prompted by textual intervention. Antony the Great, so claims the text, committed to the monastic life that made him a saint after hearing Matthew 19:21 read aloud. When, in *Confessiones*, Augustine accepts the child's song as a divine command, it is not from God but Antony that he takes his cue.

Augustine's conversion, then, is consciously social, a legible triumph. In *Confessiones*, layers of allusion block the way to the inner word. Stories of conversion turn on one another, just as God twists Augustine against himself ("retorquebas me ad me ipsum"), such that he cannot turn away ("avertere") in horror; and just as Augustine finds himself turned to God ("convertisti enim me ad te"), and the grief of his pious mother, Monica, turned to joy ("convertisti luctum eius in gaudium"). *Confessiones* turns texts upon texts, Bible verses in and out of its author's own testimony. By most accounts, the work was, itself, dictated to a scribe, the first of many interpreters to come. As readers, we find ourselves moved by Augustine's story as Augustine by of Antony's, via Ponticianus, via those anonymous officials. As the Bakhtin once wrote, "even today one cannot read St. Augustine's *Confessions* 'to oneself'; it must be declaimed aloud" (2010, 134-35).

My point is not to diminish authentic mystical experience. Augustine's revelation is surely authentic, all the more so for its rigorous preparation. A life in language lays the path to rapture: *beyond anything we could imagine.*

What Ismael says

No food, no drink, no sleep for nine days. *Talking, talking!* One thinks of solemn nights in the desert, of hands shaking from hunger, of startling vision—the rapture of the ascetic. Writing on Saint

Anthony the Great as an allegorical hero, Angus Fletcher once noted that "this is psychologically a valid image of the Saint, because the state of asceticism with its physical debility induces extremely varied, abundant fantasies" ([1964] 2012, 35). Worn to skin and bone, the hermit opens a space for the imagination of sin: the devil's "grotesque symbolic vocabulary" (ibid.). In Ismael's psychic desert, naked power and pain cohere as icons of wealth, indulgence, self-satisfaction, "softness." Yet his images do not keep to sin; they do not stop at evil.

Ismael reduces himself to make room for the otherness of God within. This God is not monstrous, but firm. He gives order to chaos. The images of cosmic cycle and apocalypse, of nature and physics, grant suffering a figural skeleton. The undying plant in the untouched desert—nothing could be more natural, more vital to Ismael. The discovery of God is a discovery of life again.

Third Movement

> … you huddle deep in the womb cave… you lie in a fetal curl clutching the fragmented pieces and bits of yourself you've disowned… in the deep fecund cave of gestation lies not only the source of your woundedness and your passion, but also the promise of inner knowledge, healing, and spiritual rebirth.
>
> - Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro* (2015, 130, 133)

> She taught me to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfillment of its time. My soul grew under her careful guidance.
>
> - Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* ([1971] 1991, 15)

1.

Ismael visited a curandero in New York. There, he received a *limpia*. He was made to lie flat on a hard bed with his arms outstretched, as if he was laying on a cross. An egg was passed over his body, then cracked into a jar of water. The yolk was examined for spots. The egg water was buried in a plot of dirt outside. He was asked questions about his stomach, his heart, and his head. He was asked about his anger, his envy, and his fear, about his diet, his faith, and his childhood.

"Yeah, and the doctor," he clears his throat, "he discovering the problem, uh, come from when I was in the, um, pregnant from my mom? My mom could be, she get very mad or she get angry, o she get scared, something. It's when happened that problem with the heart."

Wary of repeating the doctor's line of questioning, of cosplaying a sacred role, I tentatively ask what made his mother scared.

"Oh yeah," he says, "I know, because my dad, oh, also, when he get drunk? Oh! He get very, very mad to my mom, cause I saw that. Yeah, when, when, my father, he drink? Oh man. Yeah, he get very mad to my mom. So could be happened that."

I nod, suppressing a yawn and scribbling in my notebook. I'm exhausted and in desperate need of dinner. I suppose he must be more tired than I, and hungrier. I have asked him several times if he wants to stop.

"Oh?" he asked most recently, "that's all you wanna hear? Cause I…"

I scrawl a comment in my notes about Freud, about a world where nothing happens, where everything has already happened, a world of symptoms. *Where is the space for propecy?*, I write.

I ask how the experience changed his life.

"Oh yeah, mucho," he says, "cambié mucho porque ya me puso yo, uh, más atención en mí mismo. I pay attention in myself, man."

He pauses. "Porque yo podría otra vez morir en cualquier momento," he says.

Because I could die again at any moment.

"Mostly, when you got depression," he goes on, "you got more problems. It's, it's more possible to happen, that you gonna die. Es… "

One might have been surprised to hear this coming from him. *No chilles* ("don't scream" or "don't cry") and *los hombres no lloran* ("men don't cry") are still common slogans among Mexican men of his age. "Public health campaigns and community outreach activities are needed to raise Latino immigrant men's awareness about the common signs and symptoms of depression," a 2007 study concludes (Cabassa 2007, 503). The outreach has grown, but the issue of mental health remains lodged in economic sensibility. I have spoken to workers about the care they invest in exotic gardens, in pruning shrubs just right, gradually, in layers, to make the growth look natural; never about how they care for themselves. The whole notion of "self-care," whatever its good intentions, carries a touch of the bourgeois. Paying attention to yourself, eating fruits and nuts, avoiding fatty sauces, acknowledging it's hard with depression: out of context, these are the tenets of a certain "lifestyle," that most Californian of words. The lifestyle is White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. The lifestyle is New Age, West Coast. It is, at its core, a paranoid style, a middle-class obsession with death. How much, then, the context changes things. How gently Ismael turns through ideas, plants them in the soil of his mind.[xxvi]

"Clinicians treating Latino immigrant men for depression," the 2007 study reads, "should consider actively eliciting perceptions about the causes, course, consequences, and perceived controllability of the illness" (504). And, further on, "Latino immigrant men in this study had a strong conviction that their faith in God could help them cope with depression. More work is currently

needed to understand the religious beliefs and practices that help Latino immigrant men cope with life stresses and emotional problems" (505).

With a hint of this imperative in mind, and wanting, for once, to demonstrate some level of expertise, I tell him I have also struggled *con estar deprimido.*

"Si," he says, "yeah, it's very hard. Estaba muy deprimido"

He has a distant look in his eyes, as if something has just occurred to him.

"And, mostly, when you alone?" he smiles and whistles. "Oh man, you feel the whole world over you!"

2.

According to Luis D. León, *curanderismo* refers to "a wide variety of community-based curing traditions organized around charismatic and prophetic healers" (2004, 129). *Curanderas*, says León, range in their practice from occasional herbal treatment to full-blown ecstatic trance, with the most common service being a *limpia*, or spiritual cleansing. The cleansing often involves an egg, first passed over the body of the afflicted, sometimes in a crossing motion, then cracked into a vessel of water. Candles are lit. The body is brushed with herbs. The vessel is placed on the head or the chest. Sometimes, the body is passed over with a crucifix. Sometimes, the Apostles' Creed is recited, or the Lord's Prayer, or a string of Hail Maries.

The maladies that only a *curandera* can heal, writes León, include "*mal de ojo*, *mal ojo*, or *ojo* (the 'bad' or 'evil' eye); *susto* (fright or loss of spirit); *caída de la mollera* (fallen fontanel); *empacho* (indigestion); *mal aire* (upper reparatory illness and colds); *desasombro* (a more severe grade of *susto*, or spirit loss) *espanto* (the most serious form of spirit loss); *bilis* (excessive bile); *muina* (anger sickness); *latido*

(palpitation or throb); and *envidia*, *mal puesto*, *salar*, or *maleficio* (a physical disorder caused by envy)" (135). *Susto* is among the most common.

The great scholar of Mesoamerican religion, Davíd Carrasco (1982), was among the first anthropologists to name *curanderas* as stewards of shamanic practice. The description fits. *Curanderismo* works to reinstate the balance of opposing cosmic energies in the human body. It accepts this work as unending, always tipping into the future. "These forces," writes León of the time-honored binaries (hot/cold, light/dark, male/female, and the like), "are constantly in dynamic tension, fluid and shifting—*in motion*" (2004, 133). The work of balance itself may be acutely cathartic, involving great pain and effort. Reading *Bless Me, Ultima*, Rudolfo Anaya's classic bildungsroman about a boy and a *curandera*, as a "religious text," Carrasco offers this formulation:

> … we are witnessing in Anaya's novel a Chicano variation of an archaic pattern of spiritual creativity; what I would call the lyrics of Chicano spirituality. The pattern of shamanic ecstasy includes (a) sensitive and troubled individuals who (b) receive sacred knowledge through fantastic dreams and visions plus formal instructions under the (c) guidance of a great shaman (la Grande) during which the initiate (d) forms relationships with helping spirits, usually in the form of animals, which enable the seeker to (e) grasp a deep truth and techniques that enable him to renew contact with that wisdom and (f) obtain the powers to heal varieties of sickness and attack and kill enemies. (1982, 2007)

The general run of this pattern, by which the initiate "is symbolically killed and reborn into the vocation of singer, healer, and poet" will be familiar. What I wish to emphasize is stage "(c)." This stage (like all of Carrasco's stages, with the exception of "(a)") appropriately starts with a verb—not a person, place, or idea, but an action: *guidance*. Guidance implies direction without dictation, a gesture ahead and a willingness to follow this gesture.[xxvii] It returns us to familiar themes: the teaching and discipline of faith, even faith at its most personal, the private life of "inner-voice conversations."

Perhaps this is where *curanderismo*, for all its ostensible eccentricities (ostensible, I mean, from the white, EuroAmerican perspective) diverges most sharply from the so-called "Western

biomedicine" of primary care and emergency rooms. Clinical doctors, whatever their charisma or concern, are not guides of the spirit. The language of diagnosis and treatment, the tendency to view the body as a kind of living corpse ("to draw the dotted outline of the future autopsy," wrote Michel Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic*, "projective pathological anatomy" ([1973] 1994, 162)), pacifies the patient corrodes human narrative power. In the logic of *curanderismo,* healing is teaching, a lesson in the wisdom of illness and recovery. "My work was to do good. I was to heal the sick and show them the path of goodness," the *curandera* Ultima whispers on her deathbed, "But I was not to interfere with the destiny of any man" ([1971] 1991, 260).

León's discussion of *curanderismo* is titled "El Don," meaning "the Gift." The allusion to Marcel Mauss's classic work of the same name is intentional. "Each healer," writes León in Maussian fashion, "believes that his or her curing power is a 'gift' that comes directly from God… The original gift of healing imparted to the *curandera* sets into motion a distinct symbolic chain of gifting… The healer is gifted by God, and she must in turn gift others, who must then reciprocate and return the gift to the healer, to God, and to others" (2004, 137-138). This is another sort of "dynamic tension." Like that of the body's energies, it suggests balance and contradiction, disruption, substitution, revision.

Jacques Derrida (1992), revising the French canon in his own image, once described (or, I suppose, "deconstructed") Mauss's "symbolic chain of gifting" as the mechanism of language itself. "The Gift," said Derrida, is, like true meaning, impossible. Caught in a system of exchange, it is yet one more deferral, the next displacement in the sequence. It transfers obligation. It gestures to what comes next; it echoes what came before. It cannot, infuriatingly, be *present*. Meaning will never sit still. This is also the basic ideal behind Derrida's picture of language as *pharmakon*, a Platonic term referring to both poison and cure ([1981] 2021). The word gives and takes, heals and hurts, remembers and

obscures. The consonance with *curanderismo* is strong already, but I wish to push it further, on to Ismael, into the whole of his life.

Start here. In a remarkable essay titled "Words and Wounds," Geoffrey Hartman seeks a return of *pathos* to Derrida's crystalline paradox. "Because the demand to be cursed or bless stems from the same source," writes Hartman "and life is as ambivalent in this regard as words are equivocal, the psyche may have to live in perpetual tension with its desire to be worded. *It may have to turn against as well as toward words*" (1981, 131). Trauma is innate to language: the sense of a growing distance between what we say and what we mean to say (or, put more incisively, what we mean to *mean*). This is precisely the course of our therapy. As in storytelling or prayer, we reassert a faint connection. This must be fullness enough, a fathomable "present."

> *When I don't write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I do write. I can't stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make "sense" of them, and once they have "meaning" they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy.*
>
> - Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* ([1987] 2012, 92)

3.

"Yeah, because there are a lotta people that, even you," he points to me. "You don' know if you sick or not, you know, because I saw two times, uh, over here, it was ah, maybe a month ago, a guy, over here, here waiting job, for, also. He run away—*pfoom!*—fall down!"

He doesn't remember the guy's name. He says he was *gordito* and wore a baseball hat and had a high voice "like a lil bird." I ask what happened to him.

"To this guy?"

"Yeah."

He pauses to think for a moment, more about the question, it seems, than a possible answer. He tells me he's not sure. He hasn't seen him since. He repeats that he doesn't know his name.

"Yeah," he says, "And then, also, another guy over there in the Salvation Army? The people, they making, making line for waiting to get in, also one guy, a white guy—*pfoom!*—fall down too."

It is 8:55 PM. He is staring at the Body Works again, regarding its lurid enthusiasm, the yellow and purple walls, the hulking gear- and hand-themed décor, the emphatic slogans painted onto the walls in blocky, lower-case letters: "no critics," "judgment free zone," and, above the vending machine, a buoyant "hydrate!"

"Yeah," he says, "A heart attack, yup. These kind are heart attacks. Yup, so the people, they don' know."

It can happen to anyone. But it will not. They don't know. Only God knows. The believer can often seem conspiratorial, but, then, so can God.

"Yeah, and then," he goes on, still staring "the spirit goes to, to the hell, but the hell," he says, still staring, "they say, it's a dark place. All the time it's dark. Dark like, ah, similar when there are eclip—totally, eclipse total."

He looks to me to confirm his phrasing. I nod.

"Yeah, that," he nods back, "that kinda, a dark is in that place. And everybody is walking like a zombies. You know, a lotta people also looks like a sleeping but looks like a little boys. A lotta boys looks like they sleeping. Yeah, and the rest, the people, they walking, walking on like a zombies. Also, its cold, very cold, the place there."

That was in San Francisco. I ask about Seattle. Gliding past my question, he asks me if I know about a city called Reno, and if I know that Reno is west of Los Angeles even though it is in the desert and Los Angeles is on the water. I tell him that I have heard this before, though I don't remember

where or who said it. It is a fact typical of the American West, one intended to communicate the equivocal vastness of the place. It is a fact well-suited to Ismael.

The last time he had felt sick in his heart was Christmas day, 2004. He was in Seattle, at a party with friends who failed to grasp the metaphysics of his ill humor. The hostess was especially incredulous, convinced that he was not dying but just *pachecho* from *hierba mala.* He asked her for something sweet she called him crazy but served him a piece of cake.

"And I eat the piece of cake because, you know, it's sweet," he tells me. "And then I feel better. And yeah, little by little, more and more, I feel okay. But my face, like, ah, body died, man. White everything."

In search of a suitable way to ask if, looking back, he understands her perspective, I wonder aloud *si susto y una sobredosis tienen síntomas similares*.

"No, the symptom is similar, yeah, but, I say her," he shakes his head, reenacting his conversation, "to my friend, I tell her, how many you saw already the people who get drugs and they get sick, and then, with a little piece of cake, something sweet, eat, and they are fixed the problem? Cuz, ah, you make confused, because don't speak before, if you don' know, you don' have to speak!"

I tell him that she wouldn't make a great natural doctor.

He laughs. "Yeah. And why don' she asking first what happened, oh, *why you are like that? Why you feel sick?* Yep. You gotta ask."

4.

Curanderismo has been called a "syncretic" medical practice. This is an otiose word, close to an epithet. It recalls the bad old "diffusionist" days in anthropology (then called "ethnology"), when cultural hybridity was measured against mythical pureness. The metaphor was, as it so often was back

then, explicitly Biblical—in this case, Noahtic. The races of Man were aligned to the Table of Nations, dispersed in the loss of antediluvian innocence. The message was clear and imperial. The more "mixed" a culture, the further it was from God.

This plainly will not do. Not syncretism, says Carrasco (2004), but "transculturation." Not diffusion, but "contact"—and, with it, the ironic pathos of forced improvisation. Carrasco's argument starts here: faced with the nagging presence of Spanish ideas (one thinks of the obtuse Cortés asking Moctezuma to place a cross in the war shrine atop the Templo Mayor), the Maya and Aztecs from the 16th century onward sprinkled Christian icons, like drops of holy water, into the soil of their traditions. Their creativity was neither inept, nor submissive, nor suicidal. Nor was it—in their own view, as recorded in their own texts—a sign of epochal change.

The power of Mesoamerican religion, rather than fold to Spanish threat, made productive, practical use of Catholic iconography. "Indians in Central Mexico," writes the historian William B Taylor in a passage cited by Carrasco, "adopted a whole series of Christian practices that were familiar or readily understandable to them… but carried them far beyond what the priest regarded as decorous and reverent conduct" (1996, 60). Common among these indigenous people were "mass flagellations that spattered blood on bodies and walls; vigorous dancing and mock combat without obvious liturgical purpose" (ibid.). Christianity, with its shamanic lexicon of redemptive torture, of death and rebirth, was made "a route to the sacred that repeated and enlarged on the ecstatic piety of pre-Christian times," a process of "consciously entering new phases, of the living human body as a stage in a vegetal cycle of transformation uniting the human and the sacred" (ibid.). The motive for irony—for wresting partial control of hostile ideas—was as it had always been: the creative fire of a cycling cosmos.

Allow me now to sketch out two landscapes. Ismael has, I think, spent some time in each. The first is the Hebraic ecology, the landscape of the Bible. Here, the desert is a fathomless negative. The

whispering sands clear the way for the Word. The parched plant is strong. The second geography sends us from Arabian and Saharan dunes to Sonoran and Chihuahuan scrubland. In this borderlands, revelation is alive and multiple. It darts in and out view, taking the form of coyotes, snakes, and hummingbirds amongst the maguey leaves and *nopales*. Word and word dismember and combine into daemonic hybrids. Time and eternity are volatile multitudes; charged particles bond and repel across a terrain sublime as it is carnal. The old Platonic divide between rhetoric and truth, *muthos* and *logos*, becomes—like the U.S.-Mexico Border itself—yet another "vague and undetermined place," a psychic trauma capable of art.

How to move between these worlds? How to place them in dialogue? To say that *curanderismo* teaches "transculturation" is both too speculative and too obvious. What it does show, by the fact of its existence, is a pattern of imbalance and exchange. Violence pressurizes creativity. What counts as a "natural" or "unnatural" transfer of meaning—creed or metaphor—is a matter of circumstance, evasive of general explanation. Ismael, for his part, gives and takes—of myth, of experience, of rapture. Gifting God's wisdom to me, he must perpetually redress the tilt of his speech, which runs hot and cold, paranoid, reparative, sublime.

5.

"So man, oh, for talking with God?" He shakes his head and whistles.

I've thanked him for sharing with me. It's so important to hold strong to your beliefs, your *creincias*, I have said.

"Mmm, yeah," he nods. "And make sense all the, how you say, yeah, make sense, and... *fundamento*, we say also *fundamento*, and logic."

"¡Si, claro! El lógico. Es muy importante."

"Yea because when have something logic, be careful, listen, like, ah, now you know."

I tell him this reminds me of his friend in Seattle, who would not listen. Listening, *lo más importante.*

"Yeah, nah, the people man," he stammers with enthusiasm, "no, no, is, is why a lotta people they can' learn, they can', nothing, because they keep totally—is like the people, you know a lotta people don' learn English? Because they feel embarrassed to speak. I say, why you no? Cause I—"

I laugh and tell him I have often felt this way with Spanish.

"Yeah, and then, sometimes could be you feel bad when, when you don' speak very well, but you don', you don' have to feel bad! Cause are you learning!"

He gestures outward, to the world beyond the windshield.

"Nobody can, with know everything! I told to the guys, cause, I know, ah, friends. They don't, eh, speak, that, to speak. They say, *ah no I feeling bad, I think the people start to laughing about me, how I speak.* Hey, don' listen that. No, nobody born to know. So everybody, they start to practice! What's the problem? Oh, so when you speaking Spanish when you was a boy, you speak very well Spanish? No! You speak also very bad Spanish—me too! So why you feel bad? Don' pay attention, don' listen the people, man!"

"Pero es difícil, ¿verdad?"

"Sí, es very difficult."

"Sí, cuz people judge. Ellos juzgan."

"Yeah, the people judge, but tell the people like that!"

He holds up his middle finger and laughs.

Fourth Movement

The knot just under
my right ear
whispers *God is gracious,*
God will
increase. The soul,
like semen,
escapes
the body
swiftly.

Eduardo C. Corral,
"All the Trees of the Field Shall Clap Their Hands" (2012, 33-41)

1.

"And then we have to follow him, yeah. And then, ah, this god? Will be him only with all the prostitutes, exist in this life, will be get him only—" he searches for the right verb, "only live him, because the rest..."

He pauses, turning his cell phone around in his hands. He takes a deep breath.

"Okay, so, think like this, yeah, one part, the people who, like you, like me," he stops again.

"You know," he starts over, pointing at his chest, "*I* like only girls. I gon' make a couple with one girl. But the rest, the guys, bisexual, homosexual, they say, there's ah… "

He trails off. The details which, until this point, had always seemed too many now stall and resist, as if stopped in the back of his mouth.

He clears his throat and starts over again. "So, He say, all the things exist in this life is for something reason."

"Ah, sí," I offer an encouraging smile.

"Is, you know," he rubs his chin and nods, "the lotta people, they say, the people who grow up, ah, homosexual o bisexual, they say, *oh no, he, he wish like that!*"

He shakes his head and looks at me expectantly, as if I should know the answer. "No, it's not like that because, you know, his body produce more hormones, female! So if you have this problem, how can you say, *no, it's your problem*? It's something, like, if you growing up in something in your body, how can say to you, *oh no is you fault?* No it's, so God, he say, ah, we can, the natural, we can separate every, everybody, we can separate. And, so, when the volcano come, and the meteorites? And then the all, the people, the bisexual, the lesbians... uh, the lesbians? They say make a couple, they go on one planet and the guys that bisexual o the homosexual, go another planet."

I nod, writing in my notebook.

"Yeah, and for us, we, Tim, we go *another planet!* And then, uh, He say that energy, because, you know—what come from your body?"

I look up. "¿Mi madre?"

"No. Your dad. From *the sperm.*"

He starts flipping through the napkins in the cupholder.

"But the sperm don't have sex," he says, now digging in his glove compartment, "when you be a sperm, you don' have sex! Me either. No, nobody have sex. So he say, that energy…"

He turns to me. "Let, let me get a, a pen. I'm gon' explain how, explain that."

I hand him my pen and notebook. He flips to a blank page and begins sketching out an astronomical chart. He draws a small circle at the top of the page and draws a ring around the circle. It looks like an egg yolk.

"This is the sun, right?"

"Right."

Next to the sun, he draws a smaller circle, the size of a pencil eraser, and an even smaller circle next to that. He continues to work as he speaks, sketching out the planets.

"And right here, *us*." He points to the two smaller circles he has just drawn. And right here—" he continues to draw, "another planet, it's, ah, Mercury. Right here, Venus. Somewhere here, the moon, Tierra, yeah." He finishes sketching. "Yeah, so God, he telling me, when you, these guys—because right here, Mercury, Venus, there are a people, but that people are, they have, they are immortal. So these guys—"

"¿En serio? ¿No se van a morir?"

"Yeah, and when, when your mom get pregnant to you—because you a man, right? Your mom get only energy from Mercury. So you, you here, me, here, right here?"

He points to the planet labeled "Tierra," then to that labeled "Mercury."

"Okay."

"So when, when you, your mom, she get pregnant, that energy helps to make your body, for you grow a man, alright?

"Okay. Entiendo."

"That, that's why that exist, the guys. And right here, there are, ah, homosexual and bisexuals."

He points to Mercury and Venus. "These guys, when a mom get pregnant, they start to helping. If she get this, this energy, this—and right here a woman get pregnant, she get energy from the Venus, start the development, a woman."

"Huh. Interesante."

"And then, right here," he points to the moon, "in the moon? They say live people too, but that people, they say they are normal. But this energy helps to all the natural, here, the plants, animals. So He say what happens. Because if no exist this, can't make a body. So this this energy is very important! Because if then don' exist the energy, can't development your own body."

Anticipating his answer, I ask where he learned all this.

"When I talk to God," he says, "Because when you got a lotta things, you start to development your own brain? You start to asking, why this why this why this, why I'm this, why, why I'm poor, why he's rich, why I'm!... all these things, he explain to you everything man. And then he say when right here, born, a guy o a lady o bisexual, homosexual, he say, he got two energies, so when he get pregnant? He got two energies. Both, is when grow up, homosexual o bisexual o lesbian. But he say, need to exist because, again, when this sun, this the earth, right? This the earth coming in the future more big, more—again, again, will be a sun and then, this sun, it start to create, again, when, uh, aparecer. How you say aparecer? Appear?

"Appear."

"Appear life in another planet. It start to appear, same thing, life here—"

I nod. "It's a cycle."

He hands me back my notebook. "Sí, un cíclico, but take *too long*, man. Too long. That's why He explain me all these things, that's why they say the life all the time exist. The material, all the time exist."

Here it was, then, the doctrine of the unborn God, who was once human.

2.

Is Ismael's universe queer? The question itself is troubling. The trouble is palpable in Anzaldúa, who writes, "I made the choice to be queer (for some it is genetically inherent)," before brushing past the parenthetical. "Born this way" is a problem for queer theory, which has, over the course of its brief history, put its faith in the social construct, the relative truth, the fluid subject. The

prospect of innate character—the self, the ego, the irreducible inner—risks identity politics in the Enlightenment liberal mold, the religion of the census category. ("Recrimination and rancor," as Wendy Brown once called it, "culturally dispersed paralysis and suffering" (1993, 390)) At stake is moral as well as biological judgment. *It's not his fault that he's like that, but the fact that he's like that, this, surely, is a fault of some kind.*

Yet "constructivism" and "relativism"—the two-pronged horn of "postmodern" thought—come with their own hidden assumptions. Contingency, as a motto, risks more absolutism. Take this example. In *Migrant Imaginaries*, the scholar Alicia Schmidt Camacho notes that "The values of 'flexibility' and 'mobility' that defined oppositional agency for Chicana feminists in the 1980s and 1990s are precisely the same values praised by factory owners and proponents of development" (2008, 265) A good 21st century migrant worker is a malleable worker: a worker who can be made and remade (and, ultimately, perhaps sooner than later, extinguished) as the market dictates; no one more so than a *jornalero* living out of his car.

I have said that Anzaldúa, for all of her "flexibility" and "malleability," is not postmodern. The tensions internal to her work are evocative of those found in religious texts. They foreclose holistic critique. Sometimes, it is true, the borderlands contextualize, genealogize, deconstruct. But there are also dogmatic moments, moments when the myth casts off its allegorical robes, when spirits are real, when they shape our lives, when their bearing on the world structures the whole of creation.

> I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging, a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there. I see a preoccupation with the deep structure, the underlying structure, with the gesso underpainting that is red earth, black earth. I can see the deep structure, the scaffolding… I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variations and seeming contradictions, though I believe in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit. This almost finished product seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance… ([1987] 2012, 88)

The difficulty is in seeing the message in the pattern, the image in the Word—even, it should be added, when God Himself proves metamorphic, an appearing, now disappearing *leitmotif*. The conflict in perspectives suggests a cubist painting: the overlapping and intersecting planes, the patches of color; the stickered synecdochical icons (the features of a face, a landscape, familiar items of kinship and war). "Numerous overlays of paint," writes Anzaldúa, "rough surfaces, smooth surfaces…" (ibid.). The aspects flash towards a whole offset by the shifting grounds of its making.

This brings me back to images of being read and guided, of acknowledging the forms of your life as they take shape in an external body of meaning. "This type of work," says Anzaldúa of her storytelling, "dedicates itself to managing the universe and its energies" (89). Along with playfully disorienting much narrative theory,[xxviii] this picture of interpretation says something about gender and sexuality as lived ideals. These features of experience are—like reality itself—matters of faith.[xxix] We must believe in them, in their infallible presence, to move forward. Yet this forward motion is precisely the measure of our partial knowledge; it opens to the endless future of our meaning.

On the point of flexibility and the absolute, Ismael's cosmos shares something with certain indigenous cultures after all. "Two energies" suggests "Two Spirit," the Anglophonic gloss of indigenous persons who do not fit the Western European gender binary. Suffice it to say that this designation is neither "constructed" nor "relative." The dual spirit is inborn, a sign of mediating power that tilts shamanic. This is a matter to which I can claim neither expertise nor experience, and I leave it to the activists, the specialists, and the communities.[xxx] Like so many themes and conventions, it lives in Ismael's words as an echo, a marker of diffuse, even unconscious, influence.

A more debased influence, no less echoic is *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992). This couple's therapy manual by psychologist John Gray, published in 1992, shows American Man at

his most grotesque, his most crudely optimized, narrowly aspirational. "A manual for loving relationships in the 1990s" (1992, 5) is how Gray describes his vapid bestseller. By the celestial lights of his mundane analogy, he says, "Misunderstandings can then be quickly dissipated or avoided. Incorrect expectations are easily corrected" (ibid.). Gray speaks to the wounded middle-class, those reeling from the broken promise of a stable universe. If men and women are simply different, if men naturally want to solve problems, which clash with a woman's desire for empathy, we can proceed amidst our differences without judgment. The issue with Grey's book lies in the weight by "simply" in this formulation. Ismael, whatever his "naturalism," whatever his belief in innate difference is far from simple.

I want to go back to the desert plant, humble yet unyielding, no less an icon of sublime suffering than of tearful manhood. In a 2016 conversation with Cornel West, bell hooks reads this tension through the figure of Malcolm X. Malcolm X the warm and patient father, hooks would have us remember, is no less an expression of the total man than Malcom X the militant revolutionary. "We need," hooks urges, "a sense that there is no monolithic construction of masculinity, that the whole person is capable of being strong at those moments of life which require a certain assertion of agency and strength but then also to be capable of generosity and quietude and nurturance in other arenas" (hooks and West 2016, 125-126) We must remain both supple and firm. Identity is fluid; and identity is solid, durable, able to bear its weight. The strength of Ismael's vision comes from its definitiveness, as from its humility. One word for this paradox might be love.

"While it may help women to cope with patriarchal men," writes hooks in her book *Communion*, "Gray's work… perpetuates the conventional sexist belief that it is natural for males to desire dominion over others" (2002, 169). For Ismael, it is only God who has dominion. This is a God who keeps talking, keeps up the conversation. The universe keeps moving. Its parts cohere into a whole defined, expressed by motion.

3.

"So, yeah, to explain this," he says, "que the, these things are very important. They don' explain nothing about this. Because those problems exist even in the animals, man.

"¿Oh, de veras? ¿Con los animales?"

"Yeah, cuz I saw, I saw dog with dog." He starts laughing loudly.

I chuckle.

"Yeah, I saw also, but, I, one time, right here in YouTube, also videos of the, the horses with horse! Each other. Lion with lion. So what happen? And then, the people, they say the homosexual, *oh they grow, they, they be, because they wish be like that*. What kind of? No if they saw the animal do that, same thing, what can I say?"

He tells me a story about a friend of his, whose daughter, around the age of five, "started to playing like a boy." The mother, a Catholic, chastised the girl for abandoning her dolls and taking to the mud and the boys outside.

"*Oh, no! But the Bible say like that, like this!*" he imitates his friend's voice in a raspy whisper. "No, no, I say to her, the best way if you want to find God, find by yourself with your mind, don' find with the Bible."

He tells me he's started to change his friend's mind, slowly, "because there are a lotta people, only they don' use they mind. The only, uh, they are looks like a robots!"

He laughs, "yeah, no quiere, and then this, this girl, let me show you."

He pulls out his phone from his pocket and flicks his finger across the screen. A minute passes, then he hands the phone to me.

The image shows a young woman sitting on the front steps of an apartment building. She has long wavy hair and wears hoop earrings and a t-shirt. Sunlight pours across the right side of her face. It is a digital copy of a washed-out photograph. Her skin is ghostly pale. She smiles shyly.

"Is her, lookit. Is her. Mi amiga."

I tell him I'm glad he has the picture saved.

"Sí, y su hija, su," he says, "ella siempre me decía que su hija era una villana y lo regañaba mucho,"

And a lotta times," he says, impersonating her again, "she say, *come out to the church.* And I say, no, I don' like to go to the church, I'm sorry, but I don' like because, um, they don', uh, the don' explain me what, what I want *to know*. I say, you think, you think if you go asking to the pastor, one question, asking him, ah that kinda question, uh if you asking, this my first time in this life to exist like a human here? This my first time? Tell me who think, o who think can answer you, right answer your question?

I smile and shrug.

"The Bible, no. Your pastor, no. So who can? Who can, can give the right answer? Yeah, it's, it's very…"

"The answers are in the world," I say.

"Sí!" he exclaims, "And the, I explain all these things, this girl, but, now she start a little bit to change her mind because she saw a lotta problems because she say, one time, her pastor, he, uh, he got, ah, one, one, his son, he born with both, with pussy and dick!"

He laughing now, laughing and laughing. "Yeah. I say, how can explain that? So the, the, you tell me, *no, the Bible!* But the Bible don, uh, how can I explain?...Ah, the Bible don' explain the things about the life! About the, he don' explain about the really life like you and you living, me, you and

everybody, so forget, the, the, the Bible because you don' know how, who is god, who, who is him o how is him. You don' know nothing! So you have to discovering with something else."

It is almost 10:00 PM. The gym is closed now. In the rearview mirror, I see Abelardo and Hector sitting in the bed of a truck, lighting a joint. I tell him I should be going soon.

He yawns. "Yeah," he says, "I gotta sleep."

He pauses, "but its good to talk about this stuff."

CODA

> "Lo que sucede en el Apocalipsis, es que es como un niño. Va a crecer. Está empezando a caminar, como un niño aprende a caminar."
>
> *What happens in Revelation is that it's like a child. It's going to grow. It's starting to walk, like a child learns to walk.*
>
> \- Martín

1.

I want to close with some thoughts on beginnings and ends. Both live somewhere between intention and circumstance. The differences between them are situational: expressed in the flash, as Wittgenstein might say, of a change in aspect. What makes a beginning or an end is no more definable, or less apparent, than what makes tears of sorrow or joy.

The trouble, for the men I have discussed, is how to begin from the end, how to be free when it seems that fate has come full circle, blacking out the alternatives. This is, even for Ismael, a Christian question. In Christian time, as Erich Aurbach ([1953] 2013) brilliantly elaborated in the opening chapter of *Mimesis*, meaning layers simultaneously. God is eternal. The universe is complete, a closed field of signs: a structuralist's dream. To paraphrase Aurbach alongside Northrop Frye (2000), another authority on the matter, Adam is the *typos* of Christ, just as Christ is the *antitype* of Adam. The binding of Isaac prefigures the martyrdom of Christ. And so forth. How, then, to go on when you can't go on? How to make language speak?

On answer takes the form of *Señales que precederán al fin del mundo* (2010), a remarkable book by the Mexican author Yuri Herrera. Herrera, a political scientist who writes novels, is distinctly

vulnerable to the crossings of word and deed. His condensed border epic likens passage from Mexico into the U.S. to a descent into the underworld, but will not let the damned fade. Suffering will not, cannot be silent; nor can it gush. A minimalist, allegorical style—a style close to epitaph—makes room for trauma to act. Confronted with Chicano Spanglish, Makina, Herrrera's cryptic heroine, reflects: "más que un punto medio entre lo paisano y lo gabacho su lengua es un franja difusa entre lo que desaparece y lo que no ha nacido. Pero no una hecatombe… ninguna ausencia súbita sino metamorfosis sagaz, una mudanza en defensa propia" (73-74).[1] In a world forever dissolving and becoming, one lives and dies by the lines—the borders—constructed to mark the distinction. This is certainly so for Makina, who leaves her *pueblo natal* (where she works as a switchboard operator, transferring calls in three tongues) to find her brother in Gringoland, only to lose herself, to be, in her words, "desollado," *skinned*.

Herrera's element is crisis. The opening words of *Señales* are "Estoy muerta," *I'm dead*, as Makina is nearly swallowed by a sinkhole, and the remainder of the novel has the air of a dreaming descent. By the final scene, where Makina, in the bowels of bureaucracy *estadounidense*, is stripped of her name and her history, we wonder if she has been dead all along. This picture of crisis, of the end as having—always, from the beginning—*already begun* recalls older traditions of eschatology, going back to the Sibylline texts. As Frank Kermode ([1966] 2000) once argued, this inheritance is far from esoteric; it founds modern narrative. Whatever the decline of apocalypticism in public discourse, the dread is dug in, persisting without a clear object. "No longer imminent," wrote Kermode, "the End is immanent" (25). Every moment seems to beckon the End, a sudden *peripeteia* (the narrative equivalent of irony in rhetoric) that reverses expectations, that opens and forecloses at once.

The critic Nathan Richardson writes that "Makina is *peripeteia*: her restoration culminates at the very moment of her annihilation" (2019, 18-19). Earlier, while starting out on this book, I imagined the turn of the verse as the turn of the plow in the soil, a mark of damnation and renewal. Herrera

carves deeper than the plow, down a winding *katabasis*. The pivotal action of his novel is "jarchar," a neologism roughly meaning "to exit," but phrased as "to verse" in the English translation. Herrera adapts jarchar from the Mozarabic "jarcha," referring to the final couplet of a muwashshah, an Al-Andalusian lyric form. Insofar as Mozarabic marks the transition to modern Spanish literature and culture from Roman-Visigothic, Muslim, and Hebrew roots, "the jarcha, then, epitomizes not only hybrid, evolutionary language, but the iteration of that language in a specific, unrepeatable moment" (19). That a jarcha generally functions as a goodbye written in a female voice gestures to the phantasmic and prophetic quality of Herrera's narrative, his shifting, fugitive signs preceding the end of the world. Over nine chapters symbolic of the nine levels of Mictlān, the Aztec underworld, his variously Orphic, Odyssean, Dantean, and Nahua protagonist finds herself dead in life and alive in death, obscured and exposed, blinded and prophetic as she crosses from her native mine town to the United States. Like Ismael, like Aberlardo and Edwin, Makina is burdened by a language that stifles her voice and yet is forever calling her name.

2.

To register a life in the world, to account for a world of death—this is the mandate to which Ismael, Abelardo and Héctor, Martín and Edwin must respond. I respond in turn. Anthropologists, more than their peers in neighboring academic departments, have found value in such thinking, with many tapping into the old Romantic trove of expression, volition, suffering and desire to meet the problem of "structural determinism." The writers in this line who I have found most compelling heed, as I understand them, a calling historically left to poets. It is a calling to mourn.

"What is it," asks Veena Das, "to pick up the pieces and live in this very place of devastation?" (2007, 6). Das poses these words at what would seem to be an odd crossroads: the place where the violence endured by families (and, in particular, by women) in the wake of Indian Partition and the 1984 anti-Sikh riots meets Stanley Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein. What the philosophy and the suffering share is a sense of "the ordinary" as a ground studded with fragments of myth, echoic ruins which may be returned to life or let return to dust. The return proves, in either case, "a gesture of mourning," a matter of dropping one's illusions or acknowledging one's limits. The power to let go suggests a will to keep going, to fight against the paralyzing thought that the rubble might (or, as if by a moral imperative, that it *should*) restore itself as a sparkling edifice. The tower of Babel, like the Garden of Eden, or a united India, is no more. Perhaps it never was.

I have been interested in how to go on when the devastation includes one's own demise: *susto*, *necrolife*, *apocalypsis*. I have asked how to mourn when the place is unstable, when the ground shifts, when the wreckage piles and crumbles. Parsing Cavell on Wittgenstein, the philosopher Stephen Mulhall writes of moving "from one aphoristic myth-fragment to another, constantly purifying their responsiveness to human desires and assessing their proper rates or modes of exchange… an aesthetics and an economics of speech" (2001, 21). What accounts for purity of response is a matter to be broached in endless discussion with God. Conversation turns amidst fragments —of places, people, images, spirits, and histories—jumbled and reordered by death in ordinary life.

"We fling ourselves," writes Wallace Stevens (1997) in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "constantly longing, on this form./We descend to the street and inhale a health of air/To our sepulchral hollows. Love of the real" (128-130). Mournful lines such as these suggest a faith that turns and flares across the ground, the ground crumbling into death. "We seek," continues Stevens, on his dusk stroll, "Nothing beyond reality. Within it,/Everything, the spirit's alchemicana… In the metaphysical streets of the physical town… the profoundest forms/Go with the walker subtly walking

there" (156-158, 182, 191-192). I find these images strangely fitted to the men in this book, subtle walkers in numbing physical confines, men for whom everyday reality must be as vast as it is volatile: a gaping, dark mouth wide enough for both the solids and the saints.

Here is a world of things already formed—dead things, inert objects, overdetermined lives—and motions yet to come. The sense of spirit comes by facing the death in life, the life of a world acutest at its vanishing.

All is god.
A broken statue,
columns gnawed by the light
ruins alive in a world of death in life!

- Octavio Paz, "Himno entre ruinas"

3.

"The only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one," writes Walter Benjamin, "is allegory… the amorphous details which can only be understood allegorically keep coming up" (1998, 185). For Benjamin, allegory is the language of the fallen and the dead. It is the language of history. The particulars are the ruins and the wreckage that keeps coming up, pesistent as, to quote Stevens again, "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds." The parts corrode the narrative whole. Redemption, even revelation, flashes across the fragments (as it might photographs in a family album), allowing them their life, their death. Take this lesson from Ismael, from Abelardo and Edwin: the living trauma lights the way to God.

A word on ideology. One term for the narrative whole is that old political touchstone, the nation-state: the power broker of "Ethnic Culture" and the victor's History. In *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*, Alicia Schmidt Camacho adopts the melancholic

gaze to probe the cracks in this picture of expression. The cracks, internal to the story arc of "assimilation," "acculturation," *belonging*, are the open wounds of the borderlands. The border is not a trope or figure or device. It is not an antitype. It is atypical, resistant, destructive of the "national" plot. "Migrants create new imaginative worlds out of their trajectories of loss and displacement" (2008, 6) forking and disparate paths lit the late light of allegorical signs. As Brett Neilson and Sandro Mezzadra would claim some four years after Camacho, in a landmark book, "The border can be a method precisely insofar as it is conceived of as a site of struggle" (2013, 18). "A struggle for the representation of ideas" (1998, 37) we might say with Benjamin, the imaginative struggle of people in the grip of paradox—*beyond anything we could imagine, a discovery of a space*.

The paradox, familiar in the literature on U.S. Mexico border crossing, is a cruel fix of economic openness and social constraint. The plight of those forced to sell their labor at the cost of their humanity Camacho calls "migrant melancholia." "Border crossing," she writes, "implies a psychic wounding for migrants and invests their nostalgic desires for return with political significance… If current conditions make the option of circular migration unavailable to many migrants, then the notion of 'home' may take on the qualities of the beloved object, whose loss threatens the integrity of the border crosser's personhood" (2008, 299). The Freudian solution of detachment, of "killing death" so as to move on, is of little use here. Home must not be forgotten. Home, ravaged by poverty and war, was never so whole, so archetypically maternal, as Freud would believe. There must be a work of letting death live, of honoring the fragments. This is the beginning of the end.

Where Camacho ends up is not surprising: the open stare of Angelus Novus, that equivocal creature glancing between verbal cause and effect, who wishes he could stay, who must go forth. In *Migrant Imaginaries*, a book especially concerned with the plight of migrant women, who are subject to extreme rates of violence, abduction, and death, this icon wears a different mask. The image (featured on the book's cover) is "Santa Niña de Mochis," a digital print by the artist Alma López. As Camacho

describes the work: "A young girl stands astride the U.S.-Mexican boundary, wearing a first-communion dress and costume wings, her sandaled feet perched over the patient cherub who traditionally bears the Virgen de Guadalupe" (318). The wings are evocative of both the angel and the migratory monarch butterfly. The background of the print features the skyline of Ciudad Juárez overlayed with images of women picketing for green cards and a police car chasing a silhouette. The chase is, itself, overlayed onto a map of California and Mexico. "The Santa Niña," writes Camacha, echoing Benjamin, "would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed at this unnatural boundary… The border crossing has produced its own wounded figure of 'witness.' She is the maker of worlds" (ibid.).

I suppose this maker, like Makina's *jarcha*, sounds as a pang of doubt in masculine ambition: the breadwinner, the good son, the one who went out, into a hostile world, and made it. This is a doubt of which the men in this book are, at times dimly, at times vividly, aware; to which, in the end, they pay tribute. The real man of God is *el llorón*, the man willing to witness and weep. This is the man who loves.

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NOTES

[i] As with any act of reading, this method has its precursors. The names include Giambattista Vico and Frederich Nietzsche, Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer, and Edward Said. Drawing from their example, I approach our verbal life as a winding course between philology and philosophy. By this I mean a way of human beginnings and ends in words, of words as they turn or trope on one another to carry forth the language of eternity.

What binds the above figures together is their shared investment in philology as a method capable of yielding philosophical insights. Both Vico and Nietzsche were trained in philology and identified with its methods and goals over those of Enlightenment philosophy. In the early 20th century Aurbach and Spitzer helped to found the field of comparative literature as a rigorously philological discipline. Aurbach, in particular, was hugely influenced by Vico's *muthos* of "poetic history," an influence vocally continued by Edward Said. The most succinct and accessible account of this lineage is, to my knowledge, Said's lecture "The Return to Philology," from his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 57-84. The subsequent lecture, "Introduction to Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis"* casts further light on the philological mode in criticism. For a robust exposition of Said's debt to Aurbach and Vico, with gestures to Nietzche, see Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 3-78, 347-381.

[ii] It is often assumed that "the later Wittgenstein"—this being the Wittgenstein who rejected "the early Wittgenstein" of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*—opposed so-called "picture theories" of meaning. This is true only in a narrow sense. For context, the most commonly accepted interpretation of the *Tractatus* is as follows. The contents of propositions "picture" the facts of the world. The form of propositions reveals the structure of the world, such that syntax mirrors ontology. Anything that cannot be intelligibly expressed within this form, as a predicative claim (i.e., *x* is a *y*), exists outside the limits of language. This basic Kantian view, inspired by Schopenhauer, relegates ethics, aesthetics, God, and death to the realm of the unsayable. These things cannot be "pictured" as facts of the world.

In his later work, Wittgenstein does not so much reject the utility of pictures outright as expose *this* picture, the Tractarian picture, as inadequate and (to quote a famous remark from *Philosophical Investigations*) as having "held us captive." Here, I defer to Hilary Putnam, in discussion of Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Religion*:

> "When Wittgenstein attacks philosophers for being in the grip of a picture, the usual reading of this is that Wittgenstein opposes pictures—that pictures are bad. But Wittgenstein in his lectures during the 1930s repeatedly praises pictures in two ways: he praises them as good ways of explaining the meaning of words… and, moreover, he speaks of pictures as having 'weight', or of pictures' being 'at the root of all one's thinking.' Evidently, then, if certain philosophers are attacked by Wittgenstein for being in the grip of a picture, we may conclude that what is wrong is not that pictures are bad, but that certain pictures are bad—that there are pictures that should not 'grip' one, presumably because they lack any significant 'weight,' because they are not the sort of pictures which could be at the root of all one's thinking." (Putnam 1992, 156-57)

Stephen Mulhall has expounded "Wittgenstein's figure or image... [of] 'rootedness'" with particular deftness, describing it as "a pretheoretical framework or orientation, providing that without which a certain kind or range of theorizing would not be possible." Put more robustly: "The idea is rooted in the picture, the picture is the soil from which the idea grows. This tells us that the idea is logically secondary to the picture, that it depends upon it for its existence and flourishing; and just as soil is not typically nutritious for only one plant or type of plant, so a picture can and does nourish a range of related ideas" (Mulhall 2001, 37).

[iii] Perhaps it will be clear that I am mingling strands from Benjamin and Wittgenstein on the matter of the image. More specifically, I read Benjamin's Baudelairean take on the shock of the image, as a

quintessential (if deeply ambivalent) experience of modern life, through Wittgenstein's discussions of "aspect-seeing," that is, "the lighting up of an aspect." This comparison is not, I think, as unorthodox as it may seem. Wittgenstein, like Benjamin, was a Jewish exile who came of age in the 1920s, a prophet of the found object and the happenstance, of fragmented description and detail, of repetition, interruption, contradiction. The anonymous dialogues of his *Philosophische Untersuchungen* work in fits and starts of talk, urgent yet reflexive, incisive yet winding ("a mix of rigor and vacillation," says the critic Geoffrey Hartman). Common materials buzz with allegorical valence. Benjamin's rags and refuse appear as slabs, tools, and childish games; his peripatetia echoes in a nomadic course of remarks, as in further images of walking and handling, of language as a maze of city streets.

Without getting bogged down in the details, Wittgenstein and Benjamin share a broadly Kantian goal of "saving the phenomena," but mediated through a Goethean inheritance. Goethe's emphasis on "morphology" as a method through which realism and idealism collapse, in which content and form are joined, is deeply important to both philosophers, as is the figure of the "physiognomist." Goethean morphology has no need for theses or explanation. It relies on description alone. The form, the character of a set of empirical marks, becomes visible in the aspect. As Goethe himself famously wrote, "There is a delicate form of the empirical which identifies itself so intimately with its object that it thereby becomes a theory"

Wittgenstein compares our being struck by the aspects of a word as we are those of a face ("I'd like to say that what lights up here lasts only as long as I am occupied with the observed object in a particular way… there is a *physiognomy* in the aspect, which then fades away"). The physiognomist, says Benjamin, registers the passing moment of apperception through messianic power. The aspects strike the retina as an ephemeral whole, a "constellation." Orion does not appear in the night sky as a set of stars referring to an idea of a god. The sign merely is—only to "fade away" in a gesture of mourning. The light that reaches the night sky signals the death of the stars themselves. (Crucially, for Benjamin, the faces that flash up a photograph evoke a similar melancholy, a similar life-in-death.)

For a systematic comparison of Benjamin and Wittgenstein on language, see Alexander Stern, *The Fall of Language: Benjamin and Wittgenstein on Meaning*. Two big eye-openers for me were Stanley Cavell's essay "Benjamin and Wittgenstein: Signals and Affinities" in *Critical Inquiry* (Winter 1999) and his review of the Harvard University Press edition of *The Arcades Project* in the April 2000 issue of *Artforum*. Cavell provides an account of Benjamin's and Wittgenstein's shared sensibilities, their common impulse to work through the encounters between knowledge and skepticism, often manifest as shifts between mourning and melancholy. These sensibilities manifest in a reverence for low and common life, a consideration of child's play as serious business, and a catalog of "ordinary" images, among them the dog, the stone and the sphere. For a discussion of Wittgenstein and Benjamin on perception, see Blair Ogden's wonderful article, "Benjamin, Wittgenstein, and Philosophical Anthropology: A Reevaluation of the Mimetic Faculty" in *Grey Room*, no. (Spring 2010) 39, 57-73. For a full exposition of the relations between Goethe and Wittgenstein, see M.W. Rowe, "Goethe and Wittgenstein," *Philosophy* 66, no. 257 (July 1991) 283-303.

[iv] In her essay "The Crisis in Culture," Hannah Arendt notes that the Latin root *colere* suggests cultivation, tending and dwelling, a loving care for nature. See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Viking Press, [1961] 2006), 194-222.

[v] A useful figure of this dialectic comes from Stanley Cavell. Writing on Emerson's comment that "Self-reliance is the aversion of conformity," Cavell suggests that "Emerson's writing and his society are in an unending argument with one another... an unending turning away from one another, but for that exact reason a constant keeping in mind of one another, hence endlessly a turning toward one another" (1990, 138)

There is much to like in Cavell's subsequent claim that "Emerson's aversion is like, and unlike, religious conversion. His prose not alone takes sides in this aversive conversation, but it also enacts the conversation, continuously creating readings of individual assertion that mutually turn from and toward one another" (ibid.). This is a provocative gloss of the etymological link between the *convertere* and *conversare*.

Indeed, the image of the turn or trope (the Greek word for "turn" is *tropos*) in language as imminently theological is fundamental the whole of my discussion. Yet the figure of irony as a contest between dialectically heroic Man and his ambivalently conformist Society seems to me overdetermined; needlessly foreclosed to other patterns of resistance and recovery.

[vi] I suppose Benjamin would have found the very idea of Sonsini, as a painter after photography, rather dissonant. Painting, as Benjamin saw it, disclosed aboriginal power, the magic of the "aura": an icon of occult tradition. Photography (never mind film) had set this magic in crisis. The photograph was surgically rendered, a machine art for public consumption: "multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law... the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment." One response to this position, taking the grand "theoretical" view, would say something about the rise of digital technology—Google Image searches for *Guernica* blurring the distinction, deepening the crisis. In any event, the distinction seems increasingly vague.

[vii] For a brief and punchy account of the relationship between Frankfurt Marxism and Southern California, see Mike Davis, "The Exiles" in *City of Quartz* (2006, 46-54).

[viii] Nico Israel (1997, 96) notes that "the way Los Angeles becomes a kind of filter for Adorno's impressions (secondary elaborations?) of Nazism and the holocaust is remarkable: he sees barbaric traces (*Spuren*) of 'home' everywhere in the new world, the result being that while Germany and the U.S. are by no means identical, they are, through his lens, converging, like lanes on a highway." Writing on the "convergence theory of the similarities between the United States of the New Deal and Hollywood, and Nazi Germany" in the "Culture Industry" chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Frederic Jameson argues:

> "Such comparisons, which are frequent throughout the chapter, will arouse less pious indignation if it is understood that what is meant – besides the similarities between American repressive conformism and the rapid stifling of opposition under Hitler – is what most authorities acknowledge anyhow: namely, the originality of the nascent media technology throughout this period, as it is pioneered above all in the USA and Germany and has significant impact on their respective public spheres… The emergence of the 'anti-Semite' as a strong manifestation of the social form of the 'philistine' in general… makes a little clearer the cultural 'convergence theory' of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which a Hollywood and New Deal USA is structurally characterized as bearing a family likeness to Hitlerian Germany. The deeper continuity is precisely secured by this figure, who, anti-Semite in the Nazi social order, is in the United States identified as the seemingly more benign figure of the philistine of the Culture Industry: both negative embodiments of the deeper ressentiment generated by class society itself." (1990, 106, 154).

[ix] The opening page of Baudrillard's *Simulation and Simulacrum* contains the following paragraph: "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. *The desert of the real itself.*" (1994, 1)

[x] I borrow this contrast from Günther Anders (1960), for whom it distinguishes Kafka's writing from allegory: "Whereas allegory presents humanized abstractions, Kafka's stories represent abstract human beings" (47). Yet, taking a broader view of allegory, one which searches out the allegorical power of modern literature and language, a text such as "The Metamorphosis" or *The Trial* falls firmly within the allegorical grain. This is the sort of view espoused by Benjamin and Angus Fletcher, the latter of whom points to Kafka's use of the micro/macrocosmic logic of allegory forged by Medieval and Renaissance writers:

> "Kafka's allegory, despite the desire of his admirers to call it by the more fashionable name of 'myth,' elaborates an imagery which we can call 'ornamental' in both the strict and the loose sense of the term, even though at first we may not know exactly how to read the cosmic significance of his floating imagery. But that is the point: with Kafka kosmos becomes imbued with doubt and anxiety; hierarchy itself causes fear, hatred, tentative approach, tentative retreat. The sure sense of one's place in the sun has gone. The sure identification of the hero with governing political or cultural ideals has gone. Doubt inhibits action. Piety of any kind becomes difficult or impossible. 'O for a household god to keep by me,' Kafka cries out in his Diary. The horrid scales and joints of the metamorphosed Gregor Samsa are then no less ornaments than the invented trappings of Swift's Flying Island, or the forest images of Comus, or the heraldic costuming of knights in *The Faerie Queene*." (Fletcher [1964] 2012, 143-44)

For Benjamin's most sustained discussion of Kafka, see "Some Reflections on Kafka" (1969). For Benjamin's fullest treatment of allegory, on which I rely heavily throughout this discussion, see Benjamin 2019.

[xi] *Jornalero* enjoyed a generally positive reception in anthropology. The bulk of this praise came from Ordóñez's mentors and influences—those who developed the theories of violence and vulnerability which he appropriates wholesale. In a review of *Jornalero* in *Times Higher Education*, sociologist Robert Lee Maril offers a less biased appraisal, hammering Ordóñez for his methodological shortcomings: "Early on, he [Ordóñez] bluntly states that undocumented day labourers in Berkeley may be atypical because of the uniqueness of the community's liberal politics and history, but nevertheless he then chooses to follow a small group of these very men for two years... But what about the thousands of other jornaleros, some of whom are in nearby Oakland, San Francisco and Richmond?... In the end what we have is a case study of a small number of jornaleros in one atypical California city, based upon these workers' own detailed telling of their lives... this book is merely an exploratory study that points to a variety of intriguing themes, rather than a significant contribution to a very timely topic." My criticisms are similar in content but opposite in spirit. Unlike Maril, I do not doubt the value of a work focused on a small number of day laborers. "Intriguing themes" are enough for me. But I do take issue with the assumption of representativeness, implicit in a lack of geographical and historical context. Maril also points to the fact that Ordóñez takes his interlocutors' stories at face value. For him, this is a problem of internal and external validity. For me, it represents a failure to understand how language works—not as a transparent representation of facts, but as practice to be recognized as such. See Robert Lee Maril, "*Jornalero: Being a Day Laborer in the USA*, by Juan Thomas Ordóñez," *Times Higher Education,* August 20, 2015.

[xii] In *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American and the Task of Mourning* (1999), the Brazilian critic Idelber Avelar issues the following challenge: "How can one pose the task of mourning—which is always, in a sense, the task of actively forgetting—when all is immersed in passive forgetting, that brand of oblivion that ignores itself as such, not suspecting that it is the product of a powerful repressive operation?" Reviewing the work of Ricardo Piglia, Silviano Santiago, Daimela Eltit, João Gilberto Noll, and Tununa Mercado, Avelar writes after the possibility of a Latin American literature in the wake of dictatorship. If it was centralized state power that allowed the high culture of "el boom latinoamericano," then what of the textual arts in the post-dictatorial Southern Cone? The project of the patriarchal origin story, the Adamic mode of Vargas Llosa and García Márquez, of Cortázar, Fuentes, and Paz, no longer seems quite so liberating, or, for that matter, even possible, in the absence of a totalitarian state. Neoliberal market logics, with their emphasis on novelty and seamless replacement (as of old products by new, towards a "perpetual present"), block the way to the scattered remains—like so many unaccounted corpses, dismembered limbs—of a prior, despotic era. A literature up to the task of subverting free market power must work to actively forget by recovering the past as strewn shards of experience. Such a literature makes visible the violence of the past without rendering it sensible (as by assembling these remains into monoliths of tradition or history, which would only reinforce despotisms of old). This, says Avelar, is what makes it "untimely," after Nietzsche's *unzeitgemäß*, in critique of the present. Yet it is Benjamin, not Nietzche, who Avelar cites most heavily. The ruins of allegory mark the way to active forgetting.

The Chilean critic Nelly Richard offers a similar vision in her essay "Ruptures, Memories, Discontinuities (Homage to Walter Benjamin)" (1994), also written in the wake of dictatorial power. The central riddle of Richard's project parallels Avelar's: "the challenge of having to name fragments of experience that were no longer speakable in the language that survived the catastrophe of meaning." Benjamin's "refractive art" of allegory discloses a path to redemption consonant with that taken by Chilean writers and artists after Pinochet, among them Eltit, Eugenio Dittborn, Carlos Altamirano, Paz Errázuriz, and Gonzalo Díaz. Working through obscure, suggestive, piecemeal signs emblematic of memory fragments, these artists have "inscribed resistance and rebellion in the interior of the word, generating a memory of trauma and solidarity with the accidents and deformations of its graphing as a wounded word." The emphasis on fragmentation—"an unfinished succession of loose fragments unleased by cuts in meaning, and wandering about, without the guarantee of sure connection or an exact end"—subverts the no-win picture of state power as a force to be embraced or resisted, therefore reaffirmed.

In *Gender and Allegory: Transamerican Fiction and Performance* (2008), Katherine Sugg builds on the work of Richard and Avelar, who, she summarizes, "consider allegory to be especially useful in writing against the commodifying operations of late capitalism. Drawing upon the work of Benjamin, this influential school of Latin American cultural critique has developed its theory of allegory as a mode of representation that can manifest the relationship between history and writing in ways that are especially pertinent to the contemporary moment in the Americas" (5). To this end, Sugg coins the term "Transamerica" to refer to "a hemispheric entity… linked by circuits of cultural production" (ibid.) which manifest allegorically. Of particular importance to Sugg is the ability of allegorical art to play on gender stereotypes by ironically representing the failure of identity politics.

[xiii] I quote Helen Vendler (1983, 215), from her marvelous lectures on Keats' Odes.

[xiv] I quote Hartman, here, from an essay titled "Understanding Criticism.":

> "Critical thinking respects heterogeneity. Like good scholarship it keeps in mind the peculiarity or strangeness of what is studied… Are we, however, talking about the strange or the other, or both? Strangeness involves a sense that the strange is really the familiar, estranged; otherness (alterity) precludes any assumption about this matter, or it demands of understanding an extraordinary, even self-altering, effort… The question is whether we must insist on the one or the other: on the resolvable strangeness or the unresolvable otherness. Could we not say there must be a willingness to receive figurative language? To receive is not to accept; between these, as between active and passive, critical thinking takes place, makes its place. We cannot solve, a priori, the issue of strange or other; we can only deal with it in the mode of "resonance" that writing is. We rewrite the figure, in commentary or fiction, we elaborate it in a revisionary way." (2007), 26-27.

[xv] My thinking here is overwhelmingly indebted to the fourth and final section of Stanley Cavell's *The Claim of Reason*, "Skepticism and the Problem of Others," as well as to certain of Cavell's comments on Emerson and Thoreau. With respect to aspect-seeing and picturing, I highlight the following passage, a response to Wittgenstein's comments on aspect-seeing in Part II of *Philosophical Investigations*:

> Putting together the ideas that noticing an aspect is being struck by a physiognomy; that words present familiar physiognomies; that they can be thought of as pictures of their meaning; that words have a life and can be dead for us; that "experiencing a word" is meant to call attention to our relation to our words; that our relation to pictures is in some respects like our relation to what they are pictures of; — I would like to say that the topic of our attachment to our words is allegorical of our attachments to ourselves and to other persons. Something of this sort we were prepared for. My words are my expressions of my life; I respond to the words of others as their expressions, i.e., respond not merely to what their words mean but equally to their meaning of them. I take them to mean ("imply") something in or by their words; or to

> be speaking ironically, etc. Of course my expressions and my responses may not be accurate. To imagine an expression (experience the meaning of a word) is to imagine it as giving expression to a soul. (The examples used in ordinary language philosophy are in this sense imagined.) (1979, 355)

Cavell's notion of our being read by texts owes to his encounters with Emerson and Thoreau, as well as his longstanding engagement with Wittgenstein, which inform his response to deconstruction. Cavell main target here is the apparent impasse (sometimes called the *aporia*) produced by the straining of language to account for itself, for its own terms, in its own terms. "For someone who thinks this way," writes Cavell, "there lies in wait what you might call the paradox of reading… that you cannot understand a text before you know what the text says about itself; but obviously you cannot understand what the text says about itself before you understand the text" (1982, 176-77). Rather than draw from this irony "the impossibility" or "undecidability" of reading, Cavell flips the script, suggesting that reading is a matter of submitting oneself to interpretation, measuring one's convictions against the weight of sentences, taking part in a field of play. The resemblance of this solution to Wittgenstein's way out of the so-called "paradox of rule-following" (by which rules demand further rules for their understanding, *ad infinitum*) will be apparent. The paradox dissolves when confronted with therapeutic and reparative energies: when reading is approached as a grounded, incremental practice (not some abstract epistemological problem), such that we may ask, with Cavell "whether 'before' bears meaning in this formulation, and if not, whether there is a paradox here" (177).

For Cavell's most robust and nuanced response to deconstruction, see Cavell 1998.

[xvi] At this time, I was thinking through the affinities of C.S. Peirce and Wittgenstein, specifically, Peirce's semiotics and Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following." An early paper from Richard Rorty, titled "Pragmatism, Categories, and Language," provided a useful gloss of the comparison. The crux of Rorty's argument is this: "Wittgenstein, like Peirce, is insisting on the reality of vagueness… For Peirce there is potentially a sign behind every sign, and for Wittgenstein there is potentially a language game behind every language game; but both consider these regresses harmless on the pragmatic ground that practice does not require the actualization of these potentialities" (1961, 219). I had not yet encountered Cavell's image of our being read by texts, which provides a more robust response to skeptical (e.g. deconstructive) approaches to infinite regress.

[xvii] Consider Daniel 9, for instance, where the angel Gabriel delivers a tortured prophetic calculus. Here are Daniel 9:25-26, dictated by Gabriel:

> Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be put to death and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed.

I will not trouble with the esoterica of Biblical math. Suffice it to say that for Christians, the Anointed One is plainly *one*, a single figure referenced twice to signify the double-climax of his time on earth. It is Christ, his baptism and crucifixion. For Jews, the math is different, as are the Annointed "*Ones*." The first—he who "comes"—is either Cyrus (who decreed that the Temple at Jerusalem should be rebuilt and the Jews, invited to return), or Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, or Joshua (leaders of the post-exilic community). The second—who will be "put to death"—is Onias III, the high Jewish priest who was forced by Antiochus to relinquish his power and, subsequently, assassinated. These distinctions signal a more basic disjuncture. For Christians, Daniel is a major prophet. His eschatological power, his foresight of the First Coming of Christ, prefigure Revelation. For Jews, he is a middling canonical figure. His oneirocritical gifts suggest a weak inheritance of Joseph. He is a man of intuition, but not of genius.

[xviii] The tree appears in Revelation 22:1-2: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (NIV)

[xix] Another recent book, Stephen Offutt's *Blood Entanglements: Evangelicals and Gangs in El Salvador* (2023), expounds the practical knottiness. In El Salvador, familial and social ties crosscut churches and gangs. *Mareros* know the pastors who pray for them. Congregations may seek protection from gangs; they may offer refuge to gang members against corrupt police; they may accept, not without fear for their lives, the omnipresence of gangs as the banality of evil, all while seeking save these young men, one soul at a time. The men, for their part, are far from irreligious. Many call themselves devils, or pray after they kill.

[xx] I think of the affably inscrutable Mr. Endon of *Murphy* (Beckett [1938] 2011), who, rather than pursue checkmate, arranges (as the rules of chess will allow) "his pieces with a precise, self-sufficient, and drastic economy" (Lipking 2003, 163) in a symmetrical pattern.

[xxi] "Our clear and simple language-games are not preliminary studies for a future regimentation of language—as it were, first approximations, ignoring friction and air-resistance. Rather, the language-games stand there as *objects of comparison* which, through similarities and dissimilarities are meant to throw light on features of our language." (Wittgenstein [1953] 2009, §130).

[xxii] At least since Wordsworth, metaphor has been read primarily as a spatial trope playing on images of inside and outside, mind and world, consciousness and nature, etc. Yet it may also, in a more Hebraic mode, signal the reconciliation of self and other. As Cynthia Ozick writes in a powerful (if, at times, reductive) essay titled "Metaphor and Memory": "Without the metaphor of memory and history, we cannot imagine the life of the Other. We cannot imagine what it is to be someone else. Metaphor is the reciprocal agent, the universalizing force: it makes possible the power to envision the stranger's heart" (1991, 279). This trope becomes all the more poignant when we consider the fissures of consciousness—the Other within.

[xxiii] Galen accounts for the discrepancy between this quadripartite theory of humors and his Platonic tripartite theory of the soul by arguing that phlegm does not affect character.

[xxiv] Here, things get rather muddled on two interrelated issues. I cite some recent literature on the matter. First is the longstanding, much-debated, and well-documented confusion over *tonalli* and *nahualli*. In many cases, *nahualli* is used in lieu of *tona*, to indicate an animal alter-ego or a calendrical sign. Christopher Beekman adopts this usage, arguing that "it is the tonalli that is the shared material linking the human with their nahualli" (Beekman 2020, 92). This leads to the second issue, namely, the relationship between *nahualli* and shamanic sorcery. According to Beekman, "everyone possesses a nahualli, though only special individuals (human-nahualli) may be aware of it and able to control it" (ibid.). Alan and Pamela Sandstrom share a similar view, citing John Monaghan's comment that "in many indigenous languages, such as Mixtec, the distinction between 'spirit companion' and 'transforming witch' is one of degree, not kind... the spirit companion of a witch is a specific aspect of the more general phenomenon of the spirit companion" (Monaghan 2001, 672; c.f. Sandstrom and Sandstrom 2020, 90). Not so for Descola, who is less hesitant than Beekman to establish a distinct class of spiritual experts. In his view, "nagualism" is entirely different than "tonalism," the latter indicating a sorcerer's ability to separate from his *ihiyotl* and take on that of another body (Descola 2013, 214-216). With all that said, most scholars, Descola and Beekman among them, willingly acknowledge that the consonance between *nahualli* and *tonalli*, which continue to be used similarly in many indigenous systems. On this point, Isabel Laak provides a generous summary: "The sources are contradictory in this matter. Most probably, everybody had an animal *nahualli*, but only a few chosen people could identify it (mainly in dreams) or transform into it. It might also have been the case that all people knew their *nahualli*, but only a few could transform into it. Finally, it is also possible that all people knew their *nahualli* and could

transform into it, while only some had a particularly strong *nahualli*. Or, vice versa, only a few people actually *had a nahualli*. Be that as it may, we know that few people were acknowledged in their role as shamanic human *nanahualtin*" (Laack 2019, 162).

[xxv] Anzaldúa takes the image of "soul-making" from John Keats, a poet famously attuned to the imaginative power of suffering. (This is the power he called "negative capability," and gave its most acute expression in the Lethean bower of "Ode to a Nightingale," a meditation on death, life, and listening.) She aligns Keats' tender night with "the Mexican indigenous spiritual tradition of making face, making soul" (2014, 41) Like the poet taken to death's edge by the nightingale's song, the *chamana* becomes her mask. In the throes of ritual, the mask is nothing—not art, not artifact, not magical charm—without its ecstatic host, who lunges into the void.

[xxvi] I have in mind here certain comments of Wittgenstein's in *Culture and Value* on seeds, plants, and soil. Among them is: "I believe that my originality (if that is the right word) is an originality belonging to the soil rather than to the seed. (Perhaps I have no seed of my own.) Sow a seed in my soil and it will grow differently than it would in any other soil" (1984, 36e).

[xxvii] I think specifically of Wittgenstein's repeated reference to "guidance" in *Philosophical Investigations*, specifically, in the sense of *being guided* that informs our practical growth into language. See especially Wittgenstein [1953] 2009 (§170-178). This theme of guidance finds a beautiful expression in Stanley Cavell's remark on our "commitment to being guided by our experience but not dictated by it" (1981, 10). "Dictate," in Cavell's usage as in mine, plays on multiple related meanings.

[xxviii] Put simply, Augustine's Platonic distinctions of Man and God, Time and Eternity, Word and word, have been secularized into the dialectic (of great concern to literary critics over the past century) of what I will call the *tale* and its *telling*. This distinction continues to attract critics, but the concepts proposed by such seminal figures as Müller (*erzählte zeit* and *erzählzeit*), Shklovsky (*fabula* and *syuzhet*), and, later, Genette, (*histoire* and *récit*), have largely endured. Glossing these binaries in terms of "story" and "discourse," Jonathan Culler (1987, 171) notes the tendency among critics—correct, in his view—to think of "story" as a "nondiscursive, nontextual given, something which exists prior to and independently of its presentation [in discourse]," such that we may "treat the discourse as a representation of events which are conceived of as independent of any particular narrative perspective or presentation." Story, in other words, refers to the *tale* as a unified, *spatial* whole. Discourse describes the *temporal* progression of its *telling* in language.

One description of this phenomenon reiterates the concepts, well-honed in linguistic anthropology, of "conextualization" and "entextualization." Together these terms comprise a practical response to structuralist and deconstructionist generalities. It is the view of anthropologists that the intuitive picture of the *tale* as a structured, coherent given—one to be told here or there, in this way or that—need not conflict with the obvious fact that it is the *telling* which allows the tale to exist. Throwing out the need for some epistemological starting point (a dull chicken and egg contest) we can, instead, track the shared works of telling and tale in the field of social life. Whereas theorists stoke sublime conflict (or, worse yet, forges sublime resolution) between the spatial and temporal elements of narrative, anthropologists note their integration. Thus, the folklorist Richard Bauman, chiding Culler, writes of:

> a rather complex picture of the relationship between the narratives and the events they recount... a full range of factors, intrinsic and extrinsic to the narratives themselves, including local social and individual conceptions of the event being recounted (routinized, objectified, with a known and understood structure), dimensions of the narrator's personal involvement in the original events, the structure of the narrative plots, the management of information and point of view in the narratives, other narratives about aspects of the same events, and so on. The relationship between story and event in these narratives thus turns out to be reciprocal, not in some vague, general, ineffable sense. (1986, 52)

The extension of this semiosis into a variety of social fields, including oral performance, unsettles the barriers between so-called "high" and "low" verbal arts, as between verbal "art" and forms of language historically denied this label. Linguistic anthropologists thus follow the long tradition of counter-Enlightenment thought—running from Vico through Herder and into Bakhtin—which emphasizes the embeddedness of our expressions, including those of science, religion, and the arts, in contingent rhetorical forms. As I am inclined to approach Ismael as a visionary (a sort of wandering, evangelizing poet), this broadly "constructivist" picture of language bodes well for my project here. So too, does the emphasis on textuality as a practical phenomenon, one whose failures achievements must, themselves, be decided and debated in practice. Yet, the anthropological model seems, to me, too avowedly secular (and theref0re, perhaps, inadequately counter-Enlightenment). The narratives of its own becoming—rooted in Hellenic and Hebraic metaphysics—are obscured in its writing.

Linguistic anthropologists and social theorists alike have tended to ignore the theological underpinnings—most traceable, I have said, to Augustine—of the interplay between story and discourse, the spatial and temporal features of narrative. Frank Kermode rightly credits Augustine with having "anticipated all the modern critics who wonder how it can be that a book can simultaneously be present like a picture… and yet extended in time" ([1966] 2000, 52). Today, this wonder is often framed in problematically secular terms, with Augustine's Platonism washed out.

Anzaldúa's, intentionally or not, respects the religious underpinnings of narrative but refuses their Platonic framework. She both declines present the "deep structure" of God as a reliable "core," yet insists on its sublime and—in flashes—visible existence. In this sense, she is still closer to Augustine than the 20th century EuroAmerican derivatives reviewed above.

[xxix] My thanks to Rob Gelles for pointing out the significance of this "faith in reality" in the writings of C.S. Peirce.

[xxx] For an excellent introduction to "Two-Spirit" people and their complex relationship with the LGBTQ community, I recommend Nelwat Ishkamewe (2018)