

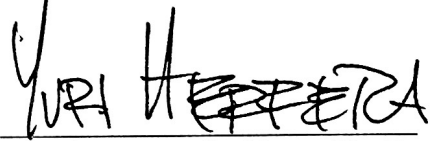
IMAGINE EVERY LIGHT IS A WOMAN  
WHO CAME TO THE CITY ALONE  
A THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE SEVENTH DAY OF NOVEMBER 2016  
TO THE DEPARTMENT OF LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS  
OF TULANE UNIVERSITY  
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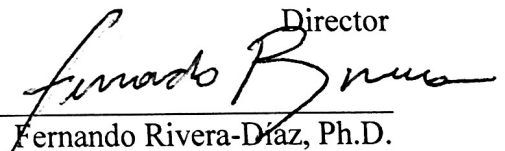
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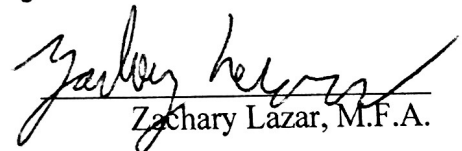
  
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*Perdí mi finca.  
Perdí mi pie derecho.  
Arriba de la rodilla.  
Y perdí el hogar.*

–Fabián

## **Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction	1
Part One: The Mothers	2
Part Two: Hypothetical Scenarios	53
Afterward	103
Bibliography	125

## **Introduction**

This thesis is a work of fiction. It stands as an exercise in narrative writing, drafted from within the US, that I envision situated in conversation with the testimonies of victims of the Colombian armed conflict. My text in no way aims to speak on behalf of these individuals or represent their voices; rather, I intend for it to serve as a meditation on issues of US hegemony, systemic violence, and displacement that manifest themselves in Medellín, Colombia, and elsewhere in the global South. I invite my reader to consider the language and place from which this thesis was written as part of its argument—made narratively—that transnational problems demand transnational reflection; that these stories do exist not in a vacuum, but in a messy, globalized space that implicates both writer and reader.

## **Part One: The Mothers**

*NB: The following text is an excerpt from my working translation of a posthumous novel by the writer Tomas Petrutis.*

*-A.*

The mothers stand in a circle in the central square and fan themselves with the daily news. Sometimes when a cloud passes, they unfold the ridges in their fans and skim a few paragraphs to check if anything true has been printed since yesterday. They are armed with umbrellas to temper the sun. As seen from the belfry of the cathedral, you'd think it was raining—but it isn't, it doesn't.

An umbrella is a shade. A newspaper is a fan.

A mother is a mother, regardless of the latest information regarding her children.

The mothers wear blue jeans and sleeveless shirts, flip-flop sandals, gold necklaces that spell their names or their children's names or feature the human forms of saints. They're younger than they look. Not a single one over 36. They have long eyelashes, long hair, short strides, thin waists.

I watch as each of them embraces the others. When they do, their colorful umbrellas shift to create new patterns, fit together like seamless tessellations. By my count from the belfry, there are maybe 20 of them down there. Later I'll review the footage to record an exact figure.

The meeting is consistent with typical protocol as far as I've observed. Each time one of their sons is reported as a missing person at the local prefecture, the mothers gather here to embrace, recite prayers, throw rocks, smoke cigarettes, curse under their breath, weep, stare into space.

Typical protocol is they take turns mothering whoever is at her weakest.



\*\*\*

According to my records, the year of the disappearances started calmly, regularly, without any sense of alarm, confusion, illusion, or aberration in the normal sequence of time passing. The B47 bus passed everyday at 5 p.m., and Kings and Servants Tavern opened its doors for business at the same hour. When the Sisters of Our Holy Ghost pushed the last Glory Be of beads through their fingers for the night and latched shut the heavy doors of the cathedral, Madame O pulled out her folding table and lawn chair, shuffled her tarot pack, and read the future written inside the palms of passersby on the sidewalk by the flickering light of the street lamp that fell on the patch of concrete between the cathedral and the post office in the central square. The mail—contrary to perceptions in the capital—arrived on schedule, more or less. Packages sometimes took longer or showed up having been rummaged through before crossing the border, but they arrived is the point. The kids were going to school. When they came home, the mothers asked them what had they learned, and the kids rattled off statistics that made no sense to anyone, which only seemed to serve as evidence that the new generation was learning in ways that were superior to the ways that we had learned, as Laura explained to me during subsequent interviews.

But looking back on it now, it's easy to find signs that things were not right:

Mimi remembered how her hair had stopped growing that spring, how it had begun to knot at the ends, tiny sequences of dead roots giving up, saying enough already.

Juliet saw how the stray cat that lived on the block stopped drinking the yogurt

she sometimes smuggled from the shelves of the corner store to leave out for it at night. Like a cat that had trusted her all its life decided suddenly that she was trying to poison it.

Gloria had started to have dreams in which the principle actors were giant birds of prey that had replaced the Heads of State after having acquired, one would assume, the necessary cognitive and motor functions necessary to govern the populace.

Women started seeing the faces of their dead husbands when they closed their eyes. Their husbands were gesticulating wildly, angrily; they were trying to say something that frightened them, but the women could never quite make it out in time before the images of their husbands were gone.

These are some of the main examples that come to mind. There are others of course.

One might be attempted to criticize these observations for leaning too heavily on informants who are women, but I would invite all would-be challengers to visit the town for themselves, install themselves within the central community spaces with a clandestine recording device, and conduct a thorough investigation to determine whether they can find any evidence of male inhabitants. Women, children, and elderly men (whose glaucoma-clouded eyes don't allow them to focus long enough to sign the waiver to be interviewed on record) account for the near total population. It's a fairly typical pattern, which is what made the latest rounds of disappearances more difficult to be accepted by the collective local imagination.

People had been disappearing for a long time, but the new pattern, more specifically, goes something like this:

Girls and grandfathers sit around in the central square, play gin rummy, play dominos, play chess, play canasta.

Boys play dead.

Mothers imagine boys playing dead. Mothers imagine boys dead.

Back and forth like this, ad nauseam. Mothers imagine the bones of boys beginning to calcify in one of the mass graves that everyone knows are waiting to be exhumed on the other side of the mountain range that separates this town from another town from another town that all share the exact same story. And so on across the interior.

\*\*\*

It started with a boy named Milo. One day he was in the central square playing kickball after school with the sons of the other mothers, and the next day he was gone. They take turns walking his mother Lexus to the Laundromat at the corner of Hieroglyph and 18th Street to keep her company even when they don't have wash to do themselves. Lexus always carries with her a large sack filled with clothes. Milo's clothes are in the sack, but she doesn't wash them. She says she doesn't want to waste the soap on washing the clothes of someone who has disappeared, because she doesn't want to get up her expectation that he will be coming back. Also, the clothes still have his smell in them.

While Lexus waits for the spin cycle to finish with the clothes of every other confirmed living member of her family, she holds Milo's clothes up to her face and inhales the fabric. He was fifteen when he went missing. He would be sixteen now, if he were anything other than a lump in the ground.

Lexus breathes heavily in the cotton T-shirt that had been Milo's, sits back in the plastic deck chair, folds the t-shirt again.

The mothers listen to Lexus while she describes inhaling the fabric of Milo's shirt: Musty, musky, alive with a quick smell that keeps mutating and overpowers all her other senses, makes the back of her throat taste of salt.

\*\*\*

The next boy was Daniel. He walked to the corner store for a soda and never came home. Since then his mother Sofia finds dead boys in her house at night, but none of them are Daniel. The mothers take turns keeping watch with her to ward off unfamiliar ghosts.

The last time it happened, Sofia found a dead boy slumped in the corner of the bath. His neck was broken. A school of minnows swam around the curves in his hipbones and heels. She put her hand into the water to touch his wrist and watched the minnows dodge her fingers.

The mothers peered into the doorway of the bathroom.

What is it? they asked.

Sofia looked from them to the tub again, and it seemed for a moment like she saw what they saw there: nothing.

He was here, she said. In the water.

But the mothers showed her how there was also no water. The shallow tub was dry and its dull porcelain gleamed. No water, no minnows, no boy.

It's going to be like this for a while, they reminded her. The doctors warned us.

The mothers approached the tub, tried to embrace her, but Sofia went outside to smoke.

When she came back into the house, the other mothers were asleep on the sofa with their shoes still on their feet. Sofia locked the back door and walked into the bathroom. She wiped her eyes and washed her face. When her face was sunken into the bowl of the sink, the splashing sounds started up again, just like before.

Sofia approached the tub and pushed her fingers through his long hair. It's when her fingers caught a snag in his hair (the minnows scurried away) that she saw how his hair was very fine and light, completely unlike her son's, which was dark and wavy and took hours with a brush to work through its most uncooperative parts. She took off her clothes and climbed into the shallow tub. The displacement of the water made it splash over the edges onto the floor for a second, and then: nothing. She fell asleep like that, her chin in the crook of the boy's neck.

She slept in the tub all night pushing her fingers through his hair—the pretty, docile, nothing hair that wasn't his.

When she woke up to the mothers knocking on the door hours later, there's no water, no boy. Naked in an empty tub, she stood up and made her way toward the door.

The mothers opened their arms to receive her, wrapped her in a beach towel, and led her to the living room, where they kept watch with her for the rest of the night.

When the mothers take care of Sofia, they keep the TV on in the background, just in case they get drowsy, just in case they run out of things to say. The TV offers a different kind of comfort because it is always on, a constant, even on the nights when they cannot be with her.

Sofia's voice grows loud late at night. It's not always clear whether she's talking to the mothers or the TV when she cries out.

To this, the mothers say, Hush, knead the skin around her shoulders into their palms like dough, and wrap the beach towel tighter around her bare arms.

When I was a girl, Sofia explained to me later during our first interview, my father worked the night shift driving a taxi. It was his second job, he was back up for the regular drivers. They only called him when they needed him. In the morning at breakfast, I would ask my mother if my father had left the house to drive the taxi during the night. If she said yes, I would always confirm that I had already registered this fact somewhere inside my senses; I would always remember the house feeling a little emptier while I slept. That's what it feels like, waking up without the ghost of someone else's boy, even though he is not mine, and only shares very basic physical characteristics of my boy.

End of tape.

I am the person who is responsible for showing up, taking notes, drawing conclusions, flying home. I'm doing the best I can to stay out of the way of Lexus's and Sofia's grief while still picking up on the most salient details that fit with the patterns I have observed to date.

\*\*\*

Life in the capital doesn't preoccupy itself with the problems of the small provincial towns like the one where my research is based, in the same way that the international community doesn't preoccupy itself with individual's problems. It's unadvisable to speak plainly of multinational militarized apparatuses that can be positively correlated to some trends we might want to discuss at some point, so no one is going to say anything even remotely close to that. It's as easy as shifting focus.

For example:

In the capital, there are minor earthquakes that happen everyday. No big deal. The only reason you can feel them at all in the capital is because of the height of the living towers. The buildings sway for a moment, just long enough to wonder, and then groan and settle back in place. Usually nothing happens. Go out onto your private balcony. Take some deep breaths. Admire the formations of the distant mountains. Better not to think about the fact that entire living towers have collapsed this way—building permits don't always take into account plate tectonics. It can be a logistical nightmare to comply with all the standards, red tape.

At night, views from private balconies are phenomenal. The mountains glimmer in the distance as thousands of stray lights switch on after sunset. You might convert the dazzling image into a practical understanding of its composite like this: Imagine every light is a woman. Imagine every light is a woman who came to the city alone. That's pretty much the exact mathematical ratio of what's going on here. Behind each faraway light is an internal alien settlement. Eighty percent of breadwinners in internal alien



households are single mothers—disenfranchised young women who, nevertheless, possess clear knowledge of illegally rigging electrical currents to reach areas that the city does not service.

Around the same time that malls started going up, all the colonial architecture was ripped from its foundation in favor of the living towers, which have come to be the preferred arrangements in a city where one is careful about who one meets. The gym and pool and children's birthday party space is all contained right here within the central courtyard. It's so convenient.

Here are the areas where it's permitted to hang up balloons and streamers.

Here is the hookup for the stereo and karaoke machine.

If you choose to sing songs with profane lyrics, your neighbors are liable to complain to management and hold you accountable. In the living tower where I've lived for the past few weeks while compiling notes, the management considers the development of a respectful community paramount.

Make sure that you request to reserve the central courtyard for your private event at least two weeks prior to the date.

Pick up after your pets.

Swim at your own risk.

No running, no diving, no horseplay.

No shirt, no shoes, no service.

Now that you have all these rules to keep in mind, can you even remember the names of any towns in the interior? Could you locate them on a map? As for the names of

the temporary settlements in the surrounding mountains, it's often easier to refer to these areas by their city-assigned numbers. Avoid 3, 10, 13, and 15, for example, at all costs.

\*\*\*

The town of the mothers is different from the places where they were born and where their parents were buried, places whose names have laid dormant, curled up in the roofs of their mouths like a secret for so long they're almost gone. Their birthplaces began with "New" or ended with "o," or they began with "San" or ended in "s." These places still exist on the map, but it would be better to pretend otherwise. Besides, maps lie. The black dots that locate the site and relative density of towns, for example, appear identical before and after massacres. The mothers have started to remove the names of their towns from their vocabularies, refer to them in vague ways if they refer to them at all.

Instead, they remember them through tastes or sounds. Sometimes, even, the air here carries old smells that disorient and confuse: salt mixed with dirt, fried meat with pollen.

Last week Mimi walked to town from halfway up a mountain with a fistful of wildflowers, and a crazed look in her eyes.

Come here, hurry up! she yelled to the mothers, pushing the flowers into their faces.

They inhaled, but noticed nothing, nothing outside of the realm of every other wildflower they've smelled in their lives.

It's gone, Mimi agreed. It's all used up. But when I was walking, I passed some horses—

She broke off, smiled, nursed the half-dead bouquet in her arms like a bride.

But she didn't have to say anything else. Even if their old homes have nothing to do with wildflowers, with horses. It's an easy correlation, all the mothers agree:

The days when they pause to breathe deeply, they feel most lost.

\*\*\*

Most days here are the same. I wake up early and start knocking on doors. I pull my recording device from my backpack, and the mothers speak into it, their eyes heavy on the little red light that gives proof of the watery sounds of their voices converting into a hard record. Their start stories like this:

Someone gave my husband a pouch of seeds.

Mallorca was the one speaking, but the other mothers nodded in collective agreement. The ruin of a family starts slowly. Only later do the principal actors trace it back to the roots that quietly spelled trouble beneath the soil.

Our land was destroyed, Mallorca continued. We spent years trying with tubers and barleys and lettuces. Nothing grew. I had five children who lived on broth and sometimes rice and almost no meat. My husband came home one day after several meetings and a stern look on his face. He asked me, How would you like to see this place covered in flowers? There was nothing I wanted less, but I saw he had already made up his mind. He whispered to me the selling prices as they were told to him, and I whispered these numbers back to him to be sure I had heard him right. My husband pushed the pouch into my hand. I was the one who planted the first seeds. I planted them with resolve. I buried them and I thought of my mother, of how when we put her in the ground I expected my family would stay on the same land where she was. My family has been running for half a century or more. Running is the trait that I share with all of my traceable ancestors. This is why when the seeds came to my husband they seemed the answer to a prayer.

Mallorca's face slowed and fell. She pushed her forehead into the shoulder of another mother, Eli, who turned to me for half a second and finished the memory as if by rote, because it is also her story:

The devil answers prayers here.

End of tape.

I used to be a believer, is sentence I have documented many times in my research.

Faith dissolves at different moments for different informants. One popular example is the moment when the youngest children, the ones just learning how to run, start dropping dead in the fields.

Look up. Overhead, low-flying planes dust crops with toxins specially formulated to decimate growth.

Aside from poisoning plants, animals, and small children, the substance has also been correlated with uncorroborated reports of symptoms including: rashes, headaches, dizziness, fainting spells, dry eyes, dry mouth, shortness of breath, blood clots, irritable bowel syndrome, infections of the liver, infections of the blood stream, kidney failure, heart failure, strokes, boils on the skin, blurred vision.

Notice that uncorroborated correlations are not the same as facts. On this point, all informants agree: bury your dead fast enough to pick up and keep moving.

\*\*\*

In the home of Sandra, the mothers gather weekly to voice different hypothetical scenarios. Some get listed aloud, and some get listed without words inside the quiet of their bodies. Scenarios include: their boys found steady jobs in the next province and have been working so hard that they haven't had the chance to write home. Or, their boys all fell in love and eloped. Or, their boys have gone to look for their fathers. Or, their boys are being held hostage somewhere.

The possibility that the boys lie quiet in one of the stretches of land where the mothers observe haggard scavenger birds make excruciating slow circles in the sky is one example of a scenario that is not voiced aloud.

Juliet's boy said to her before he left: I found a job in the city. I'll be gone for a few months, but not forever. I'll send home as much help as I can.

But that was three months ago. He's never called or written, never sent a dime. Juliet checks the mail every day to be sure.

When Joel went missing, the mothers squeezed Gloria's hands in theirs. Then, they locked themselves into their bedrooms to cry until they cannot breathe.

They do not talk about the fact that is clear to everyone, that Joel did not leave town to find work. The complications when he was born have caused him to learn to speak later than the other boys, so that even at seventeen he speaks slowly, loudly. He cannot perform simple math functions. He does not understand the value of money.

Instead, hypothetical scenarios #57, 58, and 59 are added to the running list:

The boys are lost in the mountains. The boys fell ill while traveling and are being hospitalized in small towns not unlike this one. The boys crossed paths with a rebel camp in the woods, where they are being temporarily held purely for administrative purposes.



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For the benefit of my comprehension, the mothers elaborate on the character of the chain of surviving relationships among them:

We call each other sweetie, baby, mama, skinny, love, little thing, my dear, honey, artichoke, plum.

We make each other sweet tea, sweet water, coffee, juice, lemonade.

We go to the corner to fetch one another's cigarettes, sodas, liquors, chocolates.

We fold each other's sheets, prepare each other's dinners, discipline each other's daughters, sing each other's lullabies.

Our care for each other is intuitive, obvious as breast milk.

End of tape.

\*\*\*

They miss their mothers.

Their mothers would know what to do. But the mothers' mothers were buried in the towns they fled. Or their mothers didn't support their decisions to have the babies of the men who had become their husbands, and they had just lost touch. Or they suspected their mothers were dead but because they had never seen the bodies with their own eyes, they didn't discuss this, not even with their own children. Or their mothers had been gathered up with all their fathers in fields as they sat blindfolded on the steps of a nearby cathedral, and the last thing they remember was pushing the flats of their palms into their ears. Or they still share a bed with their mothers at night.

Their mothers smelled the same as always the last time they embraced them: like bar soap, day-old bread, lavender, kitchen grease. Their eyes sting on days when they turn a corner too fast and are met with the yeast or soap smells that remind them of their mothers.

Mallorca's mom dragged the sign of the cross into her forehead whenever she left the house. She must have used the corner of her fingernail because sometimes it left a mark in her powdered face. If Mallorca complained, her mother had pressed her nail in harder.

Laura's mom patched up the holes in her clothes. She never asked her mother to do this. She would put on the same pair of jeans in the morning that she took off the night before, and notice the wind didn't pass through the knees anymore.

Queenie's sang in the shower. She had a gravely deep voice like the bottom of a river. When Queenie tries to sing her mom's songs, the words sound too thin in her mouth.

Juliet still shares a bed with her mom at night. Her mother talks in her sleep, old stories of lost homes that come out mixed with snores so loud that Juliet barely sleeps. Juliet has become beautiful with an enviable set of permanent dark circles around her eyes at all times that grow with each night she lies awake listening to her mother.

Mimi explained, When we greet Juliet in line at the grocery, we look away at piled fruits and hanging meats to avoid her eyes.

They miss their husbands.

They miss how their husbands grabbed their waists and pulled them closer to them in their beds at night. Their husbands, with their dirty fingernails and flat feet, with their distrust of saints and superstitions, with their chests and arms.

The way they yelled at the radio.

The way they tore apart the house looking for something that was in the same place as always.

The way they changed their voices when they talked to animals.

Their husbands left them with children, with bruises on their bodies, with the smells of their shaving lotions in the bathroom, with rings on their fingers or in their ears.

Sometimes the mothers used to say they wished their husbands would leave for good, but now that they were gone, it was different:

Their husbands left them for younger women, or they were kidnapped, or they stepped on explosives, or they starved to death in the hills, or they had been gunned down at home while everyone slept, or they were in the city trying to save enough to send for them, or they were already so long in the ground it was pointless to try to remember the sounds of their voices.

Sometimes they think about the days when their husbands were still strangers. When a girlfriend had said how she'd seen him staring this way, how they'd rolled their eyes and laughed. How they thought at first, No way: too short. Or, Too skinny. Or, Talks too much, my god, thinks he knows everything. How the first time their husbands spoke to them—in the park, or in the church, or in the field—and the words came out rushed because of a trembling mouth.

Sometimes they imagine what might have happened if they hadn't smiled, or turned around, or listened to the rest of what the men who would become their husbands had wanted to say to them.

They miss their boys.

At night is the worst. From inside their beds and bodies, they speak to the ceiling with voices that rise and fall at the pitch of wounded animals left for dead in the fields. Starvation is what eventually quiets the animals.

The mothers stay ravenous.

\*\*\*

I dreamed of Queenie again last night. In the dream she is floating on her back in the sea, and I am watching her from the shore. Every time a wave crests over her body, I verify that her head surfaces again. Just before I wake up, I'm ankle-deep in the water shouting her name. But Queenie is from the coast, a village where the river and sea meet—she swims like a fish. She hasn't seen an ocean in years. When she migrated to the mountains, she couldn't sleep at first because of all the missing sounds. Or, at least, that's what I've been told by the other mothers. She is one mother I cannot push far from my brain, even on gray mornings in the capital, when I am heating a coffee on the stove and have not yet pulled out my notes to transcribe the latest rounds of interviews.

Before Queenie appeared in my tapes, it was her daughter Zara who approached me. It was during the raw afternoon hours when the air is thick to move through. I had picked up a soda at the corner store that faces the facade of the cathedral, and I was sitting on a nearby bench to drink it, when Zara sat on the bench beside me. A girl of maybe eight or nine in a blue jumper and white shirt—the ubiquitous school uniform.

There were other girls in the same school jumpers in the square, sitting in a circle with a fat piece of chalk in their fingers that they kept passing around and adding something written in the middle of them that I couldn't see.

Zara sat next to me the way you might sit beside a statue or a tree stump, taking in the local scenery without acknowledging its presence. Her legs were too short to fold over the end of the bench toward the ground. Instead the heels of her shoes indicated

straight ahead, toward the circle of girls. She studied them blankly, without fear of being observed back.

Why aren't you with them? I asked.

Zara looked at me for a second, squinted her eyes a little in the corners, then turned her attention back to the circle of girls.

I didn't think she was going to respond at all, but a few minutes later she turned to me and laughed, very quietly, under her breath.

You talk wrong, she said.

I come from very far away, I said.

Zara shrugged. Then why don't you go home?

We met again a few days later, around the same hour in the central square on the bench that faces the cathedral. Zara sat down beside me again, though there were other empty benches in the square.

I'm going to the corner to buy some sodas, I said. Are you thirsty?

Zara stared ahead at the girls inside the circle of chalk.

Grape soda?

Nothing.

Lemon?

She frowned.

Orange?

She nodded, almost imperceptibly.

One orange soda coming right up, I said.

But when I came back to the bench, she was gone.

As I drank her soda, I walked from the shadow of the bench to the blaring sun of the center of the square. I walked in a straight line as if about to enter the nave of the cathedral, but on my way, I passed by the circle of girls. Inside their circle of crossed legs, I read the words:

*Traitors = Leo, Max, Adrian, Nico, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_.*

The girls passed the chalk and smiled to one another. I heard giggling as I walked by and stopped in front of the facade, which I pretended to stupidly admire, in order to keep them within earshot. They said nothing.

The next day, Zara was already on the bench when I approach her with an orange soda.

I twisted of the cap and pass it to her. She gulped at it like someone wandering the desert, half-dazed by passing mirages.

Thirsty? I asked.

Yes, sir, she said in her bird's voice.

Why don't you sit with the other girls? I asked.

Zara went silent again.

After a few minutes passed she said, I know who you are.

Oh, I said. Who?

You talk to the moms, she said. You're the old man that talks to the moms.

I'm forty-two, I said. That's not so old.

It is here, she said.

I came to tell you to stay away from her.

That's the first thing that Queenie ever said to me. I didn't have my recording device with me that day, so I'm writing this conversation to the best degree that my memory serves me.

Every time an unknown man shows up here, it spells trouble, Queenie said.

I come with only a notebook, I said.

The last one came with seeds, she said.

Queenie walked away quickly, left me standing alone in the dust and heat of the central square.



\*\*\*

They work in the city. As maids, as housekeepers, as nannies. Some of them bus in and out every day. Some of them are gone for weeks at a time and send money home for their children until they can afford an alternative. Or they work in cafeterias, in street markets, in assembly lines.

Lexus walks around nearby towns all morning selling fruit out of a wheelbarrow.

Mimi stands on the same streets at night offering sex to passing cars.

Laura sews and tailors clothes. Also, she collects bottles and cans.

Eli bakes pastries and loads them into the backpack that used to belong to her son.

Then she hikes to the bus station to sell the pastries to passengers. She boards the idling buses, walking up and down the aisle between the rows of seats.

There are different strategies. One is to tell one's story, which is to say, how one came to be a person who survives on selling pastries to idling buses.

She started out like that: key facts, broad strokes.

Yeah, I'll take a pastry, a fat man with a cigarette tucked behind his ear said after she finished her pitch, calling her to him with his hand. While Eli undid the zipper of her son's backpack walking toward him, he slid his foot out into the aisle so it made contact with her ankle, knocking her off balance. As she tried to right herself, the man had pretended to help brace her fall, pushing his two hands into her breasts.

Nothing that came next mattered: how she had heard her own voice move from a mutter to shouting *son of a bitch*, how the bus driver had started making his way toward her to escort her roughly back down the aisle; how the man with the cigarette had stared

out his window like a bystander more interested in a stray dog stretching belly up on the sidewalk; how a woman's heeled shoe twitched nervously in her peripheral vision.

It was later, at home, lying awake repeating the name of her town at the ceiling—just as she'd said it aloud to the passengers—when she saw her mother floating facedown in the river there, that she started to shiver and ball up fingers into fists that she flung into everything in the room.

Eli's new story goes like this:

Ladies and gentlemen, pastries for sale! Homemade, baked with care, baked with the best local ingredients! Get them while they're fresh! Get them while they're hot!

The days she wears lipstick she sells out by noon.

\*\*\*

The mothers grow exhausted by the growing lists of hypothetical scenarios. They continue to meet for the regular reasons, but also, they start to make phone calls. They start to make posters. They board buses with laminated photos of the missing persons who are their sons hanging from lanyards around their necks. When they arrive in larger towns and cities, they spend entire afternoons standing in the public squares that border key state and municipal buildings.

State and municipal officials and authorities regret to inform the mothers that they won't have an opportunity to listen to the stories they have come to tell.

Instead, the mothers take turns telling their stories to Madame O, whose real name is Carlotta, who sits with her tarot pack and gems lined up on a card table in the central square. She shifts their palms around inside her own looking for clues, concludes their lifelines are long or short or of average length. She can't tell them anything about those of their sons without their palms present she explains. The mothers nod, shift around uncomfortably in their lawn chairs. It's like the opposite of saying a burial can't take place without a body. Madame O understands better than most because she's already buried three of her own.

They take turns telling their stories to the empty confessional box where they imagine a priest sits and offers guidance in a steady voice. The Sisters of Our Holy Ghost are not qualified for this kind of work; they stick to the standard litanies and orations. So the mothers speak to themselves inside the box. They speak aloud the same stories that run through their heads on a constant loop. Then they assign themselves recitations of

prayers, a kind of penance without atonement. Somewhere around three consecutive Hail Marys is the standard length of time they can keep a clear head. Or they sit inside the box and rock back and forth.

They take turns telling their stories to the psychologists that are bused in for an afternoon ever other month for group therapy.

They take turns telling their stories to the traveling board of rotating officials who represent the Commission of the Truth.

They take turns telling their stories to me.

\*\*\*

This morning, in the capital, as I transcribed the latest batch of tapes into my notebook, the following notice was passed under the door of the apartment where I am staying. My long days here have been rather isolating, so I ran quickly to the door to receive the letter:

*Attention: Sirs, Residents of the Tower*

*Cordial greetings,*

*This is to inform you that we have received complaints from the residents of the lower apartments, because objects have been falling from the higher apartments, including items such as: hairs, eggs, papers, cigarettes butts, pastry wrappers, liquids, etc., which in addition to generating inconveniences, can cause harm and personal injury to those enjoying their private spaces.*

*Due to the above, we ask that you transmit this notice to the other members of your family in order to achieve a healthy coexistence in this unit.*

*We appreciate the attention and cooperation of all of you.*

*Sincerely,*

*The Administration*

I have spent much time transcribing these notes on my balcony, but I have never seen any of the named objects drop in the nearby air. It's true that I inhabit one of the upper

apartments, so the possibility exists that the culprits reside in one of the units that are between mine and the lower apartments.

What I have witnessed from my own balcony is items ascending, items such as: barbeque smoke, cigarette smoke, kites, dog fur, screams from the pool, helium balloons with messages like, *You're special!* and *Happy birthday princess!*

Further out, over the temporary homes of the internal alien populations, vultures ascend and descend.

Swoop, climb, dive.

One imagines these flight paths, too, enact personal injury and inconvenience in the private spaces of residents who have settled there.

For years local officials favored forcibly removing the settlements from the surrounding mountains. The reason most often given is that the settlements are eyesores, and moreover, they are illegally constructed with found materials by individuals who lack proper state identification.

Now there's a more popular strategy for dealing with the torrent of internal aliens that arrive in the capital: the city is building them libraries. Nothing like a good book to take your mind of the systematic loss of everything you once held dear. International architects show up with blueprints for state-of-the-art constructions; the libraries win prizes they're so beautiful and sustainably designed. Now they're offering guided tours up there. For a modest price, you can enter their makeshift communities by way of a funicular gondola (*by day, of course, the guide books assert, it's 100% safe*). The excuse of visiting these newly minted, heavily policed cultural landmarks offers the opportunity to marvel at the ingenuity with which internal aliens communities survive. Sometimes

you can see their chickens in the yards, their clothes lying out to dry flat on the roofs.

Their houses are built from the most unlikely and remarkable materials—plastic tarps, corrugated sheet metal, cardboard, plastic bottles, tin cans.

\*\*\*

The women—both in the large cities and the small towns—are rumored to be among the most beautiful in the world, in terms of basic principles of aesthetics. It's all about classic ratios.

Think, eyes to nose to mouth; hips to waist to breasts.

Surgically modifying physical characteristics in compliance with such ratios is always a possibility. There are different types of pricing plans. Better doctors, less risks of infection, depending on your neighborhood. But the point is, there are always options.

Queenie does not conform to any of these ratios. In short: her hair is a wild shock of waves, cropped around her ears. Her breasts are the size of an adolescent's. Her right leg is a prosthetic. It would be considered ethically questionable behavior to provide further detail on the physical makeup of one of my informants, so I will admit that I often find it refreshing to cross paths with her and leave it at that.

Besides, Queenie is not technically an informant because she never signed the waiver to be interviewed on record.

The second time I saw her was at a birthday party where I had been invited by some of the other mothers. I had the release forms and the recording device in my backpack. I wouldn't normally pull out all the interview apparatus at a birthday party, but I had gotten permission from my hosts to do a little light questioning.

Queenie looked at the empty line by the X of the release form I produced. She stuck her long fingernail into the white space there and dragged it until the space became a tear clear to the other side.

What are you doing? I asked her.



Letting some air in, she said.

I watched her walk away with her slow but graceful limp. As she did, I noticed the parts of her T-shirt where the sweat had made the color of the fabric darker. She walked to the corner of the yard where an old man was standing behind a speaker hooked up to his phone. She whispered something in his ear and he nodded as he cued the next song. Everyone broke into cheers when the first chords sound—a local favorite. The refrain lists the names of nearby rivers.

Queenie kept the beat in her wrists, drummed her fingers across her thighs. She watched the crowd and danced with no one. After a few minutes Zara walked up to her mother. Queenie wrapped her arms around the girl, and the two started to sway very slowly, as if listening to a song that shares no discernable characteristics with the one that everyone else dances.

It was later that day at the birthday party that Zara cornered me. The sun went down long ago, but the music was still going. Everyone was dancing in a circle around the birthday girl. I was standing under an olive tree in the corner of the yard taking down observations in my notebook when I noticed Zara coming toward me with a soda that she uncapped and placed in my hand.

Lemon, she shrugged. That's all that's left.

Lemon's good, I said.

Zara rolled her eyes.

See that girl over there? she said.

Which one? I asked. There was nothing but girls left in the yard.

The fat one, said Zara. The one that can't dance.

I nodded.

It's a friend of her uncle, she said. He's the one who promised jobs to all the boys that are missing.

Oh? I said. I took a swig of my soda.

Zara said, Maybe you want to write that down in your little notebook.

I said nothing.

We stood side by side without speaking for a few minutes, watching the girls dance.

My brother's gone, she said then. Did you figure that out yet?

No, I said softly. I didn't know.

I held out my hand to her, offering it as a gesture of comfort, but she grabbed it and shook it instead.

Zara, I said. I'm so sorry to hear that.

Listen, she said. She shook her head and thinned her lips before she spoke. Let's make a deal, okay? Quid pro quo.

Excuse me? I asked.

It's Latin, she explained.

I know that, I said. Why do you?

School, she shrugged.

We both heard Queenie's voice than, calling out her name from the kitchen, Zara! We made ourselves silent in the shadows of the trees until she went back inside.

You never saw me here, Zara said, pushing a piece of paper into my hand.

I waited until later that night to unfold the note in my pocket.

*Meet me tomorrow after school, central square.*

*Bring your recording device.*

\*\*\*

The central square was still quiet when I arrived, just before school let out. I sat and waited for several minutes on the same bench. Slowly, the regular packs of uniformed girls started to fill the space with their talk. I waited until I could pick Zara out of the rest of the group, as she wandered from the rest of them, and I watched her walk up to me.

Oh, hi, she said. You came.

Hi Zara, I said.

She gave me her best fake smile. She said, I know I'm not exactly your top choice, but my mother wouldn't talk to you for anything in the world, so maybe you'll make an exception.

I'm not sure I understand, I said.

Do you want to know what happened to my brother? she asked.

I blinked. I would like to hear to your story if you would like to share it with me, I said.

Zara nodded, Okay, yeah, that's what I thought. Then you better turn that thing on, because I'm about to start.

She paused for only a second, stared at me hard until I looked away. Then she closed her eyes for a good minute, and her voice seemed to wander off to a different place because it came out even softer than usual when she started to speak:

My brother had a bike with wide handlebars that fit me perfectly. I never had my own bike but it didn't matter because we mostly wanted to go to all the same places

anyway. Nico is a better peddler because he's three years older, and I lean back on my elbows and steer us by shifting my weight around. We could go really fast this way. We got good at it. Sometimes we raced cars. Nothing feels better than winning a race with a car. Even if the car doesn't know it's a race.

The day I came out of school and his bike wasn't where we left it, I waited around for a while but he never showed up, so I started walking home alone. Later, on my way, I found the bike in a ditch with the front wheel bent in half. It was really hard to push home with just the one wheel. When my mom saw me with the bike and without Nico, she ran out of the house and told me not to leave until she got back. She came home very late. I watched her from the window of the kitchen, walking slowly up the hill, holding her forehead inside her hand. She tried to blink the wet out from her eyes when she saw me there in the kitchen waiting up for her. Then she said that no one knew where Nico was and that there were going to be a lot of new rules in our house.

Zara continued to speak without waiting for any of my questions. I nodded to encourage her to continue, but her eyes, when they opened at all, stayed trained toward my hands, on the red light that beside the word RECORD:

Nico is still Nico when I see him in dreams, and he's always mad about the stolen wheel. He kicks the side of the mattress with his foot and says all the words that our mom would never let him say inside the house in one breath. And I say, Who cares about the wheel? Where are you? He never says. Sometimes he shrugs like he's not even sure.

I've gotten used to walking everywhere again. It takes a lot longer, but sometimes I don't even notice because my mind started moving all over the place like crazy, I don't even try to control it. Some people say to me that my brother got killed for being a traitor.

At first, I wondered if that could be true. But then I thought: 1) My brother would have told me if he was a traitor, because we tell each other everything, and 2) Nico is twelve, he's just a kid.

Now I know better. Sometimes I get in fights and get sent home from school. Sometimes I just stare into space and pretend that I can't hear anyone. In my brain I turn everyone into another species, and they become little insects that speak some spider or cockroach language I don't understand. The other kids can say whatever they want, and it doesn't matter. I know who is responsible for finding the boys to send away, because I saw the way he was talking to my brother a few days before, and my brother is not the only one he talked to, and I am not the only one who has seen him around. He's not from here. He's threatening people to not talk, but there's no one here who doesn't know what's going on. He's a stranger here, like you, so he had to make contacts. I don't know his name, but I know he's staying with Clarice's family and I know the address. See Clarice over there, the fat girl from yesterday? Now she's in front of the cathedral, talking with two other girls, and now she cupping her hand around her mouth to whisper something about me to Anaïs, that idiot, and now she's laughing. I couldn't care less. I'm telling you all this so you can include it in your report. People are watching you, I guess you know that. But as long as you're still here, you could listen to what I'm saying and you could write th—

End of tape.

Are you threatening me? I asked Zara, my index finger heavy on the STOP button.

No. I thought you knew, she said. Why do you think my mother doesn't want me to talk to you?

\*\*\*

In the mall closest to my living tower, there is a popular arcade that features a wave-making machine. Imagine surfing, right here in the middle of the mountains, with the help of highly specialized eyewear and a video that runs on a constant loop of the sea. Virtual pelicans circle and search for fish—background details, little touches to make the experience feel more real.

The waves are large but mostly peaceful. They crest and fall, crest and fall.

All without passing through coastal areas of the country that lack infrastructure and are subject to routine violence.

All without breathing in mouthfuls of salt.

Keeping balance amid the virtual waves is not as easy as it looks. If you fall from your board, the waves appear to grow in size—the shore shrinks in the distance. The degree of panic one can feel alone in the darkened room during such incidents is testament to the accuracy of the illusion.

I visited the arcade today with a fistful of coins. Since returning to the capital, I think often of Zara; of the missing boys; of the value of research; of how exhausted I am of eliciting everyone to testify—methodologically, ethically, etcetera. I will keep taking notes and publish my conclusions. My work will be read by its intended audience of readers who possess intimate familiarity with the rhetoric, methods, and practice in which the larger dialogue is situated. Or my work will be judged as derivative and incomplete. Neither outcome bears influence on the rate at which the massacres of boys in the interior occur.



When I fell hard from my surfboard, the room went completely dark around me, imitating the ocean. The virtual waves crashed over my hand. All I could see was the black water. I grasped for my board, but it was gone. I treaded water until I watched my life points slowly peter out. I was still gasping for breath when I pulled back the curtain and exited the arcade.

I sat on a bench beneath a synthetic palm tree in the mall's large central corridor for a few minutes to catch my breath. After I recovered, leaning onto railing the overlooking the atrium, I noticed the children pedaling below in patient circles around the indoor track. The children were between five and ten years old, and they each had their own bicycles and scooters. Their parents stood by in the nearby observation deck and shouted words of encouragement. My gaze rested firm on a little girl with a ponytail as I started my descent on the escalator. I glided past the food court into the belly of the mall's first floor. It didn't take me long to locate the bike shop, where I waited in line to be attended to.

Fifteen minutes later, I left with a tire, a wheel, and a hex wrench that would allow me to lower the seat of a boy's bike so a girl could reach its petals.

\*\*\*

When I returned to my research site the following week, I chose an hour that I knew Queenie would be at the bus terminal with Eli selling pastries to knock on the door of her home with the wheel in my hand.

Zara answered. Her eyes locked onto the wheel and didn't deviate.

I'm not allowed to talk to you anymore, she said to the wheel.

We don't have to talk, I said. Just let me in to work on the bike.

She stepped back from the door like she wasn't going to intervene but she wasn't saying she approved or disapproved either.

Within 20 minutes, it was a working bike again. I kept my promise. We didn't talk. I tapped my hand on the seat as an invitation for her to take it for a spin. She didn't know how to ride, so we worked on it. I gave her a push to get started. She fell a few times before she got the hang of things. She learned to lean to one side to break. When Queenie came home from the station with her backpack full of unsold pastries, Zara was riding in circles around the street. Queenie had a light look on her face for a second, as if she'd witnessed some divine act of grace, before her eyes settled on me and her face contorted into a scowl.

Do you have kids? Queenie asked me.

I shook my head. I've dedicated my life to science.

So I see, she said, before walking inside and closing the door firmly behind her.

\*\*\*

A few TV cameras showed up in front of state and municipal buildings to record the spaces the mothers occupy with their laminated photos on lanyards around their necks, the space where the mothers have been transformed into monsters, pariahs, enemies of the state. The mothers have become legendary for the speed with which they have attracted the attention state and municipal authorities. It must be some kind of a record.

Behind closed doors, and occasionally to their faces, the mothers have been called: Hags, old bags, liars and fools, whores, beggars, prostitutes, peasants, undesirables, scum.

Inventors of histrionics, hysterics, public unrest.

That the mothers' sons are gone because they indoctrinated them with garbage ideologies. That someone should push AK-47s into their guts and pistols against their teeth. That what they need is to be roughed up, shut up. That what goes around comes around.

\*\*\*

Through extended study of my recorded interviews, I note certain trends that emerge over time, illustrating the character of local consensus on the topic to be consistent with Zara's observations.

Sofia: My son came home and told me that he found work.

Laura: A man had come to town looking for laborers for a nearby construction project, and my son was hired.

Mimi: He would be gone several months.

Juliet: That he would send home as much as he could, as soon as he could.

Lexus: I hated that he would be gone for so long, but my son has always been hard worker, and he knew we needed the help.

Gloria: I thought it was strange, more likely that he had misunderstood the offer, because my boy had never worked before.

It's a persistent enough pattern that it would allow one to form a clear argument, if one were so inclined. It would depend on the organizing thread of one's research.

\*\*\*

It's the kind of hypothetical scenario that doesn't get spoken aloud at all, and then only in confidence in closed rooms, but then little by little in places where it doesn't matter who's listening, and then finally places where the greatest number of listeners will be reached.

The mothers are learning how to speak into megaphones. Two by two they approach the center of the crowd outside state and municipal buildings. They take turns. One holds the speaker high above her head; one leans into it the perforated metallic ear of the device and takes a deep breath.

Hypothetical scenario # 1,734:

The boys are lured with the promise of temporary work in another town, or rounded up against their will. They're loaded into the back of a truck. They're driven to an undisclosed location. When they get out of the truck, there are soldiers waiting who order them to strip down and dress in fatigues that are handed to them.

No one bothers with blindfolds, so the boys can see each other, although they try not to look around because of the heaviness around their eyes and the slight tremor of their hands as they button and zip their bodies into the borrowed clothes. Some keep a strange poise, peel off their own shirts and jeans with the calm of kids stripping down to swim in the river. One of the boys has a trembling eye that keeps shifting back to the surrounding mountains. They might make out the sound of a nearby river if they could stop listening to their breathing, their hearts pumping in their ears, while they waited for the signal from the one who seemed to be in charge, the order that would trigger what came next.

\*\*\*

When the phone calls started, the mothers understood that although no one was formally taking their cases into consideration inside the state and municipal buildings, their actions in were not going unnoticed by the authorities inside.

The mothers didn't want to talk to the men who called because they didn't like their voices. They didn't like the content of the calls. But the men wouldn't stop calling. The calls were always the same.

Hello? they asked. Who is it?

To which the callers on the other end replied, Get out of town. Your name is on the list. Or, Your days are numbered. Or, We know where you live and where your daughter goes to school.

The callers spoke like fortunetellers, like clichés. The mothers would hang up the phone, shudder, say, Jesus.

And their daughters said, Mama? Who was that?

Nobody, baby, they said. Another wrong number.

\*\*\*

Clarice's family didn't have a mother, I note from the security of a parked car several meters from their home, so it makes sense that I hadn't come into contact with them. I have been driving by and camping out for stints, habitually over the course of the last week: observing who enters and who exists, for how long, with what regularity. I record all figures, dates, and times in my notebook.

Here, I have a different strategy that I don't fully understand, except to say that it does not represent the best interests of my personal safety: sitting in parked cars with a notebook, driving slowly in rented cars with plates from the capital and dimmed headlights, knocking on the locked doors of unfamiliar homes, my recording device already making a record of everything from deep inside my pockets, without a clear script of the questions I've come to ask.

Can I help you? a man of about my age asks as he opens the door to Clarice's house.

I blink and falter for a moment. I have grown accustomed to speaking only with women and girls.

Can I help you? the man says again.

\*\*\*

For four months Zara will ride her bike all over town. She will feel powerful, a free agent, stronger than a boy. She runs errands for her mother, races cars, breezes past all the other uniformed girls walking toward the school without bearing witness to even a half-phrase of gossip.

It's at such moments, with the wind in her face and the blood pumping like crazy through her legs, she feels most alive, most close to her brother.

By the time she's surrounded on the outskirts of town by four men with machetes and told to dismount the bike, she will have gotten very good at starting and stopping, breaking on a dime, left turns in traffic, pedaling uphill, coasting. Zara will look from the edges of the blades in their hands to her handlebars and back again. She will have only a few seconds to consider her options, an expression that is misleading in that it gives the illusion of choice within a context in which all possible actions lead to the same end.



\*\*\*

Writing this from the balcony of my living tower, I have no way of knowing whether the first part is true. I never saw Zara again. I can imagine how the bike made her feel, but what do I know about how anything at all appears to a girl from the seat of her bike?

The rest of her story I have pieced together through spotty communication I've exchanged with the mothers over the course of the last few weeks since I returned to the capital. There's more to any story whenever there are witnesses willing to testify. The mothers have told me lurid details—sounds that were heard, pieces of clothing that were found. I steer my brain away as fast as possible. Bottom line: Queenie and Zara are both officially missing. There's no sane way to conjure up the rest of it long enough get anything down on paper.

Due to concern for my personal safety, I have all but restricted my movement to my living tower. I am writing this from inside my locked apartment, waiting to get on a flight home, any day now, just as soon as my consulate advises me of the most prudent course of action.

## **Part Two: Hypothetical Scenarios**

### **1.**

I have always been intimidated by mothers. They fascinate and repel me because they know a kind of fierce, animal love that I do not. In the subway, I could always feel their knowing, judging eyes on me: when I wore impractical shoes, when I was resting a heavy, important novel on my lap, when I fell asleep instead of being vigilant in the task of seeing if there are any of them in my vicinity that need my seat.

For a year and a half, I pretended to be one of them. I became the caretaker for a four-year-old boy. I thought I would earn some sort of surrogate respect from their kind, but the mothers are smart as whips. They can sniff out imposters. I had the fresh face of a babysitter in spite of my thirty-two years.

The boy I cared for was named R. He liked to watch the trains go by on the opposite track. He liked to sit in his own seat, even at rush hour. He liked to stand up from his seat at odd moments and hug the legs of strangers. I let R. do what he wanted to because everyday we rode the subway straight from his school, where I picked him up, to his classes in speech therapy and the acquisition of motor skills. He was a boy who had to work hard for all the things most people took for granted—being able to walk without braces, feed himself, communicate verbally. When he hugged the legs of commuters,

some of them (men, women with impractical shoes) gave me a look of *control your kid*. When the commuters whose legs he hugs belonged to mothers, it was immediately apparent, because they came down to his level and give him full hugs, or they said, *thanks honey, I needed that*. They didn't even bother with me. They communicated directly with R.

These are the kinds of actions that distinguish mothers from the rest of the population.

If R. finished with his therapy early and it was one of the long summer afternoons, we'd go on excursions together. We rode up to the history museum. We ran laps around the room with the huge sperm whale suspended from the ceiling. (R. ran and I chased him before he hugged the legs of unsuspecting tourists.) We laid flat on our backs side-by-side and stared into the belly of the whale like it's a faraway constellation that could be deciphered for counsel regarding our lives on land. It was exhilarating and exhausting, although I experienced only a fraction of the exhilaration and exhaustion that R.'s mother knew. I saw it in the way her eyes became soft when R. walked into the room, the way R. made the sign for 'mom,' over and over again in his hands whenever she came home.

At night, I read to R. to help him fall asleep. We liked to read books about wild animals who wind up in metropolitan settings. There is a crocodile that lives with a family on the Upper West Side and helps the mother out with her daily chores. There is a bear that wanders around a Bloomingdale's department store in the middle of the night. Our favorite book was about a lion that is lost in a Parisian suburb and asks all of the townspeople for directions back to his home in the zoo. No one listens to the lion. They

scream and run away and try to bring in the National Guard to shoot tranquilizer darts into its fur. A boy, the only human being in town who is not afraid, finally intervenes and offers to walk the lion home.

When I asked R. if he liked the books we read, he nodded his head, or he made the sign language signal for 'more,' or he walked from his bed and retrieved another book from his shelf. When R. fell asleep, I kissed his forehead and tiptoed into the living room, where I passed out reading my own books waiting for his mother to get home.

When she arrived, R.'s mother would shake me awake, and I would walk out of the building in a daze and ride the subway home. At that hour, commuters had aprons and uniforms balled up in their hands. The fluorescent lights and overhead ads accosted us, exhausted us; we leaned into one another's bodies with every shift and curve. Our ears popped in the tunnels underwater. Some of us fell asleep and miss our stops. The ads overhead evaluated whether we deserved to be there, whether we belonged there, whether we were transients, whether this city was ours.

The ads asked questions like, *Is your dog a real City resident?*

If the answer were yes, it would be necessary to register our pets with the city, get them some rabies shots, finance the removal of their reproductive organs.

*Made in the City!* was written across a cropped photo of a woman's cleavage. The prices for different payment plans dart across the area where we imagined the dark of her nipples.

Some organs must be removed, some organs must be enhanced. The ads suggested to us that if we deserved to live here, we'd instinctively know the difference. We'd have a local's intuition.

I didn't have a local's intuition there. I don't have a local's intuition here either. I have the kind of history that is easy to erase and not notice anything is gone. When my grandparents emigrated from four different countries, their shared goal was rapid assimilation. As a result, I am third-generation nothing. If someone asks me, where are you from originally? I say, Nowhere, USA. When I travel back to the miles of cornfields and strip malls where I was raised, I easily get lost.

Here, the only difference is: when I get lost, I talk to people to ask for directions. There are certain conditions that make it easier to express vulnerability in a language that's not one's own. When people notice my accent, they're polite enough to pretend otherwise.

I have received a small grant to translate a posthumous novel titled *The Mothers* by the writer Tomas Petrutis. This fact serves as a helpful anecdote to explain what I'm doing here, even if no one here actually reads him. The most complete biography of the author published in any language is this one:

*Tomas Petrutis was born in Vilnius, where he attended the oldest university in the Baltic States, earning a doctorate in Romance Languages and Literatures. He lived abroad for most his life and died of natural causes in his birthplace at the age of 73.*

Petrutis came to this country as an outsider to write in a borrowed language. That's one part of what drew me to him. The other part is N., because he's the one who introduced me to this story. But N. is dead to me, I remind myself. That's what I keep

saying, because if I don't, I see him everywhere—on the bus, in line to buy bread, in colloquial expressions spoken on the radio, in the laugh of the boy who gives me directions, in the posture of half the men in town.

This story starts when I was still gathering strength in that other city, the city whose name is printed on a quarter of all the t-shirts and ball caps worn in this one—an image toward which this place is always leaning, looking, even if sometimes only to spit over its shoulder in that general direction. Everyone has a cousin there. Everyone has an uncle, a brother, a friend, a lover, a story that starts or ends there.

In my case, I had been living there for almost a decade when I went in for routine tests at my doctor's office and my life started to resemble someone else's. In the end it was nothing, nothing more than a scare that showed up out of nowhere, introduced three months of strained conversations with a revolving entourage of medical professionals, and left me with a long scar along the underside of my abdomen. I was fortunate that a potentially life threatening abnormality showed up early, unexpected, in routine lab work, "a fortunate find," repeated all the medical professionals, "very fortunate." But, even so, by the time the scare transformed itself into a scar, I had lost every adjunct section of Poetry Analysis Elective for Non Majors I taught at the community college, the contents of my bank account, my reproductive system, my will to perform routine tasks such as getting out of bed, going grocery shopping, or answering the phone. But then, things shifted again. As they do.

After long weeks spent flat on my back alone in a studio apartment, I found the job with R. to pay my rent and fill my hours again during the day. At night, I went

dancing by myself. When I got tired I took the train home alone. My legs could still carry me anywhere, easily. I was a fast walker, long strides. I used to look across the bar at anyone I wanted and dare whoever made eye contact with me to ask me to dance. I was big on dance as communication then. I had some theories about it that I had either read or invented, and at the time, they all seemed 100 percent relevant and true. They gave me license to ignore the long, supportive messages friends left on my voicemail all that winter. It gave me license to stay up late embracing strangers four or five nights a week without guilt about spending money I didn't have. I'd recently paid off educational loans only to fill my credit cards with charges incurred in city hospitals, laboratories, and doctors' offices. As it turned out, each one of these institutions billed separately. The regular practice of reviewing the line-by-line itemization of charges for services with obscure names such as *diagnosis of endocervical curettage*, and *loop electrical excision procedure* made the relative number of cover fees I paid to enter bars with music on a weekly basis seem irrelevant.

Staying up late and entering bars alone at night was how I met N.

N. had small, delicate hands, the size of a woman's and hair that he kept tied in a knot at the base of his skull. He laughed with his entire body. Sometimes when the bars closed we walked around the city together. I would link my arm into his, or he would link his arm into mine and we would pretend to be tourists and ignore the fact that we both had to be awake in several hours for work. N. liked to practice speaking my language, and I preferred to speak in N.'s language, so we weren't too picky. We would reach between the two to find the best and most appropriate words, and never have to say,

"How do you say...?" I had learned N.'s language at a university in the middle of a cornfield and perfected it talking to my neighbors. N. had learned my language in a trial-by-fire kind of methodology, working as a bicycle delivery boy at seventeen, the age that he got on an airplane to come here on a tourist visa and never went home.

Now N. worked at the airport, unloading luggage from bellies of planes and onto conveyer belts. He went to the airport every day but he hadn't been on a plane since the one he boarded eighteen years ago to come here. He was a painter. He stopped painting around the time when I stopped returning the messages that accumulated on my voicemail, which gave us both a lot of extra time to run into each other at the same bars on different nights of the week where there was a reliable rotation of cheap live music.

We never communicated our plans ahead of time, we just knew: Monday at Tulum, Wednesday at Monas, every other Thursday and Friday at the pier. I always went alone, because I knew I would run into N. eventually. I would start dancing and the night would reach the point in which I could have been in any city, in any country, in any time zone, in any body, at any time of night. It was always around then, when I was halfway into a stride toward the bar or a dance, when I would feel someone grasp my hand. I turned and N. smiled.

A., where are you going?

And I'd forget where I would be going, and he would take my hand that was still grasped in his and guide it to his shoulder, an invitation to dance to whatever song had already started to play. When the bar closed and the music stopped, whichever of us had a little money that week invited the other one to eat French fries and drink chamomile tea in diners in the middle of the night. We ordered the chamomile tea because each of our



mothers—mine living, his dead—had confided in us that it was the cure for everything. When neither of us had money, we sat in parks until we got kicked out by the cops, or until one of us fell asleep on the other's shoulder. Neither of us really ever wanted to go home. There were ghosts in both of our houses.

Here's one of my family stories that I never told N.:

Lenora changed her name to Eleanor when her family immigrated to the New World. I try to insist to the progeny of her siblings that my grandmother's name is Eleanor, and everyone brushes me away with their hands as if to say, Quiet down, peon. That story is not relevant. In the hand-drawn family tree (the one that I had understood up until this point to be a collaborative effort), they write in heavy black ink over my pencil lettering, *Lenora*, so that the name that I call my grandmother is just a graphite shadow under this other name from her past life.

I ask my grandmother if this is true, and she says, Oh well, you know, as if it's something that is none of her business.

But what does it say on your birth certificate? I ask her.

I mean, says my grandmother, we didn't used to pay so much attention to paperwork then. We were just trying to figure out how to survive.

Here's one of the N.'s family stories he never told me:

N. was the first one to find his mom.

Well, I can't exactly tell you this story, because I only know it in parts, the parts that he mentioned in passing. Some of this is conjecture, but this is what I know.

Heart attack. Naked from the waist down. She was wearing a blue blouse, halfway unbuttoned, with large details of butterflies printed on it, and a white lace bra underneath. N. was just a boy when he found her like that in the shower. Her right leg twitched with the smallest repetitive motion that made him think she was going to wake up.

I can't remember if I made up the part about the butterflies and the lace and the right leg's repetitive motion, or if this is part of the story as he told it to me. It seems disrespectful to the dead to make up any further details just to tell you the story in a way that would make you feel something of what N. felt, so I'll stop trying.

Instead, I'll keep telling my own stories of immigrants who felt uncomfortable and hungry, who changed some of the official language of legal documents to ease certain transitions, but who always survived, always passed along improved living conditions to whoever was born next.

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I've come here with two contacts, two people who know of my project and my presence in a country where I otherwise don't know a soul: Henry Paura was Petrutis's editor at Semicolon Press; Edgar List is an archive librarian at the Public Library of the People. I run my fingers over their full names, institutions, and contact information as they appear in my phone, and this gives me a sense of calm, purpose, direction.

But I do not call them.

I walk to the Public Library of the People, but I pass by its heavy iron gates and brick façade and continue walking. I walk until I get lost: in warehouse-sized farmers' markets where the fruits and vegetables are stacked—exaggerated and enormous, like produce on steroids—teetering dangerously on the edges of shelves. At your service, the farmers say, brandishing their pocketknives, ready to slice off a sliver of anything I may want to sample. They give preemptive slashes to a few skins of the fruits, showing off brilliant, unexpected insides: pulps and seeds.

In walk into a neighborhood where women line doorways in bras and jeans, painted mouths smiling; and another where men lean in doorways in dresses and stockings. At your service, everyone says.

I walk the neighborhood of the pet supplies, of the auto parts, of the furniture, of the theaters, of the fabrics. Everyone greets me with the same phrase, and I imagine a full life here that would require the gathering of such services, one by one, from so many.

But I'm here only in passing. I live in a rented room at the base of a hill in an apartment I share with a couple who have an extra bedroom. They are renting the room exclusively for the extra income. They are not interested in or curious about me at all.

At night the two of them sit in the living room with all the lights out. He selects songs to play, one by one, from his phone that is connected to the speaker and, one by one, she sings the lyrics to him, along with the recorded voices. They are all the same songs that are playing in clubs and bars all over the city, the music that people dance to. But here, there is no dancing, no speaking. A silent pact in the dark of a quiet house.

If I walk in the door and say, Hi, they look up for a second, like I'm a passing car that has temporarily distracted them, and just keep singing.

The first night I returned after dark, I was alarmed to find my street closed off to traffic with roadblocks and guarded by armed soldiers. Excuse me, I live here, I said to one of them, and he lets me pass through.

When I mentioned the roadblock to the couple whose apartment I share, they only shook their heads. Those aren't soldiers, he said, they're the armed brigade. They close the street every night after seven. That's why it's so safe around here.

I nodded, as if this were a familiar distinction.

It's close to seven now and I am still in the neighborhood of the fabrics. The sun starts to fall fast, the trick of so many peaks and valleys. The lights start to flicker on in the distance. I squint my eyes toward the mountains until all the unique points of light blur.

Taxis slow for me, honking to see if I need a ride. But I wave them ahead; I prefer to walk, I tell myself, while my mind reproduces the concrete details of every story I've

ever heard about single-woman fares that involve two extra passengers at the next stoplight, a handgun, a blindfold, and every ATM in town.

An older woman packing up her juice stand for the night leans in my direction when I linger at the intersection where she works.

Clarion and 98th? I ask her.

Straight ahead, she says, pointing to the left of the direction I was walking in.

You're not so far.

She points to my purse, slung lazily around my shoulder. I start to dig around in search of spare coins, before I feel her reach and shift the weight of my purse so it rests directly in front of my body. She grabs my hand and places it firmly across the broken zipper.

Walk like this, she says. Understand?

I nod. I walk straight ahead like she tells me to until I see the armed brigade and roadblocks that let me know I've made it home.

I live here, I say, approaching the soldier closest to me. The echo of my heavy consonant sounds linger in the air between us. The soldier cocks his head and nearly smiles as he lowers his rifle. I watch him size me up in a quick mental picture: sunglasses propped on top of my head like a second set of eyes, right hand still grasping hard at the flaps of my purse as if it contained a wild animal I cannot let loose. I live here, I insist, and though we both know that this statement is only one-part true, tonight, as every other night, he waves me in.

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Because I refused to let N. come home with me—my apartment felt antiseptic, quiet; it resembled a site of quarantine—N. finally took me home with him. He lived with an older couple that had emigrated from his country 20 years ago, who had rented out the bedroom of their one-bedroom apartment to him. They moved their bed out to the living room, and N. slept in a pullout sofa in the only bedroom. When we went to his apartment, he didn't turn on a single light. He knew his way through the darkness, past their bed—where I could hear the man snoring and sometimes the woman would mutter things under her breath in her sleep. They slept in an embrace, though I tried not to notice that or any other intimacy, because I was a stranger in their home in the middle of the night. N. took my hand and guided me toward his bedroom, silently.

N. and I shared a bed several nights a week for eight months, but we didn't sleep together, because my body was incapable of being hospitable to another body. It's not something I ever tried to explain. It was a fact that was obvious to N. every time he touched me and my body went cold. Instead we laid side by side in one of our beds and we listened to each other's stories, or the parts of each other's stories we were each willing to tell, or stories that sound like the ones we thought the other wanted to hear.

I listened as N. told me about the time that his father disappeared for four days, until he reappeared, and when N.'s mother confronted him about his absence, his father took a pistol out of the waistband of his jeans and shot three bullets through the roof of the family's home. N.'s mother took him and his sister to live somewhere else for a month, but N.'s father begged them to come home, and when they finally did, N. was the

first person to enter the family house again. N.'s father turned to him before his mother entered the room and said, to him alone, that the thing that happened in this living room would never happen again, and though his father does not repeat this phrase aloud to N.'s mother, it was true. The family lived peacefully together under this roof with the three patched bullet holes in it until two years later when N.'s father disappears again, but not in the same way as before, and N.'s mother takes them to live somewhere else, this time to a place far enough away from home that no one would think to come looking for them.

I listened as N. told me about the time that he ran into his childhood friend on the street in the middle of the night, someone he had not seen for many years. And his friend's hands are visibly shaking as he says, Come on, let's get a drink, I want to talk to you. And N. felt compelled to go with his friend even though everyone knew this friend has become someone who is dangerous, someone whose hand is always a half-gesture away from a bulge at his hip. As soon as they are seated at the bar N.'s friend confessed to him that he'd just been offered a sum of money to hunt down an old schoolmate of theirs. N. shook his head as if to say, Don't do it. But it was already done, that's why he'd come directly to talk to N.; he needed help deciding what to do next. So N. sat with him in a bar all night and they slowly drank beers and talked about when they were kids: the half-blind teacher who had mixed up everyone's names; the motherless baby bird they'd tried to teach to fly before someone's brother stepped on it; the neighborhood playing fields at night. N. was never afraid because he was too busy thinking about the fact that this would be the last time he saw his friend. And N. was right. Two weeks later his friend was gunned down at 2 p.m. walking down the street in front of his mother's house.

At some point I realized that a gun appears in every one of N.'s stories. By the time I met N., I had spent a lot of time studying stories in his language and in mine—I practically considered myself a professional listener—so I knew that when a gun appears in a story it's only a matter of time before it goes off. This is one of the rules I've learned. There are others.

Sometimes N. told stories without pauses between them. His stories blurred together. He finished one and started another without transition. He told them fast, almost by rote, which made me wonder sometimes if the stories were really his. If I didn't stop him eventually to tell him that I need to sleep so I could go to work in the morning, N. would keep telling me stories all night.

My stories were different. They were mostly about the women and poets, their bodies and collected works. Women and poets are often considered minor. Women and poets rarely carry guns. This is one of the reasons that their stories don't sell as many copies to the buying public.



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The morning I decide to call Edgar at the Public Library of the People, he greets me generously, tells me to come by right away. He is an elderly gentleman with meticulously ironed shirts and old-fashioned handwriting who says he would be very happy to help facilitate my research. I write my requests for archival materials on little slips of pink paper and Edgar disappears into the back with them. When he returns with plastic wrapped stacks of papers, he winks at me as he passes them across the counter.

Thank you, I say.

Anytime my dear, says Edgar, I'm here until eight.

I sit at the long study tables of the library, crossing and uncrossing my legs, adjusting my plastic gloves, palming through documents.

The original manuscript pages of *The Mothers* housed in the archives of the Public Library of the People include material that was cut from the novel, complete with handwritten marginalia and commentary. Although the manuscript was entrusted to the library by an anonymous donor, the fact that it was heavily edited by the local poet Rita Zapo, with whom Petrutis shared an editor, suggests she may have had a hand in the manuscript's preservation. Rita Zapo is documented as a longtime friend and confidant to Petrutis. A writer in her own right, she was first female winner of the prestigious EPM poetry prize, but died violently before she had a chance to follow up her first collection.

I open the manuscript and find Petrutis's familiar typed pages and biographical information. As always, the author is a nonentity, consistent only in his steady erasure of significant details about himself that might assist my research. Editorial feedback from

outside readers was systematically accepted or rejected by Petrutis with his system of marking a plus or a minus sign besides each critique to signify whether he would consider the suggestion. In this version, Zapo's cursive hand, wildly scribbled in every margin, contrasts the order of his neat symbols. And yet, Petrutis was clearly comfortable with Zapo's criticism, judging by the amount of plus signs beneath her comments. She often chided him for his awkward constructions or cultural assumptions. In the margins of the pages in my hand, Zapo comes off as somewhere between pedantic and enraged. Her handwriting circles and strikes through passages, offers criticism in her scrawled cursive in the margins of Petrutis's manuscript.

I am mentally constructing frail lifelines, thick as telephone wires, between every visible window on the block, Petrutis writes.

In the margin Zapo scrawls, *Lazy metaphor. Literal telephone wires everywhere.*

+, responds Petrutis.

The cat plays with a moth the size of a bird while I work, and I pretend I'm too busy to intervene while I watch her chew off one of its wings, reads another line in Petrutis's manuscript.

*Meanwhile half of the city is in body bags. Who cares!* writes Zapo below.

+, concludes Petrutis in agreement.

On another page, Zapo has scratched out an entire section, attributed to one of the mothers of Petrutis's novel, so the page has been transformed into an elaborate structure

of scribbles, with only the repetition of the lower bellies of vowels left visible. I can still make out the words just enough to read it, and from its placement in the larger manuscript draft, I know which mother is attributed to speaking these words only because of the graceful limp that is attributed to her a few lines before:

I lost my land.  
I lost my right leg.  
Above the knee.  
And I lost my home.

The annotated discussion that follows in a series of scratched-out plus and minus signs suggest that Zapo and Petrutis disagreed about the use of this passage. According to other sources, in the weeks following an early serialized run of this excerpt from the novel, Zapo became convinced that the lines of the passage were not written by Petrutis, but were plagiarized verbatim by one of the mothers on whom Petrutis based his research, and from whom he did not obtain written consent.

It was around the time that Zapo was reported to have been sighted in the city's bookstores, lingering over copies of the journal that published this excerpt, pretending to browse, and—when the cashiers' backs were turned—ripping the page out. She denied all accusations of having ever had done this.

It's a binding error, the responsibility of the publisher, she argued in print on multiple occasions when questioned about it, even in instances when the page shows a clear tear.

Unsurprisingly, there is no official record on Petrutis's thoughts on the passage, but one can only assume that he eventually came around to Zapo's criticism because later editions of the draft, including the final published version of the novel, do not include it.

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N. had a membership to the art museum from back when he still considered himself a painter, and sometimes we went to see free films screened there at night. Once when we went to the film about refugee children who played with one another in a deserted border town and the guerillas who watched out for them, N.'s eyes filled silently beside me in the theater and I pretended not to notice. The subtitles of the film are necessary because the dialogue is in a language neither N. nor I understand. We left the theater and stumbled beneath nearby skyscrapers. We didn't speak. We wondered how much of the story we were able to understand through the words that were printed for our benefit at the bottom of the screen in my language, and how much of the story was lost on us both.

Sometimes N. took me to empty apartments between renovation that were not his, but that he had keys to nevertheless.

I'm doing some work here, he said once, so I've been sleeping here sometimes.

But there would be no furniture.

Looking for the bathroom, I poked my head into one of the bedrooms. There were several flattened moving boxes in a pile with a pillow on top.

N. was in what would have been the living room waiting for me.

We walked to the closest diner and tipped the ceramic cups back into our mouths, waited for the chamomile to coat our throats and do its work, work its magic.

I remember walking one evening together downtown, one of our first long walks, in a neighborhood that made us think about tenement housing but smell gourmet tacos. We

didn't have the cash to pay any covers, but sometimes we liked to walk without a destination in mind.

Let's cross Houston, he said. And walk north.

He pronounced the street name, loudly, like the city in Texas.

A group of three women with a combination of very long hair and short skirts, and very short hair and long skirts, giggled as they passed.

It's HOW-ston, honey.

Tourists, they added, sizing me up as well.

N. and I smiled at each other, meekly at first, like we knew a pretty good joke that we weren't not going to say aloud, one better than the *correct* pronunciation of Houston Street. Then the next thing we knew, we were stopped there in the middle of the street, laughing so hard we couldn't move, even if we'd wanted to. Cars honked at us, drivers yelled obscenities. We laughed so hard our lungs hurt. My eyes started to tear so much I felt I'd never laughed so hard with anyone, and I leaned into N. and kissed him on the mouth.

Even now I'm not sure what the joke was. But it has to do with geography and local intuition; it has to do with learned place-names, how they can feel like loose cannons rolling around behind the uneven barrier of your teeth.

One of the cities is the one where N.'s mother died. Another is the one where my mother still lives.

Why don't you come home? my mother said on the telephone every time I called. You can have your old room back. You can go jogging with your father in the evenings. You won't believe all the renovation downtown. Calliope Music is gone. There's a new

sushi place there now. Sometimes we go there for dinner, and you won't believe that it's the chef from that Mongolian fusion place where you used to waitress. We'll go the next time you visit. When did you say that would be?

N.'s mother never called.

When I asked him if he ever wanted to return to the place where he was born, N. closed his eyes, nodded, like it was the stupidest question he had ever heard. N. never asked me if I wanted to go home, but for the record, the answer is no.

It was that night I saw the book on a shelf in his bedroom.

I picked it up because I gravitate toward unfamiliar books among other people's personal property like insects toward the buzzing lights that electrocute them. I couldn't help myself from palming through pages, running my eyes through a few lines. The prose is typed, but the pages appear single sided and distressed, a manuscript written in N.'s language. As soon as I had my hands on it, I saw N. shift.

You write?

No, N. said.

Oh sorry, I said. Forget it.

It belonged to my mom, N. said. I found it in her room.

I put the book down fast.

But later that night, after N. told me a story (sister, rifle), but before he tried to take off my clothes, he opened the book again. He started to read aloud to me, just a few pages from an early manuscript of Petrutis's novel.

The next night, N. read a little more. He read; I listened. We continued like this every night we saw each other until we made it through to the end one night.

Then we started over again, and, this time, I read it aloud to him as if it were written in my language.



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There's a lot of static on the line when I call Henry Paura at Semicolon Press, and at first I'm not sure if I'll get through at all. His voice breaks, solid but strained, like I've woken him up from a nap.

What can I do for you? he asks.

I explain who I am, remind him I'm translating one of his authors, I tell him I have some questions about Petrutis and his posthumous novel.

Henry suggests we meet in a fashionable district with many international restaurants that will accommodate any dietary restrictions I may have. I don't have any dietary restrictions, I try to say, but Henry has already selected a place. We make a date for lunch. I write it in my planner, even though I'm unlikely to forget because it is the only thing that I have penciled in all week.

When I walk up to the restaurant at the scheduled hour, Henry is already seated, looking annoyed. A man with a pickup truck full of lemons is driving slow circles around the block saying into a microphone, *Lemons, get your lemons, 5 for 1, 10 for 2.*

I went ahead and ordered some coffees, Henry says.

Great, I say, silently confirming that I don't like him.

How are you finding the city? asks Henry. How is your project going?

Well, I think, I say. But I have some questions.

Of course you do, Henry says. Let's see if I can't help clear up some of your confusion.

Everywhere I look for Petrutis, I come up with nothing. He's a dead end. There's more information about editorial feedback the manuscript received from Rita Zapó in the archives than there is on Petrutis himself, I say. I'm starting to wonder if he ever existed outside of the novel.

Henry blinks, pulls out cigarette, holds up the soft pack to me to offer one before lighting it. He says, That's the thing isn't it.

The thing? I repeat. The man in the pickup truck passes again. *Lemons, get your lemons, 5 for 1, 10 for 2, Lemons, get your lemons, 5 for 1, 10 for 2.* He says it so many times the words stop becoming words and start to shift into something else.

Henry inhales, breathes out. Would it change anything if he didn't? he asks.

I'm translating him, I say.

Henry shrugs like this doesn't count.

You're his editor, I say. You tell me.

Rita Zapó wrote *The Mothers*, he says.

As soon as Henry says this aloud, I understand that in some unconscious part of my body this suspicion had already started to take root. But, I argue, it's published with Petrutis's name.

Henry smiled. Do you think anyone here pays attention to the names of writers of poetry and novels? Do you think any readers in your language will care? How many copies will you sell of a posthumous novel of in translation, 500 at best? 1,000 if you're very lucky?

I tighten my lips into a neutral half-smile because the thought has never crossed my mind.

Let me assure you that it's all pretty irrelevant, Henry says. And no great secret. Anyone that digs for long enough will come to the same conclusion you're on your way to making. I'm saving you some time. Consider it a favor.

And you knew that before you published it?

Henry nods. Naturally it was Rita's decision; it had nothing to do with me. Rita thought someone like Petrutis would generate different kinds of readers, you understand.

I shook my head.

A prose writer. A foreign, male prose writer, Henry continues. But you'll notice—if you were familiar with her work at all, I mean, you'd notice—that she gave little effort to disguising her own voice, or to inventing a realistic biography for Petrutis. She had been receiving threats of course as well, so she likely viewed it as a safety measure. Ultimately, it didn't matter of course.

I pause. Because of what happened to Zara? I ask.

Zara? No, says Henry. Because of what happened to Rita.

I nod, mumbling something about a reference to Zapo's death in the archives that I didn't investigate because I didn't see it as relevant to my research at the time.

Henry looks at me hard, stubs out his cigarette.

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When N. and I read the pages together, I focused on the mothers' feelings of loss as it registered in their bodies; N. focused on their militancy and ability to organize. I focused on the narrator as an outsider, his elaborate fabricated field notes. N. focused on the rising intensity of the threats the mothers receive. I thought it was okay that we had different points of entrance into this world.

Occasionally, when I read aloud in my own language, finding words of mine to replace the words in the book, N. argued with me about their meaning, but mostly he trusted me with my language and I trusted him with his.

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I return to the Public Library of the People and sit down at a table with new search terms:

"Zapo, Rita" AND "Mothers, The."

All of the first materials to surface are newspaper stories with titles like "Celebrated Female Poet's Murder Raises Questions About Ties to Leftist Guerilla Organization," and "Mothers United Representative Condemns Female Poet's Death as Act of State-Sponsored Terror." I take the elevator to the third floor archives and Edgar fulfills my request for relevant photos and newspaper clippings related to Rita Zapo.

Captioned photographs published in the local newspapers include:

A heavily made-up Zapo drinking from a juice box at the corner of Beach Road and 37th Street.

Zapo in a floral print dress, standing at a microphone alongside a panel of men in front of the National Library.

Zapo giving a speech at a podium, receiving the EPM poetry prize.

Zapo lying under a sheet on the sidewalk.

In this final photo of Rita Zapo, her high-heeled shoes stick out from the white sheet that covers her body. I stare into smooth muscles of her calves in this photo. Despite the sheet obscuring the rest of her, they look like the calves of someone who could get up and dance whatever song plays next on the radio. The crowd that surrounds Zapo is almost exclusively composed of older women. This is easily explained, the

accompanying article suggests, since Zapo was said to have exited the local branch offices of Mothers United at 7 PM when the individual thought to be her assassin was first spotted at the intersection of Saint Rex and 23rd on the back of a motorcycle. As the first shots were fired, the Mothers filed out of their offices with the likely intent to intervene.

The article continues, It is common knowledge that the matriarchs of Mothers United are unarmed and unafraid. They are experts in the art of making their bodies visible, by covering themselves in high-gloss, blown-up photographs of missing children, and singing loud out-of-tune songs of hope with furious undertones in high-traffic urban settings. They are said to be difficult to intimidate. They have been known to use their bodies as human shields.

In the photograph, the Mothers surround Zapo's body. There are maybe ten of them in frame. They do not wail and they do not cover their faces in their hands. For the most part, they assume one of two poses: either they look dead into the eye of the camera, or they look dead into the eyes of one of the portraits hanging from the sandwich-board-sized photos shrouding their bodies. Only one mother crouches at the side of the poet. In the photograph she seems to be removing a backpack from Zapo's supine body, as if to help her rest.

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Whenever N. and I found each other out at night, one of two things occurred. If we ran into one another early in the evening, we would say hello and watch each other dance with everyone else in the room—noticing strangers' arms on each other's hips and shoulders all night—before finding one another again just before the bar closed. Then we danced all the remaining songs together, sloppily, happily, our feet dragging through the steps. The alternative is that one of us arrives earlier than the other, or we don't cross paths for hours until the very end of the evening. When we both have given up on the thought of seeing each other, we instead give ourselves over to the music, to the crowd: we dance with everyone, we sing all the songs quietly, under our breath. This was also not a bad way to spend a night. But whenever I was in such a state—say it's around midnight, and suddenly I catch N.'s eye while I'm in another dance—I would walk directly him to him, or he would walk directly to me, as soon as the song ends. We smiled. He offered me his hand.

Invariably someone would come up to me at the end of the night: a woman who had been sitting at the bar drinking wine or at a table with her friends, who just came after work for a few drinks and stayed, or who was only there to listen to the music. The woman always said, I have to say how much I loved watching you dance together. And I saw that in this woman's mind, N. and I have spent our entire lives dancing together, that we are deeply committed to one another, and our desire emanates from our hips and elbows and arms as we circle around each other's bodies. I always smiled and I said, Oh, thanks a lot. Because I was capable of separating truths in my mind: so on the one hand,

it's a source of great comfort to know we inspire strangers to come to this conclusion.

Because there was no time I felt more at home in my own body than when I danced with N. And so the fact that N. and I only ever told each other half of the truth of our stories, or that I never knew when N. and I would see each other until the instant before he appeared, or that I had no idea where N. slept on the nights that I didn't spend with him was irrelevant.



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I walk to the Museum of Local Living Memory, where—among catalogues of other recent atrocities— there are thoughtfully curated timelines that chart key statistical information and personal details regarding the assassinations of key journalists, writers, photographers, students, union leaders, community organizers, and prospective political candidates. Rita Zapo is among them.

There is a set of headphones that hang from a peg on the wall beneath the same iconic photos: Zapo's receiving the EPM prize at the National Library, Zapo's body covered with a sheet surrounded by mothers. When I take the headphones off the wall and place them over my ears, I hear Zapo's last recorded interview prior to her death:

INTERVIEWER: It's been five years since you published your last collection, for which you were awarded the EPM prize. What's next for you as a poet?

ZAPO: I'm not writing any poetry at the moment.

INTERVIEWER: Should I interpret that to mean you're exploring new genres?

ZAPO: [coughs] Sure, that sounds good.

INTERVIEWER: Your editor, Henry Paura, has suggested that you have been writing prose. Any truth to that?

ZAPO: I find it amusing that Henry would conclude that based on something I mentioned to him in passing of which he hasn't read a single word.

INTERVIEWER: So then, for the record, you're not writing at all.

ZAPO: I'm writing regular essays for the *Weekly Independent*. Maybe you've seen them?

INTERVIEWER: [long pause] Some critics have dismissed your recent journalism as political propaganda.

ZAPO: [mumbles something unintelligible]

INTERVIEWER: How would you describe your involvement in the underground network Mothers United, where your presence has been noted at regular demonstrations?

ZAPO: I hold up their umbrellas and megaphones while they speak, and I listen to their stories.

INTERVIEWER: What would your response be to those who allege that the Mothers are accessories to a terrorist organization?

ZAPO: I would ask them to go do fifteen seconds of research on the topic before the next time they decide to open their mouths.

INTERVIEWER: It's been a pleasure speaking with you Ms. Zapo.

ZAPO: The pleasure is all mine.

In the obituary excerpt displayed beside the photograph, Rita Zapo is credited for her prize-winning poetry collection and her regular journalism in the last year of her life chronicling the work of Mothers United, whose demonstrations continue to be held each Tuesday afternoon in the capital. There is no mention of the novel titled *The Mothers* anywhere.

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The last time we saw each other, we ended up at N.'s apartment, the real apartment, with furniture and the old couple that sighs in their sleep in the living room. I had been reading aloud to N. the night when we ended up in an argument, and though I can't remember what started it, his small, feminine hands—hands that have always seemed to me entirely unfit for unloading luggage at the airport—found their way to my neck. We were side by side, half undressed to go to sleep, on the couch that is his bed, against which are propped the last canvases he hadn't touched for over a year, which are full of slick dark paint that looks like a mix of dirt and blood or oil. While it was happening, my thoughts became someone else's: I stared at an unfinished painting and thought about how beneath the part of me that feels it could not breathe, there was another part that understood, I am not in danger, he will let go, and that part doesn't feel pain or anger, just feels very, very tired. How as soon as he lets go I'll gather my things and leave this apartment. But when he did let go, I thought instead of the middle-aged woman who sighed in her bed on the other side of this door, and the man that held her in her sleep.

I started to cry. N. comforted me, and I realized I didn't want to go home, so I stayed, and only in the morning after he took me to the bakery on the corner and asked for several pastries that he handed to me in a greasy waxed-paper bag, did I say to him, Why? N.'s eyes looked wet, and he blinked away whatever was there just as the train pulled up. He squeezed my hand and I boarded the train before N. opened his mouth to give me his answer.

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When I arrive at the demonstration, it looks like the mothers have already been out there for a while. I can't help myself from feeling like the peripheral narrator of the novel I've spent the last six months inside of as I find a spot to stand just outside the border of their circle.

The mothers they carry umbrellas of all different colors as an antidote to the afternoon sun. They fan themselves as well, sometimes with the newspaper, sometimes with foldable plastic fans that they produce from the inside of their purses. Some of them have little spray bottles with water inside that they mist onto each other's necks and faces.

They all wear white shirts. They all carry a colorful plastic flower in one hand. They take turns with the megaphone, but there is one mother who serves as a kind of emcee: introducing new speakers, singing the first verses of the songs before the other mothers join in. Some of their stories, I notice, I know already, as soon as they start speaking. I'm not sure if it's because Rita Zapo took them all down verbatim and wrote them into her novel, but it doesn't take long to see the end of any story from its beginning. Between each speaker, they slowly repeat these words over again over again: *Mothers United is not and will never be part of the violence. Mothers United is and will always be a part of the peace.*

When one of the mothers notices me standing off to the side of the demonstration, she offers me a plastic flower to hold and a sheet of paper, which is a photocopy of the lyrics to the songs they sing. I thank her. I remain for a full two hours. I watch her from across the square as she speaks into her microphone about the death of her daughter and

the disappearance of her son. She wears a white blouse with large details of butterflies.

When I look for her to return the plastic flower and photocopied song sheet at the end of the demonstration, she's gone.

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When I had woken up, groggy and drugged, in the public hospital in the City, my mother was there. She had driven 15 hours to help me with the surgery. She sat in the waiting room with a little plastic bag full of tissues, and another plastic bag full of raisins. She must have packed them ahead of time, in the house where I grew up and where she still lives, and carried with her across the country and into the waiting room. All that week, my mother slept next to me in the bed of my studio apartment and made all my meals, even though she didn't understand where I went grocery shopping in my neighborhood, in stores where half the packaging is printed in other languages. But I didn't know how to talk to her all that week, because I didn't know how to talk to anyone. I felt alone, very alone, too alone to acknowledge the presence of anyone outside my body, even the person inside whose body I had once lived.

We laid side by side in my bed at night, and I told my mom stories, which were actually just paraphrased lines from Wikipedia entries on topics like *hysteria (female)* and *sterilization (compulsory, history of)* that I'd started memorizing while on heavy doses of pain medication.

To this, my mom said, Hush. In the case of my body, there were malignant growths everywhere; I was armed with every ounce of possible information and signed the waiver form with my own hand. My mother reminded me of these things as she pulled me out of the empty bathtub every time I fell asleep there while the water drained out beneath me, and wrapped my naked arms in a bath towel.

Sometimes when I think back on that week with my mother, I get confused. I wonder if this was something my mother did to take care of me, or if it's something that the other mothers did to take care of Sofia or Lexus or Queenie. I wonder if I read their stories so many times I migrated pieces of them into my own memories. Or if this is actually just the kind of thing that all mothers do.

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I come home from the demonstration, and I try to make a call to N. The line rings and rings, but I don't know if it's because I have the international prefixes mixed up, or because N. isn't there.

I want to tell him about Rita Zapo and the Mothers, to ask him what he knew, what his mother knew. There are so many things I want to tell N.; he is often the first person that I want to call every time something happens. But then I remember how he looked at me the last time I left his apartment, how he never tried to contact me again, not even to apologize or explain. I remind myself: one of us is dead to the other, one of us has ceased to exist, one of us does not count. I wish I could remember what words were exchanged between us that provoked this conclusion. When I review the content of that night in my mind, everything gaps and blurs. Then, I become unsure whether I want to speak to him, what it was we were to each other, who is dead to whom. So I hang up the line before I can decide, before I grow tired of waiting, before he has a chance to answer.



**2.**

The morning when I die in the shower, I am already half dressed for the day. I have put on my earrings and my necklace, my bra and blouse, but I had just stepped into the shower to shave my legs. Leg, I mean. You know that of course, just like you know how I lost the other one, even though I'm sure I never told you the story myself. I was going to wear a skirt that day because the weather was warmer than it had been. There was a slight breeze, and I wanted to feel the wind against my body when I walked. I was going to walk to the offices of Mothers United that day, as I did everyday since I started over here from nothing. It's not the first time. I was born in a place where the sea and the river meet. I fled to the mountains. Now I'm here.

General consensus says that the pain of putting one's children in the ground is the worst imaginable kind, but I can vouch for the fact that there are gradations and levels. I've buried a daughter. I've waited decades on a son. My daughter's body was all mixed up with pieces of the forest when the soldiers deposited her in the river, but I recognized her by her scars and by the key in the pocket of her jeans, found nearby, that fit into the lock on the door of our home. I buried her immediately; I fled fast and told no one. Still, I was the one to pick up the pieces of her body, so there's no way to pretend she is anywhere else than in the ground.

I have a running list of people I blame for this, including:

The soldiers.

The state.

The international community.

The other mothers.

Myself.

You.

You are on this list because my daughter wouldn't have been riding around the place where the soldiers picked her up if you had never showed up unsolicited in our home and fixed her bicycle. You were always showing up at our meetings, taking notes for a book you were writing. I didn't like you from day one. By the time I finally read what you had been writing at all those months, you were already dead, so I never had a chance to ask you any of the questions that came to my mind. For example, why did you mix up all the details? Exhibit A: Our dead mothers' smells. Lavender, cooking grease? Not mine. My mother smelled of saltwater except for her hands, which smelled of garlic, and for the record I never heard her sing a single note in her entire life. Later, you must have figured out how you sounded making us speak through your poet's idea of how a mother thinks because you tried to bury your tracks. Exhibit B: You spoke from inside of a man inside of a tower.

When you were shot down, I was the first one to kneel beside you. I took the pages of the book you were writing before the sirens or anything else. I read them all. I didn't care for a lot of them, but I've made my peace. I made a photocopy of the pages and I dropped the original into the book-return slot of the library that went up in the neighborhood. I kept the copy, I'm not even sure why.

Forgiveness is a slippery thing that comes and goes in waves: licks the ankles, retreats.

With my son, it's different, because I don't have a body to prove anything one way or the other. So in my mind, I invent wild and impossible possibilities and rank them by what I can and cannot accept.

First, I imagine a quick death for myself. My son, I decide, will be the one to find me, when he's still a child, so he knows I'm gone. And then in my mind I make him grow up and forget about me. I send him as far away from here as I can imagine: I send him to New York City.

You can imagine the blessing, the sick thrill it is finally to feel that sharp pain in my left arm in the shower, and the slower duller pain in my chest before I hit the floor near the drain. Sometimes you get what you wish for; that's why you have to be careful with prayers and desires, you have to calibrate them carefully. Here's something I've often wished for: To die first. Not the other way around.

Once I've killed myself off in my mind, I invent new futures for him. I send him to cities I know nothing about and imagine all the details of his intimate life. I follow your example. So now in my mind he is dancing with his wife in the kitchen of his home somewhere inside of a skyscraper. He lives on a floor so high up that when my son looks out the window, everyone looks like insects and toys. Inside there is a kitchen with a large wooden table. It's lunchtime on a Saturday. My son turns from the window and embraces his wife, who is making his favorite soup with chicken and corn, the one I used to make for him. He turns up the song on the radio. He's singing it to a child who is now

on his lap, who is listening to the words, who will grow up speaking three languages, and have a name that is pronounceable in every one, and is helping my son pick herbs from the plant growing from a pot on the table.

I stop.

I remember the alternative: the unmarked mass grave, and I understand my hubris. But I'm a mother, this is what mothers do. Of course it's not a fair trade, because I'm still here, inhaling and exhaling. But I know how to negotiate; I'm capable of being reasoned with. I make deals everyday. I can find the even bargain, the correct payment. I keep weighing and balancing, taking away details and replacing them with others.

Clean slate.

Take me instead. Let me die quickly, and let my son find me first and grow up without me, and let him get on a plane to New York. He will find a way to stay there. I accept that winters will be colder than he can imagine. That he will arrive unprepared and have to save for months to buy the right clothes: coats and long underwear and other clothes I don't have the words for. My son is working, working the seasonal jobs that no one else will take. My son works outside with three pairs of socks on his feet at JFK airport unloading luggage from planes making quick connections. On Christmas Eve, he's at the airport, waiting on landing planes as they burrow tracks in the snow on the way to the terminal. The hours are long, but when he get home, the woman who is his wife is waiting up for him, reheating a bowl of soup on the stove, and he grabs her waist in the kitchen and they hold each other, sway to the music playing from someone's car stereo in their socks while they wait for the broth to break into a boil. Stop.

I consider the alternative. A wife who is beautiful and attentive is too much to ask for. But then a girlfriend is not, I decide. So what if she's too skinny and if she speaks with a ridiculous accent and if she doesn't know how to prepare a soup. She can at least be kind to him, hold him at night, listen.

Later that day, or the next, I recognize my error. I know it's not a fair trade. I know I'm being selfish in the way a mother is always selfish. Then I subtract, divide, take away remainders. It's always a better deal than the alternative that always rests somewhere worrying a hole in the back half of my brain.

So now the child that sits on my son's lap and listens to the music on the radio is screaming a nonsensical word over and over again, and he can't tell my son why. The child was born with a brain that operates at a different speed, and that means that he'll be lucky if he learns the language of New York, let the one of the other languages that my son is trying to teach him when he turns on the radio and sings all the words.

Stop.

The developmentally delayed child is someone else's. The girlfriend is a nanny for a more successful woman's child, and she is childless, like you were. Maybe she's also a poet, an interloper.

But the girlfriend is good with the child; she takes him to museums and reads to him in both languages she knows at least, embraces him long enough to help him get to sleep, and once she has put the child to sleep, she rides the train to my son's apartment to

make some other kind of soup that she learned how to prepare in her own country and to wake him up smoothing his hair from his forehead. Stop.

The girlfriend does not smooth his hair from his forehead. The girlfriend is frigid; the girlfriend is emotionally unavailable. The girlfriend is incapable of caring for anyone. She doesn't have a heart; she doesn't have a uterus. In my mind I surgically remove organs from her body. There. And she's not even my son's girlfriend; she's just some girl who he takes dancing every once in a while.

But they dance so beautifully together that strangers watch them and approach them afterward and smile, and when my son dances with her he remembers how we danced together in the kitchen when he was still growing taller every year.

Stop.

The girl couldn't toast a slice of bread to save her life. She orders out, horrendous smelling foreign food all the time. The woman making the soup for my son is a middle-aged woman who rents out a room in her apartment to my son for a fair price. This older woman with whom he lives knows the places in the neighborhood to buy the ingredients to make the soup because she's been living in New York City longer than my son. The girl sometimes comes over and the woman teaches her how to cook the soup that is my son's favorite. The girl is open to learning new things that she wasn't taught as a child?

Stop.

I wonder how much I have to torture them in my mind, to make it worth it to tell these sick stories. I wonder how you did it, if you got some rare pleasure from imagining the pain registering in our bodies at night, to make those descriptions of all our losses more elaborate and strange every time, the way that I do with the girl or girlfriend or whatever she is. I decide I'll call her Ana. She should have a name as long as she's one of the secondary characters in my son's new life. I see now why you named us all the way you did. It's easier to keep the story straight that way.

The only time that Ana comes over is in the middle of the night once the woman is already asleep in the living room, dreaming in her own language that is different from the language that Ana dreams in. My son is ashamed of her, or she is ashamed of my son, so they only meet in the middle of the night in dark places with loud music where there are no witnesses. But they hold each other while they sleep? Stop.

Ana comes over to my son's house to sleep in the middle of the night, and my son needs affection from her, he needs her to hold him, because he's alone in a foreign country in someone else's apartment where he pays for a sofa in a bedroom by the week. My son pushes his weight on top of her body.

Ana does care for my son. See how she kisses his neck and his cheek, his arms and his back. Ana rubs his back below his shoulder where he has a scar from falling in the river when he was a child. My son is taking off Ana's dress when she changes her mind and says, no.

Ana doesn't do anything but tell him that one word, over and over again. My son doesn't listen. He's stubborn like his father was stubborn, shooting four bullets through the roof of our house in lieu of conversation. The girl will not acquiesce, so my son pushes his two hands together, crossed at the thumbs, in the shape of a bird, and presses them into her throat. He is pushing his hands hard into her throat and she starts to fight back with her fingernails.

Ana is strong enough to fight back, to stop my son from forcing himself on her, but she is tired or kind enough not to leave when he listens. She holds him even.

They fall asleep? Stop.

My son keeps his hands heavy around Ana's throat long enough to do what he wants with her. When it's over, she runs from the house with half her clothes still in her hands, screaming so loud she wakes up the woman sleeping in the living room. My son yells out the window at the naked girl on the street, as the lights of neighbors switch on one by one. He falls asleep? Stop.

Clean slate.

I'm alive. Ana doesn't exist. My son never makes it to New York.

My son is offered a job somewhere outside of our town, and he goes, but it's the trap that we all feared was true. Some of the other boys are killed, but my son passes out and is left for dead.

When he wakes up in the site of the execution, the first thing he notices is the deep metal smell of blood mixed with the smell of the trees. Flies circle. Buzzards circle



at a greater distance. He runs his fingers along his own teeth. The front two are knocked out. One is completely missing. The other one is cracked in half, a jagged edge. He doesn't remember having these huge gaps in his mouth before so he figures it must have happened when he hit the ground, he must have hit the ground hard. He doesn't remember falling. He remembers lining up with the others.

He crawls on his elbows for an hour and a half, until the flight paths of the birds were visible, but out of range, before he dares stand up. When he does, he is so utterly alone, he doesn't know the way halfway to anywhere, which makes sense: he had been loaded with the others into the back of a truck with no windows and driven for several hours.

He hikes to the nearest town and begs his way onto the first bus he could find that was leaving for any city. He doesn't have money because whatever had been in his pocket—his ID, a few bills—is missing. But it doesn't matter because when he went to board the bus, everyone looked at him like they had seen a ghost and got out of his way. Maybe it's the uniform, or the blood around his mouth. He is given his own row and no one sits beside him. The person closest to him mutters under his breath the lyrics of the song that he listens to through his headphones on repeat for the entire seven-hour journey. At the front of the bus, a middle-aged man stands with the help of a cane during the first 10 minutes of every hour, on the hour, to lecture on the healing nutritional powers of natural foods endemic to the nation. The bus swipes around the sides of the mountains. My son sleeps. Stop.

The worst possibility is the one I know best, the one I've spent years speaking over and over again into megaphones in public squares, regardless of who listens:

My son is driven with the other boys in the back of a truck to an undisclosed location. He's lined up with the others by men with machine guns and ordered to strip out of their clothes and into others. The rest of the story is just like you wrote it. Sometimes your story gets mixed with the version I used to hold in my mind. But then I remember, we're both filling in all the details where there are none, because there are no bodies, no definitive version of the chain of events as they unfolded. What was the part that you wrote about the blindfolds? Oh, I remember now. No one bothers with blindfolds, so he can see the others, although he tries not to look at them because of the heaviness around their eyes and the slight tremor of their hands as they buttoned and zipped their bodies into the borrowed clothes. Some keep a strange poise as they peel off their own shirts and jeans with the calm of kids stripping down to swim in the river. He could hear a river somewhere nearby if he stopped listening to his own breathing for a second. One of the boys has a trembling eye that kept shifting back to the surrounding mountains.

The rest happens quickly. One of them yells, *Fire*.

Everyone hits the ground.

The morning when I die in the shower, I wake up and I look in the mirror, half dressed, and I turn on the water. I don't know why I'm half dressed before I decide to take a shower, but this is exactly how I always have imagined it. I feel the sharp pain, the one that tells me how soon I'll see the body of my daughter whole again, but it's murkier when I try to picture my son, because I can't say if he's dead like us. I imagine he's a child

again, and I know that it's working because I can hear him making noise in the other room beneath the sound of the shower. He is in the kitchen playing on the floor. With the dogs? No... With a pot and a pan and a wooden spoon. Now I can hear him pounding away on all the different registers and notes, singing a child's song without words in any language, as my body starts to slip on the surface of the tiles, as I start to wobble backward, and I know that he will hear the thump of my body, and he will pause in his song and he will come to the bathroom, and he will say, Mama? Mom? I hear his feet coming toward me, down the hall and into the bathroom. I keep still near the drain when I feel the hiccup and surge inside my chest. My heart outgrows me. The light starts to flicker out just before it gets bigger, brighter. I wait for him.

## Afterward

The epigraph with which my thesis opens, and around which the resulting narrative was built, has served as a kind of compass, ethical and aesthetic, while drafting this project. Attributed to a victim of violence and forced displacement, the lines are displayed in the *Museo Casa de la Memoria* in Medellín, a cultural space dedicated to giving voice to the memories of the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia. This is the testimony in its entirety as it appears within the museum. It is attributed to Fabián, although this almost certainly is not this speaker's real name. This is one of the universal traits of every testimony I hear and read in Medellín: all names, geographical locations, and other identifying characteristics of the storytellers have been changed as a means of self-preservation. The name is a placeholder until the person behind it can speak freely. Regardless of the identity of the speaker of this testimony in particular, Fabian's story is reproduced in different words all over the museum and the city. There are thousands of stories that share the key attributes of this one.

Boiled down to a handful of horrific and adorned details, Fabián's story functions via an appeal to the reader that is in opposition to that of catharsis. Its abbreviated, direct form reads like a grocery list, affording the reader a glance at what is surely only a fragment of the speaker's myriad experiences of violence. In this way, Fabián's testimony asserts itself as a very different kind of story than the high-profile ones that circulate transnationally.

My interest in stories like Fabián's stemmed from my own consumption of cultural production from and about Colombia that reached me in the US. I wondered: How might various forms of narrative coexisting within an urban public space articulate distinct realities? How might the diverse narratives in Medellín produce, reinforce, or disrupt a range of imaginaries of the city and the everyday lived experiences of its inhabitants? In order to situate the project that came as a result of these questions within the context that informed it, this epilogue aims: to describe the character of the kinds of high-profile narratives that catalyzed my research, to provide an abbreviated history of the armed conflict in Colombia and its relationship with US intervention, to summarize the nature of my investigation in Medellín, and to describe the intentions that encouraged me to respond to my research questions through narrative writing.

### **Dominant narratives**

As seen from the United States, the imaginary surrounding Colombia is largely homogenized, entrenched in the persistence of the portrayal of narratives of violence and drug trafficking that drown out other stories that reside alongside such ubiquitous ones. This image is nourished on a diet of cultural production that contributes to the dissemination of monolithic representation. Colombian filmmakers Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo's term *pornomisera* was coined in conjunction with their 1977 short film *Agarrando pueblo*, which parodied the voyeuristic international gaze on the social problems of Colombia. Throughout the film the protagonists—two documentary filmmakers—train their cameras and enthusiastic directorial interventions on Cali's most disenfranchised citizens. These scenes are juxtaposed with those of a conversation

between the filmmakers and their taxi driver, as they transverse the streets of Cali, cameras in hand, demanding to be taken to a place with "'mucho gamín, mucho loco, mucha prostituta, mucho margen" [A lot of street children, a lot of craziness, a lot of prostitutes, a lot of margin] (Suárez 102). When the driver asks why they're making this film, their response is unequivocal: to broadcast it on European television.

The recent success of Netflix's *Narcos* and the plethora of contemporary films that feature the legacy of Pablo Escobar are testament to the seemingly indefatigable appetite for Colombian narco-narratives. Medellín—a city whose image continues to be overshadowed by this stigma even as it opens itself up to international tourism within the past decade—mirrors, and is a popular setting for, such high-profile stories. While the international imaginary of the city is so diluted by the narcotics trade that aspects of the burgeoning tourist industry perform this version of the city for the voyeuristic foreigner, Medellín's systematic social problems predate this narrative. According to scholar Mary Roldán's analysis of the patterns of migration and economic change in the city, Medellín "represents a microcosm of many of the opportunities and ills that have characterized urban areas in both industrialized and developing nations of the course of the twentieth century" (129). It is a history of migration and class struggle.

In order to stray from an easy reading of the strict moralizing narratives that are quick to locate the fault violence on particular groups (guerillas, *cocaleros*, drug traffickers, etc.), which have inspired this narrow representation, it's useful to offer greater context for the social problems that have led to the armed conflict in Colombia. In the introduction to his mediation on systemic violence, Slavoj Žižek writes:

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to

disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of the directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. [...] A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and to promote tolerance. (1)

Žižek argues for a panning back from the kinds of outrage that make easy subjective answers possible. Often, naturally, this movement eventually will land us at multinational mechanisms of power. The fact that the US economy benefits directly from systemic violence in Colombia is well documented. While its military aid package, Plan Colombia, ensures that the US may use the war on drugs as an excuse to continue its policies of intervention that create a sustained dependency of "narco-imperialism" (Villar 19), US participation in the construction and consumption of these ubiquitous narratives is further complicated by its status as the nation with the highest demand for Colombia's cocaine production. An accurate portrait of transnational flows—of people, substances, stories, violence, language, culture, etc.—between the U.S. and Colombia is significantly more nuanced than high-profile cultural production might lead one to believe.

### **A brief history of armed conflict and US intervention in Colombia**

In the introduction to his collection of testimonies based on conversations with hundreds of individuals' personal experiences of the Colombian conflict, writer Alfredo Molano states, "The spoils of war in Colombia have always been paid in land and our history is the history of an incessant, almost uninterrupted, displacement" (42). Intrinsic to the Colombian conflict is a deep-seated history of class struggle between a large landless peasant population and an urban oligarchy. The roots of the armed conflict as it's understood today can be traced back to the period known as *la Violencia*, a 10-year civil war that erupted in 1948 with the assassination of opposition leader and grassroots

organizer Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, who was favored as a presidential candidate by the peasant and working class. His death inspired a series of widespread revolts, called the *Bogotazo*, which led to a death toll of over 300,000 and the displacement of thousands of rural peasants to the country's urban centers. The resolution of this period of violence came in with the construction of the Frente Nacional (1958-74), an agreement between Liberal and Conservative parties to alternate the presidency between them every four years.

Although the US praised this power-sharing model in Colombia—while it fought specters of communism through intervention in the form of military training and dictatorships elsewhere in the Southern Cone and Central America—the failure of the Frente Nacional to address the persistent political exclusion of Colombia's rural poor led to the creation of a series of guerilla groups, the most well-known of which are the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), which began as an armed grassroots peasant group with Communist ideals, and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), composed mostly of middle-class students and intellectuals inspired by the Cuban Revolution. The peasant-guerilla army of the FARC grew from 500 to 3,000 between 1970 and 1982 (Villar 25), as more peasants were displaced from the land that was their livelihood and turned to cash crops like coca as a means of survival. While the FARC taxes coca, the principal way it generates income is through ransom for kidnappings, for which its support from the left has been compromised.

In response to the FARC's objectives, wealthy landowners began assembling private paramilitary militias to protect their interests, with military training and financial assistance from the US, the largest of which is *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC).



The FARC's commitment to protect *cocaleros* interests and crops provided the excuse for the US to label the guerilla group "narco-terrorists," a fluid term "first used by the Reagan administration during the Cold War to condemn the left-wing Sandinista government in Nicaragua" (Villar 27). However, this characterization is misleading if one considers that the United Nations Drugs Control Programme (UNDCP) in Colombia maintains that the paramilitaries are more deeply involved in drug trafficking than the FARC, and Carlos Castaño, the former leader of the AUC, "estimated that 70 per cent of their money came from drugs" (Livingstone 172). Although clashes between guerillas, paramilitary groups, the Colombian army, and unarmed civilian peasants predate the rhetoric of the "war on drugs," sweeping societal changes brought about by the narcotics trade into the 1980s and '90s complicated the relationships between all players and redefined the level of US intervention in Colombia.

While coca production initially tended to fall within rural territories controlled by the FARC, where the guerilla group controlled and taxed the movement of the substance, the development of a sophisticated trafficking industry systematically changed life in urban centers as well, as rising costs "redefined the stylistic taste and even the character of particular urban neighborhoods and architecture, and modified the possibilities of lower class urban employment in cities as diverse as Cali, Bogotá, and Medellín" (Roldán 130). Now, in addition to the oligarchy, a rising middle class profiting off cocaine trafficking and organized crime, under the command of drug lords like Medellín's Pablo Escobar, displaced the wealthy from their historic neighborhoods and gave back to the city's poor through urban development programs. By the time Escobar's political power eclipsed that of the Colombian state—coinciding Escobar's order for the murder of two

police chiefs in Medellín, and the 1992 bombing of an Avianca passenger plane to Bogotá with two US citizens on board—US state officials colluded with the Cali cartel to have him assassinated. The resulting lack of infrastructure of armed groups within the drug trade left behind by his death led to a period of unprecedented urban violence, in which youth from the peripheral *comuna* neighborhoods were co-opted into private militias.

In 1999, at a time when Colombia at large, and Medellín in particular, was considered one of the most violent places in the world, then Colombian President Andrés Pastrana drafted an aid plan, for which he sought international support, devised with the understanding that violence that "has deep roots in the economic and political exclusion and ... inequality and poverty" and to address those needs through "the development of productive processes, the promotion of human capital, the construction of a peace infrastructure, the strengthening of social capital, [and the promotion] of environmental sustainability" (Livingstone 124). When Pastrana's plan was circulated, it was co-opted and rewritten by US officials, in English, explicitly shifting its focus to be a military and counter narcotics strategy that focused on bolstering the Colombian military, which is known to collaborate with right-wing paramilitary groups. Through a program of training, intelligence, and hardware, it aimed to snuff out guerilla influence in rural areas, while its development of a widespread fumigation plan sought to eradicate coca production through the deployment of chemicals, such as Glyphosate (N-phosphonomethyl) whose "biggest-selling commercial formulation is Roundup, made by the US company Monsanto" (Livingstone 172). The original language of the plan changed so drastically that all other potential donors withdrew their aid, and the plan has

been widely viewed as post-Cold War excuse for US intervention in Latin America.

The strategies Plan Colombia enacts to eradicate guerilla forces operate largely not in direct combat with the FARC itself, but rather prey on the rural civilian population in an effort to "dry up" the resources that the FARC depends on to survive. Routine threats, disappearances, and large-scale massacres by paramilitary groups working in collusion with the Colombian army, supported by the US, terrorize a peasant population suspected of collaboration with the FARC, which has steadily contributed to a national epidemic of displacement in the last 30 years, casting Colombia as the nation with "the world's largest population of internally displaced persons" (Human Rights Watch 4). The policy of fumigation of coca growers' fields has contributed to this phenomenon, as formerly productive land is rendered inhabitable. According to Monsanto, its products carry health risks and should be administered with protective clothing, yet routine fumigation in Colombia is performed without notifying the populations that inhabit and work the land. Lists of symptoms incurred by exposure to such dangerous chemicals abound:

Rural workers exposed to glyphosate have reported nausea, dizziness, respiratory problems, stomach ailments and increased blood pressure. Laboratory tests suggest glyphosate may cause lung dysfunction, infertility and cancer. The US Environmental Protection Agency, however, claims it is 'less toxic than common salt, aspirin, caffeine, nicotine and even vitamin A'. (Livingstone 174)

The simultaneous effects of fumigation and ongoing conflicts—between guerillas, paramilitaries, and the state—that prey on the civilian population, have catalyzed the relocation of thousands of impoverished peasants from their rural homes to the peripheral outskirts of cities.

Control of the public perception of the stakes in the Colombian conflict have led to the construction of complex narratives that mask human rights violations on both sides. One of the most nefarious and extreme examples of the fabrication of narratives to inflate statistics of the Colombian state's success in the war against the FARC is that of the extrajudicial killings called *falsos positivos*. Anonymous collaborators round up young men and boys from families living in poverty, with the promise of work. These civilians are then transported to undisclosed locations, where they are executed by Colombian soldiers who, incentivized by financial rewards for body count, report the dead as FARC rebels killed in combat.

The case that generated the most outrage was the massacre of 16 boys from Soacha, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Bogotá. A wide-scale investigation launched in March of 2008 by the mothers of the disappeared boys drew international attention to this practice. A United Nations representative concluded that the extrajudicial killings in Soacha were far from an isolated event, saying, "el caso de Soacha fomenta la percepción de que se trata de un fenómeno limitado, tanto geográficamente, como en el tiempo. Aunque las matanzas de Soacha fueron flagrantes y obscenas, mis investigaciones demuestran que son simplemente la punta del iceberg" [The case of Soacha led to the perception that this was an isolated phenomenon, both geographically and historically. Although the killings of Soacha were flagrant and obscene, my investigations demonstrate that they're only the tip of the iceberg] ("Soacha" 12). According to *Semana*, in April 2015, 80 families attended the first national meeting for victims of extrajudicial killings, at which time there were 5,700 reports pending and 3,430 cases currently under investigation ("Falsos positivos"). Although, it's been eight

years since the case of Soacha came to public attention, only six Colombian military leaders have been sentenced.

This is one of the many examples of competing stories that overshadow the 2016 signing of the peace accords that signal the beginning of an end to the decades-long conflict. Since 1964 the conflict "has claimed the lives of more than 265,000 Colombians while 45,000 are missing and presumed dead. Seven million have been displaced by the violence" (Alsema). In a dialogue with Humberto De la Calle, head negotiator in the Colombian peace talks, writer Juan Gabriel Vásquez asked the official whether the greatest challenge of the accords would be to find a common version of a story of the conflict that all Colombians will recognize as true. De la Calle responded, "The reason behind the truth commission we have created is not to dictate one version of the truth, but to learn to live with different truths. A final agreement is not a military question. It's about learning to live with more than one truth at a time" (Vásquez).

### **Fieldwork Summary**

The fissures introduced into the "official" story by the mothers of the disappeared boys of Soacha illustrate the critical importance that marginalized groups' stories are given a platform to be voiced. In describing the necessity of archiving stories of displaced women in Medellín's peripheral neighborhoods, activist and scholar Tamera Marko writes, "In a competition of who gets to tell the past, present, and future story of Medellín, *desplazadas* have the least access to circulate their perspectives in citywide, national, and global areas. So the *desplazadas* are displaced again, this time from their own stories of displacement" (123). She calls this phenomenon *doble desplazamiento*, a process by

which the experiences and memories of marginalized groups do not contribute toward the full picture of local and exported narratives.

I arrived in Medellín with the goal to observe how different groups marshal the act of storytelling for various political, social, and/or economic ends. Considering the city as kind of “narrativescape,” borrowed from the concept of scapes coined by Appadurai, I sought out diverse forms of narrative production within the city: oral storytelling, written texts, festivals, publications, as well as narratives curated by local museums, performance, art, protest, and cultural events. I also spoke candidly to the speakers I encountered, which was not part of my formal, proposed research plan, but nevertheless informed my interpretation of their work. The most important discoveries I made in my investigation seem, in hindsight, like elements I might have expected: first, that the relationship between official and alternative narratives reveals a much more complicated power dynamic between state actors and individual storytellers than I had understood from afar; second, that personal stories often perform an act of self-erasure in their telling that render their authors anonymous, and they tended to be presented collectively, gathering impact through their strength in numbers; lastly, that narratives of Medellín presented at the local level could not be understood in a vacuum, as the effects of globalization have caused its understanding of itself to be deeply entrenched with the imaginary of other cities, including those of the US from which I had traveled.

To situate my research, it's important to understand that geographically and topographically, the city is deeply divided: between the gilded high-rises of El Poblado and the shopping malls and single-family homes of middleclass Laureles, and the peripheral neighborhoods of illegally constructed settlements that continue—since the

first wave of settlers during the years of *la Violencia*—to stretch up the sides of surrounding mountains. The condition of these settlements vary widely the further one moves up the foothills, ranging from brick-and-mortar structures with electricity and running water to tarps with dirt floors. Within the last ten years, the municipal government's campaign to transform the city's image has included an investment "building three hundred points of infrastructure throughout the poorest and most violent and isolated city neighborhoods" (Marko 130). Among these public projects is the construction of branch libraries and cultural spaces, as well as the 2006 funicular metro cable that links the peripheral neighborhoods to the rest of the city.

As I started my research within this landscape, my expectation was that I would encounter dominant narratives, advanced by the state, in direct opposition to subaltern narratives that would challenge these "official" versions. However, I found there was a much more complex relationship between the state actors and individual storytellers. Under the banner of the tagline *Medellín, todos por la vida*, the municipal government directly funds and supports cultural spaces and events that give platforms to citizens who are victims of violence and displacement to tell their stories. According to the strategies outlined by Mayor Aníbal Gaviria Correa's office, this has as much to do with physical spaces as it does with cultural events designed around principles of the inclusion of diverse sectors of society (Gaviria Correa 54).

A few relevant examples of such spaces and projects I observed included the release of the publication *Reintegrados: La vida después del conflicto*, a collection of testimonies narrated by demobilized individuals of armed groups reinstating themselves into civil society. It was published with forward by Gaviria, saying, "No es nuestro

querer ocultarles unos hechos; maquillarles un pasado glorioso. Al contrario, en aras de construir con ellos una memoria y ayudar a elaborar una verdad colectiva sobre nuestro conflicto armado" [It's not our wish to conceal the facts in order to make up a glorious past for them. Rather, for the sake of constructing memory with them, we wish to help develop a collective truth about our armed conflict] (Zulunga). I attended the launch of the collection in Plaza Mayor, the ritzy central conference center, in an event that was free and open to the public, attended by hundreds of city officials, press, collaborators, and observers, all of whom walked out of the auditorium with a free copy of the book.

There are also events designed with the objective to create spaces for different sectors of society to cross boundaries and exchange stories. The *Séptima Parada Juvenil de la Lectura* is an annual city-sponsored narrative festival targeted at teens and youth within Parque Biblioteca Manuel Mejía Vallejo, a public park that offered free entry to all attendees and participants. Tents surrounding the perimeter of the park are dedicated to performances or expressions of storytelling and memory via different media, including workshops: *No somos peligrosos* (We're Not Dangerous), orchestrated by a local theater group with aims to empower youth and rewrite history; *Lectura Viva*, a project that charts acts of storytelling onto city maps; and *Carpa Memoria para la vida* (Tent Memory for Life), in which children were invited to use visual art—drawing, animating, constructing dolls—to create characters to tell their own stories—with prompts, including: "¿Cómo comunicar, narrar y percibir las causas, los daños y las consecuencias del conflicto y a la violencia armada en Colombia? ¿Cómo me veo? ¿Cómo me ven? [...] ¿Qué ha pasado en su territorio?" [How to communicate, narrate, and perceive the causes, damages, and



consequences of the conflict and the armed violence in Colombia? How do I see myself? How am I seen? [...]What has happened in your neighborhood?].

The content of the *25th Festival Internacional de Poesía de Medellín*, which took place in remote sites throughout the city, directly engaged with personal narratives of the armed conflict, paired readings of the work of international poets with that of students in low-income communities greatly affected by violence or displacement, such as those in Comuna 3 and Barrio Antioquia and Bello Oriente ("Proyecto Gulliver"). In other words, city-sanctioned and sponsored events were directing foreign visitors into the most historically stigmatized areas, presenting the writing of marginalized community members to be read in the same venues as the invited poets.

Yet whom do these projects serve? The public face of Medellín to the international community boasts a new era for the city, yet displaced citizens remain skeptical after years of distrust. Historically, the work that has gone into these communities has been that of displaced citizens who have remained on the land, often working in direct opposition to a municipal authority who, for decades, had the reputation of destroying settlements in an attempt to quell violence within these areas. Meanwhile, the very rhetoric used to refer to their communities belies the decades of history the residents have there: "land that people occupy without purchase in Medellín is commonly called *una invasión*" (Marko 130). If the municipal authority portrays itself as the city's savior, the catalyst of change with its investments, where does that leave the people who've fought state and local authorities for years to save their communities? As Marko points out, "The Medellín campaign is problematic not just because of its myth of rescue," but also because it makes invisible the labor, artistry, and expertise of thousands

of community members who built dozens of neighborhoods five decades before state support" (131). The stories cancel each other out. The same governing bodies that build community spaces and organize storytelling events were the same ones burning down people's homes.

Many middleclass students and professionals I spoke with shared this sense of skepticism, that while the exorbitant costs that went into the construction of state-of-the-art facilities and programming would improve the city's image worldwide, it would be better spent on infrastructure that could help the most disenfranchised citizens support themselves. In every trip I took to Parque Biblioteca San Javier in Comuna 13—one of the new library constructions in perhaps the area of the city historically most stigmatized by poverty and violence—I was far from the only foreign tourist who used the metro cable to visit the celebrated project. The library visit is ubiquitous in international tourism literature generated by the city. It makes one wonder whether such projects are more about inflating the city's image abroad, or about serving the communities in which they're built.

The second discovery regarding the dissemination of local narratives is that while official stories of the municipality take clear responsibility for their narratives they put in public space, the speakers of individual stories often render themselves anonymous or fold their personal stories into that of a collective. Much of this comes down to a matter of personal safety as many speakers place themselves in personal peril by speaking out. The *Museo Casa de Memoria* houses a unique collection of resources and curated displays specifically related to memory of the armed conflict and displacement in Colombia, and is open to international scholars' independent research. Personal

testimonies—sometimes collaboratively produced with local writers and journalists—include stories by the displaced, by family members of the disappeared, by demobilized citizens, and are written in the first person with the caveat that all identifying information had been removed from their stories.

When I attend the demonstrations of the group *Madres de la Candelaria*—a group of mothers of missing children in Medellín who organize themselves under the model of Argentina's Madres de Plaza de Mayo—the women of the collective often begin their oral stories, delivered in public plazas and cultural spaces, by stating their full names and the full names of their missing children. These facts are always given, despite the fact that over the years many of them have been personally threatened. Yet when I speak informally to members of the group in their Medellín office, the mothers speak collectively, refer me to one another's experiences as they speak through their own. They tell their stories in quick succession and broad strokes that give a dizzying sense of trauma reproducing itself between and across their distinct stories. They list their losses that have become so much a part of them over the years, entering the most intimate spaces of their own stories with detached straight faces. They constantly refer to other members of the group who have lost more than they have.

According to John Beverley's definition of the function of the *testimonio* form, one of its most critical elements is that the "I" that speaks in place of the voice of a community:

Because the authorial function has been erased or mitigated, the relationship between authorship and forms of individual and hierarchical power in bourgeois society has also changed. *Testimonio* represents an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle.

[...*Testimonio*] always signifies the need for a general social change in which the stability of the reader's world must be brought into question. ("Margin" 23)

The fundamental understanding of the dissemination of local narrative through this particular lens helps account for the tricky asymmetrical power relationship between an innovative local government that places its stamp on everything it helps curate or produce, and the individual storytellers who deliberately efface themselves with acts of self-preservation and collective empathy that come with the territory of narratives of true political urgency.

This realization is related to the last discovery I'll discuss, in that each of my confrontations with narrative production in the city is complicated by my own subject position, which comes preloaded with its own range of imaginaries that carry specific connotations in this context. During my time in Medellín, my presence as a US visitor was consistently brought to my attention, as I was encouraged to take the Pablo Escobar bus tour, or to ride the metrocable to Parque Arví in order to observe the dangerous *comuna* neighborhoods from a safe distance. The version of the city that strangers assume I seek to experience as a US visitor reveals the imaginary of the US I cannot help but carry with me that are the result of my country's intervention here and the larger effects of neo-liberalism and a globalized world.

There is a preponderance of T-shirts with images of the Brooklyn Bridge, of New York Yankee caps, of Hispanicized names of Anglo origin that I work to pronounce correctly here when I greet every Bryan, Michael, and Anderson I meet. Many families' members I meet straddle the continent between Colombia and the US. On Latina Stereo, a local radio station, emigrants listening remotely by internet regularly call from Miami and Queens to request songs. My presence as a US visitor is often met with far less

indignation than I'm accustomed to, suggesting to me that in addition to the stories of acts of violence exacerbated by the meddling superpower nation that I call home, dissemination of other versions of US imaginaries have been rendered more readily accessible by contemporary modes of exchange. In Roldán's words:

Latent, unresolved issues of land concentration, resource exploitation, ideological struggle and the impact of neo-liberal economic policies have fundamentally altered the character of urban life and its possibilities in multiple and complex ways. The spatial dimensions of urban exchange, memory, identity and interaction no longer obey fixed territorial limits. Medellín's history has long been part of a broad, multinational, almost virtual community that stretches from New York and Europe to Colombia. The exchange and distribution requirements of the narcotics industry accelerate and energize the globalization of cultural influences in multiple directions: food, clothes, slang, music, money and fad jet from the lower class barrios of Medellín to the urban hipster in Manhattan and back again with dizzying speed. (146)

This complex sense of distribution and appropriation between the global North and global South has only continued to complicate with contemporary modes of technology and communication. My first nights in the city, I was hosted in the Prado neighborhood by two strangers I had met on the internet: an Argentine social worker and a Colombian nurse, who received me offering both *yerba mate* and *maracuyá*, while requesting help translating websites written in academic English relevant to their goals of graduate study; my second host, who had spent his entire life in the working-class Belén neighborhood of Medellín, greeted me his favorite New Orleans brass bands playing on YouTube in the background. I learn more about *salsa caleña* and *salsa choque* from a Finnish transplant in Medellín than I do from my Colombian friends who don't like to dance. Sophisticated forms of exchange not only complicated my notion of local narrative, but also provided

me with a greater sense of the fluidity in approaching the kinds of preconceived boundaries I brought to my research.

### **Narrative Intentions**

In choosing to respond to my research through fiction, I came to understand that it would be impossible to work in this medium without a firm focus on my own subject position as a writer. Despite my intentions to design a text that would be representative of the layered and complicated flows of narratives, the risk of contributing to a tradition of voyeuristic narratives of violence felt like a genuine one, because of the mere fact of the language and place from which I write. I believe that the work of fiction writers, to imagine ourselves—through language—inside the lives of others whose experiences are not are own, carries with it an extraordinary responsibility to do so with sensitivity, empathy, and cultural awareness of the hegemonic systems of oppression that continue to shape the worlds we inhabit and represent.

To fortify myself during the writing process, I studied narrative forms that take testimonies and historical events as catalysts for fiction. In Rodolfo Walsh's preface to *Operación masacre*, he stresses his distance from the 1956 botched massacre of Peronists in Argentina around which his novel is built, asking if he can instead go back to his chess game: "¿Puedo volver al ajedrez? Puedo. [ ... ] Es solamente el azar lo que me ha puesto eso ante los ojos. Pudo ocurrir a cien kilómetros, puedo ocurrir cuando yo no estaba" [Can I go back to playing chess? I can. [ ... ] It's only chance that has put this in front of my eyes. It could have happened 100 kilometers away; it could have happened when I wasn't there] (Walsh 8). This seems to me to be a critical prelude with which to open

(although it's important to acknowledge, in Walsh's case, that he did not return to his chess game, but rather kept writing until he was murdered on a Buenos Aires street in 1977 for the publication of his Open Letter from a Writer to the Military Junta). He begins with an acknowledgement his distance from this particular atrocity, acknowledgment of the risk one takes in appropriating elements from real people's testimonies into fiction.

The confrontation of the risk of aestheticizing of the horror of real human experiences in a way that could be viewed as irresponsible or uninformed guided the drafting process of my text. It was important to me to defamiliarize the referents of this story to the extent that both Medellín and New York, to a certain extent, disappear. This story takes place in fictional landscapes, yet my hope is that the settings suggest real-world analogies. I aim to estrange the reader from preconceived expectations one inevitably brings to places like Medellín and New York, not only to interrupt the presence of high-profile narratives in the mind of a reader, but also because while this piece of fiction draws on reflection of actual memories of violence and displacement, these events are far from being circumscribed to cities like Medellín. I aim to occupy this messy globalized space between imaginaries, and allow the reverberations of trauma and violence to ricochet back and forth between narrators with varied levels of access to circulate their bodies and stories. It was important to me to create a fictional world in which massacres exist alongside private agonies, in which refugee crises unfold in the same time and space that literary texts are authored and translated. So by not locating the narrative action in a particular corner of the world, I aim for it to occur nowhere and everywhere at once. I aim to create a narrative space tolerant enough to allow their stories

to coexist, while conscious of the way that their versions of truth interrupt and compete with each other, mediate each other, and even cancel each other out at once. Lastly, as was the case in Fabián's testimony, I have tried to eschew drama. My hope is that the cycle of perspectives function alone as a self-contained story, but also that I can continue to build on this framework as I develop a novel-length manuscript.

In considering Žižek's thoughts on systematic violence, with which I opened this epilogue, I aimed to "step back, to disentangle" myself from any preconceived notions I, or my imagined reader, would bring to these settings and stories, and instead create a narrative space that was mimetic of how violence reproduces patterns of violence that moved in multiple directions in a globalized world. In the introduction to the same work, as Žižek describes the process that has guided his own strategy in writing in an indirect fashion on the topic of violence, he goes on to say:

Adorno's famous saying, it seems, needs correction: it is not poetry that is impossible after Auschwitz, but rather *prose*. Realistic prose fails, where the poetic evocation of the unbearable atmosphere of a camp succeeds. That is to say, when Adorno declares poetry impossible (or, rather, barbaric) after Auschwitz, this impossibility is an enabling impossibility. (5)

This enabling possibility is precisely the risk, and, on some level, the inevitable failure, narrative writing may take on in attempting to construct truths out of lies. When organized straightforward writing designed around argument cannot translate horror, fiction can at the very least seek to complicate forms of representation.

I chose to respond to my research through narrative writing because it seemed to me the vehicle with which I was best equipped to satisfy these objectives, but because it's impossible for me to offer further comment on my own work as its author, I'll end with an example of engagement with such ideals toward which my work aspires. Álvaro



Cepeda Samudio's *La casa grande* is a novel that chronicles, through fragmentary style of narration in ten distinct sections, the 1928 Banana Massacre of striking United Fruit plantation workers in Ciénaga, Colombia. Part of the reason that the novel so successfully narrates these events is its insistence in occupying different perspectives—those of the soldiers, the sister, the father, the town, etc.—that are informed by their different motivations and desires, and whose elliptical voices render a singular telling of a historical event impossible. In his forward to the English translation of Cepeda Samudio's novel, Gabriel García Márquez writes, "This manner of writing history, arbitrary as it might seem to the historian [...] is a magnificent example of how a writer can honestly filter out the immense quantity of rhetorical and demagogic garbage that stands in the way of indignation and nostalgia" (García Márquez xi). This feels like what, at best, fiction strives for. As a writer, one works with the same tools—of language, of stories—that are used to dehumanize and perpetuate systems of oppression, generating the most damaging kinds of rhetorical and demagogic garbage. These tools are inherently flawed, but they have potential, in their finest iterations, to suggest new ways of thinking through problems that have become so familiar to readers it's difficult to see them for what they are: to humanize individuals in a way that might disrupt easy distinctions between victims and aggressors, to undermine dominant narratives, to offer alternatives.

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**Biography**

Sarah Bruni holds a BA in English literature from the University of Iowa and an MFA in fiction writing from Washington University in St. Louis. She has taught creative writing in St. Louis and New York, and volunteered as a writer-in-schools in San Francisco, and Montevideo, Uruguay. Her first novel, *The Night Gwen Stacy Died*, was published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in 2013. Her translations have appeared in the *Buenos Aires Review*. While a graduate student in Tulane University's Latin American Studies program, she received Tinker fellowships to pursue research in Uruguay, in 2014, and Colombia, in 2015. The majority of her coursework at Tulane was fulfilled through literature classes in the Spanish and Portuguese department. She plans to continue translating and writing fiction.