



SAINT DEATH

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*For Ian Diment and Artur Santos
And for my father, who would have understood*

*This book is about other stories that occur over there,
across the river.*

*The comfortable way to deal with these stories is to say
they are about them.*

*The way to understand these stories is to say
they are about us.*

—CHARLES BOWDEN (1945–2014)

THE RIVER

Not too far away from here, just over the horizon of our imagination, there's a girl floating in the river. She moves with the water, whispering through the bulrushes by the bank. Her arms are out to the side, her legs splay, and tiny fish dance around her toes. The hot sun warms her body against the cool of the water, which ripples peacefully as she drifts. A change in the current at the turn of the bend shifts her course and she floats out away from the bank, toward the center, uncaring, heedless.

Her only clothes are a stained tank top, and panties with Mickey Mouse on the front, a failed guardian angel. She picks up speed, and the far shore approaches, coming closer, until finally, a strong eddy takes her plump body and rolls her over, facedown in the water. She doesn't react.

There is little left to show who she was; her body says she was a young woman, but it's hard to judge her age; her head is wrapped in thick electrical tape, leaving only a thin slit for her nostrils. She lay at the bottom of the river for two days before the bloating

brought her to the top, pushing her arms and legs away from her body.

When the police find her, *if* they find her, when they write a report, *if* they write a report, they'll say she drowned, just another mojado, another "wetback," and she drowned while trying to cross the river. Never mind the tape around her head. Never mind she was almost naked. Never mind the marks on her body.

Now, tantalizing, her fingers stroke the northern shore of the river. Over here, they call it Río Bravo. Over there, they call it Rio Grande, for that is El Norte: America.

ANAPRA

It doesn't look like the most dangerous place on earth. It looks like somewhere half-made, it looks like an aborted thought. It looks like a three-year-old god threw together some cardboard boxes and empty coffee tins and Coke bottles in the sandpit of the Chihuahuan desert, and then forgot it. Left it to its own vices. The god was forgetful and has not returned to care for his creation, but other gods, pitiless ones, are approaching even now, in a speeding pickup truck.

There's no more than a hurried moment to look around this careworn land. A dozen of the roads are paved: cracked concrete and full of holes; the rest are just rutted strips of dirt. Most of the houses aren't houses at all, but jacales: shacks made of packing crates and sheets of corrugated iron, of cardboard and of crap, with roofs of plastic sheeting or tar paper held down with old car tires. The best have cinder block walls. The worst take more effort to imagine than is comfortable. Few have running water. One or two have stolen electricity using hookups from the power lines, a dangerous trick in a world made of sun-baked cardboard and wood.

The jacales are things that might, some distant day, be the ghostly ancestors of actual houses. When those houses are finally built, they will be built on lines of hope—the grid that’s already been optimistically scratched far out into the desert in the belief that this place can become a thriving community. Already, there are attempts to make this a normal kind of place: whitewashed cinder block houses with green tin roofs, the Pemex gas station, a primary school, a secondary school. There’s even the new hospital, up the hill. The Del Rio store on the corner of Raya and Rancho Anapra, the main drag through the town. But these are exceptions, and all this, all of this, is founded on a belief that needs to ignore what is rapidly approaching in the truck.

This is the Colonia de Anapra, a little less than a shanty town, trying hard to be a little bit more than a slum; poorest of all the poor colonias of Juárez. And Juárez? Juárez is the beast, the fulminating feast of violence and of the vastly unequal wielding of power; where the only true currencies are drugs, guns, and violence. Juárez is a new monster in an old land: Juárez is the laboratory of our future.

Juárez, from where the pickup truck approaches at pace, lies down the hill. Anapra is just a small feeder fish, clinging to the belly of the whale, and while it doesn’t look like the most dangerous place on earth, it is here as much as anywhere else where drugs are run and bodies are hanged from telegraph poles, where dogs bark at the sound of guns in the cold desert darkness, where people vanish in the night. And the nights are long. It’s the end of October; the sun sets at six o’clock and will not rise again till seven the next morning. Thirteen hours of darkness in which all manner of evil can bloom, flowers that need no sun.

* * *

The night is yet to come.

It's still warm. The truck cannot yet be heard, and on the corner of Rancho Anapra and Tiburón, where the paving stops and the road runs off toward the North as dirt, kids are playing in the street. Here, far from the ocean, where water is so precious, nearly all of the streets have the names of fish. On Tiburón, the shark, a little girl and her friends watch her big brother wheeling his bike around in circles by the hardware store, showing off. Another group hang out by the twenty-four-hour automated water kiosk, hoping to beg a few pesos to buy some bottles. A gaggle of parents coming back from a workshop at Las Hormigas passes by, talking about what it means to be better mothers, better fathers.

Then there's Arturo. Almost invisible, he steers his way steadily along Rancho Anapra. He glances at the kids. So serious. So seriously they play, that as Arturo weaves between them, they have no idea he's even there. There's a smile inside him, a smile for their seriousness, and on another day he might have joked with them a little and made them laugh, but he's too tired for that today, way too tired. Some days he helps out in an auto shop and this is one of those days. He's been lugging old tires around the yard all afternoon and his shoulders ache from the effort of that while his brain aches from the effort of listening to José, the owner, complaining.

Cars come and go down the road. A bus stops and a load of maquiladora workers climb out and stand around for a while, chatting. A patrol car crawls by, a rare enough sight in Anapra. The factory workers see the car and begin to disperse into the streets of

fish, but they needn't worry, the cops are just thirsty. One of the cops gets out and wanders over to the water shop. He buys a couple of bottles and heads back to the car, ruffling the hair of one of the boys. He doesn't give them any money. Handing one of the bottles through the window of his car to his colleague, he pulls the cap off his own. Then, as he tilts his head back to drink, the sound of the pickup comes down the street.

Trucks come and go all the time, but the people know what this is. It's moving fast, it has the growl of a powerful engine. It bowls into sight over the crest of the road and heads rapidly toward them. The people scatter. It might be nothing, but better to be sure. The truck gets closer; a flashy dark red body, tinted windows. Two guys in the cab, another four clinging on in the flatbed.

As if trying not to disturb the air, the cop carefully gets back in his patrol car and nods to his colleague, just as the truck reaches them, slowing right up, dropping to a crawl as it passes. All six men stare at the cops, who make very, very sure that they do not look back.

Everyone else has disappeared.

Arturo too looks for somewhere to vanish, and quickly backs into the shaded doorway of a green house on the corner opposite, an unusual house, one of the very few with more than one floor. The four men climb down from the flatbed and, pulling out pistols, head into the hardware store. The policemen start their car and drive steadily away, back toward the city.

Arturo doesn't feel that frightened; this is, God knows, not something new, but suddenly he feels very visible. He makes himself small in the doorway, as small as he can, and stands very still.

The four men are dragging the owner of the shop into the street. The man is called Gabriel. Arturo doesn't really know him, nothing much beyond his name. The men are roughing him up, nothing too serious, but then, as Gabriel tries to fight back, one of them hits him on the side of his head with the heel of a pistol and he slumps to the dust, barely conscious. Arturo can see the blood even from across the street.

The men haul Gabriel onto the bed of the pickup, and climb back in, two of them clinging to the sides and two of them lounging on an old sofa that's been bolted to the floor. The truck makes a turn across the median, heading back to Juárez, and Arturo starts to relax, but as it passes him, the driver of the truck looks over and sees him. Their eyes meet. Their eyes meet, and as they do, Arturo feels something jolt, as if the world has shuddered underneath his feet.

The man's face is tattooed, more ink than skin; markings of a narco gang, but at this range it's hard to see which. His head is shaven; he's dressed, as are all the men, in a white wife-beater shirt; tattoos snake all down the muscles of both arms. In slow time, the driver straightens his left arm out of the cab window, and points at Arturo. He makes a pistol with his thumb and forefinger, cocking his thumb back, aiming the gun right at Arturo, who cannot look away as the man drops his thumb, and mouths something, something Arturo cannot grasp.

The man's head tilts back, his mouth open as he laughs. He flattens his foot to the floor and the truck speeds away, back toward the city. The cops are long gone, and anyway, it's not the police these men are scared of; they're scared of the other pandillas, the other gangs, like the M-33, the gang whose turf this is, for now at least.

* * *

It's over. They've left, and the tattooed narco is gone, but Arturo can still feel that finger pointing at him, right at his face, as if the fingertip is pressing into his forehead. It's so strong a sensation that Arturo reaches up and tries to rub it away.

Above him, unseen, something hovers. It is something with immense power. Pure bone, and charcoal eye. Ephemeral yet eternal: the White Girl. The Beautiful Sister. The Bony Lady. Santísima Muerte. Her shroud ripples in the breeze, white wings of death. She holds a set of scales in one hand; in the other, she holds the whole world. Her skull-gaze grinning, her stare unflinching. She looks down at Arturo; she looks down at everyone.

As the truck disappears from view, Gabriel's wife, whose name Arturo does not know, emerges into the street, screaming, her kids clinging to her legs, crying without really knowing why.

—¡Hijos de la chingada!

She screams it over and over.

—¡Hijos de la chingada!

It isn't clear if she means the men who have taken her husband, or herself, her family. One or two people emerge from hiding and rush to give her comfort when there is no comfort to be had.

Far, so very far away, on the other side of the street, Arturo looks down and sees what he has been standing on.

Here, outside the green house, is something strange—a stretch of concrete sidewalk, where everywhere else the sidewalks are dirt. There are marks on the concrete, marks of chalk. They are lines and curves; there are arrows, and small crosses and circles within the curving lines. One device, a pair of interlocking curving arrows, is intersected by seven more arrows that point into the house. So now Arturo realizes where he is, which doorway he has backed into.

Cautiously, he edges away, and looks up at Santa Muerte herself, Saint Death. La Flaquita, the Skinny Lady. She's printed on a plastic banner that's pinned to the wall of the house, right above the doorway. The plastic has been in the full sun for years now; her blacks have become grays, the green globe of the earth is weakened and weary. Above her, in a semicircle, it's still just possible to make out some writing on the fading plastic: *No temas a donde vayas que haz de morir donde debes.*

Don't worry where you're going; you will die where you have to.

No! She is not the Catrina. She is not that enticing girl of flowers and feathers, that sultry seductress of death. Neither is she the sugary skulls to be eaten, the calaveritas, with the names of the beloved lost. Nor is she the Halloween reaper of gringo fame, scythe in hand, though she could wield it as well as anyone, and does!

No! She is not those impostors, those delusions of decay. For she comes without negotiation. She has no need of come-hither eyes. She is not sugar; she is not candy in the Halloween basket. Yet she is fair. She welcomes all. She opens her arms to the saint and the sinner, to the rich and the poor, to prostitute and narco-lord, to criminal and police chief; a folk saint, a rebel angel, a powerful divinity excommunicated from the Orthodox. She is she, of absolute loyalty. She judges no one, and yet everyone will judge themselves by her in the end.

Yes! She is Santa Muerte, she is Santísima Muerte; the most holy! She is Saint Death. That is who you should worship!

ISLA DE SACRIFICIOS

There, no more than ten meters away, is the fence. Beyond it, is El Norte, where *metros* somehow become *yards*. Thirty of them bring you to the railroad tracks, upon which mile-long freight trains lumber slowly past, night and day, slowly enough to make their contents a target for anyone willing to risk it. Heading in from the west, the twin tracks run parallel to the border, within feet of the fence, until this point. Here, just beyond where Arturo lives on Isla de Sacrificios, lies a hill, Mount Cristo Rey, forcing the American railroad to swing north before it continues its journey east and south around the hill. On the top of the hill Christ himself stands with his arms outstretched, facing both Juárez, and, on the other side of the river, El Paso, in a gesture of brotherly love. It's a misleading gesture. His arms are outstretched because he is nailed to a cross.

It's a funny kind of fence. One day, perhaps it will stretch the whole length of the border, almost two thousand miles of it. Right now,

less than half has been constructed, from stretches of double-height twin fences with border patrols and searchlights, to single-height runs of chain link. In other places it's three-wire cattle fence, or climb-proof steel plates, or even piles of crushed cars. There are sections of concrete-filled thin wall, and stretches of nothing more than concrete posts in the ground, yards apart from each other. At its western end it trails off into the Pacific Ocean as a series of rusting iron girders poking out of the sand like the fingers of a giant buried robot.

The fact that the fence is not complete is something Arturo is well aware of, because from here, at the corner of Salmón and Isla de Sacrificios, he can see the break in the line. It appears that faced with the arduous task of climbing Mount Cristo Rey, the fence simply stopped. There is nothing. No border, no line, no concrete marker posts. Nothing. Just a dried-up watercourse coming down from the hill, and Mexican sand, which at some point becomes American sand. Arturo knows this well, for he buries his cooking gear, and any other big stuff that he doesn't want stolen from his shack, out here in the sand, usually choosing a creosote bush as a marker. He guesses he sometimes buries his stuff in America, sometimes Mexico, it doesn't matter to him. What matters is not having his stuff stolen.

It's a funny kind of fence, Arturo thinks, which you can simply walk around. And it's not even as if the hill is insurmountable, for while the peak upon which Christ stands with his arms out is getting on for five thousand feet, its lower slopes are easygoing. Besides which, you could drive an army of trucks across the flat patch of desert from the end of the fence to the start of the foothills,

just behind Arturo's jacal. That's a funny kind of fence, and one day, Arturo supposes, men will come from El Norte and finish the job, right over the hill to join up with the border again—the great river that runs between El Paso and Juárez. Up to any point before then, Arturo could simply walk into America.

A hundred feet would find him at the railroad tracks. Three thousand feet would get him to New Mexico Route 273. Another three thousand feet, and he could be in Sunland Park, fooling around on the rides at Western Playland. On still evenings, or when the wind blows gently south, he can hear the music blaring from the rides: garish norteno, American pop, or narco-rap lite, not the real stuff, because that might scare people.

On nights like those, when the sound of America comes to him, he lies on the crates he uses for a bed, closes his eyes, and imagines that he's there, with his family who love him, or friends, or better, a great girl who's crazy about him.

Any night of the year, he could pack up the almost nothing that he owns: a folding knife he likes with a pretty Catrina skull on the handle, a pack of cards for playing calavera, his dirty, red Angels cap. He could put on his jacket, and he could go and start a new life.

He doesn't. He never has. People try it, from time to time, and he has thought about it, of course. But he has also thought about the things he hears in the night. Things he hears after Western Playland has gone to sleep.

Sometimes people smugglers walk right past his shack, feet away, hissing instructions to the pollos—the “chickens” hoping for a better life somewhere else. And he hears trucks and Jeeps out in the

desert, their engines revving. It's such a cheap-looking piece of sand, in the day. Only at night is it clear that this is very expensive dirt. That this scrubby land is something valuable, and being fought over. This fact is often confirmed by the sound of voices, shouting, panicking. Gunfire. Single shots from pistols. The repeated stutter of automatic rifles. Arturo sees lights sometimes: floodlights on the Jeeps of narco gangs, the flashing blues and reds of police trucks, the regular cops or MIGRA, the patrols hunting immigrants. He's heard American voices once in a while, crackling and hissing over intercoms just yards from where he sleeps, though because he speaks almost no English he never understands.

And everyone has seen the remains of nights like that, the mornings after. Kids come and stand around the bodies, looking on in the way that only little kids can, looking on blankly, understanding nothing. Arturo remembers one morning when he saw a gaggle of children standing around the remains of a necklacing: someone executed by a burning tire forced around their chest and arms. The kids just stared, until their mothers arrived. Then they stood and looked too.

It could be something elaborate like that, it could just be a single bullet; either way, these are the things that happen in the desert at night.

And is it better, Arturo has wondered, to be a fly who spends the whole of its short life banging against a closed window, buzzing crazy, buzzing, buzzing until its life runs out and it drops to the windowsill, slowly twitching, or to be a fly who finds an opening, a gap in the window frame, and flies out to who knows where? Who knows what?

* * *

Arturo pulls his grimy T-shirt off and drops it on the dirt floor, then lies on his bed. His shoulders ache so badly they burn. He feels nothing else, can think of nothing else, but slowly, eventually, his body eases, and with it, his thoughts turn outside of himself. José was in fine form today; within five minutes he managed to complain both about the heat and the fact that winter is coming, something Arturo is equally well aware of. Already the nights are cold, and he will have to find an extra blanket or two from somewhere. He has a kind of stove he made from an empty oil drum and a length of plastic pipe for a chimney, which pokes through his roof. Most of the time he has little to burn on it, and even when he does, it doesn't work very well. On the rare occasions he does get it fired up strongly, the plastic pipe is liable to melt and toxic black smoke churns into the room, choking him. There are holes in the corrugated tin that's stretched over his packing crate roof, and he could do with fixing it on a little better too. Nails driven through bottle caps make cheap rivets, but they wear loose in the end.

He should cook something. Soon. He should get up and get a drink. He doesn't. He's thinking about Gabriel, at the ironmongery, wondering what he'd done, though he knows that's a stupid thing to wonder. No one deserves to be dragged out of their home in broad daylight, taken away from their family. But he'd done something; said something, been somewhere, just plain *done* something that someone else with guns didn't like. He might show up again, but Arturo doubts it. And if he does show up, he'll show up dead. The best to be hoped for is that it will be a swift ending.

He can forget Gabriel, and he does, quickly, because he's seen it often enough, but he cannot forget that narco, the one driving the pickup, pointing an imaginary gun at him, mouthing something at him, mouthing something, but what? He tries to replay it in his head to see if he can see the words falling from his lips, but he can't. All he can see is the half-tattooed face, laughing, laughing, laughing, and all he can feel is that fingertip, pressing into his forehead, hard.

We are alone, everywhere!

Everywhere alone, and our solitude is all the greater for the knowledge that we have been abandoned in the wide desert of the world, abandoned by uncaring gods, deaf to our cries, and blind to our devotions.

We, the people of these gods, we are torn from the womb of the world, and so, desperate for reunion, we wander. We have wandered far from the dark caves where once we huddled around a fire, for warmth, for protection. Hermanos. And wandering far, or staying near, one thing alone is true: each of us dies the death he is looking for.

LA HORA DE LA HORA

I want to destroy something, Arturo thinks, as he lies on his bed. And if I cannot destroy something, then I want to create something. It's time. It's time.

He gets no further than this, does not begin to unravel the logic of these illogical thoughts, for as he stares at the ceiling, he hears a car outside. A car outside is not enough to draw his attention; what draws his attention is that the car has stopped, right outside his shack.

Still lying down, he lifts a corner of cardboard where it has come free from the packing crate wall. The only person he knows with a car is José. He has four or five beat-up old wrecks, only one of which will be working at any given time, and this car, which has stopped outside, is not one from his boss's current collection. It's a white Ford, sunk on its heels, almost dead.

Arturo can't make out who's driving it, not at first, but then he sees the door open, and out of it, as if he were here yesterday, steps Faustino.

—¡Cabrón!—says Arturo, under his breath. He sits up, pulling his dirty shirt back on, and then Faustino is already slapping his hand on the roof.

—¡Hey! ¡Chingada! ¿You in there?

Arturo wants to say no. No! I'm not here. And anyway where the hell have you been all year?

But he doesn't. And the door, which is the door of some old closet and has no lock, is opening.

Faustino steps inside.

—¡Sure, just come on in!—Arturo says, and he tries to say it like he's mad, but then, Jesus, it's Faustino! It's Faustino! And he starts laughing, unable to stop himself.—¡I might have had a girl in here!

Faustino stands there, laughing too.

—First time for everything. ¿Right, cabrón?

Arturo tells him to shut up and then he tells him to come right in and sit down, and Faustino walks over, his hobble just as obvious as it always was, his head nearly scraping the roof. He doesn't sit.

Arturo waves a hand at him.

—¿Have you grown, vato? You were always so skinny.

Faustino stares at Arturo.

Arturo stares at Faustino, wondering who's going to talk about it first. And if it's Faustino, what he's going to say. But Faustino just stands there, like he was here yesterday, like he was here this morning, saying nothing. Arturo can see he's changed. Faustino's wearing a long-sleeved flannel shirt, but the cuffs are rolled up a way and Arturo can see there are tattoos on his arms. He had no tattoos

before. Arturo cannot make out what they are. The shirt looks like it's pretty damn new, and he wears it open over a white T-shirt. And Arturo has noticed the Nike Cortezes on Faustino's feet. Well, he thinks, if you're going to have only one and a half feet, you may as well put them in some fucking fine shoes.

Still, Faustino stands. He stands, and there's something else about him. There's a bigger change than all these clothes; than the fact that he has enough cash to run a car, even if it's a piece of crap.

Arturo sees the earth tremor under Faustino's one and a half feet. His legs plant themselves into the ground as if they go way underground, miles down, so that as he leans forward slightly, ducking under the roof, there is no danger he will fall. He is rooted. Something has erupted, something has given him power. Something from the old land has come to dwell in Faustino, investing him with force, a force so powerful the very ground tremors, the air shakes around him.

Now, the smile slips from Faustino's face, slowly, slowly, and as it does, Arturo's gaze falls on the webbing belt around his old friend's waist. There's a Catrina there, a gaudy Catrina skull for the buckle, grinning back at him.

—Well—says Arturo.—Quite the cholo now. ¿Eh, cabrón? One thing: that buckle is re-gacho.

Faustino's smile is long dead. He takes two strides over and hits Arturo on the side of the head.

Arturo lurches sideways on the bed, more stunned than hurt, at least for now, and stares back at Faustino, who's glaring at him like an animal. Then Arturo throws himself at him and they fight, collapsing into a struggle, scrabbling at each other, as Arturo

shouts—¿Where were you, chingada? ¿Where have you been all damn year?

Faustino doesn't answer. They wrestle some more; they fight like little kids, panting hard, arms flailing and fists making bad blows that hurt all the same.

Then Faustino, who's not as skinny as he once was, rolls Arturo onto his back, and as he does, Arturo's hands knock against something heavy and hard on Faustino's back.

An automatic pistol falls onto the dirt floor.

Arturo sees it, and immediately stops struggling. Faustino thumps Arturo once more, but meekly; the fight has gone from them, and so he stops too, and sits up, pushing his hand back through his hair. Arturo stares at the gun, then he stares at his friend.

—¿What the hell?

Faustino doesn't answer. He gets off his friend, picks up the gun and tucks it down the back of his jeans, as if it were the habit of a lifetime. Then he sits on the bed. Then he starts crying.

Arturo has never seen Faustino cry. Not in all their years as brothers in the colonia. Not in all their time, despite everything they've seen, despite everything that's happened to them, Faustino was always the calmer one, always the wiser one.

Arturo doesn't know what to do, what to say. Finally, he thumps his friend's knee with a gentle fist.

—¿Vato, what's wrong?

Faustino's holding his head.

—I'm in trouble. I'm in big trouble. Jodido.

Arturo doesn't say anything.

Now, the world shakes again, but it is not Faustino who is

shaking the world. It is the world shaking him, shaking them both. Deep down in the soil of the desert, deep down in the old rocks of the earth, things that have been true since Man first erected a totem and worshipped it are about to rise out of the ground and swallow them both, unless they can cheat their way out of it, though that will mean cheating truth itself, and meanwhile, the air in the shack vibrates with the buzzing of flies stuck against the walls, trying to escape, trying to find a crack in the cardboard through which to wriggle out.

—¿So? ¿What happened?

Faustino stares at the ground, saying nothing. Arturo sits back on the floor, uneasy.

—Come on, carnal, it can't be so bad.

It's a dumb thing to say. Faustino lifts his head and the look on his face reminds Arturo of a time, long ago. They'd hitched a ride into Juárez, looking for fun, messing around, and at the end of the day they'd climbed onto the roof of a massive warehouse by the railroad tracks. They'd looked out across the whole damn city, and then they'd stood at the edge, daring each other to go closer to the drop. They got closer and closer, urging each other on, calling each other names, until finally, with their toes hanging into space, they'd realized it wasn't a game anymore. That's the look he sees now, on Faustino's face.

Arturo tries again to reach his friend. He gets off the floor and sits next to Faustino on the bed, Faustino, with his new shoes and expensive clothes.

—¿Cabrón, what are you?

—Soy un halcón.

A falcon. His best friend has become a lookout for a gang.

—¡Meirda! ¿Who for?

—There's a new pandilla. Los Libertadores. On the west side of the city. In Chaveña. That's where I live now.

—¿In Chaveña?

Faustino nods, says nothing.

—But falcons are just kids, vato. They don't give guns to—

—I'm not a kid. I—

Arturo cuts him off.

—I was going to say they don't give guns to *falcons*.

—I'm more than a falcon. I run this bunch of kids. The boss gave me a gun. Keep them in order. Know I'm in business. ¿Right? My boys keep an eye on things in the street. They see anything, they tell me and I tell El Carnero.

—¿Who's El Carnero?

—The boss. His real name is Eduardo Cardona, but they call him El Carnero. Because of the way he fights. Like a ram.

Faustino taps the top of his head.

—¿So you work for the cartel?

—¡No! No, cabrón, I'm not dumb. I work for Los Libertadores.

—¿Yeah? ¿And who do they work for?

Faustino hesitates, then mumbles—They're with Barrio Azteca.

—¿And they work for the cartel! You're right. ¡Que esta jodido!

—No, no. That's not the problem. Life's good. I got money.

A car.

—¿Yeah? ¿Life's good? ¿So why are you crying like a little kid?

Faustino doesn't even react to the insult. He wipes his face and tries to look Arturo in the eye, but finds he can't, not right now.

—I borrowed some money.

—¿I thought you said you had money?

—I mean serious money. El Carnero gave me a stash to look after. A big stash. I don't know why. I figured he wanted to keep it away from the rest of his gang . . .

—¿And?

—And I borrowed some of it.

—¿How much?

—A thousand.

Arturo stares at Faustino, speechless. It's not possible that this is happening. This is Faustino. This is goofy little Faustino, and they used Anapra as a playground, and yes, the women were going missing then a lot, but Arturo and Faustino were just little kids and they still found a way to be little kids, despite all the disappearances, and all the horror. Now Arturo realizes something, something his friend didn't say . . .

—¿You mean pesos, right? A thousand pesos.

Faustino shakes his head and Arturo feels the horror rising inside him.

—¿Dollars?—Arturo asks, his voice lifting.—¿You borrowed a thousand gringo dollars from your jefe? ¿And he gave it to you?

—He doesn't know I took it.

—You're dead.

—I know.

—¿So why did you do it?

—Never mind that. I took the money because I needed it. I really needed it. And I thought I had time to get it back. I could have done that; there are things you can do.

Arturo doesn't want to know what he means by that, but there's no time to wonder anyway; Faustino is still talking.

—El Carnero said he'd come for his stash in two weeks. That was a week ago.

—¿So?

—So I got a message this morning. He's coming for it tomorrow. I don't have it, vato. I don't have it. And he's coming tomorrow night, some time after nine. There's something else.

—¿What?

—I think the whole deal was a setup. A test. To see if I could look after the cash. You don't know what he'll do to me if his twenty grand is light.

Arturo shakes his head. He knows as well as anyone what they'll do to Faustino. He's seen them in the street; the bodies. Or hanging from the overpass, with bits missing. Messages cut into their now-dead skin, messages of warning and hate.

—¿Faustino?

Faustino looks up.

—No offense. ¿But what the hell are you doing here?

Arturo waves a hand angrily at his shack, and at the nothing that is in it.

—¿Does it look like I have a thousand dollars to give you? You'd be better off asking some of your new rich friends.

—Believe me, I already tried that.

The way he says it, Arturo feels the insult. *Anywhere but here, anywhere but here. Anyone but Arturo.*

—I already asked everyone I can ask without getting killed. That's why I'm here. You have to help me, carnal, you have to help me.

Arturo shakes his head, and mutters under his breath.

—Cabrón.

Faustino nods.

—I know I am. But I'm begging you.

Arturo hangs his head. He gets off the bed, and goes to the unlit gas lamp that hangs off a bent nail in the center of the ceiling. He sits down again next to Faustino and, setting the battered and rusting lamp on his knee, unscrews the base where the gas canister fits. Tucked in around the tiny gap between the canister and the base, Faustino sees pale green money.

—I hide this here—Arturo says.—No one's going to steal this piece of shit.

He slides the money out and then sets the lamp down, flattening the notes, counting them. He hands them to Faustino.

—¿That's it?

—That's it. That's all there is. I promise you. Fifty dollars.

Faustino gives the money back to Arturo.

—That's not why I came.

—¿No? ¿Then why?

Faustino points at the upturned box that is Arturo's table. Sitting on top of it is Arturo's destiny, and it is this destiny that Faustino is pointing at: a pack of cards. A pack of cards for playing calavera.

Arturo understands what he means.

—No. You're joking.

—You can do it. I know you can. That's how you earn your living. ¿Right?

—I play for pesos. Not dollars. Pesos. I play kids on street corners

and I go to El Diván and play their dumb dads. For pesos. I *earn my living* by hauling crap for José.

—¿Yeah? ¿And how often do you work there? ¿And how much does he pay you? I know you make more from calavera than you do working for José. There's this game, Arturo. Every night they play at this club in Chaveña. For dollars. Big dollars. I know you can do it. I've won there, sometimes, and you, you're way better than me. You can do it, vato. I know you can do it.

Arturo holds the money out toward Faustino.

—Take it. If you're lucky and you beg hard enough you can find the rest of it by tomorrow.

Faustino shakes his head.

—Keep it. You'll need it to get into the game.

He fishes into his own pocket and pulls out twenty more dollars.

—Here, take this too. It's all the American money I've got.

Arturo shakes his head.

—Forget it, cabrón. I'm not doing it.

—You have to. ¡You have to!

Arturo stands, backing away, shouting.

—¡No, I don't have to! You didn't have to come here. You didn't have to come and ask for my help. ¡Last year you drop out of my life, just like that! You could have been dead. I never heard from you, not once. ¿And then you come back here like it's yesterday and you want me to put my neck in a noose for you? ¡No way! ¡Chingada! ¡No way!

Faustino stands too.

—¡You! ¡You're a dreamer! ¡Stupid! ¿You think we're still kids? ¿You think we don't grow up? Things change, vato, things change.

—Yeah, I can see that.

Arturo looks at his friend, at his clothes, the shoes, the tattoos. Even his haircut says he is not who he once was.

—You think you're some kind of big man, now. ¿Is that it?

—I'm not a kid anymore, Arturo. I'm not a kid.

—¿And when did that happen?—Arturo shouts.—¿When they gave you a gun?

That hit Faustino. He says nothing for a moment, runs his hand across his slicked-back hair. Then he points at Arturo, stabbing the air.

—No—he says.—It happened when I stopped thinking about myself and started thinking about other people.

He says it quietly, so quietly it takes the anger out of Arturo. He too stands for a long time without saying anything, his chest heaving, his breath slowing as he calms down, and he thinks about what Faustino just said and he knows that it's way too smart for Faustino to have thought of it and wonders who it is who put that idea in his head.

Then Arturo says—No. I won't do it. I'm sorry, Faustino. I don't want to die.

—You won't. There's no risk for you. At worst you lose your dollars. They won't know you have anything to do with me.

But Arturo shakes his head.

Faustino slams his hand against the wall of the shack. The whole thing shakes, and then this brief anger is gone too.

—Come here.

He goes to stand by the door, pushes it open.

—I said *come here*.

Arturo comes over and steps outside after Faustino, who calls out, to the car.

Now Arturo realizes that there is someone else in the car, someone he couldn't see before. The passenger door opens and out steps Eva.

In her arms, she's holding a bundle. The bundle makes a noise, a little cry.

Faustino puts his hand on Arturo's shoulder, and with the other hand points at Eva and the baby.

—You're not doing it for me. You're doing it for them.

At 3.54 p.m, 11/6/16, CHOMSKY68 wrote:

Should there even be border controls?

Crazy, you say?

Say you believe in a free market. Nobody actually does, but say you're one of those people who claim to believe in free markets. Well, free markets are supposed to be based on the free movement of labor. No free movement of labor, no free markets, right? But nobody talks about that.

So should there be border controls? Should people be free to live and work where they want, where the market "wants" them to? It depends on what you think countries are for.

It's an interesting question to ask in a country where (unless you're a native) everyone is an immigrant. The native peoples didn't have the power to stop immigrants coming in.

Now we're trying to stop anyone else getting in. In the end, it's all about power. Wealth, and power.

FAUSTINO RIDES THE BEAST

Tomorrow is the word. *Tomorrow* was always the word, for Faustino. Arturo looks from his old friend to Eva.

Eva is jiggling her hip up and down, trying to soothe her baby, who's started grizzling. She lifts a hand and gives Arturo a little wave, a weak smile.

Automatically, Arturo raises his hand in reply, and then he turns back to Faustino again, because Faustino is asking him something.

—¿You want to see him? ¿My little boy?

Arturo knows now they've stopped being kids. He just can't work out when that happened. He doesn't answer Faustino, doesn't move, he just stares at Eva and the baby, until eventually he says—
¿What's going on?

Faustino shrugs.

—I guess tomorrow finally came.

Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow.

It was Faustino's word before he and Arturo even met. It was

his father's word even before Faustino was born. Back home, in Guatemala, his father used to say it to his mother: tomorrow I will get a job. Tomorrow I will mend the roof. Tomorrow everything will be okay. And Faustino's mother would roll her eyes and moan and love her husband anyway. They survived in La Limonada, picking scraps from the garbage dump, reselling what they could along with sixty thousand other people crammed into the teetering ravine that cuts almost to the heart of Guate.

One day, Faustino was born, and then his father taught him the word too; tomorrow we'll go to the park and play football, tomorrow I'll find you a bike, tomorrow I'll show you how to ride it.

As Faustino grew, however, something changed in his father, and the word changed too. It actually began to mean something, and finally, one day, Faustino's father said to Faustino's mother—We cannot stay here anymore.

It wasn't just the poverty. It wasn't just the murders; the police who did nothing, who wouldn't even enter La Limonada. It wasn't just the floods and the landslides. It wasn't just the outbreaks of disease. It was all of these things and more that one day made Faustino's father say to Faustino's mother—Tomorrow we will go to America.

This time, when he said tomorrow, he meant it. It was bad that he and his wife had lived like this for ten years, but he couldn't let the same thing happen to their only child.

One day, just before Faustino's seventh birthday, they left. They had sold everything they had, for dollars where they could. They had been saving what little they earned. It was now or never.

They knew where to go; everyone told stories about people

who'd made it, and everyone knew the dangers too, but despite that they hitched a ride north to the border with Mexico. At Tecún Umán they paid a *lanchero* ten dollars to cross the Suchiate River on his makeshift raft of planks lashed to giant inner tubes. It should have only cost them a dollar but the *lanchero* could see they weren't locals. He knew what they were, and he knew their desperation had a price. So did the border guard who stopped them almost as soon as they set foot on Mexican soil, in Hidalgo. He searched their bags indifferently; two plastic sacks with everything they had left in the world, explaining that he was looking for drugs, or guns. Finding none, he stuck out a hand for his bribe, and left them to continue their journey.

They were lucky. They made it to Tapachula in one piece, grabbing rides in the backs of trucks for another few dollars each time. No one assaulted them. No one robbed them. No one beat Faustino's father or raped Faustino's mother. No one dragged Faustino away into the bushes.

In Tapachula they asked around and got directions to the Casa del Migrante, a shelter run by a middle-aged Italian priest. Aside from a small rosary around his neck, he looked more like the owner of a bar than a man of the cloth. He spoke dirty, mestizo Spanish, with Italian thrown in here and there, but he gave them, and dozens of others, a bed for two nights and hot meals. He prayed for them, and he handed them pamphlets about the dangers of the road ahead, which they politely took and then did not read.

They chewed their food, and they waited for their time to come.

Faustino spent much of this time staring at one wall of the

shelter, to which was pinned a large, grubby map, with graffiti and other scrawlings all over it.

—¿What is it, Papá?

Faustino's father pointed out some places.

—That's Guate, where we came from. That's where you were born, niño. And that's where we are now. Here, in Tapachula.

Faustino kept staring.

—¿How far is that?

—Three hundred kilometers.

—¡That's so far!—said Faustino.—¡We must be nearly in Los Angeles!

Faustino's father didn't smile. How could he tell his son that they had barely begun? How could he tell him there were over four thousand kilometers more still to travel? He could not.

After their two nights, they left the shelter along with the priest's blessing and twenty-two other men and women. There were a few kids on the trail north, but none as young as Faustino. People looked at his parents and some muttered and some even told them it was crazy to bring a young boy along.

It was almost another three hundred kilometers to Arriaga, and they walked some of the way, and took buses when they could, though they knew that if anyone asked for their papers they would be detained and deported back to Guatemala, and still they were lucky. Along the way, Faustino listened to what the grown-ups were saying, who spoke as adults always do, as if children cannot hear. But Faustino did hear, and he heard one word, over and over again: la bestia. The beast.

The beast, the beast, the beast, until finally, Faustino grew

scared of it. He picked up on not just what they were saying, but how they said it, and as so often, though children do not *know*, they understand anyway. And he understood; the beast was something of which to be afraid.

—¿Papá?—he asked.—¿What is the beast?

His father looked at his mother, and his mother shrugged, and so his father explained.

—Tomorrow, Faustino, we will ride the beast. The beast is huge. ¡A kilometer long! ¡Longer! And the beast will take us to America.

Still, Faustino did not understand, but that evening they arrived in Arriaga, and walked the short way to the railroad station, to the freight terminus, where hundreds of people were settling down for the night, huddling against huts, sleeping between the rails; a ribbon of steel for a pillow. Others simply lay on the ground, in twos or threes, waiting.

Faustino's father was wrong. They did not ride the beast the next day, because the beast did not show. So they waited, and waited, and it was hard to understand what everyone was doing here, hanging around a deserted railroad station, a station with no trains, nor signs posted as to when one might appear.

On the afternoon of the second day, some people came, all wearing orange shirts with the letters GB on them, which no one understood the meaning of, but they handed out water bottles, and warned anyone who would listen about the beast, and the dangers of riding it.

—*Do not climb on a moving train. They may seem slow but it's too dangerous.*

—Look out for thieves. They may get on the train disguised as migrants like you.

—Look out for MIGRA.

—When you reach the north, it will be hot. Be careful with your water. The heat can get to 50 degrees Celsius, or more. Higher. It can kill you.

Then, on the second night, it came. At three in the morning, the world began to shake. Deep underground fantastic leviathans from ancient times were stirred as the tracks vibrated. They forced their way to the surface, gasping for breath, and then the creatures emerged into the fetid night air of southern Mexico and from around the bend in the forest, three dazzling eyes blinded Faustino with light.

—¡Papá!—he cried.—¡The beast!

With no more warning than that, it had come: a train a kilometer long. A freight train, with no passengers or passenger cars, just wagon after wagon of closed steel boxes.

When Faustino saw it was a train, he was no less amazed, no less disappointed than if a dragon had scuttled up from some primeval chasm. It slowed to a crawl and then stopped, and many people shouted and ran and clambered up the steel ladders to the roofs of the boxcars, while others sat on the ground, those who'd made the journey before, who knew it would be hours before the train left again.

The hours passed, and Faustino was scared. He and his mother and father had found a spot under the sloping end of a wagon made to hold liquid goods. It was lower to the ground, and there would be some shelter if it rained. They were joined by three other men

and a young woman, none of whom spoke, and Faustino was scared, in this time of waiting; a desperate kind of tension hung all about them, as they waited for someone to come and tell them to get down, or arrest them, or worse. But no one did, and there was no one in sight, no one from the railroad, or the town. Somehow, after hours had passed, during which they ate the last of the food they had, the beast began to move again all by itself, a metal animal, rumbling its way north through the southern Mexican jungles.

—¡That's it!

Faustino's father laughed.

His wife held his hand, clinging to it tightly.

—El Norte. We are going to America, Faustino. ¡Los Angeles!

—¿When, Papá?—asked Faustino.—¿When? ¿Tomorrow?

One of the other men huddling with them laughed. The young woman turned her head away, stared out at the black jungle night.

—No, Faustino. Not tomorrow. But soon.

Faustino spent his seventh birthday clinging to the back of the wagon, huddled between his mother and his father as the rain lashed down. When the rain stopped they passed a village where kind people threw fruit up for them to catch, and they each ate an orange, eating the peel too, licking their fingers clean.

Their luck held still, for a day, and halfway into another night, and then it ran out.

They were asleep, despite the thumping of the train over every crossing, despite the terrible roar that the beast's wheels made on

the tracks, despite the colder nights. There were shouts, shouts from ahead on the roof of the train.

—¡MIGRA! ¡MIGRA!

—¡Run!

—¡Get off and run!

Confusion swept down the length of the train, as their luck fled faster than they could. For it was not the migration police, but something worse, a gang of robbers. A couple of shots sounded, the gunfire flashed in the dark, and people began to scramble and jump from the train.

Faustino's father shouted at his wife to jump. He had to shout twice. It wasn't far but the dark made it even more frightening. Then Faustino jumped, his wide eyes seeing nothing. Then Faustino's father jumped, and before they knew what was happening, rough hands grabbed them all and lined everyone up in the headlights of a pickup.

Men with guns went along the line and took everything. Money, phones, nice clothes. Everything. They took the young woman, and Faustino's mother, and bundled them into the back of a beaten-up van, which sped away as soon as the doors were closed. They shot Faustino's father as he tried to stop all this from happening.

They left Faustino clinging to the body of his dead father in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of the night. After a day passed, even the young Faustino knew he had to move. He waited for the next beast to roll along the tracks, and he tried to climb onto it as it was moving.

Hands reached for him, friendly hands.

—¡Mierda, he's just a kid!

—¡Grab hold, kid! ¡Grab hold!

Faustino tried to grab, but he slipped. His right foot went under the wheels of the train, which sliced it in half. He lay in the dark, unconscious from pain, and his blood flowed and flowed but finally stopped, just before death came.

In the morning, a farmer found him and took him.

Many tomorrows passed. Tomorrows that became months, that became years. Faustino was passed from place to place. He ended up in a hostel for people like him who'd lost a limb, or more, to the beast, but he didn't like it. One day, he begged a middle-aged couple who were heading north to take him with them, and finally, he ended up in Anapra.

He was ten years old.

Somehow, he survived in Anapra. He met Arturo. They became friends. They were brothers, and they even went to school for a short time, which was where they met Eva. And all the time, all the time, Faustino would say to Arturo—Tomorrow, carnal. Tomorrow, I'm going to America. I don't have to stay here. In this dump. I can leave whenever I want. Anytime. ¿You know?

—Yeah—Arturo would reply.—I know, sure.

Tomorrow.

INSATIABLE GODS

Just like in a game of calavera, Arturo knows that Faustino has played an unbeatable card. The game is won. The game is won because Faustino isn't talking about himself.

Arturo knows Faustino's story, or most of it. He knows what he means when he says "tomorrow." He knows it never really meant anything, not till now. But now that it does mean something, Faustino isn't suggesting *he's* going to leave for America.

—It's Eva—he says.—Eva and the baby. I paid for them to cross.

Arturo can't believe it.

—A thousand? I'll hold your hand and we can walk over there right now, cabrón. ¡There it is! ¡Right there! ¡El Norte!

—You're so dumb, vato. You don't just walk into America without a plan. You know that. I paid coyotes to get her to LA. They leave tonight. It would have been five hundred but they wanted an extra five hundred for the baby. I said, no way, it's nothing. It's so small. But they said it could cry and make a noise and get them all

caught. Said I was lucky they didn't want a thousand just for the damn kid.

Something's not right.

—Five hundred each—Arturo says.—That's damn cheap. I heard it cost ten times that to keep a coyote happy. I heard it costs five thousand. Or more. ¿No?

Faustino doesn't answer. Arturo knows he knows the answer to the question; he just doesn't want to admit it. But there's Faustino, staring at the ground, looking for all the world like a little kid with his hand caught right in the cookie jar. And Arturo knows exactly why the coyotes are charging a tenth of what they might.

—She's going to be a burro. That's it. She's going to haul drugs for them. ¿Right?

Faustino doesn't reply. He still stares at the ground. Across the street, by the car, Eva stands, rocking the bundle in her arms, staring north, across the desert. Arturo cannot imagine what is in her mind, or, for that matter, what was in Faustino's.

Arturo keeps his voice down, for Eva's sake, but he cannot keep the anger out of his voice.

—¿What were you thinking? Making her a burro . . . ¿She's going to have to carry drugs, and the baby?

Faustino's rage returns. He steps right up to Arturo, hissing into his face.

—I don't have ten thousand dollars, Arturo. I figured I could find a thousand to replace what I took from El Carnero's stash. I knew I couldn't find ten. It was the only way.

Arturo shakes his head.

—You're crazy.

—It was the only way. I had no choice.

It seems there are no answers to Faustino's replies, just as there is no end to his stupidity. Arturo knows it costs a lot to pay a coyote to help you cross over. They promise more than just dumping you in the desert. They have networks of people, to take you to a city, to LA if you can afford it, or maybe Tucson or Phoenix. It costs a lot because the borders are controlled, not just by MIGRA, not just by the American border patrol. There are other forces controlling who crosses the desert, and you either pay them and be safe, or you take your chances. And even if you do pay them, there are always those cases where they just take you out into the night and—

Arturo stops that thought, dead. Stone dead. Instead, he thinks, ¿Tonight? ¿They're leaving tonight? ¿Eva and the baby?

He puts a hand on Faustino's shoulder.

—¿But you're not leaving?—he asks his friend.

Faustino looks sick. He looks like he will actually be sick on the ground, there and then.

—Listen, I didn't want it this way. Eva's mother threw us out. ¿The moment the baby arrived? She threw us both out. No more mouths to feed, she said. ¡Cabróna! So I said, that's it. We'll go. And I borrowed that money for Eva, but unless I pay it back before tomorrow night, I'm not going anywhere.

—I thought you were the big man now, earning a fortune.

Faustino is rubbing his head, glancing over at Eva from time to time.

—I earn some—he says—but look. That's not what I want. I want out. I don't want to be a falcon. I want Eva and the baby to go to America. And me.

He doesn't say "finally" but Arturo can see the word in his face.

—¿Why didn't you take enough to pay for all of you? You could still go with her. Just run.

Faustino stares at Arturo for a second as if he's crazy, and then he turns and vomits all over the ground.

Arturo takes a step back. Over at the car, Eva wrinkles her nose, and turns away slightly, bouncing the baby.

Faustino stands, bends again, takes a deep breath, then stands and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

—Wait—says Arturo, and ducks into his shack. He comes back with a Coke can with the top cut off and tape around it to cover the sharp edge. It's full of water scooped out of the old oilcan Arturo uses to store it.

Faustino takes a swig, spits, throws the rest over his face. He rolls up his left sleeve, wipes his face with his forearm.

—Thanks, carnal. The water here still tastes like shit.

—You're welcome.

Arturo knows that what he said was crazy. Faustino cannot run away. He must settle his debts in Juárez, one way or the other, or there can be no escape. Los Libertadores, the gang he works for, work for Barrio Azteca. They work for the cartel. Both Barrio Azteca and the cartel have people everywhere. In Mexico, in the north. In El Paso, in Los Angeles. As far away as Chicago. In fact, in pretty much every big city. And they don't forget and they don't leave a score unsettled, for these men are gods, insatiable gods, more brutal perhaps than those of the old world, who have lain unappeased

in the earth for centuries since they were seemingly overthrown. Only seemingly, for they have not vanished altogether. If Faustino runs, it will be suicide. Delayed suicide, perhaps, but suicide nonetheless.

Now that Faustino has rolled up his left sleeve, Arturo can see one of his tattoos. Two long Ls, interlocked, running down the length of his left forearm. Los Libertadores. His gang, marked on his body, forever. It would be easier, and cheaper, and safer, to get a fake passport than get that mark taken off. There is nowhere Faustino can run. If he ever wants to sleep again, if he ever wants to spend a day without being scared again, if he ever wants to see Eva again, he must find that money before tomorrow night. If he doesn't, he's already seen enough of what they do to punks like him to know it will not be fast and it will not be easy.

—Okay—says Arturo.—Okay. I'll do it.

Whenever I dream of a closed space, a darkened room, I know I am dreaming of my mind. That the dark space I'm dreaming of represents the world of my mind.

Last night I had such a dream, and I was standing in a big garage, with no cars in it, but I was living in it, or working there, or trying to work there. The doors were open and it was bright outside, but the brightness didn't come into my space.

There were candles hanging from the ceiling on strings, and I was walking around trying to light them with a box of matches, but either the matches broke or didn't light properly, or the candles lit for a moment and then died.

I couldn't light a fire in my head. There were figures in the bright doorway; dark beings in silhouette who were going to come in, and I couldn't light the fire in my head, the light that would keep them away. And as I woke I knew it wasn't just my head: it was the whole city. It was Anapra, it was Juárez, it was all of Mexico. It was the world.
