

A bass drum masks trembling hands. I take Mariana's from across a table ensconced in the corner of the restaurant.

"A bit too loud to talk, isn't it?"

Her feet nestle mine, though I cannot be sure unless I lift the tablecloth.

Her head tilts, shoulders shrug.

"Should we find someplace else?"

She smiles, embarrassed.

I point out the window to the lamp-lit alleyway.

"Let me get it."

I thumb rusted coins onto the table. I'm unsure what they're worth, though we've ordered nothing.

"Vámonos?"

Outside, Mariana runs the back of her hand across my cheeks, registering the coarseness of winter for the first time. Translation fails her, so she smiles.

She flashes her expired student card to the bus driver, somehow gets us on for free. The aisleway is carpeted with black rubber, the tattered seats smell of diesel.

"Where are we going?" I ask in semi-Spanish.

Something about a dance.

Mariana sits next to me, the contrast stark between her olive dress and the torn cloth seat. Through the window, I see mountaintops given form by porch light constellations. Endless ghettos in the hills.

My eyes fall back on Mariana. The tender-eyed undergraduate I'd once taught. The sleepy graduate student I tutored vainly over glasses of Grenache. The blazered post-doc presenting alongside me at a conference two years running; her presentation in Spanish, mine English. The sudden synchronicity of our lives a testament to the budding of her young career, the stasis of mine.

The bus hits a bump in the road. We bounce off our seats. And there it is, the sound I've traveled so far to hear: her laugh, the same blubbering laughter I remember from those faraway nights. How it trumpets through the air like a song. How it parades through the room. How it erupts like a caldera, opening the taps on whatever's inside.

We lean into each other, in hysterics, though I'm unsure why. She runs her fingers over the top of my hand, letting die in silence what can't be said aloud.

The bus stops and we're thrown into the next row of seats. She shrieks, snorts. That spasmodic song. Our laughter is broken by shouting from the streets, a tapping at the window.

Men are outside, clad in black, machine guns clasped across their ribs. Belts of ammunition hang over their shoulders like sashes. Their cheekbones severe under the shadow of their berets. A soldier motions to the bus driver through the door, raps it with the butt of his rifle.

The bus rumbles ahead, streaming past an unending line of soldiers. Shopkeepers shutter their windows, slide their signs in from the sidewalk. The hilltops slip away. House lights are snuffed by panicked sons. Fathers kill the cherry tips of cigars, then abandon their verandas. Mothers hush their dogs.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“We will be okay,” she says. Whether in truth or delusion, her voice is deadening. Here is a woman forced to flee her former life yet unretreated in her faith in a better future.

“It is unsafe to stop. The bus must keep going. Keep, you know, moving on,” she says.

“Who are they?”

She pauses, stares into nothing. Desperate for the right words, the right way.

“Policia?” I ask.

“No.”

Marianna leans ahead over her seat and speaks hurried Spanish to a greying man in a bandana.

“Militia,” he snaps.

He stares at the men and their guns the way one might stare at undisciplined children. As if they were an ordinary annoyance, like finding a kernel stuck between one’s teeth at dinner, or wetting one’s shirt sleeve under the faucet.

“What?”

“They do not want to do with us, I do not think,” Marianna interjects.

“Look at them—”

“They are,” she searches for the word. “Like politicians.”

“I see.”

Pickup trucks border the roadside, gun turrets mounted to their beds. They form a perimeter around the city center, shutting the valves of the city’s heart. One by one the side streets and alleys blot out then blacken like organs starved of blood.

“The exits are blocked,” I say.

“Yes.”

There is a moment of pause, its severity steeping in my gut.

“We circle the city until tomorrow. Then the militia will leave when the sun comes.”

“How do you know?”

“I know that we will be okay.”

For so many nights before my arrival I had lay awake thinking of how one’s absence can be felt more like a presence. The slamming of a taxi door, the zipping shut my luggage on the kitchen table. Doubt finds openings in small closures.

There is no urgency in Mariana's eyes. I cannot see myself in them. No divorcee, no adjunct instructor, no childless fuckup. Her embrace carries an implied forgiveness that unburies what possibilities for my life still remain.

"Come," she says. She shuffles to the front of the bus with me clumsily behind. I clutch handloops and seatposts for balance. "Señor," she says to the driver.

He turns the dial on the radio, and out springs a staticky tune. She pulls me at the waist and hurries to the back of the bus, toes pattering on rubber, where she spins to face me, cha-chas forward, and flaunts her talent for being alive.

"Dance."

A gunshot rings somewhere in the distance.

I place a hand in hers as the bus ascends a bridge. The vehicle levels and then we begin, every footfall a flub. One-two, three-four, one-two, three-four.

At this distance there is something to hoard in her every detail. A trove of small beauties, as pluckable as heisted jewels. The sticky perfume residue on her sideneck, the stale apricot scent on her arms. How far they traveled, all bottled up, to chance on her. How easily my fingers glide like the hours of the night across the skin behind her ear. The softness of cheeks born of eternal spring. A strand of wine-coloured hair fallen on her dress. To take register of these is robbery. As if any beautiful thing in the world exists only in lieu of another.

We're thrown to the ground as the bus driver hits the brakes. The rubber floor breaks my fall, and I break hers. The overhead lights glint in her eyes, those garden gates. We

laugh over the music, palm to nape, the chorus out of step with her pulse. How unsteady it is to be looked at in this way, to be the object of her mind.

I hear someone hum a tune. Then the voice croaks into song, croons in a language I do not know. The overhead lights flicker then cut out and suddenly we're in the dark, where I cannot see her fully but she is fully there.