

Life Like Smoke

Stories

Lucia

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For Nick

“I have spent weeks in the desert forgetting to look at the moon, he says, as a married man may spend days never looking into the face of his wife. These are not sins of omission, but signs of preoccupation”

- Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*

XII

Sleeping, turning in turn like planets
rotating in their midnight meadow:
a touch is enough to let us know
we're not alone in the universe, even in sleep:

- from "21 Love Poems," Adrienne Rich

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Seeing Eduardo

1958

Think of the edge of the world, a place without maps. Patagonia. The children draw figures in the dirt. Words and pictures. The wind fills the scratches with dust, new grass pushes up through the earth, and when the rain comes, the mud runs in slippery rivulets down to the creek. They build dams in the creek that wash away, waterlogged branches disintegrating into dirt, stones clattering across the shallow bottom, new patterns drawn in silt. The house is wearing away, weathered wood growing soft and gray, splintering, the bricks of the chimney beginning to crumble. The sounds are the wind and the rustle of grass, the bleats and maahs of sheep across the valley, occasional shouts that echo and cede back into the quiet. And the sky like a cathedral dome, cobalt and soaring.

There are two children on the hillside. Nine years old and skinny, their slim limbs jutting out at all angles. They are not yet aware that the placement of arms and legs can be read by others, and still, at this moment, they are not quite aware of one another. Or of themselves for that matter. The boy is picking at the dirt between his toes. The girl flops onto her back to look at the sky.

She says to him, "Do you think that cloud looks like a sheep?"

He thinks about this for a moment, and says, “Don’t all clouds look like sheep? I mean, white and fluffy?”

“Not those ones,” she says, pointing to some streaks farther up.

“Maybe those ones got hit by a truck or something.”

“Wouldn’t there be blood then? Red stuff?”

“Nah. Cloud sheep bleed cloud blood.”

“Cloud sheep bleed cloud blood.” They like the sound of this, so they repeat it a few times. *Cloud sheep bleed cloud blood. Cloud shleep clead cloud cloud.* The words slip away into the grass and wind, and they laugh. The girl stands up and reaches down for the boy’s arm. He reaches his hand up to meet hers, and she pulls him up roughly.

“Ow!”

“That didn’t hurt.” She sticks her tongue out at him. They begin to amble down the hill towards the creek, bumping into one another occasionally, pushing, and running a few steps, absentmindedly tearing at the tall grass. Their thoughts are driven by their immediate sensations; the slight hunger that will drive them back towards home soon, the dusty dirt underfoot, the sun warming their narrow shoulders.

Their names are Luisa Roveda and Eduardo Medina. Their fathers are both sheep ranchers, their properties adjoining one another. Luisa is one of seven, their names together forming a litany, repeated again and again: Manuel, Juan Carlos, Emilia, Ana, Luisa, Julio, Jordán. Manuel, Juan Carlos, Emilia, Ana, Luisa, Julio, Jordán. Though her two oldest siblings are actually half siblings, the sons of a Tehuelche woman who wandered into Luisa’s father’s house and bed, and, a few years later, without a word, wandered out. Luisa’s mother, Hannah,

did not know this when she married Luisa's father. She was nineteen at the time, living in a German farming community in Chile. Luisa's father did business with Hannah's father and uncles. When they married, he brought her home over the mountain pass, across Lago Fria, right up to the screen door, where they were greeted by two children. Luisa's father thanked the dark, portly woman who was there with them. Hannah didn't think to ask who she was, someone's unmarried sister maybe. The woman gave Hannah a tired smile, and plodded away down the hill.

"Domingo?"

"Hmmm?"

"Who are these boys?"

"Manuel and Juan Carlos."

"But who are they?"

"My sons."

She never really forgave him, nor Manuel and Juan Carlos for that matter. The two mestizo boys that never could have come from her, now growing into men, seventeen and nineteen. So when her husband and his two sons walk into the house from a day out with the sheep, there is that hint of bitterness, the understanding that the house belongs to their mother, and the land to their father. When he comes home, their father is usually a quiet presence with a sheepish grin, who scratches his children's cheeks with grizzle when he kisses them. To Luisa he is somewhat of a stranger. She is quiet around him. It is her mother that she really loves.

Her other siblings have paired themselves off, Emilia, thirteen, and Ana, eleven, constructing dolls out of scrap fabric and greasy sheep wool, and now, for the most part, following around and imitating their mother. Julio and Jordán, eight and seven, who often come home with llama spit in their hair, thick like raw egg white, telling their appalled mother how

they spent the day chasing llamas. Eduardo also has siblings, three brothers, but they're much older. Two of them are married and living on their own properties, and Sebastián is nineteen, out working with his father the way Manuel and Juan Carlos work with theirs.

And so it was that Luisa and Eduardo came to be Luisa and Eduardo, their names in constant connection. Born a week apart, they'd been babies smacking wooden spoons on kitchen floors together. Nine years later, they are still a single animal, roaming the hills.

Luisa and Eduardo begin to meander back towards the road, their increased hunger and some instinctual understanding of the time of day driving them back towards home. With a mumbled goodbye, Luisa leaves the road for the path that leads up to her family's house, and Eduardo continues along the road towards his family's house.

Luisa has long, dark hair, straight like the grass, a pale face courtesy of her mother that burns spectacularly at the start of each summer, irises like sliced green olives. She is the type of child who wanders aimlessly, muttering stories under her breath, supplying sounds when needed. By their house is a low stonewall, or more of a ledge really, running parallel to one side of the house, and disappearing into the dirt at the ends. Julio and Jordán are walking up and down the wall, chattering about a herd of guanaco they'd seen earlier in the day. She ignores them, and pushes the screen door open slightly, and squeezes her way into the kitchen. She pads barefoot across the concrete, dim confusion beginning to rise in her.

She pokes her head out the door. "Where's Mami?" she asks her brothers.

They shrug, and follow her as she retreats back into the house. She walks over to the counter, thinking for a moment to check in the drawer. Instead, she checks the back room, while her brothers check the rooms upstairs.

“She’s not up here!” Julio shouts. Luisa bursts out the back door. Hills, grass, sky, distant mountains. A person could just disappear, couldn’t they? In that dark space in the blink of an eye, gone. She runs around the side of the house wailing, “Maaaaamiiiiiiii!”

And then a voice from down the hill, “Ay, Luisita, que pasa?”

Luisa sprints down the hill and slams into her mother’s legs, Julio and Jordán follow.

“Oof, nena, you all right?”

Luisa hugs her mother with all her thin-armed might, painful love beating against her chest.

“I thought you were gone.”

“Well, I wasn’t in the house.”

“No, I mean gone. Like gone gone.”

Her mother smiles and sighs, “No, I was just down at Eduardo’s house, dropping off some bread and soup. His mami’s not feeling well.”

“Oh.” Luisa squeezes her mother’s hand all the way up the hill, and lets go only when they are in the kitchen. Distractedly, her mother begins to peel potatoes for dinner.

The next day, Luisa, Eduardo, Julio, and Jordán are down in the creek, sorting through the smooth stones at the bottom and piling them on the bank. She has a slight summer cold, and occasionally, she wipes her leaky nose with the back of her arm. They do not notice Eduardo’s older brother until they hear his steps brushing through the grass. Eduardo gives a whoop of delight, and bounds out of the stream with lanky steps to embrace him. Luisa follows behind him, suddenly quiet in the presence of the older boy that she has met only a few times.

“What are you doing?” Sebastián asks.

Eduardo gestures to the pile of stones, “finding eggs and seeds. We’ll build nests for the eggs, and they’ll hatch into birds. We’ll plant the seeds, and then we’ll have flowers.”

Sebastián raises an eyebrow, and ruffles Eduardo’s hair with a palm that is already calloused. “Sounds like fun,” he pauses. “Our father wants us home, Edi.”

“Why?”

“I’m sure he’ll explain when we get there.”

Eduardo waves a bony arm at the rest of the children, and begins the long walk home. Luisa watches Eduardo’s back for a few moments, and then wades back into the creek, squatting down into the water once more.

A few days later, Luisa comes into the kitchen to find the priest there. He’s a balding man with broken veins in his nose and paunchy cheeks who drives out from Bariloche to see the sheep ranchers every once in a while. He reads to them in Latin, lays blessings on their heads, gives them wafers that stick to the roofs of their mouths. The children are more interested by his beat-up truck than by him, but they still listen to the stories that he tells them. Stories about God and his son, about angels and wicked men in distant deserts. Luisa feels a tug in her chest, a tingle of pleasant fear in her fingers and toes when she hears these stories, but she doesn’t quite believe them. They sound too foreign, too far away. She and Eduardo look up at the clouds sometimes.

“That’s where God lives I guess,” says Luisa.

“Guess so.”

And when it’s raining, she says, “God must be crying.”

And Eduardo nods. But the wind comes and pushes the clouds away towards the oceanic plains, and the sky is empty.

“Well, I guess God must be gone then.”

“Looks like it.”

Luisa takes a seat at the table where the priest is, bare feet dangling.

“Hola, Padre,” she says.

“Hello Luisa, how is everything? Are you being good to your mother?”

“Yes, Padre.”

“Luisa,” her mother says, “the Padre and I need to talk for a little bit. Can you wait outside?”

Luisa joins Julio and Jordán who are sitting against the side of the house, trying to hear the conversation through the window. Emilia and Ana are lying in the grass a little ways down the hill, having also been told to leave. The voices only slip through the window in murmurs, so they give up and climb into the back of the rust-splotched truck. It had once been white and blue, but all that was fading now. The priest finally comes out, shoos them out of his truck, and tiredly tells them to remember to say their prayers each night.

“Yes, Padre,” they tell him, already forgetting what he’s asked. The truck starts up with a cough, and pulls away down the dusty road. They run inside.

“What happened, Mami. Why was the priest here?” Luisa asks.

Her mother sighs. “Eduardo’s mother is very sick, Luisa.”

“I thought she just had a cold.”

“No, worse than a cold. The doctor says it’s pneumonia.”

“What does the priest have to do with ammonia?”

“Pneumonia,” her mother corrects. She finishes chopping the onions, slides them into a pan with her knife, wipes her arm across her forehead, and says, “The priest is here to give her her last rites. The doctor thinks that she’ll...” Her mother’s forehead scrunches for a moment. “The doctor thinks that she’s going to pass on in a few days.”

“She’s going to die?” Luisa asks.

Her mother winces. “Yes, she’s going to die. So the priest is staying with Eduardo’s family, and talking to her about God.”

“What can God do about it?”

“Well, she’s going to heaven.”

“Oh.” Luisa thinks about this for a few moments. Julio does a handstand against the doorway, his shirt falling down to reveal his rounded child’s stomach.

Luisa says, “Mami, when we go to heaven, are we the same age as when we die? I mean, if Eduardo dies when he’s older, will he be older than his mother in heaven? If I die when I’m older than you, will you still be my mother?”

“Ay, Luisa. Just set the table, all right?”

“But – ”

“Yes, I will still be your mother. Table, please?”

“Okay, Mami.”

Luisa does not see Eduardo for three days. She helps her mother with the chores like she does every morning, dumping food scraps in the vegetable garden, making her bed, wiping down the kitchen table, but there is no Eduardo waiting out on the road when she finishes them. When the priest brings them the news that Eduardo’s mother has died, Luisa is not struck with grief.

She did not know her well, only as a tiny figure in front of her house, calling Eduardo back for dinner or chores, or as a small, plump woman, coming over to talk to Luisa's mother in the kitchen. She is struck first by curiosity; there was a person, and now there is no person. One moment alive, next moment dead, dead in the space of an eye blink. Gone in the darkness of an eye blink. Then, relief; now she will be able to see Eduardo again, they'll be able to go back to playing and wandering around and trying to figure out how God can live in the sky when there are no clouds to sit on.

Luisa's definitions of herself are still hazy. She floats along, her person bleeds into the grass, the sky, Eduardo. Ask her to talk about herself, and she will say that she likes the color green and finding sheep skulls, that her favorite food is potato soup, and that she doesn't like taking baths. The day Eduardo's mother dies, she feels something in the air, tension and sorrow. She sticks close to the house, kicking stones, rearranging the sheep skulls on the low stonewall. When she comes in for dinner, her mother is at the table with her head in her arms. Emilia and Ana are sitting at the table, looking at their mother and saying nothing. Julio and Jordán are sitting on the floor, staring into space. The kitchen feels cold, there is no smell of cooking food.

“What's wrong, Mami?” Luisa asks.

Emilia and Ana both glare at her.

“Cecilia is dead.” She amends herself, “Eduardo's mami is dead.” She says this without lifting her head.

“I know. The priest came and told us.” Luisa pauses, “Is that what's wrong?”

“Yes, Luisa. I'm sad.” She sighs through her nose. “I'm going to go take a nap.” And then she stands up, and slowly walks up to the bedroom. They all listen to the creaking stairs,

and then Luisa sits down at the table to wait with her sisters. Soon Julio and Jordán join them. They wait. And soon enough, their father and their two older brothers push through the front door. Their father stops, and looks at them.

“What’s wrong?” he says, and pauses. “Where’s your mother? Did she make dinner?”

“She’s upstairs,” Emilia says quietly. “Taking a nap.”

He begins to walk towards the stairs, but remembers his boots, and silently sits down to pull them off. They listen to his heavy steps go up the stairs. Juan Carlos and Manuel look at each other, then sit down at the table. They hear voices upstairs, then shouting. Their mother telling their father again that she wishes she’d never come here, their father yelling about dinner, taking care of the kids, being selfish. Juan Carlos rolls his eyes at Manuel. They all hear a door slam. Their father comes downstairs. No one looks at him. He slices and toasts bread, scrambles eggs in the skillet, tells them to grab plates from the cabinet. Silently they line up for their food, and silently they all eat dinner. Emilia and Ana do the dishes, Juan Carlos and Manuel follow their father out back, Jordán and Julio sneak out the front door. Luisa pauses, then walks out to the road where she usually meets Eduardo, lies down in the grass, and watches as the sky begins to darken.

The funeral is a few days later. The morning of, Luisa’s mother wakes them all up early, even Luisa’s father and Manuel and Juan Carlos, who sit awkwardly at the table, looking uncomfortable boxed in by the kitchen, out of the hills and wind. There’s a large wooden tub standing enshrined on the poured concrete, and one by one Luisa’s mother pulls off shirts and pants and underwear and drags the younger children into the water, squeezing thick yellow soap into their hair. She scrubs their skin raw, scouring away all the dirt of the hills and the plains, the

rocky outcroppings and the chalky scree. Scrubbing away, at least for this day, the stories told by the dirt and the grass to make room for the funeral.

They walk in a procession, a few neighboring families in mourning clothes, Eduardo's older brothers come home for the ceremony, the wooden box carrying Eduardo's mother bobbing along on shoulders. Every few steps, Luisa has to jog to keep up with the group. She looks around, but cannot find Eduardo. She sighs through her nose. She wants him here with her.

They arrive at the cemetery. A small, overgrown fence with a cluster of lichen-stained stones beside a large, cracked rock with a cross thrust into that draws black lines across the sky. The balding priest reads to them in Latin, voice rising and falling over alien words, and they all say amen when he does. When they begin to lower the box into the ground, Luisa looks for the soul flying out of it. This is, after all, what the priest has told them: that the soul will rise. As the body sinks into darkness, the soul reaches for light. Shouts goodbye and makes its way to the clouds. But Luisa doesn't see it, she doesn't think she feels it either. She wonders if the others do. There are no clouds in the sky, just blue arcing over their heads, and the box hits the earth with a bodily thunk. Soil beats against the wood until the sound softens to soil on soil, rocks and grit scraping quietly over one another. As they are murmuring the last prayer, Luisa looks up and sees Eduardo.

He is staring at his feet. He won't look up at her. The ache in her surges. It occurs to her for a moment that he probably loved his mother the same way she loves her own mother. She imagines what it would be like to return to an empty house that remains empty, to know that her mother had actually disappeared. But the thoughts fade. She thinks, I want to talk to him. I want him to talk to me. When will he come back to play?

After the funeral, they all walk to Eduardo's family's house. The women have brought empanadas and milanesas, bowls full of mashed potatoes. The men pass around a maté gourd, and they speak quietly and reverently, as though they are in church. But soon enough the noise begins to rise, and there's a flutter of laughter. The children are under the table, barefoot though they've been warned to keep their shoes on, holding bits of food in their fists. Luisa wanders between legs and skirts, looking for Eduardo. She spots him by the door, with an angry look on his face that momentarily stops her where she is. As she takes a step towards him, he slips out of the door. With a frown, she follows.

Outside, the sun is starting to darken to gold, making its way down to the mountaintops. Eduardo is already a dark figure, pushing his way through the yellow-green grass. Luisa can hear voices, talking and singing, and a guitar drifting out through the windows. She pauses for a moment, encapsulated in this warm bubble of sound, and then in a burst she runs, shoving through the grass until she reaches him. Out of breath, she settles into a walk. He says nothing, and she says nothing. She feels like she should speak, but suddenly the words seem difficult, caught swimming circles around her head rather than leaving her mouth.

They walk for a bit longer. Their shadows are long against the grass.

Finally she says, "Hey, Edi, are you okay?"

He doesn't answer.

She tries again. "Maybe you miss your mom?"

He keeps walking, his skinny legs brushing loudly through the grass.

"You know," she says, "the priest says she's in heaven now. You know, with God. So she's probably okay." She looks up and sees that the sky is cloudless. It's just the sun sinking

lower, coppery-red and stinging her eyes. “Maybe we could play a game or something? What do you want to do? We can do whatever you want.”

He stops walking. Luisa stops a few steps behind him. His narrow shoulders are tense, rising sharply from his back, his fists are clenched. He lifts his face to the sky and he screams. Luisa jumps back with a yelp. The first scream is followed by another, and then another. Screams that tear at the soft red flesh of his throat and end in wounded howls. She covers her ears with the palm of her hands, and takes a few steps back.

“Edi! Stop it!” she yells.

He screams. His slim body shakes with the force of it, his hands claw at his shirt and the air. He screams until the sound won't come anymore, until the air rasps quietly past his lips, and he seems to crumple in on himself, body shuddering. The screams linger for a moment, echoing out before sinking into the ground, lost to the air. He is crying quietly, sniffing. Luisa takes a tentative step towards him, then another. She reaches a hand out to touch his shoulder, and he jerks away.

“Don't touch me!”

She tries one more time, reaching her hand towards him, and he turns back and screams at her, “Leave me alone! Don't touch me!” And their eyes meet, and she sees him then. The dark skin and the dark eyes, red-rimmed, the curly brown hair falling over his forehead that he furiously pushes back, the clear mucus dripping from his nose, the jutting shoulders and knees, his narrow child's chest, his long bony fingers and the delicate lines of dirt beneath each nail. And the eyes, the anger and the hurt and the confusion in his eyes, all that force directed at her.

Luisa sags and begins to walk away with a tightness in her chest, her footsteps brushing through the grass. In front of her, the lights from the windows of the house leak into the night. She turns away, pushing out into the darkness.

Accept the Cigarette

1963

1.

On the day that Luisa and Eduardo found out, they tried to run all the way home. It was too far, of course, and eventually they stopped, hands on knees, coughing in the dust they'd kicked up. They'd left the other kids far behind, and for the moment it was just the two of them triumphant, gasping for breath. The sheep sunning themselves on the road gave them disinterested stares and kept chewing their cud. They walked the rest of the way, breaking out into a run every once in a while, settling back into a walk. Then they were quiet. There was nothing else to say. In front of Eduardo's house, they hugged, dancing up and down together for a moment.

“We did it we did it we did it!” Eduardo said. “Vamos a Buenos Aires!”

She walked alone the rest of the way by herself, kicking a rock along the road, not really thinking about what the city would look like or the school or the old woman who was paying for them to go there. Just outside the door to her house, she felt the energy flare up again. She skipped into the kitchen, planning on bursting out with the news, but when she saw her mother, she changed her mind. Instead, she tugged on her sleeve, and handed her the letter. Her mother stood by the window, the paper crackling as she unfolded it. Outside, the sun was just beginning to set. Its light fell through the window, illuminated the wisps of hair framing her mother’s face, turned the wood of the kitchen table gold.

Her mother began to cry. Not tears of joy, Luisa sensed. They were coming from somewhere else. Her mother set the letter down on the counter, and hugged Luisa tightly, pinning her arms to her sides. She tried to squirm away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “Aren’t you happy for me?” But her mother wouldn’t answer. She finally let go, and turned around to continue peeling potatoes.

“I am very happy for you, Luisa. I’m so proud of you. Really, I am.” She wiped her nose on her sleeve. “Really,” she said softly. And then, suddenly, “don’t forget me, okay?” For a moment, her mother was a child. Don’t forget me. Love me. Don’t leave me.

“I’ll never forget you. I love you.”

2.

Six months later, their fathers wait on the platform until their train pulls away. The trip takes three days. They race across lonely country that falls off the horizon, wind-blown lakes and hazy mountain peaks. And on the third day, the Pampas. A sea of whispering grass, gold and

green, clouds drifting lazily across the arching sky. Herds of heavy cattle followed by dark-faced men on horses who turn to watch the train beat by. Fields of late summer sunflowers, faces turned to the sky. Luisa's heart frantically beats what feels like thinning blood, watery and weak. Neither of them sleep much. The two nights on the train, they stay up late talking or lying in silence, watching the starry sky through the window.

When they arrive, the ceiling of the train terminal is higher than the dome of the cathedral in Bariloche. They stand, stunned into silence, surrounded by the click of leather shoes, murmured voices, the whispering of brushing suit sleeves. People slide around them like a stream around a rock, and they move close together, so their arms are pressed shoulder to elbow. When they finally make their way outside, they are assaulted by sound and color, honking horns and shouts. The smell of gasoline and scum on the street, cooking oil, urine, flowers. They see their names scrawled on a card held by a man in a suit, and shuffle over to them.

“Welcome,” he says with a curt smile. “The car is this way.”

The woman sitting in the back of the car waiting for them is Susana Benedetti, the aging widow who is paying their tuition as a part of a scholarship program that she started in her name. She bids them enter, her slender fingers fluttering like streamers, a silver bracelet bobbing up and down on her tissue-paper wrist.

“You made it! Welcome! You must be exhausted! We'll just get you something to eat, I'll tell you all about Santa Teresa, and tomorrow you will be there! Delightful! You must be so excited.”

They nod mutely.

“How was your trip?” she asks.

After a moment, Eduardo says. “It was long. But nice. There was a lot to look at out the window.”

“All of Argentina practically!”

Susana Benedetti’s apartment has dark polished wood floors, Turkish carpets, heavy drapes over the windows, a shelf filled with chubby porcelain cherubs with static smiles that look vaguely threatening to Luisa. There is a white tablecloth and place settings on the table, seats with red cushions. Susana Benedetti talks for most of the time, telling them the story of her husband’s death, all the money that was left her, how the idea had come to her while she was on holiday in at the Llao Llao in Bariloche.

“I bumped into these children,” she tells them. “Begging for money outside of the chocolate shop. And you know, they reminded me of the maid we had growing up, Tatá, who was really a very intelligent woman, you know. And so I thought, well, I have all this money, why not start a scholarship? You know, to give some children an opportunity to go to school, take them out of the South and into the city. Not to say your school wasn’t lovely, I’m sure, but you know Buenos Aires really has so much to offer in the way of an education.”

Luisa and Eduardo nod along, but their eyes are wandering all over the furniture, the lights of the city beginning to flicker on through the window. Never having been served by anyone but her mother, Luisa feels hot embarrassment when a mestiza maid comes in with the ravioli, but forgets a few minutes later when she tries the food. She wants to kick Eduardo under the table to get his attention, she wants to exclaim to him, shit, have you ever tasted something this good? They make eye contact finally.

Eduardo says to Susana Benedetti, “this is delicious!”

“Ah, yes, ravioli is my favorite. You know, my father was Italian.”

They nod.

“So you two grew up on sheep ranches I hear. What is it exactly that you eat out there?”

It takes a few moments of chewing before Eduardo is finally able to answer her. Long after dinner, their bellies are full enough to make them feel sick. Susana Benedetti shows them their rooms and a bathroom where they can shower, and then leaves them. Buried beneath a fluffy comforter with the lights off and the city lights seeping under the window shade, Luisa realizes that this is the first time that she’s slept in a room by herself.

3.

The driver waits with the car, while Susana Benedetti walks Eduardo and Luisa up to the school. There’s a thick brick wall topped with creamy-colored concrete that runs that encloses the city block that the school grounds take up, an ornate wrought-iron gate that’s been pushed open to let people through. They walk up the path and through the double doors into a dark echoing room, and situate themselves at the end of a line of parents and children waiting to register at a table that’s been set up at the other end. Her gaze travels all across the room until she sees that the other students are glancing surreptitiously at her and Eduardo. Luisa can feel the heat of their eyes darting onto her skin, and spends the excruciating minutes that they spend in line plucking at the sleeve of her thinning green sweater.

When they reach the desk, a nun gives Eduardo and Luisa a packet of papers containing class schedules and school regulations, a full set of uniforms arranged by Susana Benedetti on their behalf, and room keys. Susana Benedetti kisses them each on the cheek, bids them buena suerte, and tells them that she will see them in four weeks for tea.

Luisa balances her suitcase with a foot, and Eduardo gives her an awkward hug, hard and shaky, and then he's walking away, following an older student. Something in her chest clenches.

"This way," says a nun in a habit, and Luisa follows, turning her back on Eduardo, dragging the suitcase bumping over each step of the stairs. They turn off into a long hallway with brass numbers on the doors.

The nun says, "Ah, here we are. It's open, I believe." And she hands Luisa the key. "Welcome to Santa Teresa. Remember that there will be an all school meeting at six o'clock in the auditorium, and that dinner is at eight. Just follow the other students, you'll find everything easily enough." The nun's shoes clack away down the hallway.

Luisa takes a deep breath, and then another, and pushes the door open. There is a girl lounging on her stomach on the bed. She looks over Luisa lazily, starting with her hair, moving down to her boots. She snaps her gum, and sighs.

"Great, that's just great. I guess that's what I get." She looks up at the ceiling as if making a plea.

"What?"

"I just transferred here. I was supposed to go to the high school in Martinez, but at the last second I got transferred here. So they stuck me with the charity student." The girl has boy short hair, pearls in her earlobes. Her skin is darker than Luisa's, a Mediterranean brown.

Luisa doesn't know how to respond. "My name is Luisa," she says finally.

"Mariana."

Luisa drags her suitcase over to the empty bed, set perpendicular to Mariana's bed on the wall opposite. She can feel Mariana's eyes, just like the eyes from the entry hall, resting heavily on her back.

“Just don’t go following me around everywhere, okay? It’s not my job to teach you everything you don’t know or help you with your homework or anything, okay?”

“Okay.” More silence. Luisa feels like she should say more, but she can’t think of a single word to send out across the space between them, no spot of common ground for them to both stand on. Instead, she sets her copy of *Martin Fierro* on the bookshelf (a gift from her teacher), along with a bible (a gift from the priest), a journal (a gift from her family), and a smooth stone from the creek.

Mariana continues to snap her gum. After a while, she says, “I’m going to explore. I guess I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. See you.” She listens until she can’t hear the footsteps anymore, pushes the door gently closed, and curls up into a ball on the bed. She thinks she wants to cry, but the tears won’t come.

4.

It’s a relief to be wearing the same thing as everyone else, but she can’t stop thinking about the uniform. The stiff fabric of the skirt and the rigid collar of the shirt and the red indents that the socks leave on the backs of her knees, the shoes that announce her presence down the long hallway. As long as she keeps her mouth closed, she thinks, the uniform can hide her. A simple glance at the students pushing down the hallway is only enough to take in the navy blue sea, the starched white foam, shoes tapping and clicking like crabs along the bottom. A simple glance will not reveal the fear wound in her shoulders and eyes, the slight shaking of her hands.

5.

That first day, Luisa realizes that the bathrooms are going to prove difficult. Not peeing. That she'll manage fine. A tinkling sound of water on water, a flush, and all is well. It's the other thing that no one talks about (though she's already heard them talking about their periods and cramps and other bodily functions all the time), that involves plopping sounds and terrible stench. At home, the outhouse already smells, and a new addition is hardly noticed. Here, she shudders imagining a bathroom full of people wrinkling their noses at her stink. She'll just have to find a time when the bathroom is empty, she thinks.

The afternoon of the first day is also the first time another student talks to her, the honey-haired girl examining her nails that she's sitting next to in History, according to the seating chart.

"Oh, hello!" the girl says, and extends a hand.

"Hi," Luisa says.

"My name is Elizabeth," she says with a smile.

"Is that English?"

"Yes. My mother is English. No one here can pronounce it right though. Here, you say it."

Luisa pauses nervously, and says, "Elizabeth."

"See? No one can pronounce it."

"My English is pretty terrible."

"That's okay."

Luisa waits for Elizabeth to ask her name, but she's returned to examining her nails. "I'm Luisa," she says finally.

"Luisa, hmm, beautiful name!" Elizabeth says. Her face is pale, brushed with a dust of freckles. Her bright red lipstick makes her teeth look slightly yellow whenever her lips part.

When the bell rings at the end of class, Elizabeth tells her, “it was nice to meet you! I guess I’ll see you tomorrow!”

“See you tomorrow,” Luisa says, but Elizabeth is already gone.

6.

In the afternoons, the girls smoke cigarettes, dangling their long legs from windowsills, watching the smoke swirl in the city wind. Slender cigarettes from cardboard packages that they hide under mattresses and wrap in socks. Luisa, sitting on her bed, draws her knees up to her chest, and tries to follow the words on the page of her book rather than the line of Mariana’s leg tapping the brick wall beneath the window ledge. Mariana sucks on the cigarette, purses her lips, and blows the smoke out in a whoosh, glass eyed.

“What are you looking at?” She snaps at Luisa.

“Nothing.”

7.

At night she twists the knob on the lamp twice, and the light snaps off, but there’s no real darkness here, no silence. The light from the city leaks in around the edges of the window shade, the murmur of the city creeps in through the windowpanes – tires over pavement, voices and laughter from the street, the garbage truck and the street cleaners, the occasional shout. From the hallway come footsteps, the Sisters checking that the lights are out, later the soft whispers from other rooms, the creak of shrinking floorboards, outside a yowling cat. Our room is a box in a stack of boxes, Luisa thinks, one on top of the other, filled with people. She tries to imagine what it would look like if the building were to become invisible, reveal the proximity, people stacked

on people. Out on the campo there was the house and an almost complete silence, an almost complete darkness, outside a spill of stars across the sky. Here, the buildings and the people crowd in, pressing against the thin bone of her skull. The stars are mostly lost in the city-light haze, the moon climbs slowly up from behind the buildings.

8.

She runs into Eduardo in the hallway. His face lights up when he sees her, and he pulls her to the side while the sea of students continues on.

“Che, Luia, que pasa?”

“Hey, Edi. Doing alright I guess.”

“God, it’s strange here, don’t you think?”

“Tell me about it.”

“Nothing like home,” he says. He leans nonchalantly against the wall, watching the students flow by with an eager and anxious look in his face. “But the food is good.”

“God, the food is good.”

“And the bathrooms are nice.”

“The bathrooms are terrifying.”

He laughs, “I mean, they’re certainly different, but terrifying?”

“Full of people all the time, and everything echoes.” And then she blurts out, “I haven’t been able to go in three days.”

“I’m confused. What?”

“I mean shit. I can’t shit here.” She’d tried during siesta, shutting herself in to the stall at the very end of the ceramic cave, the one against the wall with the tiny window and patch of blue sky. She had sent a prayer up, asking God if He would please keep everyone out of the bathroom for just the next five minutes. She had willed her body to release its load, but nothing happened. She strained, and felt embarrassed even though she was alone. Nothing, zip, nada. She is sure that it is starting to affect her walk.

He raises an eyebrow. “That was more than I wanted to know.”

“Keep your voice down!”

“You’re the one who blurted it out.”

“What should I do?”

“Christ, Luisa, I don’t know.” He pauses, and says, “my mami used to give us a spoonful of oil, I think. Or make us drink maté.”

“Where am I going to get maté?”

“I don’t know Luisa, just go to the nurse or something.” He pats her head awkwardly.

A boy walking by calls out to him, “Edi! Come walk me to Spanish!”

“That’s Beto, my roommate,” he says cheerily to Luisa, and then he’s gone back into the sea.

9.

The junior and senior girls wear their hair in short bobs and paint their nails red or salmon pink. On Mondays, they tell stories about their weekends in hushed voices. The younger girls wear their hair long, pinned up on the sides, or tied back with a ribbon. They travel in packs

down the hallways, twisting strands of hair around fingers, nervously laughing with each other, eyeing the girl who laughs a little too loudly. On the periphery, there are other groups. Quiet girls who scatter like mice when Luisa tries to get close to them. The kids who play soccer out on the lawn, and grow their hair as long as they can before the nuns make them cut it. Skinny boys with loosened ties and untucked shirts reading Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar. Some of them read poetry out on the lawn, while others argue Peronism, populism, communism, socialism, and capitalism, the military coup of last year, and the impending October elections.

One boy says, with the stance of a poet, “Buenos Aires is the heart of the country, pumping blood into the provinces, sending a capillary to wrap around even far away Trelew.”

To which another boy, lounging on the grass replies, “Buenos Aires is the tumor, growing dark and rancid, its diseased cells seeping into the grassy plains.”

10.

After a week, Luisa begins to worry that the other girls will notice how greasy her hair has gotten. Her scalp itches, and the roots of her hair won't lie flat. When she sees Mariana wrapping herself in a towel, she does the same, and quietly follows her down the hall to the long tiled cave. There's steam in the air, slick skin, slippery floors, laughter, and chatter. Girls in their underwear with their legs balanced on sinks, running razors over their shins and calves. A world of legs, some skinny and child-like like Luisa's, others more rounded, some dimpled, some bony.

“That's gross,” Mariana says, looking down at Luisa's legs.

“What's gross?”

“Do you ever shave?”

“What?”

“Your legs. When was the last time you shaved them?”

“Never,” Luisa says, her cheeks reddening. “Why would I need to?”

“Ugh,” Mariana says, and marches towards the showers.

“It’s just hair!” Luisa calls after her. The other girls stop talking for a moment, and look at her. Someone whispers, another girl snorts.

“What?” Luisa says quietly. “What?”

“Nothing,” says the girl nearest her with a smile. “Nothing at all.”

Shoulders hunched, Luisa walks down to the showers and shuts herself into a stall. She turns the knob, and yelps when the water comes out too hot, adjusts the knob, and tentatively submerges herself in the spray. She looks down at the delicate waves that the water makes through the soft, fine hair of her legs, and feels a lump rise in her throat.

11.

It’s the same image that she always sees when she starts missing home, the head of her mother, caught halfway turned into the morning light streaming through the window. Pausing for a moment, curly wisps framing her face glowing gold, looking out over the rocky hills and windswept grass and gray-blue mountains fading behind morning mist. Caught in that moment before the kettle begins to whine. On the verge of sleep, Luisa tries to see her mother’s face, but the memory dissolves like dust, and carves a hollow in her chest. Sometimes she sits up suddenly, groping at the dark, breath pushing in and out of her.

From the other side of the room, Mariana groans, “What the fuck is wrong with you? Go to sleep, okay?”

“Bad dream. Sorry.”

“It’s fine, okay? Just go to sleep.”

12.

On Fridays, most of the students go home for the weekend. Mariana spends an hour glaring into the mirror, putting on dark lipstick and darkening the contours around her eyes, muttering angrily to herself. Luisa watches surreptitiously from over her book, listens to Marian’s low heels clacking on the wood floor. Halfway out the door, she stops, sighs, and looks over at Luisa.

“Well, have a good weekend,” she says, and then clacks away down the hallway. Luisa waits until she can’t hear her footsteps anymore, and then slips out of the room in her socks to go find Eduardo. With the school empty of the friends he’s made, he comes back to her. On Saturdays, the nuns let them explore the neighborhood around the school, warning them to not talk to strangers, and pressing small change into their hands for the mendigos. They walk around staring, trying to understand, faces filled with awe, until gradually the noise and the chaos seems to pound itself out into a beat and a rhythm. They walk through the old colonial streets of Recoleta, and into the cemetery to see Evita’s tomb. A whole city of stone build for the dead, mausoleums lining the streets like houses, stray cats napping in the sun, Evita’s tomb drenched in flowers.

13.

An hour or so after lights out, Luisa pads to the bathroom. This is the system that works. Bathed in the city-light haze coming through the tiny window in the last stall, her body finally

relaxes and releases. She stays there for a while on the slowly warming porcelain bowl, still a little ashamed at the happiness she feels at her body's relief. The city lights make the clouds look slightly pink. She yearns for darkness.

In the daytime, when the bathroom is full, she's astounded at the number of implements apparently needed to maintain and present to the world a body. Shampoo, conditioner, soap, razors, nail clippers, nail files, nail polish, cuticle cutters, tweezers, deodorant, moisturizer, face wash, tampons, pads, hair clips, hair ties, ribbons, combs, brushes, tubes of cream, bottles of pills, fluffy washcloths. And then all the time devoted to these things, girls crowding the mirrors in the mornings, studiously plucking eyebrows and squeezing pimples. She refuses to shave her legs. She skitters past the rest of the girls with her head down, hoping they won't notice her.

14.

After a while, she notices that Mariana does not quite fall into any one group. She's an obvious sort of beautiful, and Luisa often sees her walking with the other girls, but there's something wild about her that makes them wary, a tendency towards anger and truth-telling. She doesn't follow their rules completely. Their hair is long, her hair is short, they spend their afternoons painting their toenails or sitting outside together, she plays field hockey and walks into her and Luisa's room with sweat in her hair and dirt on her face and a fierce look in her eyes. Luisa begins hearing whispers fluttering through the school like tissue paper caught in the wind. That she had gotten thrown out of her last school for slapping a girl, for yelling at a teacher.

“I heard she got thrown out for indecent behavior,” Elizabeth says. Their teacher has not yet arrived for history class, and the girls are crowded around Elizabeth’s desk, which is also Luisa’s desk.

“What do you mean? What kind of indecent behavior?”

“Well,” Elizabeth says, and they all lean in. “Apparently, there’s this guy that lives in the house behind hers in Martinez, and someone caught them kissing.”

“So what,” a girl named Chela says. “That doesn’t seem that bad.”

Elizabeth raises an eyebrow, and smiles coyly. “He’s a med student, not a high school student. Apparently he’s twenty-two.”

There’s a collective gasp, and then chattering, a ruffling of plumage. Luisa tries her best to look surprised, but there’s more than surprise on these girl’s faces, a vindictive glee just beneath the surface.

“No way,” Chela says. “I don’t believe it.”

“It’s true!” Elizabeth says. “Here, Luisa, you live with her, don’t you? Don’t you think it could happen?”

Suddenly, all eyes are on her, the floor is hers. She wants very badly to give them what they want, she wants very badly in that moment for them to like her.

Finally, she says, “definitely. I could see that. She’s pretty crazy. I could definitely see that.”

They squeal happily. The teacher walks in, and then they scatter.

15.

Like a swarm of starlings, united through the identification of *other*, they swarm together in a flock, pulsing together, changing direction together, swooping through the halls. Luisa can tell that Mariana is aware that something is happening, has noted the change in flavor of the smiles she's been receiving, the sudden silences when she enters rooms. She can see it in the slight tension of her shoulders as she walks down the hallway ahead of Luisa, and it is in the hallway that it happens one day. Mariana is suddenly flanked by girls. Luisa can't distinguish them from one another, the voices seem to come from one creature.

"So, Mariana, I heard you've got a boyfriend."

"What? No. Where did you hear that?"

"Is he cute?"

"Tell us about him?"

"I don't have a boyfriend."

"There's this rumor going around that you're into older men, is that true?"

Mariana tries to laugh, but it comes off as a high pitched *ha!* "What bullshit," she says. "I don't know where you heard those things, because they're not true."

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"C'mon Mariana, tell us about him."

"There is no him." Mariana stops walking, and the girl behind her runs into her.

"Hey!" the girl says. "That was rude!"

Mariana turns away, and walks the other direction, past Luisa without making a sound. Luisa wants to feel triumphant, she wants to feel avenged, she wants to hate Mariana. Instead, she slips past the starlings without a word, and slides along to the wall to class, a feeling of sick rising in her throat.

That night, when Luisa walks back into the room, Mariana is sitting on Luisa's bed, waiting for her. Her cheeks are wet and her eyes are burning with anger.

"I heard what you said," she says. "I heard what you told them. It's not true. You don't know anything about me."

Something in Luisa's chest sags, some organ comes detached from her ribcage and settles into her stomach. "I didn't tell them anything," she says softly.

"Liar!"

"Really, I didn't, I swear." She feels tired suddenly, like a damp, heavy blanket has been draped over her head.

Mariana glares at her for a moment, then begins to get ready for bed, shrugging into her nightgown, taking out her pearl earrings. Luisa hunches over her desk and pretends to do work.

Finally, Mariana says, "Sheep. They're sheep. I hate them." She snaps her bedside lamp off and squirms into bed, turning her body towards the window.

Luisa quietly finishes her work and gets ready for bed, treading softly, turning the light off, breathing in that brief moment of pure darkness before her eyes adjust, and listens to the quiet sniffles and mutterings coming from the other side of the room. She thinks to herself, I miss sheep.

16.

The fourth week, as promised, Luisa and Eduardo walk to see Susana Benedetti. They follow directions scratched onto a piece of paper by the principal of the school. *It's easy*, he'd told them, *the city's a grid. If you hit the river, you'll know you've gone too far.* They are side by

side walking down the sidewalk. Luisa reaches instinctively for Eduardo's hand, and he laughs at her.

"What are you doing?"

"Wasn't thinking, sorry," she says, and yanks her hand back.

"Hey, hey, Lui. It's okay. I'm sorry. I just thought it was funny."

Her cheeks are burning. He gives her a brief, one-armed hug.

They've given themselves an hour to find the apartment. The wall surrounding the school goes on for a few blocks, and then they're really in the city surrounded by cacophony and symphony, an onslaught of sound and color, a melody and harmony. Cafés and antique shops, Italian restaurants and street vendors, a couple dancing to a tango streaming from a record player, legs twisting around one another, the mendigos with paper cups and cardboard signs, washed up against the sides of buildings, stray cats. Chastised, Luisa does not loop her arm through Eduardo's though she wants to. She looks up as they walk at the sky partitioned by buildings, straight channels of cloud and sky.

They walk around a corner, and the river stretches before them. The Rio Plata, the river of silver, so far across that they cannot see the opposite bank. In silent communication, Luisa hopes, some vestige of before, they simultaneously loop their legs over the bottom railing and lean their chins on the top bar. Chill air whips off the gray-green water, flipping their hair into their faces and back. Open sky, open space. Luisa feels a tug on her heart. She turns to Eduardo, and sees that he is smiling.

"I can't believe we made it here," he says.

"Me neither," she says with considerably less enthusiasm.

"You okay, Luisita?"

She is silent for a long time. She sighs through her nose. “I don’t think so. No. I’m not. No. Are you?”

“I love it here.”

She winces. “My roommate hates me, and I can’t hate her back because they’re all being so mean to her.”

“They?”

“All the other girls.”

“Oh.”

“But she’s such a bitch. She’s so fucking mean. It’s stupid.” She can’t think of anything else to say.

“Sorry,” Eduardo says lamely, and they both look out over the water.

“I miss my mami,” she says. “I want to go home.”

“Yeah, well, I miss my mami too. At least yours will be there when we go home.”

She feels the first trickle of snot, and snuffles pathetically, tears leaking out of her eyes. “I hate it here.”

“You’ve just got to relax, Lui. It’s not that bad. It’s more than not that bad. It’s an opportunity. We’ve been delivered.”

“I want to go home.”

People walking by are looking at them.

“So go home,” he says irritably. “If you hate it so much, then go home.”

She’s shocked silent by his tone.

“I love it here,” he continues. “I mean, I know it’s different. But God, Luisa, we have this whole world in front of us, and you want to go back?”

For a split second she thinks, but I'd miss the hot water, the comfy beds, tres leches. And then shame, I'd trade my mother for cake. And then the sinking realization that home could never be home again. The open sky would never feel the same again after the enclosed city, the food would never taste the same, her family would treat her differently.

Finally, she says, "I don't know if I want to go home."

Eduardo sighs colossally, "then for fuck's sake, grow up and get over it, okay?"

She's crying, there's clear mucus dripping from her nose.

"Okay?" he says again.

"Okay."

"Good." He lingers for a moment, and the sound of the air shaking in and out of Luisa is present between them. A moment later, he gets up. "I'm sorry, Lui," he says quietly. "Let's go, we're going to be late."

She takes one last look at the river gliding past, and follows Eduardo back into the orderly labyrinth.

17.

When she walks back into her room, Mariana is sitting on the windowsill, her legs dangling out into the open air, smoking. It's mid-April. The long Buenos Aires summer is ending. There is still sweat in Mariana's hair, dripping down the side of her face, drawing lines in the dust that's settled there. Luisa wants to say something, wants to apologize, but she cannot figure out how to begin, so instead she goes to lie on the bed. Silence blooms in her chest.

"Tell me about your mother," Mariana says suddenly.

Startled, Luisa doesn't answer for a moment. "What about her?" she asks.

“Anything.”

“She’s blonde.”

“Really? Huh. I never would have guessed. What else?”

“She’s German. She’s from Chile. She likes to cook and sing. She tells us creepy German fairytales at night.” Luisa feels the dull longing in her, slowly beating, the words beating their way out. “Every morning she’s the first one to wake up, and she makes coffee first, and then breakfast for my father and my two older brothers, and then tea for the rest of us. The younger kids. Every morning. She can’t sing very well, but she does anyway.”

“Does she love you?”

“Of course. And I love her too. I miss her.” Her nose prickles, she can feel the tears coming back.

“My mother hates me.”

Luisa looks up. Mariana is staring out the window, her cigarette dripping ash onto the sill. She’s crying.

After a few moments, Luisa says quietly, “I’m sure your mother doesn’t hate you.”

“No. She does. She said so. That’s why I’m here, at this school. I didn’t get kicked out, that part isn’t true.” Mariana keeps crying.

Luisa slowly raises herself from the bed, so she’s standing there facing Mariana’s back.

“Our neighbor, who lives behind us. He. I liked him. He used to talk to me at night.

And...”

Luisa takes a step towards her.

“And my mother told me she hated me, that she couldn’t understand me. And she sent me here to be away, as punishment.”

Luisa takes a step, and says again, "I'm sure she doesn't hate you."

"No. She does. But I hate her too."

"Maybe she was angry...my mother gets angry sometimes too." Another step, and she's standing next to Mariana, looking out over the lawn and the trees and the city buildings beyond.

"No, no. That's not the point. I just..."

"You just?"

Mariana shrugs, "I just wish it weren't true. That's all."

They stay like that for a while, Mariana crying quietly, Luisa standing beside her, feeling her body loosen, the knot in her chest unfurling with a sigh, the tension in her shoulders releasing. Mariana sniffs, wipes an arm across her nose, and then reaches for the cigarette carton balanced on the windowsill.

"Cigarette?" she asks.

Luisa nods, "Okay. Thanks."

Mariana hands her the slim white tube and lights a match. "Have you ever smoked before? No. Okay. Here, lean down, okay, and now suck it in. There you go."

Luisa feels the smoke burn its way down her throat, and then it escapes her in a cough. She climbs up onto the other side of the sill, dangling both feet down. Together, they inhale and release, the smoke rising up, mingling, shredding on the air like silk.

Critical Afterward

Learning to Write with Honesty

You ask whether your verses are any good. You ask me. You have asked others before this. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems, and you are upset when certain editors reject your work. Now (since you have said you want my advice) I beg you to stop doing that sort of thing. You are looking outside, and that is what you should most avoid right now. No one can advise or help you – no one. There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig in yourself for a deep answer.

- Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

In a sense, something has to force me to write a story; I am incapable of simply sitting down and writing. The ideas have to arise elsewhere first, and then they have to build, like water in a dam. Initially, I try to run away from the pressure. I clean my room, I go running, I paint. The feeling is like guilt in the way that you physically feel guilt, in the way that your guilt rears up even when you think you've pushed it away or buried it deep. Eventually, the pressure comes to be too much, something cracks, something breaks, and finally, I sit down and write. Which is

not to say that a story comes to me fully formed; usually, what I'm struck with first is an image, a mood, a tone. If the image keeps coming back to me – in daydreams, in dreams, in random moments – then I might have a story. The first story I ever wrote, the summer after my senior year of high school, came as the result of a dream. I was on a small planet, and there was dune grass, sand, and blue shallow water. I was swimming, the planet began tilting, and then I was falling with the water. An arm reached down to pull me up, and I woke. Luisa first appeared to me as a young woman, sitting on a windowsill, looking out over a city at night, chain-smoking, and waiting. I asked, waiting for what? And the story began.

This time around, the image that sparked the story that would become “Seeing Eduardo” was not quite my own. Instead, it came from *Dr. Zhivago* (1965), which I saw for the first time last summer. The opening scene is a funeral procession in Siberia. In the background, a mountain made blue-gray by the distance takes up almost the entire screen. In the foreground, what must either be a telephone or telegraph pole stands at an oblong angle. And in the middle ground, walking across a plain that seems to melt into the mountain, a line of tiny human figures. I was struck by the human ceremony – this human attempt to explain and therefore create insulation from death – amidst the incredible vastness and overwhelming presence of nature, of which death is a part like any other, within which human lives are very small and transitory.

It reminded me very much of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento's 1845 pseudo-intellectual work *Facundo: civilización y barbarie*, which I'd read the year before. Sarmiento's claim throughout the book is that the character of the Argentine people developed as a result of the landscape. The vast and empty nature of the provinces, he believed, caused the people to be resistant to authority and hierarchical structure, making them, therefore (in his mind), barbaric, as opposed to the structured city, which he saw as civilized. Interestingly, he specifically notes

the Argentine attitude towards death; after listing the many dangers the people of the provinces face, he writes:

This insecurity in life, imprints on the Argentine character, to my mind, a certain stoic resignation to violent death, making it one of the misfortunes that are inseparable from life, a manner of dying just like any other, and perhaps, this may explain, in part, the indifference with which death is given and received, without leaving any deep or lasting impression on those who survive (46).

After reading *Middlemarch*, I was inclined to think of this phenomenon in terms of competing narratives that all, as D.A. Miller puts it in his essay, “The Wisdom of Balancing Claims,” “conspire to identify what is, in terms of its main actions, *the same story*” (109). The “same story” here is the fact of death, and the narratives that arise – governmental, religious, personal – all serve to explain death in some way. It occurred to me, however, that in this instance the natural world itself follows a narrative – the seasons, the spiral pattern of seeds in the face of a sunflower, the organization of cells in a leaf – in which death is not mysterious or terrifying, but is simply an inevitable part of the cycle. In large natural spaces, the narrative of nature would be omnipresent and powerful, constantly dwarfing and challenging the human narratives woven by the people living in such immensity. In a sense then, the “indifference with which death is given and received” that Sarmiento describes would be explained by the imprinting of nature’s indifference to death on its inhabitants. Simultaneously, however, such a landscape suggests that social structures and ceremonies surrounding death would no longer have the power or legitimacy to explain death, thus leaving its inhabitants exposed to the mystery and terror surrounding death.

My grandfather grew up on a sheep ranch in Patagonia, about a four hour drive along a dirt road twisting through the foothills of the Andes, washed out in parts, covered in sheep and llamas sunning themselves at other points. I had grown up hearing stories of the campo, and

when I was thirteen we'd finally gone to visit. So when I think of deserts, I immediately think back to Patagonia, the colors, the cliffs, the spill of stars that nearly erased the constellations. Thus, the funeral procession that I saw in *Dr. Zhivago* was transplanted into the desert that I'd visited as a child, a line of people in mourning clothes making their way to the cemetery where we'd visited my great-uncle Emiliano's grave. The grass obliterates the path the people have taken, the immensity of the surroundings interrupts their ceremonial mourning. I saw the procession from afar, and wondered, who is watching? And, of course, it was Eduardo, a character I'd written about before. Why is he not a part of the procession? It is his mother who has died, and the answers given to him by his family and religion have done nothing to assuage his pain, confusion, and anger. Luisa, in the procession, looks up at him and, sensing something, looks away. This is what I began with in September, this one moment. The procession of tiny figures, Luisa looking up to see Eduardo, and then looking away.

I would love to be able to say at this point that the rest was easy, that the words flowed from a deep place with ease, that the structure arose naturally over time. The truth is, however, that I soon ran into problems. The extension of this truth is that retrospectively I am glad that I did, because, of course, it was from my blunders that I learned the most. The first issue stemmed from the incredible longing that filled me and served as the impetus to begin writing. My father is an Irish Catholic from New Jersey, and my mother is Argentine, but born in Alabama, so I've always felt somewhat between cultures. I grew up hearing a language that I could pronounce but not speak, feeling terrible guilt each time my Mamina had to switch from Spanish to accented English for me. I grew up hearing stories of a country I had never been to – stories about the ranch outside of Bariloche, the wealthy neighborhood that my Mamina grew up in in Buenos Aires before her father went bankrupt, the various relatives spread throughout Argentina and the

rest of South America. In short, I longed desperately to be a part of a culture that felt like it was receding from me, that I felt I did not quite have a right to call my own. Added to this was the fact of being born in the city and raised in the suburbs, rendering the countryside something foreign and entrancing, a place that existed mostly in my head, or in the books that I loved, starting with Tamora Pierce's young adult novel *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* (it seems only fair to give credit where credit is due), and bleeding into Michael Ondaatje's portrait of the Sahara in *The English Patient* and Willa Cather's painting of the Nebraska prairie in *My Ántonia*. This in addition to my natural tone of writing – somewhat somber and unnecessarily dramatic – made for some very vague and lifeless early drafts.

Added to this was my reluctance to leave theory behind. I was very interested in the ways in which the formulation of language itself reflected the formulation of narrative. I was thinking once again of “Narrative and its Discontents,” but also of J. Hillis Miller's *Ariadne's Thread* and *The Ethics of Reading*. In short, I was entranced by J. Hillis Miller's explication of language as the breaking of a line to form repeatable symbols in *Ariadne's Thread* and the idea of storytelling as the differentiation of the undifferentiated Absolute in *The Ethics of Reading*. In a few drafts I foregrounded theory, introducing a somewhat distanced narrator (very much influenced by Milan Kundera's narrator in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*). As a result, my early drafts had mostly to do with landscape and literary theory, and very little to do with my characters, who all felt abstracted and vague. One day, while I was reading Jonathan Franzen's interview with *The Paris Review*, I stumbled across a line like a slap in the face; speaking of the writing of his novel *Freedom*, he said, “I was making the same mistake I always seem to make initially, trying to write from the top down. I always have to learn the hard way to begin with character,” and I said to myself, *oh fuck. That's exactly what I've been doing*. I had been thinking up grand narratives

and theories, falling in love with the poetic language of Ondaatje, Cather, Kundera, and Marilynne Robinson (among others), and forgetting the people that I'd stuck into these situations. As my dear friend Nick Trickett put it to me once of characters, "they need to suffer, to cry, to scream and yell at each other, to think about fucking and how they miss their mothers and the way fresh seafood tastes." *The English Patient* and *My Ántonia*, while abundant in splendid writing and grand human themes, succeed on the strength of their characters. Katherine Clifton and Almásy, Jim Burden and Ántonia are all complex and idiosyncratic, loveable and detestable by turns, very much flawed, and very much human.

"Write what you know," Nathan Englander said in an interview with *Big Think*, "It isn't about events. It's about emotions." I very much lacked the firsthand experience that Ondaatje and Cather had; Cather spent a good portion of her childhood in Nebraska, and Ondaatje moved to Italy in order to do research for *The English Patient*. I did not know slang like Junot Diaz did in his short story collection *Drown*, or the intimate details of life in the Bronx in the 1950s that Don DeLillo uses in *Underworld*.¹ What I had were stories, a few black and white and sepia photographs, Bruce Chatwin's 1970s travel book *In Patagonia*, and memories from a week when I was thirteen. Most importantly, however, I had that "jewel beyond all price" as Rilke calls it, my own childhood, my own emotional experiences.

Thus, from a theoretical standpoint, the story was about the point of differentiation between self and other, differentiation being the site at which narrative forms according to D.A. Miller. From a more personal and emotional standpoint, however, the story ended up being about the peculiar feeling that I would sometimes feel in the presence of my best friend growing up. Her name is Molly, we met when we were six, and we still talk almost every day. We grew up

¹ I remember reaching a description of mothers tapping pennies against windows to get their children's attention in *Underworld* and feeling like it was one of the details that made the whole thing smell real. Lo and behold, it turns out that DeLillo did in fact grow up in the Bronx.

and developed together to such a degree that it would be impossible to trace which influence came from who. We usually didn't have to speak in complete sentences with one another, and were often struck by the same thoughts at the same moment. Because of this, it was always a strange and striking experience when, in a moment, I would understand that Molly was a separate human being from me, that she had thoughts and feelings that I had no access to, that I would never see completely into her mind. This realization, in a strange way, took place on a surface level. That is to say that, suddenly, I would *see* Molly; literally, her physical features would suddenly become apparent to me, and I would be struck by the strangeness of human relationships, the spaces that we can never overcome, the intense loneliness that comes simply from being a human individual.

It was from this realization that the story began to gain depth, began to take on the hue of reality; rather than the narrative of nature being the main focus of the piece, it became rather, a catalyst, a representation of the harsh realities that we are exposed to when our social, religious, or familial structures fail to insulate us as they would. Hence, the piece still opens with the landscape in which Eduardo and Luisa live before their own introduction in the next paragraph:

Think of the edge of the world, a place without maps. Patagonia. The children draw figures in the dirt. Words and picture. The wind fills the scratches with dust, new grass pushes up through the earth, and when the rain comes, the mud runs in slippery rivulets down to the creek. They build dams in the creek that wash away, waterlogged branches disintegrating into dirt, stones clattering across the shallow bottom, new patterns drawn in silt. The house is wearing away, weathered wood growing soft and gray, splintering, the bricks of the chimney beginning to crumble. The sounds are the wind and the rustle of grass, the bleats and maahs of sheep across the valley, occasional shouts that echo and cede back into the quiet. And the sky like a cathedral dome, cobalt and soaring (5).

We are in a place “without maps,” meaning where human mastery over space (or perhaps more accurately, the appearance of human mastery over space), has not occurred. The overwhelming expanse of Patagonia resists the architecture of language through which we make sense of the

world, as well as the network of roads or towns with which to locate ourselves. In Luisa's world, human structures – both physical and social – fail in the face of the natural world in which they attempt to exist. Thus, the figures that the children draw in the dirt, indicative of language and stories, are soon blown away by wind and overgrown by grass. The dams that the children build in the creek wash away, the branches ceding back into the natural cycle by “disintegrating into dirt,” and nature asserts its own narrative by drawing patterns in the silt.

The house, which is supposed to provide them with shelter, as well as marking the site at which the family comes together as a unit, is falling apart, the natural elements out of which it was made (wood, bricks) slowly calling it back into the cycle of matter. As we see in the rest of the story, the house lacks the ability to hold the family within it; when Luisa comes home to find her mother gone, the space becomes insidious, and when her parents fight, the children leak out of the house and scatter into the night. Lastly, the sky is “like a cathedral dome,” suggesting that the narrative of the natural world supersedes human religions, asserting its own doctrine. The rest of the story reasserts the inability of Catholicism to insert itself into the lives of Luisa and Eduardo; the stories that the priest tells them seem to them simply stories, and the empty sky appears to tell them that there is no place for God to sit, and therefore no God (at least in the Catholic sense of God).

Thus, in many ways, Luisa has already begun differentiating herself as an individual separate from those around her. Home is not a place of comfort or safety, religious explanations of the world around her fail, and her siblings have paired themselves off. However, because she still has Eduardo, she does not quite conceptualize herself as an individual yet:

And so it was that Luisa and Eduardo came to be Luisa and Eduardo, their names in constant connection. Born a week apart, they'd been babies smacking wooden spoons on the kitchen floors together. Nine years later, they are still a single animal, roaming the hills (6).

Luisa does not see Eduardo as a separate being, but rather as a part of herself. Thus, they are not aware of one another or themselves, but absorbed in the tasks before them, the grass that the “absentmindedly” tear at, the immediate sensation of hunger, their wandering thoughts. They insulate one another from the surrounding immensity, from their own human loneliness.

Thus, it takes an event that affects Eduardo in a fundamentally different way than Luisa to make her understand that Eduardo is distinct from her, with an interior life that she will never have access to. Whereas Eduardo, it is implied, has a deep connection to his mother, Luisa had almost none, so while Eduardo is strongly impacted by her death, Luisa is mostly affected by Eduardo’s absence. The rising tension in the story centers around the inevitability of the split between the two of them, brought about as a result of their differing reactions to death, and Luisa’s inability to empathize with Eduardo’s grief. The final scene of the piece dramatizes this divide between the two characters. Luisa, desperate to reestablish their previous relationship, follows Eduardo, and Eduardo, in his state of anger and grief, lashes out at her, and in this moment, Luisa sees the surface of him:

...the dark skin and dark eyes, red-rimmed, the curly brown hair falling over his forehead that he furiously pushes back, the clear mucus dripping from his nose, the jutting shoulders and knees, his narrow child’s chest, his long bony fingers and the delicate lines of dirt beneath each nail (17).

Forced away by Eduardo, Luisa is finally individuated. Initially, she walks towards the house, but as has been established, the house no longer serves the function of comfort or enclosure, but rather “leaks” light out into the night. Thus, she pushes out into the darkness, alone.

The emergence and shaping of the second story is a much more difficult process to trace. Rather than one image, there were many – the girls smoking cigarettes, the hallways of the

school, Luisa's bedroom, Luisa and Eduardo seeing the Rio Plata, Mariana offering Luisa a cigarette. I almost had to trick myself into writing the images down. If I approached it head on, I slipped to the side like a magnet repelling a like force. Instead, I wrote in my journal, I read, I doodled, and when I got to a place where I was no longer on the outside of the writing – when I was no longer thinking of form or reception or style – then I could begin to write.

As with before, I also began with theoretical conceptions of the story, which while at first stimulating, became problematic as the story began to progress. Whereas out in the countryside one overarching narrative reigned, it seemed to me that the city would be a tangle of narratives. What interested me was the idea that these narratives, while inherently constructed, still had very real impacts on the people living within them. I was thinking more specifically of the war of ideologies that composed Argentina's Dirty War (which contradicted Sarmiento's claim that the city was "civilized"), the desert explorers in *The English Patient* who become embroiled in World War Two despite their desire to be nationless, and the narrative composed by the community of Middlemarch who eventually expunge people of differing narratives (Dorothea, Lydgate) from their midst in order to maintain their conception of their social construction as natural.

Once again it became apparent that it was the emotional life of the characters, rather than the specificity of the context in which they lived and to which I had no access, that I needed to develop. Thus, while I did not attend a boarding school in Buenos Aires in the sixties after having grown up in a poor rural setting, I did have my own set of powerful memories from my experiences in a suburban public school. In this regard, the phrase "self-conscious" seems worth examining – the painful awareness of the self, being aware of the need to construct actions rather than letting them flow from being without intermediary thought. I was a shy kid, but also

rebellious, very sensitive to teasing, but unwilling to conform to social standards – I did not shave my legs, I dressed like a boy, I didn't wear makeup. Often, I remember, just wanting very much not to be noticed, wanting to feel like myself so I wouldn't have to constantly be aware of myself.

Does this sound a little bit like Holden Caulfield? Probably. And that's what made the story all the more difficult to write, to find a place within the cliché drama of the high school student who doesn't fit in. There were points when I really hated the story, when the conceptual readers leaning over my shoulder would roll their eyes and wince. *Don't you know that there's war and poverty and disease out there, they'd say, who cares about the feelings of high school kids?* What I had to remember was that what now may seem trivial – getting teased for not wearing shoes in the hallway, for example – then felt like a humiliation that filled the whole world. But in order to get at that feeling, I had to get rid of my conceptual readers, I had to stop thinking about reception, and write. And so, I turned to Allen Ginsberg, the great poet of personal honesty, who, in his interview with *The Paris Review* said this:

The problem is, where it gets to literature, is this. We all talk among ourselves and we have common understandings, and we say anything we want to say, and we talk about our assholes, and we talk about our cocks, and we talk about who we fucked last night, or who we're gonna fuck tomorrow, or what kinda love affair we have, or when we got drunk, or when we stuck a broom in our ass in the Hotel Ambassador in Prague – anybody tells one's friends about that. So then – what happens when you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse? The problem is to break down that distinction: When you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would talk with yourself or with your friends.

And so, I tried my best to forget that anyone was going to be reading my work, and tried to think about all of the emotions in the story, and how I myself had experienced those emotions: missing home, drifting apart from a friend, the painful awareness of the body, the humiliation and pressure. I tried to talk frankly to my Muse.

In this regard, the several scenes of defecation (or of unsuccessful defecation) seem especially pertinent. It is, of course, a fact universally acknowledged that everyone shits. By which I mean it might as well not be a fact universally acknowledged that everyone shits given the shame that often surrounds it. The maintenance and presentation of the body, as Luisa discovers early on, is one indication of an individual's adherence to the social order, and despite her resistance to that social order, the consequences of breaking social rules still cause her intense shame. Thus, even though shaving leg hair seems strange to her, Luisa still feels embarrassment when Mariana points out her leg hair and the other girls laugh.

And in the end, of course, this story, although much more fragmented and complex than the first, ended up revolving around a specific human relationship. While the first story ended with a division, this story ended with a union, a human connection. Ultimately, I wanted the connection between Luisa and Mariana to be a complicated but true one, a connection born not out of benevolence or love, but nonetheless meaningful. Thus, Mariana has transgressed and thus been ostracized and hurt, and is, in a sense, reaching blindly out from a place of desperation and defeat. Luisa, for her part, has just lost Eduardo, who can thus no longer serve as insulation against the social dynamics of the school, or as her connection to home. She is alone and exhausted, but she is not completely giving up the past or assimilating into her new culture. Though all the girls at the school smoke, the cigarette she is being offered comes from a person who herself is uncomfortable with and aware of the social constructions that surround them, who is of the host culture, but not completely a part of it. And yet, the connection is real, a genuine opening and receiving on the part of both girls: "Together, they inhale and release, the smoke rising up, mingling, shredding on the air like silk" (39). For the first time they are referred to in the plural, becoming one creature for at least a moment. Like smoke, relationships form and

dissolve, twist together, and shred. Like smoke, life, friendships, seasons, beliefs, moods, and emotions are transient, one moment there, one moment borne away on the wind, one moment gone.

Ultimately, I do not know if these two stories will ever feel done to me. I suspect that perhaps a story never quite feels done, that the orderly printed text and covers on books give the illusion of boundedness and wholeness, hiding a completion perhaps forced by a deadline or exhaustion. I am certainly tired. A happy tired, but tired nonetheless. These stories feel to me as though they could still branch away into a thousand different directions, evolving, splintering, until all the words return to the ocean from which I plucked them, or bloom into something else altogether. I can tell that I am not done with Luisa and Eduardo. Their story, I believe is much bigger than the thirty-six pages I've tried to encompass it within. Out of all my grand ideas of narrative and theory, characters are finally emerging, forming into people rather than illustrative tools, and the next step, I believe, is to give them room to grow.

And finally, to address Mr. Rilke; in working on this project, I have tried to find a deep answer, I have turned inward. I have discovered that while the writers I love inspire me to write, they cannot tell me what good writing is, they cannot tell me how to write, and I cannot measure myself against them. To write out of fear, to write in anticipation of judgment, is to write dishonestly. To write honestly often feels like proffering one's heart up to a stranger. To write honestly is to find a deep place from which the self flows. I was the type of child who stared at flowers both because I found them entrancing, but also because I thought that staring at flowers was something that artists did. So the question now is, why I am writing? Am I writing because I

have been seduced by the romantic vision of the writing life? Do I want to be a writer, or do I want to write? Would I, as you ask, die if I weren't allowed to write? I am still answering these questions, and I think I always will be, though more and more I think I am appreciating the flower, and thinking less of what it means that I am appreciating the flower. And this, I think, is a good thing.

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