MOLLY BEER

Coatepeque Nightswimming

¿Que voy hacer? Je suis perdu.
—Manu Chao

When I'm out of words, out of context (as I was so often in Salvador), my memory turns visceral: I remember the oozing feel of warm bottom sludge. I remember the way my body glowed an eerie white in the moonlight, the stark contrast of my skin against greased black water, a shard of bone upon obsidian. I remember how hard my heart beat.

Esteban (I would not call him Steve until we left El Salvador) is more disciplined. He compartmentalizes, deconstructs, reaches some quantitative understanding of what remains for me abstract. He remembers dates, numbers, and names. He tells me that I remember it wrong: I remember two separate visits to Lago de Coatepeque and compress them into one. My journal is no use for sorting out such stuff because in those days, in spite of the adventures and strange encounters of my life abroad, I wrote only of being in love with him: *Skinny, green-gray eyes, sudden smile that fans out all over his face. . . . He writes poetry to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, but will not speak to me. . . . Get this: he keeps orchids in his kitchen.*

Esteban is right: Coatepeque has its dates and body counts and seismic details. But even now, safe in our house of books that are in no danger of toppling off the shelves during nocturnal tremors, I insist the numbers do not matter. It was the *feel* of the place, the fear, and how close we were to being in over our heads even as we skimmed the surface of Salvador.

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Lago de Coatepeque was one of our early trips, late in my second semester teaching in Salvador and very early on in our love affair. I don't know what month it was, but it was sometime during that nameless season spent anticipating the rains of the summer monsoon everyone in Salvador calls wintertime. The mangoes were ripe and the flame trees fiery red, but the only change in weather, besides the sucking sensation that comes before any rain

but lasts for weeks in the tropics, was the flashing of blue heat lightning around the Volcán San Salvador.

It's no secret that El Salvador was not . . . safe. The civil war had been over for a decade but there was a pulsing sense of threat: an aura of guns. Guns pointing out of passing trucks. Guns clenched by shop guards, restaurant guards, bodyguards. Invisible guns. And the new guerrillas—mostly unseen, their tattoos shrouded—left territorial tracks, tags, tied-together shoes tossed over an electric line, graffiti: SalvaTrucha, Mara 18, the 118th Street Gang, imports just like us. And then there were the dead—even a decade after the war—still lying on the roadside. Not the same bodies, of course, but a naked boy, curled up fetal in the leaves by a red light, or a leg, a torso, a seeping stain of blood, traffic nosing around the corpse of a *campesino* hit-and-run, a burned-out bus jutting out of a shop window.

What we were coming to know about El Salvador we had seen through car windows, in the company of armed guards, in flashes. The rest of the time we lived in razor-wire luxury on one of Salvador's plush First World lily pads. At the imported teachers' compound at the American School we had maids and security staff, a pool, tennis courts, coconut palms, and a rubber-surfaced track that I ran on late at night with the lights off, huffing the adrenalin I fabricated from imagined fear. Many of our colleagues stayed within the walls—as the State Department recommended—but although Esteban and I had come to Salvador from opposite corners of the U.S., we had come for similar reasons and those reasons would not be realized sitting by the pool. We wanted to touch, if only for an instant, the real El Salvador—whatever that was, however gritty and grim, however it might contaminate us. Or so we thought.

In any case, if only for our sanity, we had to draw our own map—one that extended beyond our whitewashed walls of English and Edenic ignorance, but not so far as the guns and the gangs and the roadside gore. We were willing to step off our dilettante lily pad or at least dip our toes in dark water—but we were conscious of the riptides, the vortex, the sharks. We were not reckless or rash, not in our minds. But fear is a construct one can internalize, just like walls and other boundaries and borders.

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"*¡Ai MEES!*" my students gasped if I mentioned I'd visited villages like Suchitoto or Perquín over the weekend (and they *always* wanted to know where I had been over the weekend, and with whom). "You shouldn't go to those places; they are very dangerous!"

Sometimes one of my tenth-graders would linger after class.

"Mees," he'd say (it was almost always a boy), "you know, they are all Communists in these places you go to."

Sometimes my students would tell me stories.

"Once we had a teacher, and he got on the bus and went downtown."

I would wait for them to get to the point, but they had told a complete story: exposition, rising action, climax, implied dénouement. Already they were shaking their heads and clucking their tongues.

"Can you believe? *¡Que bravo!*"

There was even one loaded rumor—told in a whisper because it either wasn't true or was unmentionable—about an American teacher who'd been shot by a "stray" sniper bullet during the '80s. In one version of the story, that teacher had just shown Oliver Stone's film *Salvador* to his class.

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Coatepeque, however, was not off the map of acceptable risk—ours or our students'. In fact, they would have approved if I'd told them—which I would not do because if they heard I was spending a weekend on an island with only their math teacher and his wife and "Meester Samford," the other English teacher, I would never hear the end of it. Our students spent weekends at the lake themselves, lounging in hammocks between spins on their Jet-skis, so we expected Coatepeque to be one of the lily pads—safe and serene—a little respite before the end-of-semester chaos caught hold of us. We had rented a treehouse, whatever that meant.

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It ought to have been perfectly tranquil. The district had been relatively quiet during the civil war, and the crater—Coatepeque is a *caldera*—had not seen a major natural disaster since the

Holocene. We expected to enjoy the harrowing drive (we loved driving) and then relax, in lakeside chaise longues, with cold beers and gringo food we'd picked up at the PriceMart by the Embassy. We expected the usual hurdles—breakdowns, police checkpoints, and language barriers—but these were irrelevant to us—amusement, really. We were young and in love and it would all be perfectly good fun.

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And so we set off on a Saturday morning in Davíd-the-math-teacher's baby blue, '77 Mercedes—a relic that predated both me and the Salvadoran civil war. Davíd's wife Hilary rode shotgun—a phrase meant literally on those highways. They were honeymooners those two years in Salvador. Meanwhile, Esteban and I rattled around in the big back seat as we always did, careful not to step on the rust holes in the floor where the road blurred past beneath us. Esteban wore bug-eyed, silver Elvis sunglasses—a memento from Davíd's bachelor party—and my hair spun up wild in the gritty wind.

We rolled west along the Panamericana, or the Pan American Highway as it is called once it reaches El Norte, nosing through swarms of shoppers and hawkers in Santa Tecla, then dropping a thousand feet in elevation in a stampede of other vehicles—ancient school buses, pickups loaded with standing passengers or cows or both—all with brakes as bad as those on the Mercedes.

I had yet to learn to drive in Salvador, but when I did get my own car, that kamikaze drop down from Santa Tecla to the Free Trade Zone would become my favorite stretch of road. This was not because I was a suicidal driver, but because I thrilled at this place where the lines on the pavement went straight into a cement barricade, while the road turned, rough and unmarked, ninety degrees to the right. The last earthquake had moved the mountainside; new road had been laid to go around it, but never painted. It was the sort of thing that in the States would cause an uproar: lawsuits, public apologies. Not so in Salvador. It was just one more bend in a hectic highway. For me, in my struggle to be okay with being completely out of control, that turn to the right in the Panamericana was a concrete measure of my progress.

At last we entered Lourdes, where the Free Trade Zone began. Here textile *maquilas* lined both sides of the highway, and the wild road leveled out and eventually widened, drastically, into what was actually an airplane runway. The temperature had risen exponentially with the drop in elevation and the heat jiggled up off the asphalt. Women on the roadside hawked fried plantains with salt and chile or sacks of coconut milk out of cracked Made-in-China plastic bowls that they carried on their heads. School buses—U.S. discards with Cumberland County School District still legible on the side, a Sacred Heart of Jesus airbrushed on the emergency exit—careened on and off the road again, picking up passengers and their chickens without ever fully stopping. Women with infants and ancient *abuelitas* ran to catch the buses; some man would lean out, grab a woman's arm, hoist her aboard, and off they'd go in a billow of black exhaust.

Where the highway forked, Davíd maneuvered the Mercedes north toward Santa Ana. Dingy plumes of sharp-smelling smoke rose from sugarcane fields they burned to kill the snakes. Hil turned up the music. The cassette player was temperamental and accelerated as it warmed up, but our favorite band for the road was the frenetic, multi-lingual Manu Chao and it didn't matter if it got a little fast. Hil and I sang loud and off-key, butchering the languages as well as the melody:

Me gusta viajar, me gustas tú.
Me gusta el [mumble], *me gustas tú*

¿Que voy hacer? Je ne sais pas.
¿Que voy hacer? Je ne sais [mum—],
¿Que voy hacer? Je suis perdu. . .

Davíd didn't sing; he was too busy dodging bullock carts while getting passed on both sides in spite of oncoming traffic. On the shoulders, kids, out of their school uniforms because it was Saturday, played soccer in the dry season dust.

The radiator started to boil as we came into a village not far from the turnoff at El Congo. Davíd pulled onto a rutted side street that poked half a block back from the paved highway. He was grinning; Davíd loved breakdowns. He and Esteban leapt

out and opened the old Mercedes wide on both ends. A crowd materialized to watch them uncap the radiator with the only article of clothing in the car that we weren't wearing: Hil's extra pair of underwear. Water erupted like a geyser and the crowd gasped.

I got out also and watched the spectators: men with their t-shirts turned up to expose and cool their bulging brown *panzas*, a cluster of bashful girls, lots of dusty kids who stared, and a lady with gray braids and a frilly pink gingham apron selling sodas and Diana potato chips. We all smiled at one another with more warmth than was usual for Salvador. The mood turned festive; Davíd was ecstatic.

"*¡Puchica!*" he hollered, shaking hot water from his wife's underwear. An old woman with glass teeth cackled.

Esteban was less of a showman. He struck off with the five-gallon water jug to find a cool refill for the radiator. Hil chatted with a little girl through her open window.

"We go to Coatepeque. At times, this car is good. At times, this car is bad. . . ."

Since she was keeping an eye on our stuff, there was nothing for me to do but use the interruption—that might last five minutes or all day—to find a Saturday fruit stand. I could already hear the criers: *¡Mandarina! ¡Coco! ¡Mango! ¡Cuatro por un dolar!*

Mango season is what I will always miss most about El Salvador: that glut of perfect, blushing fruit, or the puckering green ones; the maintenance men at school climbing trees like little boys with Christmas morning eyes; and absolutely everyone complaining of bellyaches—"too many mangoes!"—and grinning. That day I found a woman with a hand-crank mango slicer who still had green mangoes for sale. She sliced two into plastic baggies, then cut open a lemon—or a lime, rather, though they were one and the same in Salvador. She drizzled the fruit with juice then scooped in a few clumps of damp salt and handed the baggies over. My mouth ached watching. The apparatus looked clean enough, but the list of contaminants rattled off in my mind reflexively: *dysentery, typhoid, cholera, ascarids, amoebae*. . . . One friend of ours had recently contracted a stomach fungus that rendered him unable to digest fat—to measure this, his doctor had asked him to eat a half pound of butter each day for three days and collect—well, people don't talk about such things when they don't live in such places. I bought an extra five-cent lemon to double-douse the fruit.

Then I headed back to the Mercedes with my prize, ignoring the catcalls that trailed after me and scuffing my flip-flops in the soft, waiting-for-rain dust. The little crowd was leaning in to watch Davíd pour water over the sizzling radiator. Esteban was still wearing the Elvis glasses and stood at least a half-foot taller than the people around him. I could see smile lines fanning out across the side of his face. When I spoke, he turned.

"*Cierra los ojos*," I ordered.

He didn't need to close his eyes. In the Elvis glasses—without his prescriptions—he could hardly see anything anyway.

"*Abre la boca*. Wider." He opened his mouth and I slid in a lemony slice of salted sour green mango. He shuddered as the acid hit him. Beside him, a twig of a man in grease-stained khakis and a John Deere cap cackled. He was missing a front tooth.

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Salvador was a strange place for a love affair. That first awkward spring of ours, Esteban and I watched a dove's nest in the philodendron pot on his balcony: first two eggs, then one, then an angry little hatchling-fledging ugly feathers, and, at last, flying frantically—fumbling, falling—to the almond tree. We watched the mangoes ripen. We watched the lightning. We allowed ourselves to get drunk on the sugary sweetness of our bougainvillea-draped foreigner oasis, palm trees, parakeets, birds-of-paradise, German pancake breakfasts and coffee straight from the *fincas* (the export sort you needed to know someone to get). But there seemed to be so much at stake, so much we couldn't control.

We were inadequate from the start: I would wake suddenly one night on an island in the Golfo de Fonseco from a dream of Esteban etching a design on my arm and know that the creature—not Esteban after all, but what? A scorpion?—was still in our bed. With the lights on (the hotel had a generator), we would see a furry centipede several inches long leap from the bed to the floor and scurry for cover. It acted more like an animal than an insect and I had never heard of such a thing. Esteban slaughtered it with his flip-flop, but then what? My arm was swelling steadily, the sting haloed in white. There was no telephone on the island. We were an hour from the mainland where my car was impounded, three hours from Tegucigalpa and a real hospital. Esteban flipped

through an old guidebook. There was nothing in it about centipedes. What did I want from him? Should he wake up the hotel? Radio for the Embassy?

"Shhh," he murmured, stroking my hair from my face where it stuck in my tears. "Try to relax. Maybe you'll go back to sleep and it will stop hurting."

I lay awake hating him for a long time.

The next day, I would be the awful one: shouting at a police officer—a horrible, angry *gringa* trying to force her way through red tape and miscommunication, baring the strength of my will and my dark blue U.S. passport like teeth. It just didn't get easy.

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When we reached El Congo, Davíd turned left. The landscape below us was bare: low, wide trees sporadically spaced on a sun-dried savannah, the only color an occasional explosion of red from the flame trees. A dead horse lay in the ditch, its feet sticking stiffly into the air, an aura of flies visible from the car at forty miles an hour. Davíd honked a vulture out of the road. Then the Mercedes heaved and we began the climb to the crater rim over Coatepeque as the sun intensified to midday. Everything, even the people on the sides of the road, appeared muted by the heat and dust. . .or is that dimness a function of my memory?

The most colorful aspects of the landscape were the names of places: Cuinahuat, Jicalpa, Nahuizalco, Teotepeque, Chalchuapa, Usulután . . .Coatepeque, too. Koh-WAH-teh-PEH-kay—the sound rounds the mouth like a suckerfish feeding, then bares its teeth.

However ostensibly festive our journey, we were not unaware of what had come to those villages before us. In pre-Columbian times the land between the Rio Lempa and the Guatemalan border was populated by Uto-Aztecans called the Pipil. According to the assassinated Salvadoran poet, Roque Dalton, whom Esteban was in the throes of translating, the word "pipil" is the word for "boy," further reduced by a diminutive suffix not unlike the Spanish "—ito." The better word is *Nahua*, for the people; the language is Nahuat.

Kuswat.

Kuswat, I discovered, means snake. I thought of my walled home in the capital, safe from the dangers on the other side of it. At the same time I remembered a favorite story from my childhood—an Iroquois fable about a boy who finds and feeds a beautiful snake, but the snake is insatiable and grows to be so large it crawls outside the village palisades and positions its open mouth at the gate, devouring all who try to escape. Colonialism, latifundia, paternalism, revolution—I couldn't sort it out, but the impressions layered one atop the other.

My knowledge of Salvadoran history was a vague one: In 1932, I knew because of Esteban's books, the dictator General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez sent in the army to suppress an uprising by indigenous peasants who were protesting the absorption of traditionally communal lands by the coffee plantations. Roque Dalton writes that those ten to thirty thousand people, as much as two percent of the population though the number is nebulous, were massacred for carrying a machete or merely looking like an *indio*.

But that was not the end of it. Fifty years after the uprisings, the General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez Battalion was the name of a death squad also known as Mano Blanca. The Battalion poured corpses onto roadsides or heaved them into body dumps, but thousands of "disappeareds" were never found. The death squads could well have pitched them into that deep lake in the Coatepeque volcano too. The only reason not to release the secret dead into those depths would have been the interests of the villa owners. But by then, those owners were getting their suntans in South Beach.

"Was the lake ever a body dump?"

We looked at Esteban to remember what we had all read.

"*Quizas*," he shrugged. Perhaps.

Unlike the people, the villages, lakes, and volcanoes had held onto their Nahuat words: Chilitiupán, Juayua, Zacatecoluca. They were like fossils, or sun-bleached bones—beautiful, ancient remains—those names of places that were not much to see. Except Volcán Izalco was much to see: that breathtaking black, perfectly conical cinder spire was just coming into view as we crested the desiccated ridge of the Coatepeque volcano.

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Suddenly below us gaped the great blue eye of the crater. We hadn't seen color so saturated since the December winds turned everything yellow with dust, so all that blue made us ecstatic. Davíd hooted and we sailed along the ridgeline until we found the road we wanted, and began the headlong dive down into that tectonic phenomenon.

At the edge of one waterside village inside the volcano, the road petered out. Davíd gave a little chuckle and muscled the Mercedes forward over ruts and run-off ditches clotted with plastic bags and other trash. Dirty, churlish dogs—*chuchos*—crouch-tailed in the arroyos as we passed. Finally Davíd gave up, threw the overheated car into reverse, and backtracked to the soccer field in the village. There he pulled into the shade of a flame tree, and we piled out.

"Where is the boat to the island?" Davíd asked the kids who gathered nearby to stare at us. The kids considered the question seriously—the children in El Salvador were always serious, like miniature grownups. They did not beg or ask for bonbons or school pens like poor children in other poor countries. They didn't expect anything.

One boy with spindly bare legs spoke for the group.

"Por allá." He pointed back the way from which we'd first come.

Another boy disagreed, shook his head without smiling and pointed the way from which we'd just returned.

The ferry, when we found it, was no reward for our troubles. It looked like a slab of drawbridge plunked down on water, just long enough for the Mercedes to drive onto, but without anything to keep the car from driving off the other side into the blue *caldera*, nothing but the defunct parking brake, anyway.

We negotiated with the ferryman and embarked. The water was blown up and choppy, the air a few degrees cooler. Now and again the low front of the barge knocked a whitecap into the air, spraying our dust-and-diesel-coated faces. The ferryman tried to herd us back into the car, but we held our ground and stood on the metal deck, preferring to be free to swim if need be. Besides, the cleanness of the air, the cool, the familiarity of a body of water all made me feel sane and safe in a way I hadn't in many months. There were no guns in sight, no *polícia*, none of the sleek Wackenhut guards. Coatepeque, I thought too soon, had been an excellent idea.

Molly Beer

At that moment, a flat clatter suddenly chopped the air and a helicopter dropped over the opposite ridge. Helicopters were a nuisance in Salvador—flying low over the school so that my class would stop for full bone-rattling minutes, and, during earthquake evacuations and bomb threats, some parents tried to pick up their children by helicopter, much to the chagrin of the U.S. Marines who had helipad dibs on the American School soccer field. I still cringe at the sound of a helicopter. They are menacing, like dengue mosquitoes, like vultures. In El Salvador, the national bird is the painfully pretty *torogoz*, a tiny thing with a blue metallic fan at the tip of its long tail. But everyone joked, according to context, that the real national bird was either the vulture or the helicopter.

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The island we were bound for was tiny. We drove off the ferry, took a right a few hundred yards up a cobbled road, and turned into the driveway of our destination. The treehouse turned out to be a vaguely renovated boathouse tucked out of sight on the bank below a split-level villa with ordinary sterile landscaping of chest-high crotons and pungent gardenias. The caretaker unlocked the door and confirmed our suspicions that the treehouse was not exactly in a tree. But there was an old tree that grew up through the middle of the deck that was the kitchen and common space between two enclosed bedrooms and an unpromising bathroom.

"Look at all the bromeliads on the tree! Esteban!" I forced enthusiasm as my mind checked off problems: No screens in the bedrooms. No mosquito nets. No fan. Malaria. Dengue. No toilet paper—but Hil would have brought some. The water in the kitchen—did it come from the lake or a cistern? Typhoid. Would we just boil it? Or disinfect and filter it first? Some problems could be anticipated and avoided—I was becoming adept at that, anyway.

Not ready to be still yet, we tossed what little we'd brought—books and flashlights and my water filter—onto the thin cots in the two tiny bedrooms and rushed to the water's edge. A rickety dock

reached out over the water and we clattered to the end and looked around. Patches of seaweed or yard clippings floated just beneath the surface; a delicate, rainbow sheen from motorboat fuel had collected around the dock pilings. Just out of reach, a red plastic gas can bobbed like a buoy.

"This evening," I proposed—my will facing off with the reality—"we can go nightswimming!"

It was a dare, really, and the others accepted, even as Davíd upped the ante by reminding us of the mysterious disappearance of a Colombian rower during the Central American Games that past November.

"Strange things happen in volcanoes," we'd been told by Salvadorans who were not at all surprised when the young man's boat was discovered, but never his body.

On that dock we half-joked about Loch Coate-Ness monsters and gaseous volcano belches. We shuddered and laughed. We were not superstitious, but we were certainly afraid of being too afraid. We were there—on that island, in that country—to have fun, to have an experience. Maybe we wouldn't swim in that oily water in the daylight, but we would go nightswimming.

Back in our treehouse, Esteban unpacked the Peruvian playing cards decorated with strangely phallic Incan art, Hilary unwrapped her leftover Shabbat challah and a special-treat block of imported cheddar cheese, I produced fresh pineapple that my maid had cut up for us, and Davíd moved his treasure chest of beer within reach of the plastic lawn chair he claimed as his own. As the sun rippled down over the ridge and out of sight, we sipped our watery Pilsners—Salvador's finest—and played round after round of pitch like we were ordinary twenty-somethings kicking back on a blip of volcanic earth.

When darkness came, the air turned comfortable. We switched on the single bare bulb by the plywood bathroom door and the gnarled tree seemed to lean in closer. From inside our ring of light, we could not see the dark water or the looming ridge of that volcano mouth we sat within. There was only light and shadow and friendship. And then there were mosquitoes.

"I'm being devoured," I whined, swatting my arm. Hil tossed me her aerosol repellent. I caught it but hesitated to spray myself. I was feeling out a balance of exposure and tolerance in El Salvador: I didn't want to be doused in toxins all the time any more than I wanted to live solely within guarded walls.

"I think I'd rather get in the lake," I compromised. "Anyone really up for nightswimming?"

We made our way, giggling like teenagers, to the water's edge. On the mainland, dogs were barking. Davíd and Esteban hovered in the shadows, suddenly shy, but Hilary and I stripped down to our flip-flops and stepped into the dark lake.

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The water was so warm it felt thick. Too thick to be water. I held my breath and took another step, ahead of the others. I realized then that I didn't know, really, what might live in a volcano crater—what fishes, what blood-sucking creatures, what snakes.

Kuwat, I thought.

I could hear Hil behind me. I kept stepping forward; the warm water lapped my thighs. I paused, breathed, and turned back to abuse the men.

"*¡Vamos, niños!*" I called and Hilary echoed me. I could hear disenchantment in her voice too. We would feel safer when there were more of us. With most girlfriends, I would hold hands to walk into dark water, but Hilary wasn't like that. Or maybe she just wasn't like that with me. I moved in deeper.

I thought about the slender, spiny fish that live in "sweet water" (as they say in Spanish) in Brazil or Belize or somewhere. The fish can swim up the urethra of a human and must be surgically removed. I realized I wasn't sure those fish didn't live in all tropical freshwater. The sludgy bottom oozed over my flip-flops; I thought of leeches and lifted my feet to tread the water, pulling out towards the end of the dock.

Normally, in Salvador, what scared me most was more abstract than the leaches and *Kuwat*. I was less afraid of the real dangers: car accidents, dysentery, dengue, even spiny fish. Physical harm happened; bodies healed or they perished. What really kept me up at night were notions of the monstrous, the apocalyptic.

The Nahua of Mexico, I knew, had drowned children in sacrifice to the thunder god, Tlaloc. Had they done the same in Salvador? In Coatepeque? The crater lake was so deep—one

hundred twenty meters in some places. If there were dead in that water—the Colombian rower, the disappeared, the dismembered, the children given to Tlaloc—they were down, down, down—farther from my body than if I walked past a cemetery. I looked out at the inky expanse. Liquids, I thought, are terribly different from solids. Earth between my body and the bones of the dead was one thing; water was quite another.

I told myself I would not swim out far. I would only go into the moonlight; I could manage. But then, I had believed I could manage the fear that came with living in a country where even the orchids are armed with serrated blades.

I heard a wild yelp and one white body—short and compact, so I knew it was Davíd—streaked down the dock and leapt wildly off the end. I had just come level with the last piling of the dock and I turned my face away so the splash wouldn't get in my mouth and eyes. Hilary was close behind me, breathing audibly as she swam.

When I turned back, Esteban's slender figure sprinted past. He couldn't see a thing, I knew, without his glasses, but he spread his arms as his legs, still running, cleared the dock. Suspended a moment in the moonlight he looked as if he were embracing that darkness around him.

Watching him, I forgot to turn away. Like Davíd, who surfaced with a hoot, I wound up with a mouthful of Esteban's wake.

Why wasn't I that free? I thought, sputtering and panting.

I looked at the men ahead of me: They would wrestle, if they were not too nervous in their nakedness. They would splash. They would push me underwater.

I reached a tentative flip-flop down to test the water's depth, and touched nothing but the cellar cool of deep water. In front of me the skin of my submerged arms looked dull, dead and white—like a body floating just below the surface, no longer buoyant. My heart burned from pounding. I thought I tasted sulfur in my mouth.

"Ugh," Hilary said behind me. Or maybe it was I who groaned first in disgust.

"Fuck this," came the reply from one or both of us. Or maybe we said nothing. But we both turned and stroked for shore with urgency.

"Hey! Ladies! *¿Adonde van?*" Davíd called after us.

"Yeah, wait for me," I heard Esteban mutter.

Hil and I were in the shallows, flailing our arms for balance and trying not to press our feet too deeply into the sludge as we rushed out of the water.

By the time the men reached shore they too were panicky. Esteban told me later that he had landed in a floating patch of greasy weeds he'd thought for one terrifying moment was a net. We wiped the mud off one another with someone's shirt, quickly, afraid of what we might find on our crawling skin.

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There would be no more nightswimming. The panic had not washed off with the mud and no effort of will would gloss over that relentless night, but we were still trying. We had to. Otherwise, what was the point? Laughing, we headed for our treehouse.

Back under the tree of bromeliads, we sipped Pilsner, shuffled cards, and swatted mosquitoes. Cicadas buzzed in the darkness. As the night deepened, great black beetles the size and sheen of dry dates arrived to court our bare lightbulb. They careened into the wall, our beer cans, our heads. They landed on their backs and clawed the air with thin string legs. The splat-clatter-buzz turned rhythmic, then cacophonous. We snapped them off the table and into the darkness, giving up cards for this new entertainment. More beetles came. The illuminated wall by the bathroom became an almost solid shiny-black swarm.

Meanwhile, white welts rose on my arms, mercilessly itchy. We sprayed repellent. I wrapped myself in a sheet off one of the cots. Bugs bit my face, my hands, anywhere flesh could find.

At last we dumped our beers and went to bed.

Still there was no reprieve. The room Esteban and I had chosen was stifling, and there were neither ceiling fans nor mosquito nets to keep the bugs at bay. We left the windows latched. If they wanted us, they would at least have to go through the trouble of crawling between the rough planks of the walls. Which they did.

I clutched at sleep to save me from the heat and discomfort. But I was not alone. I dreamed of mosquitoes as big as helicopters, of dead horses, of Tlaloc the thunder god. I dreamed of a moun-

tainside running with blood as a volcano runs with lava. And I dreamed of the piles of dead that I imagined lay at the bottom of Coatepeque as they lay in photographs I'd seen of Salvador's body dumps: bloated and discolored. Instead of vultures picking out their eyes, the fish nibbled them, swam into them.

From heated dreams I woke and there was not a cicada buzz or beetle splat to be heard, only the lapping of dark water on the shore below. In the quiet, I could not sleep.

* * *

It was one of many wide-eyed nights in Salvador, before and after our trip to Coatepeque. The anxious heat, the sounds—barking dogs, backfiring cars, gunshots—even silence scared me. When Esteban and Davíd were out for a binge night in the capital, I lay awake and listened for the belts of the Mercedes whining up the Avenida la Mascota. Nights when it was too much, I climbed out of my bed and into the pool, or I went running on the school track in the dark, looking long and hard at the volcano that glowed red on top with cell-phone towers. But on that strange island there was no place to run and I certainly wasn't going to go for a swim. The boundaries of my map were squeezing inward.

Let go, I tried to tell myself. Just let go. In Latin America, people shrug and say *"Así es"* when things get bad. Earthquakes. Atrocities. Apocalypse. That's just the way it is. But I came from a place, the culture of Puritans, where I was supposed to control my destiny, where hard work and good intentions meant I was better than other people, that I deserved to be comfortable. In El Salvador, I was simply mortal, like everyone else, rich or poor. The walls reminded me. The guns and mosquitoes and the tremors in the night reminded me. The dark water of Coatepeque reminded me. The best one could do—went the prevailing logic—was to hope for a death without violation, without violence.

I was not in El Salvador to change anything but myself. It was simply something that I had to do, just as I had to swim in Coatepeque. I had come, dangerously naïve, and afraid, but willingly, to an edge. I was willing, I thought, to take a leap, but instead I teetered there. I held my head above the surface. Unlike Esteban, I could not run off the end of a dock blindly, open my

arms, and leap into darkness. Not then. Probably not ever.

In that darkness, kicking to make sure Esteban wouldn't sleep well either, I hated El Salvador. I hated Coatepeque. I hated Spanish and Pilsner and the old Mercedes. I hated mangoes and I hated the unfathomable dust. I hated teaching. I hated my well-meaning students. I hated orchids and volcanoes. I hated them all because they revealed my borders, my limitations, and my unbearable weaknesses.

When the parrots woke me from sleep-at-last at pink dawn, I hated them too. Then I opened my eyes and went to the window to see them squalling overhead in their fiercely faithful pairs. I did not hate the parrots. Not really. The Nahua believed birds were the bearers of the soul, *el alma, el ánime*. I would discover them years later in pre-Colombian poetry:

Ti xiuhtototl ti tlauhquechol ti ya patlantinemi.
You, azure bird, shining parrot, you walk flying.[1]

The parrots, I thought, are as marvelous as the mangoes.

I climbed out of bed, scratched my lumpy arms, and looked out into the morning light. The lake was beautiful, sapphire blue and still. I slipped on my flip-flops and went to sit beside it.

When he awoke, Esteban came down to the dock and sat beside me, dangling bare feet over the water.

"No hay corriente," he said, wrapping his slender arm around my shoulders.

"What's *corriente*?"

"Current. Electricity."

"Oh. *No hay cafe, pues.*"

It was a new day, I thought. Another gauntlet to run across this strange land.

Esteban's eyes were laughing as he turned to me.

"You gonna swim?"

* * *

[1] Nezahualcóyotl, "You, Azure Bird," *Romances de los Señores de la Nueva España* #40 (24v-25r), translator John Curl, Bilingual Press (Arizona

But everything looked different later that morning as we switchbacked up the ridge of Coatepeque in the old Mercedes and the lake panned out to something distant, flawless, and jewel-like. Our moods improved. Davíd pulled over at a roadside fruitstand near the ridgeline.

From up there on the ridge we could not see the trash that bobbed on the water, or the rainbow swirls of oil, and we couldn't well imagine what lay beneath. It looked glassy and whole, just as it does now in my memory. One of us laughed and that laughter caught and spread.

Driving back to the capital, I cut mango slices with my pocketknife and passed them around the car, dropping the skins and pits through the hole in the floor between my feet. We washed the fruit down with lukewarm leftover Pilsners. The wind blew our hair and coated it with dust, the mango juice ran sticky rivulets down our faces, and Hilary and I and Manu Chao sang:

¿Que voy hacer? Je suis perdu.

If we were lost—that is what we assumed the song said—it was what we were in Salvador to do. Our map had to be big enough for being lost, for being terrified, even, or there was no point.

In the blinding light of another tropical day, we were victorious. We had made it back to a familiar path, careening blithely towards the next impasse, the next test that would put us past our boundaries, that would stretch our borders, all over again.