

We pass through the aquamarine doors and leave the courtyard of Las Granadas behind us, the kind of exit that tries to grab at our shirtbacks, yank us into the recent past. We step into the dusty street as if a jetway, Alfredo's cab idling crooked in the ruts, the right front tire wedged into an ample pile of mule shit. Louisa takes my hand and we ready ourselves for another departure, and here we are again, ever-departing, never arriving, never getting anywhere and, in the dust, the groaning of the cab engine, the pack mule disappearing up the street, overloaded but miraculously still upright, my hand in Louisa's, the sky itself seems to tell us—force upon us like some too-blue missionary—that this departure, this opening of the car door, this entire day is the eve of something. Oh yeah: Christmas.

We have fled, my wife and I, to small-town Oaxaca, Mexico after having spent the last year living in my parents' house on the outskirts of Chicago, nursing my mother through her battle with cancer, our marriage desiccating in my old childhood bedroom. We have fled away from something definitive, and toward the sort of marital nebulousness that manifests itself as jet lag, intestinal duress, mild intoxication on the local hooch, village market, and cabs driven by teenagers. Neurotically, we have been overusing the word, *recover*.

Safe in the familiarity of Alfredo's backseat, scratching at each other's mosquito bites, blazing out of the mountains, his dainty seventeen-year-old hands clutching at the steering wheel like the hips of his girlfriend, dancing clumsily under an obese disco ball while some chaperone scowls in the corner, getting drunk on his flask of mezcal, I turn to Louisa just as we narrowly miss running down a stray dog, its tail stripped to the pale pink underskin, and ask, "Are we really leaving tomorrow? Are we really going back to Illinois?"

At the word Illinois, its Frenchified-Algonquinness, bearing the migratory weight of Rivers Mississippi, Illinois, Des Plaines, and Chicago, Lake Michigan and the railroads, blues and jazz, John Deere's steel plow and dirty

inland creeks carrying green foam, poisonous trout, and cans of Old Milwaukee, I sigh and feel like running, away and through cornfields, getting lost in the very soil that's an indelible part of me, reinventing it, maybe even renaming it, Mexico—as if, in this place of domesticated wildness, familiar in smell and sustenance, but completely off the grid, in the middle of the fields, the tassels way above my head, bearings lost, the grasshoppers of Champaign and Oaxaca feasting together on the kernels, I can help locate myself, foster some kind of bridge between harbors, situate myself within some larger context; cornfield as life, cornfield as cancer and Quetzalcoatl, the U.S. and Mexico, god and marriage. Somewhere above the rows, some braggart archeologist announces his discovery: that the pre-Columbian copper plate carvings he unearthed from burial sites near Collinsville, Illinois (formerly Cahokia, the central regional chiefdom of the indigenous mound-building Mississippian culture) bear an uncanny resemblance to the ancient pre-Hispanic carvings of the Oaxacan Zapotecs, and once again, I'm bewildered. I'm not going to say, *Where am I?* I'm not going to say it.

Instead: linguists believe that the name Illinois, in the Algonquin Algie language, means *man*, which means that I have no idea what that means. I have some vague feeling that, as Louisa squeezes my hand, as Grandma Ruth may have years ago, in answer to my questions, as my chest seems to swell from the inside and her eyes go glassy, that I'm supposed to react as a *man*, be a *man*, a *man* beyond biology, and I swear to God that I have no idea how to do that, in spite of being born in Chicago, Illinois, the biggest city in the state of Man.

Alfredo watches us doe-eyed in the cracked rearview. Out the windows, bees the size of bran muffins lift from the purple blooms at the crowns of the cacti, old women hunched in the fields behind them, harvesting things to eat, things to dye with. We're getting closer to Oaxaca City, but we still have a ways to go. In spite of our backseat melancholy, Alfredo remains energetic and vital, and asks us in his thin, womanly, teenage voice, "¿Todavía

quieres encontrar huitlacoche?”

The word *huitlacoche* is just enough to snap Louisa and me from our weepy reflection, our ears twitching cartoonish, as we watch one old woman retrieve what appears to be the body of a housecat from the desert floor. We pass her before we can read her face.

“Oh, sí,” I say, “Of course.”

We have been seeking out this *huitlacoche*—this fresh corn fungus delicacy—since we arrived here last month. Alfredo nods his head, his spine’s stacked nickels poking from his long neck, disappearing into the sweat-stained collar of his Cañita Habisco Chucho T-shirt. He lifts his CB from its perch and soon, through its crackling static, the voice of some other male teenager with a feminine voice ignites on the other end, driving his own cab somewhere in the region, winding among his own roads where old women lift dead pets from the heat of the earth, and tells Alfredo where we can score some of the elusive corn smut so inky black, the Aztecs named it *huitlacoche*, the Nahuatl term for raven shit.

When Louisa asks, excited, “are we really going to get to taste the truffle of Mexico?” I want to kiss her hard enough to resurrect the early Algonquians and the French missionaries who fucked them over, ask them which Illinois town represents the state’s penis, which dirty creek carries the testosterone I’ve been searching for.

In a burst of static, Alfredo signs off, replaces the CB and turns to us in the back seat, the sun reflecting doubly from his sunglass lenses, blinding us.

“Mercado de la Merced,” he sings.

“He’s found it,” I tell Louisa.

Alfredo has located some fresh *huitlacoche* at the Merced market—the one we searched for late that night, across town from Hotel Las Golondrinas at the intersection of Insurgentes and Murguía; the market that was by that hour long closed and crawling with sentient rats.

Blinding us reflectively, breaking into Oaxaca City as if through an eggshell, the chaos downright slimy and fertile after the humming peace of Teotitlán, Alfredo tells us that he doesn’t have time to drop us at the market, that he has to, in less than two hours, catch a bus to Mexico City, where he will, after the seven hour haul, celebrate Christmas with his wife and her parents. I’m stunned to learn that Alfredo is married, has in-laws, his own symbolic cornfields through which to navigate, his wife, his lover, his

partner by his side. Suddenly, I’m aware of the emptiness of the front passenger seat.

When he drops us in front of Las Golondrinas, I can’t tell if we’ve arrived at the white or the yolk. Louisa and I face each other with a odd brew of delight and dread—the sort evoked when visiting a place of one’s past, however distant or recent; the Oaxacan Buffalo Grove, Illinois—the place where the Illinois Natives and the Mexican Natives inexplicably carved the same things. In the defined mixture of smells here, I am able to locate myself, replace myself into some life-course, whether it’s the “right” place or not—whether we’re a little ahead of, or a little behind in time. Alfredo tells us in Spanish, after we wish each other Merry Christmases, *You must come back to Oaxaca, even if it takes you years. I will remember you, because you try to speak my language, even if you speak it poorly.* As Alfredo takes our hands in his before rocketing off into the future, belching exhaust behind him, I can’t help but feel that, even at seventeen, he understands the nature of my homestate—the language of its corn and its tornadoes—more than I ever will.

LAZARUS AND THE LAMB

As an undergraduate college student, trying his damndest to fan the paltry smoke of his first real crush into something to call love, crouching as if to the ubiquitous cornfields, the simmering stench of cow shit, the sewage of it carried away by a creek named The Boneyard, to build some metaphorical pedestal out of stripped cobs and detasseled silks onto which to raise Elle, this pale artsy redhead with skinny lips and giant tits, I caught a glimpse behind the scenes of an Illinois slaughterhouse. The poet and professor Mike Madonick took our class, of which Elle was, I believed, the smartest member, to the last stop for Urbana, Illinois’ many pigs and cows and lambs in an effort to ignite in us something resembling poetic inspiration. I remember the lead “slaughterer,” a tall, thick-glasses’d man in a floor-length white smock (miraculously free of blood and fat stains), the name *Lazerus* stitched misspelled over his lapel in green cursive, blowtorching the hair from hanging pig halves.

In order to reach Lazerus’ station in this state, the pig first had to pass Willy’s post. Willy, his smock filthy, his safety goggles spattered with bone fragment, constellations of gristle, and bits of meat, his long beard tucked safely

into the chest of his undershirt, received the dead pig from the previous station, threaded two steel hooks through the animal's hind ankles, and hoisted the beast upward, the snout pointing down toward the white tile where a young female intern hosed the blood into diluted barely-pink Illinois rivers. Willy stood on a platform with a chainsaw behind the upside-down corpse, his goggled eyes rising from between the animals spread hind legs, and with his gurgling orange ripcord Stihl, the chainsaw gasoline of it coupling with the smell of blood, halved the hanging animal from crotch to snout. After gutting the pig into a plastic brown trash can (precisely the sort my parents dragged to the streetcurbs each Tuesday in Buffalo Grove), Willy pulled on a thick cable as if closing windowblinds, and the pig halves slid like dry cleaning along a ceiling mount toward Lazerus and his blowtorch.

Elle and I had been out a few times, but she had been giving me the cold shoulder after I had said something undergraduate and offensive to her at a creative writing party at Murphy's Bar—probably something about her breasts which were, at the time, my two primary and hopeful catalysts into what I then believed would be an irretrievable manhood. Ever the idiot, I felt that this slaughterhouse was the appropriate time and place to make my pleas for reconciliation. Standing a mere foot beyond Lazerus' station, I remember trying to argue her into agreeing to go to the movies with me that night while we stood separated by a hanging curtain of rosy, and now hairless, pig. This was not the right thing to do.

Elle turned in a huff, her long red hair nearly smacking me, and the pig, on the shoulder, and walked off toward the remainder of the classfolk, now retreating into an adjacent room. I remember Madonick saying something about taking notes—whether physically or mentally, a rare solemnity in his baritone. I remember Lazerus abandoning his post to continue his role as tour guide from hell, chuckling from behind his thick glasses as he extended his white-gloved thumb toward a lamb.

In a high-pitched voice, carrying the twang of the south-of-Chicago Illinoisan, his tongue stained candy blue, he explained to us would-be writers, "You see, the lamb still has the suckling instinct; the bastard thinks I'm his mother."

Elle was standing in front of me, and I peered around her back to watch the lamb reach its small mouth

toward Lazerus' thumb, attempt in vain to draw milk there, as Lazerus slowly backed the animal toward the steelgun, which hung from the ceiling by a black stretch-cable. Wide-eyed, the lamb continued to suck his thumb, drawing only the glove's powder, following him on new, awkward legs, his hooves clattering on the tile like castanets. As Lazerus reached for the steelgun with his free hand, Elle turned her eyes away, not toward me, but behind me, the world beyond this slaughterhouse, and this dumbass boy, and this farmland stage in her life, which was to be so much bigger than this. I didn't meet her eyes—didn't even try—but remained fixed on Lazerus and the lamb. My life perhaps would not get bigger than this, and I would perhaps dwell on these slaughterhouse events for years, perhaps forever trying to make sense of them, and their relation to me as a contributor, passive or active—I still can't tell.

The lamb still suckling, Lazerus raised the steelgun to the beast's temple, the cable of it squealing, and in a quick *boom*, as if in fast-forward, the air-forced gun fired its retractable steel bit into animal's brain, Lazerus' smock and glasses exploded with its blood, and the lamb, as if gravity had doubled its force, accelerated to the tile in heavy heap. In the dull, crumpled *whump* of its body to floor, a couple students gasped, a few cried, a few smiled delighted, and a few remained silent in a distillation of mourning, amazement, and shell-shock. I was among the last group, Elle among the second. As Lazerus strung the beast up via hook and cable, à la Willy with the pig, centered a cleaned brown plastic trash can beneath it, and slit its throat with a foot-long blade, the flow of blood so steady it looked solid like a veil, like drapery, Elle hugged Madonick, and the two of them led us out of the room toward the exit as Lazerus did his carving behind us—something I recall only via its ripping sounds.

This was also the wrong thing to do: In the final room of the slaughterhouse, before stepping into the corn and fecal smells of the great Central Illinois outdoors, a robust middle-aged woman—the sort often called Salt of the Earth—stood behind a glass case of meats-for-sale: steaks and chops and bacon and sausage. She poised her hands above the cash register keys as if readying to play the piano, and I couldn't resist buying a package of bacon. At my purchase, after what we had just witnessed, Elle snorted, disgusted, and I tried to explain, "but it's so fresh, why wouldn't I buy it? It's better to get it from the

Schnucks where it's shipped from out-of-state, and dying under supermarket cellophane?" but she wasn't having it. I was young and stupid and arrogant and unwilling to empathize, and oblivious to things like tact and timing. She never spoke to me again, in spite of my various attempts via telephones and ambushes after class. Elle's mother had died when Elle was a sophomore in high school. Mine was still healthy. That night, when I called my parents and told them about the day, my dad gave me shit for not buying him sausage. My mom softly cried.

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Louisa takes my hand as we walk the rows of the Mercado de la Merced, which is rife with the kind of stuff to resurrect dormant memories of Illinois—massive hanging pig strips, entire sheep strung up and skinned, their ribs ivory white and fly-riddled; smells of food and death whirling together into some liquor that sustains us until it decides to kill us. Each vendor's booth comes equipped with a hose with which to rinse the blood into those diluted, barely-pink rivers. This market is primal and nauseating and exhilarating; another bridge between Oaxaca and Illinois, the stations of my life unmanned by any Willy.

"Oh, boy," Louisa exhales, her breath riding over some speed bump of a gag, "this is tough."

"Our *huilacoche* is here, baby."

"Oh, I know. Believe me," she says, squeezing my hand as if to reassure me, or to play to role of the reassurer, "I'm excited about it, but..." and she swallows hard another rising heave, "it smells like pure slaughter."

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We walked here, this time in daylight. After retrieving our bags from The Perm at the front desk, her tight nest of hair scratching at our faces like the fingernails of prisoners quarantined in hairspray, she hugged us simultaneously Hello and Goodbye, whispering, like a secret, *Feliz Navidad* into our ears (we didn't, sadly, see the faux-stomach-puncher old man), we walked our old path down Calle Tinoco y Palacios, past the laundry on their lines, the too-blue stucco buildings, the hour-long ATM queue at the purplest bank I've ever seen, the swimwear shop whose owner conceals bottles of mezcal behind the counter ready for the tasting—even for the gringo browsers, the *farmacia* that doesn't sell tampons, the quiet daytime facade of La Nueva Babel jazz club, saving its wild music, and window-bar hanging drunks for later, away from the lush, swallow-

ridden courtyard of Las Golondrinas, the rooms in which we slept and woke up there to bird sounds and spears of sunlight, the roof we mounted watching for stars over the steeples and radio tower lights, the fruit and flowers shedding their night-perfume, into the honking traffic of the city, the scents of diesel and donkey and flower and sewage, the street food on each corner sending steam to the gods, the parks and squares tinkling with music and peddlers, artists, and shoe-shinees. We dragged our suitcases behind us, tipping and righting them over the potholes in sidewalk and street, brushing shoulders with the passersby who regarded our too-huge bags-on-wheels warily. Hanging a right on Av. Hidalgo, and crossing its intersection with Diaz Ordaz, we came to the Suites del Centro, our room for the night, and stepped into its cool shady lobby, the trees contained in pots, no birds, no insects, and the sounds of a big traffic drilling into the earth as if an ostrich egg. Just as I remembered it.

The aged Lidia Lilia, her hair coral and curly, her tinted glasses gold, matching the etched and pillared colors of the lobby, remembered us with a "Eye-yi-yi-yi-yi-yi!!!" rounded the front desk, and hugged us more gently than did The Perm. Her younger compatriot, Hector rose from beneath desk as if from some concealed cellar door, his goatee even more perfect than I remembered it, his face oozing that sort of odd sweetness and loyalty that could have been learned in prison. Hector led us to our room along a roofless section of corridor, the narrow strip of sky acting as a runway that we could never, we lowly wingless bipeds, fly into. He unlocked the coral-gold door to a cavernous space—more apartment than hotel room—replete with three bedrooms, a kitchen, a furnished living room, and a walled, open-topped outdoor patio where, after Hector handed us the key and retreated to the front desk, Louisa and I took a shot apiece from the bottle of the moonshine mezcal we bought in Etla and forgot about in the bowels of our suitcase.

"I guess we have to choose a bedroom," Louisa said.

In Suites del Centro, the village of Teotitlán, where we spent the last few days, evaporated into the mountains as if a dream—I couldn't quite make it gel, and wondered if my time there will later reignite in memory like all things slaughterhouse.

After placing our 5:00 am wake-up call with

Lidia Lilia, who tried to convince us that it's too early, that we should stay here longer, that the morning planes that fly out of Oaxaca notoriously run late, we made our way across town toward the Merced market, bypassing the dissonant musics bursting from the Zócalo, searching for *huítlacoche*, and finding blood.

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Louisa holds her hand to her mouth and nose as we pass a stall lined with pigs' heads, entire sides of beef, hanging ribbons of tripe, and cleaver-chopped livers, the smockless vendor—a small girl—waving the flies from her wares with a tiny ungloved hand. I want to make Louisa laugh, to point to this stall and say something like, *Who the Lazarus and Who the Lamb?*, but I've learned, if imperfectly over the years, when to keep my big mouth shut.

Taking Louisa's free hand, I weave with her through the tight rows of vendor and customer. I think of Lazarus and Lazerus, wish both of them had entries in some easily findable *Where Are They Now?* column. I think of how their names derive from the Hebrew *Elazar*, which means "God helped," and wonder if, in the face of all this death, in the face of leaving Mexico tomorrow morning pre-sunrise for no place in particular, if we'll ever find what we're looking for—our *huítlacoche*—and wonder who the fuck God is helping today, and where, and how early we have to wake up to get there on time.

ATRIA

Next to a stall specializing in pigs' eyes and pigs' kidneys—the two indelicate delicacies stacked atop one another like some Grand Guignol Napoleon, the former watching us as we pass: a staring contest we can't possibly win; the latter stirring the salts in our bladders—we find it. It is the most crowded of the food stalls, fronted with stools so narrow the most anorexic of asses would have trouble staying upon them. But Louisa and I, determined to finally, finally pull this off, elbow and forearm and knee our way through the mob, as they attempt to do the same. There is no such thing as a line here. The *huítlacoche fresco* will be for the fastest, fittest, most flexible and aggressive only. Darwin would have enjoyed this.

Around us, families with baskets on their arms, buckets on their heads, do their Christmas shopping. Strings of multi-colored holiday lights web the market's ceilings and walls, blinking, electronic viscera. Illuminated,

knee-high Santa Clauses tilt oblivious and stone-faced to us, their rosy cheeks and red lapels collecting wayward bits of animal slaughter—reindeer, I'd like to think. Louisa hip-checks an old man in a white wool vest into his rotund wife, who struggles to hold onto her straw basket of tomatoes and onions. In here, the bloody concrete corridors of the Mercado de la Merced, the skylit atrium overhead reminding us that somewhere—perhaps above us—the concept of afternoon still thrives, the stench of iron now cut with the rich fungal bloom of the billowing *huít*, we are ants in an ant farm, cellular, mere but essential blips in some larger circulatory system—the atria of our own hearts and brains rushing with our essential fluids, collecting in our hallways like some scene out of *The Shining*. Both inside and outside of our bodies, the world goes arterial, hearty and slightly Latin—*vena cava* (hollow vein), *crista terminalis* (final crest), *fossa ovalis* (egg-shaped ditch) beating with oxygen behind our eyes and behind this stall, somehow communing with the celestial things above us that, in daylight, we can't see—the atria of the sky, the Alpha Trianguli Australis double-star preparing to bare, once the light goes out, its body to us, its flickery, erotic Primary Triangle of the South, our hearts by then beating, with any luck, with the resinous smut of Mexico's raven-shit corn fungus.

Into the face of a young woman in a dusty medical mask, Louisa fake coughs, and the woman, stirred by (perhaps necessary) neurotic germaphobia, scuttles to her left, leaving us a small window to the tiny stools. We take our opening, press forward into it, brushing hat brim and arm-hair, and slide, like Indiana Jones that decoy bag of sand in the place of the Golden Chachapoyan Fertility Idol at the beginning of *Raiders*, our big *gringo* butts onto the pinhead seats fronting the famed La Güerita stand, named for the now-middle-aged light-skinned Oaxacan woman who folds eyeball-sized spheres of the obsidian *huítlacoche*, opaque as her lip-mole, into a translucent nightie of an *empanada* dough.

She says nothing to us, and we nothing to her, simply hold up, as does the remainder of her "audience," the number of fingers indicating how many *huít empanadas* we want. We give her the peace sign and she nods, flipping her spatula in her fingers like a rock 'n' roll drumstick, as, next to us, we hear the sounds of a cleaver splitting a skull, a rooster crowing in protest, the smells of wild

blood, salted fish, and coffee overscoring it all. Though quarters are spandex-tight, hopeful customers thrust their arms between Louisa and me, shaking wads of bills, rattling coins, holding up indicative fingers. Screamed numbers in both Spanish and Zapotec threaten to drown the bellyaching rooster who, as a result of his complaints, has his aching belly knife-split, his head collapsing softly to a white plastic cutting board, where a prepubescent girl severs, with a straight razor, the comb from his capitulum, and tosses it limp into a pile of like bird parts.

We can say nothing to each other. We have nothing to say. Again, the world goes delightfully, threateningly *present*. The words Teotitlán and Illinois go the way of gibberish. We are unanchored to sense. When La Güerita, sweat beads moored to her thick eyebrows, lip-mole morphing into a howling wolf, slides two red plastic baskets before us, we reach into them with both hands, retrieve the half-moons of golden fertility idol dough stuffed with fat pearls of *huilacoche* from the oil-stained waxpaper and eat like there's no tomorrow, because there's no tomorrow. This is the market of reward and reward and bloody visceral reward. From the steaming dough, the *huilacoche fresco* runs into our mouths, each scintilla rolling over our tongues, maintaining individual integrity. The inner stuff of each black marble is held, in spite of its heat, within an ultra-thin intact membrane which we can crush against the rooves of our mouths, the inky sludge bursting forth as if from a popped balloon, carrying with it the thick effluvia of concentrated corn, mushroom, prairie grass, and vanilla, honey, mint, and the kind of sweat that holds to our thighs, after standing on some Parisian heatwave streetcorner half the night in fishnet stockings ripped at the knees, streetlit, our eyeliner beginning to run, our bodies beginning to ferment, but still so fucking beautiful, and sexy, and full of baby powder.

Our saliva runs black over our lips and we bite again, rupturing piece after piece of this holy corn smut with each of the sixteen choreographed muscles of our tongues, now joining hands and torch-singing *Joy to the World* in matching blue sequined cocktail dresses, low-cut to be sure. We commune via narrowed bawdy eyes with the other black-lipped diners, stool perched and teetering, their own mouths similarly blessed, born again, filled with the *Holy Fecal Spirit-ah, of the Raaaveeen-ah! Can I get a digestive ¿jAmén?!*

"Amen!" Louisa howls, swallowing her last bite, our faces flush with heat, the blood beating in our ears.

"I believe!" I say.

Only now, our vision creeping back in, our senses of smell and hearing re-picking up the overload of the market, crawling out through their own membranes, our two-armed, two-legged, one-headed inner stuff now oozing over these stools, do I notice that we missed the array of garnishes lined up along the left edge of the stall counter—marinated red onion flecked with habañero and epazote, and *salsas rojo* and *verde*.

"Fuck garnish," Louisa affirms as if banishing the devil to a hell of styrofoam bowl and plastic spoon, "this is about the purity of the *huil*."

And we stand, anointed, converted and satisfied to our electrons, to our hearts and mouths and baby-makers, the basidium and hymenophore, the fruiting body and freckled ribcage of the hottest corn on earth riding the Mercado de la Merced on our immoral breaths. New seekers take our vacant seats, throwing their own elbows, knocking aside their own old lady obstacles. A short, fat, plugged-in Santa Claus smiles at us from behind his mask of blood. Woozy, afterglowing, having given up any tether to plane ticket or country, Christmas or Hanukkah, we search the market, animals of all shapes and sizes being decapitated, disemboweled, charred and bitten around us, for any kind of juice with which to wash the smut in our mouths down, down, down to the burning ring, the hollow veiny, final cresting, eggy ditches responsible for the ways we walk, swallow, marry.