



The Corner of Baja California and Medellín

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*there are now forty thousand zombies laying waste to Mexico
according to official statistics.*

1.

THE DECOR HAS THE BAD TASTE OF A DOCTOR'S OFFICE. "LA DECORACIÓN tiene el mal gusto de un consultorio medico." That's what *Time Out Mexico* said about the joint. It was the Spanish-style cantina called Salón Covadonga in Mexico City's Roma Norte, a haunt for old men who played dominoes under sterile lighting before writers and artists found the right-sized tables and pushed the grandpas out with too much talk. So there we were, early in the evening the day after New Year's Day, drinking tequila and having a good chat. It was here, with elbows propped and a wisened eye, that the poet told us the story of the couple in the bathtub.

A young man and woman—or maybe it was a man and a man; *él y ella* or *él y él*, I didn't catch the Spanish pronouns—had shut their bathroom door to keep the dogs out. But the hot water heater was leaking carbon monoxide and the lovers died with their hands spasmed into fists from a lack of oxygen, their towels left untouched on the rack. Their bodies were found some days later by a friend who beat back the hungry dogs to enter the apartment. Luckily or unluckily, depending on how your imagination tugs, those dogs could not open doors.

Such were our morbid thoughts as we paid the tab and stepped out of the Cova, and it is here that *our* story begins. We went for dinner at a nearby place called El Parnita. Our order included tacos de nopales. The nopales are a good place to start because it was upon the nopal cactus, a.k.a. the prickly pear, that Mexico City was built. Or rather, as we learned in grade school, it was upon the ripped-out heart of a priestess's son, his gladiatorial organ sprouting roots on a ledge and growing into a nopal, that the infamous eagle of flag and legend gored a snake with

* All headings are excerpts from "Notes on a Zombie Cataclysm," by Mexico City poet Luis Felipe Fabre, translated by Amanda Hopkinson for *Words without Borders* in 2012.

its talons and marked the spot the Mexicas would call Tenochtitlan.

Our story also starts with the nopales because as I ate them I was overcome by a certain glee, and it is always the moment when you realize you are having fun that the party begins to turn. By then it is already too late. You have missed your cue for exit and the night will not remain a savory remembrance but will instead become bitter, strung out, overstayed. Or, in a slaying of the poet Jack Gilbert's words, beware: our biggest risk is delight.

So we were eating nopales and speaking less morbidly, and I became aware of our laughter. We paid, left, got into the car. It was early yet, but we were taking it easy on account of the New Year's pagan-tries that had lasted well into the morning of the day before—a dawn met with even a paraplegic dancing *cumbia*.

The artist among us was driving. He was the responsible type, and the empty streets and lack of seatbelts in back made us feel cozy, like we were on a family ride. We dropped the poet off at his house with a fraternal goodbye, and cruised on among trees lit from below and sidewalks broken apart by a history of earthquakes. We were scheming grand plans for the next day. Perhaps we would visit the archeological museum to read the codices that recount the time when all of humanity was eaten. Or perhaps we would drive to the suburbs to see the windowless towers of Satellite City, inside of which the man in white from Jodorowsky's film *La montaña sagrada* (*The Holy Mountain*) sat in a state of ascension, flanked by stuffed goats and bodyguards inked with signs of the Kabbalah.

We stopped at a red light. Someone's sentence got cut off. It felt like a rock hit me in the back of the head.

My arm flew in front of my eyes and my forehead pinned it to the back of the driver's seat. I later learned that one of us was screaming, but all I heard was the silence of that sentence left undone. We were spinning, facing the stretch of road that should have been behind us then swinging back toward the red light. The red light was now green. Our car, once again, came to a stop.

Our responsible driver had already jumped out onto the street and was shouting a license plate number. I turned to look at the plates of the car that had hit us, but could not decipher the markings. The fleeing vehicle swerved the wrong way onto a one-way and its wheel detached. I could see an airbag had been released. The loose criminal then crashed

into a bus stop—a place of some logic, considering the state of his ride.

I turned to the critic sitting next to me in back, but could not think of any words.

“Are you okay?” she asked in English.

“Yes,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“No.”

Our responsible driver poked his head in. “Are you all okay?” he asked. It really was the only thing to say. The critic must have answered in Spanish this time, because I have no memory of her reply, but we had our limbs and our organs were with us and there was no blood and we could speak and move and...where was the front-seat passenger?

I climbed out of the car and saw our missing man: the curator with a cigarette in mouth walking fast toward the wreck at the bus stop. “Stop!” Our responsible driver shouted. “We don’t know who he is. He could have a gun.” The curator stopped. Our driver called the cops.

The siren of an ambulance could already be heard, as if we had been hearing it all along. It grew louder and the rig came lobbing around the corner, halting at a strange angle. The curator helped the critic toward the men who got out dressed like paramedics. The pros put the critic on a gurney. They took her blood pressure. It was high.

The cops had arrived without announcing themselves, and one of them crept up behind me, asked for my name, asked me how to spell it. But the badge soon lost interest on account of my English vowels, so he scrawled out a misspelt identity and I climbed into the ambulance to join the curator and now strapped-in critic. The ambulance doors were shutting but our responsible driver lunged forward, thrusting out his hand. “Your glasses,” he said. “I found them in the street.” I took the somehow unscathed lenses and realized why the license plate numbers had looked so cryptic. And that was that, the doors closed. We left the artist alone on the corner of Baja California and Medellín.

Zombies: the decay of the social fabric personified.

2.

“TAKE US TO THE CENTRO MÉDICO DALINDE ON CALLE TUXPAN,” THE critic said from her gurney.

“There’s no traumatologist on duty there,” a paramedic said. “We’ll take you to a private military hospital. It’s very close.”

“That man was definitely drunk,” the curator said to perhaps no one. He was looking out an impossible window in the solid ambulance wall.

“I saw the guy’s face,” the ambulance driver said. “He was laughing.”

*The authorities insist they are taking
appropriate steps
to control the plague of zombies.*

3.

IT WAS AFTER-HOURS AT THE HOSPITAL AND THE JOINT WAS EMPTY except for a lady at the front desk who was wearing a winter coat over her dress. We followed the gurney under shrill lighting and were shuttled upstairs. “Don’t let them do anything,” the curator whispered, “until we know how much they’ll charge.” Our insurance was not valid outside of the US.

The critic was hoisted into a stiff bed in an empty room not far from the elevators. She was fitted with a neck brace and someone went out to find an x-ray technician. The place seemed understaffed. The front desk attendant now doubling as a medic asked, “How are you feeling?” The curator and I sat down in school chairs at the foot of the bed and realized the question was for us. “You probably have whiplash,” she said. “You should get x-rays too.” My neck was burning and the spot where the rock or inertia had hit me felt numb.

“We feel fine,” the curator said. “We think we’ll wait a bit to see if anything changes. Could you give us an estimate for the treatment?”

“I’ll be right back,” the attendant/medic said and walked out.

“This brace is hurting me,” the critic said to a nurse who was fussing about. “Is there any way to loosen it?” We heard the cruel sound of Velcro. “Thanks. And do you think I could get a glass of water?”

The nurse refused. “You shouldn’t drink water if you’re in shock,” she said. “It could cause instant diabetes.”

The critic’s phone rang and the curator answered. *Instant diabetes*, I thought, and slipped into the hall.

The metal cart in the hallway was empty up top, but loaded with discarded needle parts in jugs below. The parts were not the used needles themselves, but more like something you break off. *Syringe caps? The lids for utility glue or caulk?* The cart was reflected in a window that looked into an odd-sized room, a compartment neither big enough for a patient nor small enough to be a closet. An identical space mirrored it across the hall. Both were empty. *Compartments for portable machinery? Perhaps the equipment has gone home for the night?*

The sound of labored breathing escaped from a room down the hall, shifting my attention. I could see the invitation of an open door. I walked toward it, steeling myself for the sight of a bandaged monster hooked up to a metal lung. I peered through the gap between door and jam and saw a tangle of legs. Three legs, two styles of panty hose, one trouser. I stepped forward to get a better view. The number of legs doubled. Three nurses were cuddling in bed, moaning. One of them was male.

*It is 4 am: light escapes from windows
televisions and computers of every Mexican
remain lit like lanterns
devotional lamps that are a sleepless prayer
for the night of the zombies to end.*

4 .

CORRUPTION HAS BEEN CALLED THE SUFFOCATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY; it can squeeze oxygen out of the people and cause them to clench their fists. Something funny happened that particular New Years that perhaps has never happened again or perhaps happens all the time. The insurance companies were complicit. The cops were complicit. The drunk uncle of the drunk driver, well, it was more or less his idea.

See, the automated bank payments that had been allocating money to the insurance companies without a hitch for years suddenly stopped. The computers failed both our driver and the man who had hit us, *and only them*, on exactly the same night. Or, as anyone with a grade school education might expect, the insurance men who arrived on the scene of

our accident refused to pay. It would thus be up to the drivers to come to an agreement. But before any negotiations began that night, one key payment *had* already gone through. The drunk driver's drunk family had bribed the cops.

"We didn't see what happened," the cops said and stepped back, making it clear there was nothing they could or would do.

"We saw what happened," said the residents whose windows overlooked the intersection.

"You're interested parties," the cops told them. "Your motivations are suspect. We won't take your depositions."

"That's when he called me for backup," the poet told us, sitting on a bench in the hospital lobby. The lighting at that moment belonged in a bar. The overheads had been turned off and Christmas bulbs pulsed above us, their rhythm jumping into disco mode. "He realized he was alone with the family of the drunk driver and neither the cops nor the insurance reps were on his side."

"And would you believe it," the poet went on, "as we were all talking, another accident happened at the *exact same spot*. A huge truck overturned. It was a mess. People got seriously hurt."

"Get out of here," one of the insurance men told the poet and artist. "This corner is hot." The poet at that moment was coatless and shivering under the crooked street signs of Baja California and Medellín.

Perhaps in the flames or at least in the fumes of that overturned truck, our responsible driver struck a deal with the drunk uncle of the drunk driver. Several hundred thousand pesos (a five-digit sum in USD) would be deposited into the account of the responsible driver as payment for his totaled car and the fact that his lover (the critic) was in the hospital with God knows what injuries. The uncle would turn over a new Lexus he owned as collateral until the money arrived, so long as our responsible driver promised not to take the drunk driver to court. A contract that stated as much was scrawled perhaps on the remains of insurance papers from a glovebox. The poet's chill must have heightened when he read that document, for it referred to our responsible driver as "*el finado*," a term the drunk uncle thought meant "the victim," but in fact means "the dead man."

Our responsible driver signed the paper. He called a cab. He and his poet bodyguard followed the hopefully-not-too-drunk uncle into a

well-off subdivision across town—a *colonia* landscaped with rumors of shady deals, a place where something good or something unthinkable waited for them in a garage.

What that long drive toward the Lexus was like, I do not know and can only imagine in the direction my thoughts pull. What I do know is, around this same time the critic's body was being passed through with x-ray light, and the curator and I took a walk. The attendant/medic had written out an estimate of how much it would cost to get our necks checked—but words were misspelled and the numbers seemed as if they were written half-backward, so we decided to forgo all procedures and treat ourselves with a smoke. The walk was to find some tea to soothe our throats.

The street outside the hospital was dark, empty, and all those things your mother warns you about cities at night. The impact of the car wreck was still in our bodies; we were dead tired and in a survival state of alert. The convenient store was close but we could not see it. There is that old trope of a block feeling like a mile. Any act of violence could have come to mind then, could have come to our bodies, but what arrived in my thoughts was a story I had heard or misheard or read somewhere about a fruit seller. Somewhere in this city, on some sunny day, someone, perhaps someone wearing a uniform, had knocked over a fruit cart to intimidate its vendor. No one helped the fruit seller, even though all he had to live on had been overturned and was now scattered, bruised, oozing on the pavement.

The twenty-four-hour convenience store was closed for a thirty-minute mop-up. People inside moved in a pantomime of cleaning and we could not open the doors. We tried to coax, but a man made it clear through the glass that not even hot water was possible. So we returned to the hospital. It too was on lockdown. The attendant came in her coat after some banging and loosened the bolt. We entered. The poet was upstairs with the critic, but a visitor restriction was now in effect, so we could not join them. We looked for a place to collapse away from the pulsing Christmas bulbs, found a waiting room off the lobby, flicked on the lights. Sleeping bodies, perhaps the families of victims or the relatives of dead men, were strewn across sofas, across the floor. Someone lifted their head. We turned off the light.

*"We are all zombies": emblazoned
On T-shirts, graffiti, stencils, placards.*

5.

DAWN ARRIVED WITH US CRAWLING INTO A TAXI WITH THE POET, OUR legs numb, but our hands quick to grab seatbelts. Every stoplight in that city seemed to be red. We arrived at the house of the artist and critic, and hugged the poet goodbye as if he were kin. We unlocked the gate and saw a black Lexus consuming the entire drive. We had to slither to get past it. We went up into the artist's studio, where the guest bed was kept, to make tea.

That is when the artist called with an update. The critic had contacted her parents to tell them where she was. "Get the fuck out of there," her parents had said. "That hospital doesn't exist." It was some kind of scam. Her parents promised to make sure a real doctor, perhaps even a traumatologist, would be waiting for her at the Centro Médico Dalinde on Calle Tuxpan.

"And her neck brace," the artist said, "those fake nurses put it on with the back in front."

At the end of *Holy Mountain*, the alchemist in white who is in fact the director Jodorowsky and is now wearing black, breaks the fourth wall. "Here we are, mortals, more human than ever," he says. "We began in a fairytale and we came to life. But is this life reality?" He orders the camera to zoom out. "No, it is a film.... We must not stay here, prisoners. We must break the illusion."

I stepped out onto the balcony with my tea that morning and felt like I was attempting the opposite; I was trying to step back into the safety of not knowing. I looked over the driveway and saw the Lexus in the sun. I heard children throwing pebbles against the gate. This city I did not know and still do not was just a vista of rooftops over miles and miles of obscured pavement. A billboard next to a palm tree advertised red Jello. "*Sabrosamente nutritivas*," it read. Flavorfully nutritious.

Instant diabetes, I thought.

They say the best thing for your body after trauma is to lie down, keep warm, rest. They say the best thing is to clutch your lover and try to relax. I walked back inside and sat down next to the curator on the bed. Perhaps all we needed was a long, hot bath.