as we used to sing

by sam deleo

chapter 1

e's a man well acquainted with rivers. So, as he wakes up slumped against a cement wall near the waterline, Emilio Chaccone is not unconcerned about the glut of alcohol mounting a surge back up his esophagus, or the fact that he has found himself sleeping outdoors. But he wants to listen to the river first, to let it carry off the other sounds that have collected around him during the night, that are gathering around him now. He still remembers how to do this.

Light rain sieves the blue husk of a pre-dawn sky and beads on the rails of the steel bridge above him. The droplets rupture as quickly as they form, warmth lingering in the metal surfaces from an extended heat wave. As smoothly as it descends the rain streams across the seared ground toward the banks of the river. Veils of steam lift from the patchwork of asphalt and earth and rise past the melting pearls of the streetlamps.

Occasional showers in the evenings are all that have snuffed the spark needed for a sizable fire, especially in the hills outside the city. The ground always dries by morning.

Few people ever notice a rain has fallen. Today will be the same.

It was still too early for commuters, and, with the curfew imposed at the war's onset many years ago, much too late for pedestrians. A rusty blotch perforated the tin sky in the east, just enough to have roused Chaccone, then the second man sleeping at the base of the bridge connecting the neighborhood to the central downtown district.

A group of wealthy families in the mid-19th Century gave birth to the neighborhood by building their homes on the other side of the river, apart from the industrial squalor choking the city at the time. Three triangular blocks facing each other like wedges of a broken circle at the foot of the bridge marked the namesake and entry to the district, "Tri-Corner." The name traced back to more than a few stories about its origins, but the most plausible version had its original name of Tri-Borough changing to Tri-Corner to better reflect the streets and architecture that later developed around the intersection. A zealous city council representative of the district during the 1950s insisted the name was linked to the hats of the American Revolution, but was later identified as an investor in a company that tried marketing replicas of the hats to neighborhood retailers and school districts, with little success. Perhaps it was a harbinger of the area's decline. In the early 1960s, business closings and waves of urban flight signaled the end of Tri-Corner's growth.

In pursuit of his friend, Chaccone had run down the four-lane avenue perpendicular to the bridge. It had been barren like all the other streets, sounding their footsteps back to them like stones skipping across water. In decades past, First Avenue greeted visitors with family-owned shops and delis, a sycamore- and oak-lined thoroughfare with regular train service at all hours of the day. Now, in the moonless night, a cracked barber pole near the intersection by the bridge resembled a relic from a forgotten carnival. Sheets of plywood covered the window space of what was a women's shoe store. A bit further from the bridge a crumbled storefront left a hollow gap in the block like a missing tooth, with piles of bricks and debris pushed against the back wall as if from mortar shellings. The yellow neon glow at the end of the block came from the barred windows and signage of one of the few operating businesses, a gas mart that, in addition to fuel, sold convenience items, temporary credit approvals from a drive-through bank window, wireless phone services, and fast food counters offering burgers, fried chicken and tacos. Mosquitoes spiraled lazily in the grainy light, reaching the end of their options, the whole corner fluorescently blinking as if filtered through the prism of a sticky insect strip.

Breathing at various capacities inside the signature intersection's two- to five-story brick buildings were airport workers and delivery drivers, out-of-work carpenters, line cooks, drug dealers, addicts, members of housekeeping staffs, as well as a scattering of those who burrowed into the abandoned garage or shop front

until they were holed out by police or security details.

"Hey. You alive?" said Chaccone as an orange shaft of light inched down a bridge support. This was the first night he had spent outside since he was a youth. His back was too stiff for him to stand up at the moment and rouse his friend Browne. He rested on his knees and touched a welt on his forehead like a boxer trying to buy as much time as possible before getting counted out. He wore blue jeans and a white V-neck tee shirt under an unzipped black nylon jacket. The straight lines of his thin, lanky frame were broken only by the beginnings of a beer belly, protruding more than usual by his stretching backward on his knees, and a thick tangle of black and white hair reaching almost to his shoulders. He wore plastic black-framed glasses.

"Who's there!?"

"Me. Emo." Chaccone tried straightening his spine and groaned. "You didn't want

to sleep on my couch last night. I didn't want to leave you alone here." "Where?" "Here, Delaney Street Bridge. I came to see you play last night at the hotel.

Remember?" He stretched again, this time with less pain. "It's me, damn it. Emo!" "I'm Johnny Browne." "I know!" "How you know?" Browne quickly turned his head and cupped his ears to listen. Like interferenced

chatter from an old transistor radio, voices echoed faintly from the city side of the bridge. "Grunts," he whispered, suddenly much more coherent. "Shut up and stay down." The noise quickly outpaced the light gathering on the walls, but didn't separate or

become any more distinct as it neared. Wild "whoo-hooooooos!" mixed with groans, guttural syllables and punctuations of more screaming. Chaccone's muscles tensed again; sure, he'd heard of Grunts, but he'd never *heard* them. A dozen or so youths — the two males in front actually looked to be well into their 20s or even early 30s, the two breeder girls in back slightly younger — ambled toward the bridge through the stripes of night shadow and faint sunlight, the withering gold glow of the downtown skyline their backdrop. Their clothes nodded to the latest fashions but were dirty and torn from repeated wear and living outdoors. The males all wore heavy construction shoes or military-issue, calf-high boots. Their hair had rigidly formed into unwashed clumps.

Browne and Chaccone followed the voices above them with their eyes, listening for any detour of boots coming down the side walkways leading under the bridge. They had all halted in the middle of the bridge, as if sensing the blood heat from the two bodies beneath the asphalt.

"Gaaaoow! Harrrrgh!" one of them moaned, "Booaahh!" another, and soon all of them were screaming and jumping up and down and stomping. "Gawaaoow!" one side seemed to be yelling, and "Aieeeeyaa!" screamed the other, as if in answer.

"Across the bridge," Browne thought hard, "across the bridge, get across the bridge." There was no place to run without being spotted and he knew they attacked first and *didn't* ask questions later.

A furious din uncoiled as they finally ran downhill from the viaduct and made their way into the neighborhood, smashing car windows, toppling trashcans, looting the rare storefront for food or clothing, screaming until blood spots likely leeched the tissue in the backs of their throats. A few lights turned on in the apartment buildings above and quickly turned back off, the mistakes of rookies or, more likely, immigrants. With flickerings of nostalgia, some may have mistaken a few of the sounds for farm animals being slaughtered, but this was a long ways from the green. All the same, one look was all it ever took to convince them of the sagacity of non-intervention, one glimpse to imprint the image in memory for future recognition. Everyone else in the neighborhood knew who it was in the same way one instantly recognizes the siren of an emergency vehicle.

Gangs were not rampant, but along with the risks of muggings, they prevented most people from any notions of challenging curfew. Safe travel at night was by car, not on foot. The rare police or private security presence in Tri-Corner was almost always to enforce evictions. Grunts and their competitors, Toughs, could be distinguished from each other by region and race nationally, though the police who had arrested or made contact with them had no clue as to their specific turfs or territories, had no real theories of how they organized. Far from portents of some grand and dramatic terminus, most people could not remember exactly when Grunts and Toughs were born in the now decades-old economic slide. Most people had given up hope for grand and dramatic ends long ago.

As suddenly as they had descended the bridge, they were gone, moving deeper into the quadrant.

“I got to get on up outta’ here,” said Browne. “If I was you, I wouldn’t go that way.” He pointed in the direction of the Grunts and, then, as if discovering the scrapes on his palms and the clothes he was wearing for the first time, rubbed dirt from his hands with saliva and brushed off his sports jacket and oversized pants, took off his pork pie hat and beat the dust from it.

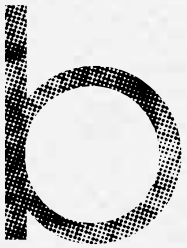
“Hold on, man,” Chaccone protested.

“I told you, I don’t need you to help, just listen. And you have.” Chaccone walked toward him as he got up to leave.

“Stay back, Emo. I’m Jimmy John Browne.”

The sounds of the Grunts screaming, shattering glass and upending objects in their path had finally faded, but when the silence resettled the air still felt loaded with their charge. Shards of rust spread across the cloud cover without anchor.

chapter 2



rowne had been flighty at practice earlier in the afternoon, trying out different time signatures and veering from song to song without signaling Cummings and Harris, the bassist and drummer he had played with on and off for years.

"Let's stick together a minute, man," said Harris, trying to lift Browne's attention from the piano. "Quit actin' crazy, you ain't crazy. Here, here we go now, J.J."

"I'm not there, either, Joe," said Cummings after a few measures. Browne went by Joe, as well as the nickname J.J., because he liked the way they sounded. He wasn't answering either of them. He wasn't thinking of anything, just feeling his fingers play. Then he was skirting through a tangled melody with his eyes closed, past amorphous images parading through his mind — black fields shadowed by peaks and valleys like notes on sheet music, rays of moonlight on the horizon, and, in brief glimpses when his eyes almost opened, the blue sheen of rivers at night.

They practiced in a red-brick cottage house Cummings had converted into a studio in the aluminum-clad residential section of Tri-Corner far from the river. Lining both sides of the alley, an eight-foot-high patchwork of wood fencing had been constructed by residents to shroud their homes from view.
The band entered and exited the house from the backyard, the wood fence walling off access from the alley. Contractors provided trash pick-up once a month, about the only time alleyways were passable by car.

Cummings had soundproofed the cottage house to guard against intrusion from those who might inform on their playing in hopes of a reward, as well as the dumpster divers who sifted through the alleys and the two families who had constructed shanties in the small turnabout spaces at either end of the block. Steel bars over an alley window protected the instruments from theft.

Sometimes Browne practiced late and spent the night on the single bed that lined the alley-side wall. Cummings' wife begrudgingly agreed to this arrangement, declaring it would end the first time she looked out a window to find the "vagrant" peeing in her backyard. Browne preferred his own space, anyway. If a rental space or hotel provided access to a piano, that was enough, the rooms could be snake holes.

His address for the last few years had been The Hotel Standard in Tri-Corner, which harbored an old Steinway in the entrance to the bar from the lobby. The air inside the hotel had the stale yet papery crisp scent of a library. Grime smudges and flaking white paint blemished the fine rounded plaster of archways and entrances. A multi-colored floral carpet lined the lobby. Usually staring off into unknown distances, two or three lonely tenants always seemed to be sitting in the lobby's faux-wicker chairs placed around a few coffee tables. An old hardwood floor with narrow slats in the bar creaked under the weight of steps. Daylight from the lobby shrank inside the bar as if one were entering a tunnel.

Browne had convinced the owner that the place needed the ambience live music could provide on Friday and Saturday evenings to draw people into the bar and keep them there, and more importantly, that the money this could bring in outweighed the risk of getting caught in violation of the performance statutes. For Saturdays, he had even convinced him to pay for the added ambience of drums and bass to accompany the piano for a short while. This was all the owner said he could possibly afford. He had no idea Browne also was playing the piano for tips during the week, usually in the late afternoons and early evenings when he returned from his job in the city and his mind could find rest on the length of the keyboard. This was foolish, given the chances of either the owner finding out or word spreading to the wrong ears, but Browne didn't care. It was the only place beside the carriage house where he could play.

Most musicians did not fare any better than Browne. Harris and Cummings, never completely at ease with playing the Saturday gig, eventually gave in to their wives' concerns about taking underground jobs

like the one at The Standard. Browne carried on solo to keep the show alive. The three of them continued their rehearsals on Saturday afternoons simply for the opportunity to play and keep their chops up for that rare, profitable and safe opportunity, though they knew those chances had all but disappeared now.

The piano was Browne's true home, if the hotel surrounding it often played a rude host. Especially mid-ballad during a set, Browne could hear the steps on the bar floor's high-pitched, out-of-tune "strings" transformed into the slower brush work of shoe heels burying themselves in the blades of the carpet, one after the other on the path to the hallway restrooms, repeating a circle of steps in odd rhythms that colored the songs beyond his control, tied his playing to a plodding nausea, a waltzing schizophrenia, always something a bit more than song themselves. The chatter of voices and feet also meant no one was paying much attention to his playing.

Even before the first cigarette was lit, a haze circulated through the bar and rendered some corners murkier than others, the pools of dull shine on the dark cherry wood bar breaking through every few feet and the rest of it vanishing into obsidian. By the time Browne started at 9 p.m. there were three people present, not counting Elise, the bartender/waitress/manager/bouncer with whom Browne shared a long and guarded past checkered by more than just the white and black of their skin. Closest to Browne was an older man at the end of the bar who occasionally encouraged himself aloud as he worked on his drink. Near the waitress station, a man and a woman sat close together on stools and talked lowly, often shaking their heads in disagreement. After a few bars Browne didn't notice any of it.

He closed his eyes when he played and often lost track of time. His set lengths were so wildly inconsistent that Elise sometimes reminded him to take breaks by flinging bottle caps at his head from behind the bar. With the piano stationed near the lobby, it was easy for the three customers to continue their conversations at the bar without Browne interrupting them, even during the flurries when he mashed the keys with his fists. Only Elise watched and listened. Ten minutes in, Chaccone arrived and took a barstool. Now the audience was four. It wasn't going to be a big night for tip jars, either Browne's or Elise's.

A banana moon sliced above The Standard's roofline through a cloudless navy blue sky. Though the horizons were still clear, Browne's left elbow was starting to ache as it often did when rainstorms gathered

and the barometer sank. His was the kind of old scar born from an act of idiocy whose origins not even he could pinpoint any longer. But consequently, he did not enjoy rain.

He played far past the discomfort, until he felt himself entering a new landscape: a stuttering, shy sensuality, then playfulness, maybe a frolic on the wet grasses of North Carolina where he grew up, the smell of night air, some greasy strokes of blues, red beans and rice, the lightness of fugues, darkness and death, stars piercing black velvet, slowly light again, morning, the sea, a generous and violent sea under him, carrying him out, carrying him in; and, for Chaccone, after settling in his chair: sadness, brightness, reds and blues, disagreement and resolution, sunlight in orange groves, freedom… He reached into the pocket of his sport coat and grabbed his phone to film Browne. He had never attempted this before at one of Browne's shows, but maybe it could help somehow, he thought. He fumbled and dropped the phone, picked it up and set it to record again. It started and quickly stopped. Browne's left hand built a blur of fingers. He cleared the phone and pressed it to record again, but it seemed jammed somehow, as if stuck back in an analog quagmire. Browne's raised his right hand and pounded the keys repeatedly. Annoyed but engrossed in his distraction, Chaccone slumped on his barstool and was examining the phone when he was blinded and nearly knocked over by a blow to his forehead, tears flooding his eyes, and suddenly a cold sensation in his crotch, as if his urine hadn't had a chance to warm before its unexpected release. From 20 feet away, Browne had slipped his right hand under his bench while keeping rhythm with his left and underhanded Chaccone a can of beer. Elise usually only allowed Browne to drink from his smuggled cache, but, as it was Chaccone, she brought over a cold towel for his head and a glass for the PBR in his lap.

Toward the end of Browne's last set the couple on the stools began yelling at each other, one of them taking their outside leg to the floor to offer resistance whenever the other got pushy, until the momentum swung again to the other side, and then back and forth and back and forth again, like a seesaw. Browne played louder, rising to the mood. Elise informed them she was cutting them off. The man immediately made a grab for the one- or two-dollar tip he'd placed on the bar at the start of the night, a con man's front for other soldiers who never arrived, but Elise slammed one of their beer mugs down where his hand had been and swept the money away. Challenged, the man rose unsteadily to his feet, but the woman must have

seen the conviction in Elise's eyes and convinced him to leave with her. Almost instinctively, Browne had reached full gallop at this instant, stopped, then plinked the keys in uneven intervals to fade his set to a close as the couple skulked out.

He got up and moved to a barstool.

"You trying to fucking kill me!?" Chaccone said.

"You looked like you needed a drink. And then you drank it. I'm a scientist!"

"Not so loud, Johnny, I'm trying to close. Don't start attracting your fans now," Elise said, nodding toward the two hotel residents in the lobby passed out in the wicker chairs. Browne was guzzling a beer and did not register her remark.

"Can we go to your place, Els', finish some beer? Just for a minute," said Browne.

"I want to talk to you about music," said Chaccone.

"We are talking about music," said Browne.

Elise cleared the register and made a deposit in the safe while Browne gathered what was left of his case of beer and the three of them headed up the hotel's creaky staircase. Chaccone had known Elise almost as long as he'd known Browne. But, perhaps because they were separated for long stretches by his working abroad, he always acted as if their meetings were re-introductory. In the beginning years this grated on Elise, but over time she grew used to it and played along. He didn't know whether it was her presence that caused him to act so irrationally or something in himself, or both.

The structure of Elise's face had maintained its classic, high-cheek-boned, V-shaped form, even if skin had now begun to bunch around her eyes and brow. She wore her graying blond hair on top of her head usually, was a bit heavy, though not enough to disguise the steep curves sloping her tall frame, and possessed ice blue eyes. For Chaccone, full of the beer Browne had been feeding him, her figure quickly transformed into its younger visage. The mounds of thighs and ass pulsing through her slacks no longer looked like middle-aged haunches to him.

Poor circulation in the hotel made it stifling in the summers and at the top of the stairs Elise stopped to take a breath and wipe her brow, lifting her blouse front to her forehead and revealing her bare torso and

white bra strap. Standing directly behind her, Chaccone followed the valley between her shoulder blades, two smooth brown moles on either side staring back at him like pupils, crease down past her ribcage and spill out like a small river delta on top of her full hips and ass toward the border of her white lace bikini panties. To his surprise, the skin was more golden-hued than the porcelain white of her face. It twitched gently as the soft muscle tissue responded to the movement of her arms. The heat and inertia of the canvas released for him. As if in both inhalation and exhalation, the top of her waist lifted as the bottom half tapered downward. The stretch could have been felt beneath the touch of a palm before it even reached her skin. In his own torso now he seemed to feel some hidden motion, something unspoken that tracked from her pores to her form. It stopped him, the same way Browne's solo had stopped him earlier, minus the beer can.

In the breadth of the gesture she had used her palms and shirt tail instead of the back of her hands to wipe her brow, then flicked the sweat away from her fingers. Sweat? She was glistening for him now, not sweating.

He had to collect himself and come back.

Would he mistake attraction for epiphany, he wondered, as he refocused his gaze on her ass just as she turned around and looked at him.

"See something you like?" asked Elise.

Browne made a snickering sound but was determined to hold in his laughter long enough for the ensuing silence to realize its full potential for embarrassing Chaccone, so that Chaccone might initially be confused, might momentarily think Browne was amused about some other distraction than his getting caught gawking at Elise's ass. Once the moment had set, had concretized, Browne let loose a barrage of belly laughs.

"You wouldn't, haha, you wouldn't know what to do with all of that," he said, "what you gonna do with all of that?"

He laughed so hard that he had to sit on the steps and grab a spindle in the railing with one hand.

"What you gonna do, Emo, with all-" he could not get the words through the laughter.

Elise and Chaccone both waited. She smiled with him at first, then grew impatient and began to kick Browne in his thigh to get him to stop. This made him laugh harder.

"Let's go," she said. "You'll get complaints again." More laughter.

Chaccone averted glancing up at Elise while this was happening and instead looked down the stairs, considering an exit — there would be other times, less awkward times. No, he thought finally, stay — if he was here for the music, then personal humiliation could only be part of the backstage anarchies to be suffered. Browne rolled up to his feet finally, a few snickering laughs still working their way out of him, and they all continued up to the third floor.

Residing in the same building, Browne and Elise lived as two people whose bonds had endured too long for either to escape the other. Their primary connection now was music — Elise having been a singer in her youth when she first moved to the States — followed secondly by drinking. They played vinyl albums first, then CDs, followed by their mp3 players when the nights got too sloppy to maneuver a turntable stylus or jewel box. They were all that was left for each other. Most of their friends had given up music and moved on when it became too risky. Elise brought out another round of beers and Chaccone forced down one more after a protest.

"What you turning into, Emo, one of those groupies?" Browne said.

"I like the way you play, but not enough to sleep with you yet. And, I don't know why I tell you any more because you can't fucking remember, but I live here now, six blocks north."

Chaccone had lost touch with other musicians he'd championed. No one would risk posting news of shows digitally; it was done through word of mouth, if at all. For all he knew, maybe some were playing at other decrepit hotel bars in other cities right now.

"Figures I get me a big ostrich-looking groupie."

"He's played better," Elise said.

"What do you know about playin'?" Browne yelled.

"Enough, you don't need to scream," said Elise.

"Don't listen to her," said Browne to Chaccone.

“Let him make up his own mind.”

Browne leaned toward Elise, the alcohol causing him to almost lose his balance:

“And you think I don’t know? You lounge singers should shut up when-”

“You don’t tell me to shut up in my own home! I’ll kick you in ze ass out uf here, mister, no help from ze accountant!” Her German accent sometimes re-emerged in her speech when she grew highly agitated.

“Accountant?” asked Chaccone.

“You don’t know piano is all I’m saying,” retreated Browne, realizing he’d gone too far.

“You should wish it was all you said!” she shot back.

“I need to get going,” said Chaccone, smelling the smoke of a bigger fire burning between them and not wanting Elise to associate him in her memory with the quarrel.

“Why do I let you come here and act like this when you’ve got your own goddamn room?” Elise asked, not really interested in Browne’s answer. “I’m tired, I’ve been waiting for your *audience* to show up all night. Go, both of you. Now!”

There were still three beers in the refrigerator but Browne didn’t press things. These alcohol-fueled moments might resemble a spinning carousel of images and sounds if reflected on in the days ahead, a jumble of snorts and shouts, a light shrinking toward the middle of a room like the close of an old animated film segment. Most of it would slip away for good. But Chaccone would link back to Elise’s curved and tapered waist as his first point of focus in the blur of images.

“Let’s go,” said Browne lowly, “she got a rag on.”

Elise flung a crushed can at Browne and hit him in the back of the neck as he reached the door. This caused him to laugh again though the edge of the can had creased a small cut on his neck. Chaccone pushed him out the door and into the hall.

“Good to see you again,” he said to her from the doorway, immediately regretting it. “I mean, it’s been a while, I’ll see you later.” “Damn it,” he thought upon closing the door, but couldn’t think of anything else to say that warranted reopening it. The door locks clicked forcefully and loudly into place.

“Come on,” said Browne.

“Let’s save it for another night. It’s late.”

Browne was having none of it. He vaulted down the hall toward the stairwell, overshot the railing and tried to right his mistake by spinning around. Instead of redirecting himself toward the stairwell, though, he continued spinning around in circles like a record needle skipping on the same scratch over and over until Chaccone clutched him by the shoulders, grabbed his arm and led him safely down the stairs. The night had the makings of a curfew breaker already, thought Chaccone. And though Tri-Corner was not a top priority for the police wagons on curfew duty, Chaccone knew that the visibility factor, and therefore, the risk factor, increased dramatically for drunks like Browne zigzag-wandering their way across neighborhood streets. Three curfew breaks — three felony offenses of any kind, for that matter —got you life as a habitual offender.

Chaccone followed Browne toward the handful of dive bars and speakeasies in the bowels of Tri-Corner that had managed to stay in business despite the curfew and escalating municipal taxes. A woman with a bruised left cheekbone approached and asked for a cigarette. Would they like her to smoke anything else of theirs, she asked. Chaccone gave her two cigarettes. She shuffled away hiking up her rayon stretch pants with both hands and exposing the holes in the backs of the knees. Light from a streetlamp sputtered above of her on the corner.

About the only new life visiting Tri-Corner consisted of those who had begun to venture across the bridge in search of an alternative to the private clubs, guests-only hotel bars and high-priced martini lounges downtown. Leisure came at a premium that bought one separation from the crowds. As for the crowd frequenting Tri-Corner, there was a limit to the poll shows, gamer nights and virtual kicks that could contain restless youth. They came for the cheap drinks. The grit, down-and-out characters, the layers of grime rounded the nights with a thrill.

Most were too young to have experienced the link between the shake in one’s ribcage and the amps of a rock band on stage, the feel of getting lost in the crush of bodies moving to the mix from a DJ booth, or laughing till one’s eyes welled with tears from a comedian’s bit in a club. Those kinds of nights had passed, save for the few like Chaccone, Browne and Elise who kept trying to relive them.

Parking was plentiful on the narrow and relatively car-less streets, so no one had to walk for long stretches. The neighborhood had gained a reputation as the accepted arena for being seen "drunk," whether one was actually drinking much or not. The presence of these new customers gave action to empty, somber rooms, as well as conversations new to these parts.

"Woooo-hooo!" a young woman exclaimed from a table behind where Chaccone and Browne sat at the bar. She stretched her arms above her until her black silk tube-top slid up high enough to expose the soft white skin beneath her breasts. The man accompanying her wore an untucked buttoned down shirt and shiny jeans with suede black cowboy boots. Browne and Chaccone waited in vain for the girl's top to come off, then turned back to the bar.

"Where should we go next?" the woman said to the man.

"We just ordered."

"Whatever," she said, then got up and circled the table as if experimenting with different vantages before sitting back down in her chair. "Wonder what's going on in downtown," she said half to herself, pulling lint from of her black slacks.

"We can go back later. Unless you want to go back now?" he said. "No. No, let's stay here for a while."

"They got it bad, these folks," said Browne. "Move down some."

"Hey there," the woman said, "how are you two darlins doing tonight?"

"Baby, leave them alone," the date said, uncomfortably glancing toward her targets at the bar. "Sorry, I mean, unless you guys want to talk to her, then cool, I don't give a damn… Did you guys want to talk to her?"

"Come on," she enthused, "let's party!" She raised her glass high and emptied it in two large swallows.

The date got up and tried to nudge her back toward their table, "She gets excited."

"So we heard," said Chaccone.

"You guys live around here?" the date asked.

"Pretty close."

"Nice. Anything happening here on Fridays?"

"Don't think Fridays has a lot to do with it," Browne said. If there weren't legal risks to informing strangers, as well as Elise to answer to, Browne might have extended an invitation for the couple to come back to The Standard next weekend. Though crowds were hardly yet an issue for Elise to deal with, she still made sure to check the ID of the rare new face at the bar before ever allowing Browne to play, just to be safe. To Chaccone and Brown, these new faces made the neighborhood more interesting, especially the women. For business owners, the visitors brought in money and gave motion to blocks traversed more and more by straggles of vagrants picking through alleys, dealing drugs and looking for any way to avoid living exposed on the streets where one was vulnerable to the vacancies of detention centers and penitentiaries. At least there was a stream of people running though the neighborhood now that did not peddle too deeply in its desperation. And for a few hours, the streets sounded with voices, car doors slamming, footfalls and laughter. A few animated hours and the area fell comatose again.

The familiarity of living in Tri-Corner for several years made it harder for Chaccone and Browne to relate to its outsider appeal now, its new "cool." They had had their own scenes in their youth, music scenes, political movements, artistic trends. But they never believed it was possible to disappear inside of one, as if one's self could be contained by a group membership — at least not during that brief interim between entering the world's stage at birth and exiting it stage left at death. As Chaccone responded to a woman who once asked how he could feel at home while living abroad for long stretches of time: "We're born in disguise." Logically, it seemed to them, any scene tacked on to the theater of existence, even one in lowly Tri-Corner, was not only superfluous but dangerous if one began to believe it was somehow real, if one's second "disguise" gradually made it impossible to recognize the primary illusion.

The flip side of this, however, was that even what one held valuable and true as an individual could not be protected, as Chaccone, Browne and Elise had each discovered through their own losses. Rather than rid themselves of the illusions that multiplied like ghosts around them over the last decades, they allowed themselves to assume what all lovers wrongly assume — that the world loves what they love.

The drinks began catching up to them. They slid off their seats and stumbled over to the open stools

at the far end of the bar after escaping another round of shots the woman was loudly urging until something distracted her.

"You remember the band that was playing on the east side at Hallsey's all the time? What happened to them?" said Chaccone.

"They stopped."

"Company men?"

"Some. Dunno' about the rest."

"The band and the owner were friends, as I remember. They didn't want him to risk losing the bar. This was a couple years ago. But damn, they could make anyone get up and move."

"Even you?"

"I dance OK when I want to."

"Right."

The woman began to swivel and spin across the floor to songs in her head that more and more in the bar also seemed to hear now, while her date tried interjecting himself into the dance with stabbing hip thrusts. She danced before tables of other visitors who welcomed the show with minor variations of the de rigueur "woo-hoo" on the scale of emphasis.

"She don't need a card, huh?" Browne griped, watching the girl move across the floor. "But I do?"

Like every other licensed performer, dancers needed New Work Cards. Browne had a New Work Card years ago before losing it, though he never actually found an opportunity to use it. Cards meant you could perform legally, not that you would get many chances to do so. You also needed access to those few who could still legally hire you to perform. Like a driver's license at the DMV, the registrations of New Work Card owners were filed in both federal and state databases, so there were no dead zones one might travel to in hopes of finding work without one. People used to sell their cards in the beginning; now it would be a struggle to find a buyer for one. Live performance, carried on underground by a few like Browne and Elise in the hidden corners of cities, was all but a dead form.

On the TV above the shelves of liquor, a rock band played inaudibly during an episode of the wildly

popular phenomena known as the “poll shows.” As cigarette smoke wound through the pink light of the neon tubes framing the bar’s large mirror, a few neighborhood regulars tugged at their drinks quietly and watched the band gesticulate wildly. At the corner table near the entrance, four college-aged kids engaged in drinking games with quarters and playing cards.

The woman gyrated to the mirror, occasionally brushing her date away when he stepped in front of her, but gracefully and without malice, as if she had learned not to interpret his efforts personally. She danced over to the drinking games table and began flashing her top up. “Yeaaaahhhh!” “Woo-hoo!” “Here we go now!” “Woo-hoo!” “Oh yeahhh!” “Go baby!” The four college kids slid their chairs in a circle for her and pulled out some dollar bills for tips. They glided their hands along the outline of her body without making contact while her date danced in the middle of the floor, apparently to the same song she danced to, and tried not to stare at what was going on. She pulsed her abdomen, donked her ass up and down rapidly, grinded her crotch as near as possible to each of their faces, then made return passes so they could stuff bills inside her beltline. After they ran out of bills she smiled and wave-winked goodbye. As if an imaginary curtain had pulled close, the students reassembled their drinking game without glancing toward her again as she walked away switching her hips side to side. She high-fived her date and they laughed uproariously on the way back to their table.

“What about Cummings and Harris?” said Chaccone.

“They been talking about trying to get contracted,” said Browne, “signing up with a commercial division or studio. They got kids. Probably do the same if I was them.”

“I have a few ideas for you and Elise. Instead of walking all the way back to the Standard, you can stay at my place tonight, it’s closer. We’ll talk about in the morning.”

Browne suddenly threw some crumpled bills on the barhead and weaved his way out the door with Chaccone following behind him.

“Hold up!” he said, grabbing for the inside of Browne’s elbow. Browne yanked his arm and spun away.

“The fuck off,” and then, unable to stop his momentum, he fell on the sidewalk. Chaccone tried to help

him up, but was pushed away. Browne squatted upright and lunged forward from the curb into the street. The sound of tires squealing and the acrid smell of rubber continued for seconds after Chaccone had caught Browne's collar and pulled him backward onto the pavement.

"Sunovabitch," Browne slurred, thrashing around and throwing roundhouses. Chaccone crab-crawled out from under the barrage of swings in fire-drill style without being glanced.

"You assholes wanna get killed!?" came from the jackknifed car door up the street. An arm made more visible in the night by a gauze wrap around the elbow extended from the open driver-side door and fired a bullet from a small-caliber pistol just above them and into the alleyway. After the single shot, the silence grew deafening with anticipation. Chaccone lay motionless on his stomach, listening, and also regretting that the man had been so quick to answer his own question for them. He lifted his head and saw Browne sitting on the sidewalk wearing the expression of a daydreamer.

"Get the fuck down!" he whisper-yelled. He heard the engine rev loudly and the sound of the tires squealing moving away from them.

Browne got up again and began weaving side to side down the pavement, walking a little faster every step that proved to him he could somehow remain upright. Chaccone scrambled up after him, careful to make sure the car's taillights fade from red to pink in the distance as he followed.

"Hold up!"

"Stay the hell away!" Browne made the corner and now began a stuttered jog toward the cement monolith at base of the bridge about three blocks ahead. Because of First Avenue's downhill slope and Browne's level of inebriation, his jog couldn't help snowballing into a full-tilted churn of elbows and knees. It had begun to rain lightly and the dry film of dirt on the streets set up a greasy resin. But even after he fell, if Browne had not paused after getting back on his feet to raise his middle fingers to the drizzling sky and scream at the rain, there was little chance Chaccone would have heard him and spotted his smudged outline in the moonless night.

At the bridge base, Browne gasped to catch his breath, examined both sides of his skinned and bleeding hands, then, his lungs finally relaxing, almost immediately passed out slumped in a cubbyhole on

the river side of the monolithic column. Chaccone followed down toward the river, hoping to find no one else under the bridge beside Browne. The gunshot had luckily not prompted any police sirens. A light hush of rain was all he could hear now. The streetlamp on the corner threw a pale blue sphere on top of the wet pavement but did not stretch far enough to illuminate the column.

Rain stippled swaths of the river tempered by the green glow of the boat lights undergirding the bridge, clearance markers for traffic. Facing into the darkness and standing where he believed he had last sighted Browne tilting skyward, Chaccone noticed a slumped silhouette at the base of the column, the flow of the water in the background serving to better frame the stillness in the foreground.

He approached cautiously until he was close enough to recognize Browne and felt under his nose for a breath. He examined his body as best he could in the darkness. He wasn't certain at first whether he had been hurt from his fall, and Browne would not wake up no matter how he jostled him. He couldn't leave him here alone. He sat down with his back against the column and faced the river. It was almost curfew now. He rested his head against the cement, the rain ticking away around him, and before nodding off, reflected on the last few years.

They had not been fruitful. He had struggled to remain independent while more and more of his trade sources in Latin America were bought up by large companies. More worrisome to him than this, he felt the buoyancy of his spirit challenged at every moment now. Marooned in the middle of a game he had fought to avoid playing, it was harder to locate what had given him sustenance in the past, and there was the growing fear that only he was aware of this, save for his closest contacts like Browne and Elise, as if everyone had adapted to an oxygen depletion in the air but him. He was astonished and even a bit envious at how quickly normalcy reasserted itself for people, no matter how drastically their circumstances changed. Maybe it was fear, he thought. He wasn't going to give up, wasn't in him. But there felt like less room to breathe.

He awoke to a rust in the dawn sky, the moment before an arrival of voices that sounded spontaneously and recklessly playful at first, a rebellion against the keeping of hours and quotidian routines, if only they were not in such a strange tongue. He awoke to uncertainty as raw as the column's grain of cement against his face, to the world he constantly tried reviving with his personal hopes even though it was dead and

there was nothing left to escape anymore, only the jumble of actions, the whir of motion, metal and plastic, hurtling past the eyeless windows and doors of gray buildings, past the giant torn billboards, the acres of chained lots, spaces expanded and restricted simultaneously, the faded memory that there was once a choice other than simple force and fear, now buried deep in the pits of peoples' stomachs. Every day now felt a bit farther from the day before it.

"I have pursued my self, and been pursued by it," Chaccone thought upon limping back to his apartment in the morning. Especially when he was hungover, he had a habit of tossing melodramatic philosophical daydreams around in his head as if to deodorize the vile excursions of the night before. They helped add distance and purpose to acts like getting drunk and sleeping outdoors unnecessarily.

"I have made both peace and war with my self, followed it home and also to wrong addresses, felt secure from its façade of limitations and desperately oppressed by them, used it and been used by it, felt it desert me in dangerous places, defended it and denied knowing anything about it, and finally, loved it and seen the moment when I would need to kill it."

He wasn't always sure if it made sense. But it was reverie. For him, uncertainty and identity existed symbiotically until the end. But he sensed that, in the time he had left, a farewell of sorts was still possible to all that he valued and felt had now passed away.

"What is to be done?" he thought. He held a bottle of Ibuprofen and a bottle of aspirin close to his face in the middle of his living room as if one would magnetically draw itself toward the ache inside his head. He went with the aspirin. He adjusted the blinds on his windows from closed to one-quarter open.

"Alright, there, better," he mumbled to himself as his eyes adjusted to the light. Keeping the volume appropriate to the level of his headache, he put on a favorite aria and immediately felt himself replenishing.

It healed him almost as much as if he sat before a soprano whose eyes closed as she lifted her arms up and reached for the upper register, her ribcage gently swelling and narrowing, swelling and narrowing, the way he had seen Elise's do only hours ago.

He surveyed the small one-bedroom apartment crammed full of books and records but barely any furniture save for a metal-and-glass kitchen table set, two black lamps sitting on oak end tables to either side of a black leather recliner, and a queen mattress on the floor in the bedroom. He'd moved in long ago after defaulting on the loan for his condominium in the city but never got round to decorating. He should've known better about buying the condo, a man in the foreign import/export racket like himself where the money comes and goes according to the trade winds. He told himself that with all his Latin American contacts, he would find something that provided for his allowances. He always did.

His last gig started out well enough, selling Columbian coffee beans to a few small independent outlets in the city, no sales pressures, no huge travel demands. But he wasn't a rookie to be forgiven a false sense of security, he knew that when a price or tariff rises, clients scare off and pull back shipment orders. It was that way with almost everything: coffee, bananas, alpaca clothing, folk art, pan flutes, the bootleg recordings of American music that he peddled under the table for his own unreported pocket money. There was no predicting any of it over the long term, not even "units" of black market blues.

However uncertain his livelihood was, it had never bothered him much before because he never had anything to lose prior to the condominium. He'd amassed debts now. He knew poor. He didn't know poor and in debt.

Now in his fifties, he felt thankful he had not signed on many of the other major dotted lines. There was a marriage license in his thirties, but the signing of divorce papers shortly thereafter proved some of life's dotted lines were reversible. He'd been a man with more passions than partners, always placing his faith in the present. "I'm familiar with the unexpected," he thought, enjoying the oxymoron in his reverie and thinking back to the days in his youth before he knew any better, those sun-blind days when he embarked on his affairs with rivers disarmed by the utter lack of planning and overabundance of enthusiasm that would develop into personal hallmarks…

chapter 3

"No la mata," Chaccone cried to Norberto, who held the turtle in his hands as if he was weighing whether to take his knife to it for their dinner or toss it back into the river. The eye of the turtle facing toward Chaccone rolled upward slightly and calmly blinked once, expressing the ennui of a traveler enduring a standard border search. Travelers without pre-arranged destinations are seldom in a hurry.

But how could Chaccone guess Norberto's thoughts when he could scarcely believe his actions: setting down his paddle so suddenly and snatching a tortoise from the water with his bare hands, sensing fish below the muddy crest of the river, hearing monkeys minutes before the sound of their crashing through the trees reached Chaccone. When he was moored on dry land, the man was considered a town drunk by his fellow villagers in the Amazonian island of Lagunas. He was a different being on the water, as if he had retained sensory abilities everyone else had lost in the passing of generations.

The young traveler Chaccone had been told Norberto was the man who could show him the submerged jungle, or the "semillas," as the natives referred to it. Every time he heard this word used he pressed for clarification, knowing the word "semillas" translated as "seeds." But this is exactly what would be repeated back to him — semillas. Some even scooped up soil or shook loose tall stalks of grass to show him seeds in the palm of their hands. Finally someone pointed to the trees and explained that it was the seeds that sprouted the trees, from the tree roots came clumps of soil, from the soil formed lagoons, hence, semillas.

Alright, he'd never thought of it that literally before, but alright. And, in another part of his mind, he sensed they were telling him something he hadn't been on the continent long enough to understand.

Chaccone saved money for over a year to buy a plane ticket to Lima and cover his expenses. Magazine articles and books he'd read in the fluorescent flickerings of his graveyard shifts as a cashier at a convenience store in Buffalo had fueled his curiosity about South America. He didn't know if different kinds of chaos existed, but the one he was living in felt much too predictable. It felt to him that, if lands could be compared to animals, there were still some left that had not been tamed. To delay the fears of his mother, he told her he was taking manager position at a sister store in Albany. There was not time to go into detail, but he would call and explain once he was there.

The hazy clouds his plane had sailed through to touch down in Lima never completely dissipated once he was on land. The city wore a coat of fuzz and always appeared just beyond focus to him, as if he lacked the prescription glasses necessary to see as the locals saw. It was also more expensive than he had imagined. He found a Spartan room at one of the several hotels named The Inca and that evening walked to a depot to purchase a bus ticket north to Chiclayo. From there he could begin the inland trek to the rivers. He didn't know this path would be littered with snapped wheel axels and walks in the dead of night waiting for the next crowded Volvo truck to test the cratered terrain, with white waterfalls pouring from the sides of the jungle basin as if frozen in the distance, the few beds every 50 or so desolate miles reserved for prostitutes, that it would be a good week before he would set foot in a boat and almost another after that to the bigger rivers. There would be plenty of time to explore the capitol later, he presumed confidently.
The Amazon awaited.

One afternoon while stranded in Lagunas he followed some directions given to him by the owner of the cinder-block building that sometimes served as the town hotel when the rare visitor arrived. He discovered Norberto laying drunk on the dirt floor of his mud hut, having started the small fire beside him to cook his dinner but then passing out before getting around to it. Chaccone left him sleeping there and walked back slowly toward the cement building on the town's thin dirt roads to resume figuring out how he could leave the island.

At the brick police building, one of the island's few other structures beside the hotel that had generator-powered electricity during the daylight hours, he was greeted by a green-and-yellow plumed parrot who spoke more than the desk clerk did on the frequency of river traffic. Mud huts with thatched roofs spread out on either side of him as he continued back to the hotel, a few children sitting pants-less in the dirt likely seeing their first foreigner.

He'd been stranded there for eight days. His excitement over exploring a new country had hardened and crystallized into a tension that felt like a stone he carried around in his stomach. There was water, there was jungle, there was sky, but there were no doors. In one of the books he'd read, a man had gotten lost in the Amazon Basin and quietly lived out his Mormon mission for 20 years before finally finding his way back home. The empty rumors of boats arriving on their way to Iquitos, where there was an airport, sounded more and more like people telling him what he wanted to hear. They had problems more serious than his, anyway, though he may have least been a source of some amusement to them.

He had left behind the larger islands of Moyobambo and Yurimaguas without much delay — a fortunate decision on his part, since the terroristas moved in after his departures and had their fill of raping, robbing and killing. How long would it be before they reached Lagunas, the next island in their path? The small Lagunas police force had already fled three days ago in motorboats. They had taken their parrot mascot with them. It finally struck Chaccone how far away from home he was.

He spent his days scribbling in a notebook at his garage-like quarters behind the main house, his nights sitting with Arturo, the father of the family that owned and lived at the hotel. Since he was their first guest in several years, the family had adopted him as their own. He ate with them, used the same outdoor shower they used near a wildly tall green garden, and sat in front of the building with them to follow June bugs, satellites and stars with their flashlights each night after dinner. Arturo boasted his family was well-armed and would give any comers more than they would want to handle. Even with the uncertainties it held, the night sky always roused their wonder and unfettered them from worries about terrorists that may have taken hold during the day.

With so little to do, time floated like citrus scents winding through an orange grove, dreamlike and

sensorial in the same breath. One morning at dawn he awoke on his cot on the dirt floor of his room to be startled by an apparently sober Norberto standing over him and peering down at him. Chaccone had learned to sleep lightly and keep at bay the advances of rats in the rafters above him and the blood-brown roaches on the ground with the flashlight he slept with on his chest. He never heard the man approach. He reflexively shined the beam in Norberto's face, but he did not go away. It took him another moment to realize he was not dreaming. And yet, it was as if he had slept through not only their introductions, but also some agreement they had made about an excursion.

"Vamonos señor. Necissitamos provisiones," Norberto said in an urgent tone, the knife scar on his crevassed left cheek, which he would refuse to explain, opening and closing like a tiny flower as he spoke. He stood there while Chaccone dressed, then led him outside and explained their itinerary as if they were merely reviewing a schedule that had been arranged months in advance. Chaccone bought the rice and tins of tuna Norberto ordered at the shack that served as the village store. They loaded them in a canoe near the water, and, as if the semillas were about to revert back to seed form any moment, left before dawn the following morning.

By the time of the turtle detainment, the recent college dropout who couldn't swim and the village guide had floated the river for three days, sleeping in the canoe and riding out incessant rains that had swelled the water level over most of the lagoon mounds where they might have camped or at least regained their land legs again momentarily. The turtle could have been a flavorful alternative to their tuna if only they had somewhere to build a fire. Norberto slipped the disk-shaped patient gently back in the river just as the rain was slackening a bit and a muted glow burrowed through a pocket in the sky.

As the yellow sun finally broke and spread, a new world came to life, parrots reflecting the wet light with azure, lime and scarlet feathers, the unleashing of a pent-up cacophony of whoops and whistles, cries and laughter from any number of other birds and creatures. Norberto suddenly pointed upriver, and, like the pulling of an aquatic rabbit out of the river's hat, a small dolphin leapt out of the water in a pre-fab, upside-down "U" arc, as if it had been spinning in oval revolutions that climbed nearer and nearer the surface of the water, timed to the moment of the sunlight's descent, yet, also moving outside of time, marooned as it was

from its origins in the sea.

"Escucha. Monos," Norberto said, cupping his ear to listen for monkeys. After they had rowed steadily for at least five solid minutes — though it was almost always Norberto rowing since only he had the technique and strength for it — after they had completely left the stretch of area where these supposed monkeys were and Chaccone was sure his guide was mistaken, a low wheezing started, like the wind streaming far off through the trees, then slowly built momentum into a roar spiked with high-trebled snaps and crackles, and then the whole swath of forest sounded as if it was being run through a wood chipper. The quick black arms forming blurry triangles as they swung and reached, swung and reached, a great invasion of arms and legs off the ground, black forms levitating through the treetops. Black shapes in green leaf polka dots. At the end of the tree line it stopped. They sat and watched. They looked at the water. After a rest, as if a ritual had been completed, mingling and playing broke out, some eating, and they were gone. Excitement over the charge he witnessed pulsed through Chaccone with such electricity and pace that he could not form thoughts. He felt his breath come back, finally.

For the first time in his life he was part of a world beyond what his expectations could encompass.

He could hear the howler monkeys in the distance now also, with the echo of their roar always rounded by a soft, "just kidding" sigh. Norberto smiled in satisfaction, but Chaccone's heart filled with light. So he'd read a few books about South America and reminisced about his childhood daydreams that dinosaurs lived in the southern continent longer than anywhere else, so long perhaps that maybe one or two still thundered through the jungle; so he'd envisioned trains with cushioned seats and refined compartments, instead of the reality of buses and later trucks snapping their axels on mud roads and stranding passengers in the middle of nowhere; so he'd come here alone and had imagined regional boat transit service in the Amazon Basin — so he was a naïve and gullible dupe. But he wasn't crazy, after all, he thought, there were wonders.

The sun began to raise every molecule in the lagoon to its steaming point and to Chaccone it no longer felt like a river their canoe rested on but a lily pad perforated by hot murmurings, with dolphins geysering up all around the canoe and other fish surfacing to see what life was moving on top of the river as well. A small caiman found a patch of earth near the treeline and maneuvered itself in the sunlight. Birds of prey

glided the rain-wiped sky. For both men setting their oars down, it seemed a good time to stop. They let the soft current rotate the boat around in lazy circles. More than generations separated Chaccone's senses from the way Norberto's could function, but it didn't matter now. They were not moving forward or backward, but almost like the jungle, Chaccone thought, floating beyond purpose. He thought of his stalled life in Buffalo for a moment

and wondered why this felt different.

"Escucha. Personas," Norberto said suddenly.

"?Como?"

Norberto didn't answer, he just waited, and Chaccone had forgotten completely about it when a larger canoe appeared in the distance several minutes later. They did not signal. Couldn't they see them, Chaccone thought, were their senses duller than his? But Norberto was not concerned. When they grew closer the three men in the large canoe waved and Chaccone went back to resting his back against the interior of the canoe tip again.

The men turned out to be Norberto's cousins, out hunting in the rain, gone for who knows how many days and now making their way back to the village. Carrying a boatload of batteries and lamps, they were going to hunt and fish tonight as well, not wanting to waste a chance at the nocturnal life that would soon come on shift in stranger, stealthier forms. They spoke to Norberto lowly and sparingly, with long pauses, as if their prey might be eavesdropping. They gave him some bread that they'd miraculously managed to keep dry. Another extremely long pause and it was time to part. They waved and were off.

Norberto was unlike anyone Chaccone had met for more than just his extra-sensory instincts of the jungle. Under his snarled bush of black hair, his inset eyes expressed a growing awareness of Chaccone's world and his own separation from it, of his body struggling against the soreness of aging more and more, of his talents eventually finding their end in the foreign tour companies that would surely move to this part of the jungle one day, as Chaccone had read about along the heavily populated stretches of the Amazon.

For the first time in almost four days, Chaccone and Norberto would feel land under their feet and, if lucky, start a fire to help ward off the emergent flying insects that had been absent in the rains. Thanks to

a tip from the hunters they found some surfaced ground among the groves of trees that lined the banks of the channels and set up camp as night was falling. The soil was moist but dry enough 20 feet back from the water to hold a fire. Replacing the diurnal aviary chatter was a new language, as if a second work shift gave way to a third.

The darkness ripened around them in a slithering, loose-skinned presence, imbued with the slow march of those who preferred seeing to being seen. An albino armadillo tiptoed toward their camp twitching its back luminously as it stopped, turned and retreated back the way it had come. Eyes glowed in the path of their flashlights on the surface of the water from time to time. It wasn't so much that Chaccone felt outnumbered and disadvantaged, as it was that there was not the luxury to choose fascination or boredom in the same way one could while waiting in line at the grocery — and when he was actually back in line at the grocery, he wondered if he would remember this fact. When he'd finished eating and got up to rinse his bowl he was stunned to see a small albino caiman watching him from the edge of the river. Norberto had just commented on the rareness of albinos at seeing the armadillo, so their sudden appearance sent a wave of chills through Chaccone.

They had surrounded themselves with their mosquiteras early in the evening, their small fire having little effect on the insects. Chaccone began to say something when Norberto silenced him with a raised palm. What was it he was hearing this time, Chaccone thought? He followed Norberto's silent lead but the uncertain look on his copper-hued face, usually a repository of certainties about the lagoons that appeared and disappeared every six months as land and water, like two exposures of the same negative, seemed edging toward doubt in Chaccone's wearily formed opinion. Exhaustion weighed on both of them. A few moments more passed and Chaccone began to doze off every few seconds and then shake himself awake with worry he'd missed what Norberto was saying or hearing.

As little as a month ago he was also experiencing nights full of their share of reptiles while working the graveyard shift at the convenience store in Buffalo. He was a college dropout looking for a new kind of thrill, something to fracture the patterns and motions he'd learned to execute in rote like everyone else around him. He'd already developed a number of habits that usually take years to manifest themselves:

washing his hands and face excessively, pulling and twisting his thick black locks repeatedly, exercising a tendency to overuse the word “effluvial” in common everyday speech. He was aware of his eccentricities just barely enough to be eccentric and not neurotic. But he hadn’t been finding many kindred spirits in his “village.”

As long as he they were going to be waiting for whatever Norberto heard to either appear or remain hidden, Chaccone got up to wash his hands one last time. It was when he was reaching for his bottle of camp soap that he noticed it, a speck of light far off on the river’s surface seemingly moving closer to them. Norberto saw it also but sat silent and still.

“?Quiéne es?” Chaccone whispered.

“No sé,” Norberto said quietly, uncertain who it could be. “No hagas ninguno ruido.”

And so they waited without making a sound. The light grew closer and now it could be seen playing on the surface of the water as it diverted side to side, as if probing for something. The light didn’t bounce much, so the boat seemed to be moving smoothly through the water. And now the low, steady thrum of an outboard motor’s trolling blade could be heard faintly. At the point where the wide channel began to bend away from their camp, the boat edged in their direction, though Norberto had doused the fire minutes ago. More than two voices echoed over the still water but Chaccone could not make out any of the Spanish words. And by now he was not going to ask Norberto, fearful of both making noise and of what his answer might be.

Neither of them moved more than it took to shallowly inhale and exhale. The boat still appeared to be traveling in their line. When it reached about 50 yards from them, an unmistakable sound was heard, the ratchet of guns cocking and empty chambers accepting bullets, followed now by the loud whine of the outboard motor as they accelerated toward the camp, the floodlight illuminating the bodies of Chaccone and Norberto pressing so flatly against the ground they looked to be trying to lift up a sleeve in the earth and crawl inside like worms. The canoe had given them away.

They were screaming before anyone climbed ashore. They pulled Chaccone and Norberto from the ground and one of them hit Norberto in the jaw with the butt of a gun, some of his blood splattering through

the floodlight's beam. There were three of them, the largest was wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap and walked straight to Chaccone, pointing his pistol at a spot on Chaccone's forehead where he fancied adding a third eye:

"!Hable! !Hable!" He pulled back the trigger.

Thoughts of how to stay alive for a moment longer raced through Chaccone's head

— quick-something quick or it's over. He would speak as instructed and it would be without the slightest trace of accent. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. This was it. No last-minute rescue, no third party on its way from the screen cut of a movie, no saving sniper shot, just death, and the accompanying ridiculousness of sudden unexpected death, of it being here, now, like this.

And so an odd resignation set in, a giving up, of submitting to the mercy of terrorist thugs, because Chaccone knew there were no exceptions, these people killed all foreigners, but especially Americans. He'd been reading about them in the periodicos: in the altiplano Germans pulled off of trains, tortured and shot; a Swiss woman raped and killed in Yurimaguas; American hikers shot near Cusco. Sure, two different groups of terroistas, your mountain goats or your jungle rats, but the same result. He was young, he would miss out on so much, but on that most defining aspect of life, he would learn soon.

"!Hable!" the man yelled again but with even more force.

And Chaccone had no choice. The charade would end sooner or later. They would have him as soon as he uttered his first upstate-New York-accented Spanish, so, why not:

"!Chinga tu madre!"

"!Gri-i-ngo-o-!" the man barked ferociously, firing the gun, sending the bullet just to

the side of Chaccone's head, close enough for him to sense heat and motion passing his right temple as he held his eyes squeezed close, wondering if he was still alive. He felt water empty out of his bowels and then a searing bright light knifing into his head and then, nothingness.

A diamond sun glimmered through the haze above him when he awoke, drawing out sweat beads to sting the wounds on his jaw and the side of his head. He was on his back, his hands and feet bound, and his hands and wrists ached from lying on top of them. As near as he could see craning his neck, they had spent the night at the camp, but the canoe was gone.

"?Donde esta' Norberto?" he asked the man standing and watching him from the other side of the smoldering fire pit. The man wore hiking boots, khaki fatigues and a beige unbuttoned shirt with red-and-white emblem patches on the shoulders. He pointed his AK-47 lazily at Chaccone, then glanced away.

"?Donde está mi amigo?" The man reacted with the swiftness of one swatting away a persistent mosquito.

"!Callete!" he yelled and lunged at Chaccone with the butt of his rifle. A second man wearing the same uniform approached and they spoke lowly to each other. The two men helped Chaccone to his feet and then walked him to the boat where the man with the baseball cap was sitting smoking a cigarette. Unlike the other two, he wore jeans and a Harley Davidson T-shirt.

With an outboard motor they moved at a clip fast enough to actually make Chaccone feel a bit seasick. That's perfect, he thought, to feel like vomiting also. But he was alive. That was the odd thing.

They veered off a bend in the river and took a narrow inlet that led deeper into the jungle. It wound onward into the brush for a few minutes, and then there appeared a clearing through the rim of trees. Dry land. A Quonset hut occupied most of the land strip, but a narrow dirt road coiled away from its far side. On both sides of the hut were oval holes dug in the ground. Chaccone had heard the jungle rebels ran drugs. It could be a coca leaf refinery, he thought, the road a cocaine transport route, but his mind quickly shifted again to his own survival — did it matter if they were making baskets?

They threw Chaccone inside the hut near a support beam while smirking men took turns approaching and inspecting him. He'd faced down death, he thought, and it turned out they actually wanted him alive — but maybe only because they mistakenly assumed he knew something he didn't, or could be of some use to them that he couldn't — in which case, they would probably torture him before killing him. Never believe things can't get worse, he thought. Then, to his surprise, one of the three men he arrived with unbound his feet and hands and calmly handcuffed his wrist to the beam. Like a disoriented animal gradually realizing it was the center of attention, he sat on the floor in the middle of the almost empty Quonset hut, save for the several cots lining the walls and a table. Sunlight flooding in from the high windows seared the room like the convection rays of an oven.

A lengthy discussion among the men began just outside the hut, with Mr. Baseball Cap's voice leading most of the meeting. What little was audible to Chaccone came too fast for his level of Spanish and in a dialect he hadn't heard before. He tried to follow but exhaustion eventually overpowered hope and he hovered in a state of semi-consciousness a few blinks above sleep.

If he made it out alive, he vowed, he'd make the most of every second afterward. No more wasting time, working at convenience stores, stealing the food when he grew bored or hungry, spending the days hanging out in his room; he'd start really living, set out for adventure somewhere and- "Wait a second," he thought, "that's what got me into this bullshit situation. No, I'll learn to value the mundane as adventuresome, like I was following an instinct, like the turtle we pulled from the water, a son of the land and sea, sky and earth, and the days will go by as new and sweet as when I was a baby."

It was not so long ago, even if it felt like it was from the vantage of his present circumstances: He must have been 5 or 6, out on the sidewalk shoveling Buffalo's heavy March snow with his small plastic shovel, not paying much attention to where or why he was shoveling the snow, when he stopped and noticed the sweat on his forehead and eyebrows below his knit cap, felt it beginning to slowly evaporate from his skin in the still, wet March air. He looked over at the snow piled against the maroon brick side of the duplex. The contrast of colors must have fascinated him. He didn't know for how long he was staring at the snow against the brick, but he couldn't really stop staring at it, either.

At some point, a recurring dream he had been having began to invade him with a heaviness. He didn't understand this dream that always woke him abruptly in the night and which was beginning to scare him recently, but it floated into his mind without invitation. It came with the feeling of a growing weight filling his body like lead, accompanied by a dark and nebulous image of iron and flowers mixing, of the merging of plant and metal. When he was lying in his bed it made him feel so dense and heavy that he could fall through the mattress and boxboard, through the floorboards and foundation

into the earth itself.

He doesn't remember toppling over into the snow, he doesn't remember anything, only waking in his mother's arms while she carried him inside the house. He would never pass out again. The dream eventually went away. But there would be other occasions hereafter when he would again feel paralyzed by such an expanded pause in his thoughts, caught still as a reptile in the sun, perched somewhere in a balance between the passing of time and its cessation.

The room seemed to be rotating on a slow camera pan and the men he glimpsed through the entrance were out of focus to him. He tried to listen in on what they were saying again but was still not picking up much. With his free hand he felt his head again to make sure it wasn't blood loss that was causing his exhaustion. No, good, a feel of oatmeal thickening, it was starting to dry and build a matted base for scabbing.

He did not want to think about how he found himself in this situation anymore. If a person can be working in a convenience store in Buffalo one day, traveling the Amazon Basin the next, then almost killed, he thought, there were no natural patterns at play, only artificially constructed forgeries, the kind that frame the jungle and its inhabitants as either hospitable or unwelcoming, benign or malevolent, when in actuality it was a place as far from his grasp as the moon. It had taken him coming here to understand this, to realize hazard was king here as well, that perhaps even hazard and the jungle were the same. And so, there could be no accurate prediction of one's reactions, either, not now and not in the future. As if he were about to reluctantly bear this notion out, a chaos-fueled kind of mirth settled over him.

Get past it, he told himself, pay attention. A new push of adrenalin helped him keep his eyes open.

One of the men was raising his arms when he talked. They seemed like actors going over a torture scene in a prison break b-movie:

"I'm not whipping him," he imagined one of them was saying. "I've got tendonitis with all the whipping. You whip him."

"Whipping?" another would say scornfully. "I'll cut him a thousand times like a Japanese samurai." He hoped there was not a Spanish translation for the word samurai.

"Why go to the trouble?" he thought he heard a third say. "He's not worth more than a bullet — ok, maybe two or three!" As if one cue, one of the men let out a cackle.

And then Chaccone felt the same sensation overtake him — laughter. Of course, he knew this was the most dangerous abreaction to his trauma, and maybe because he knew this, it now grew less easy to avoid. At first silently, deep inside his brain he laughed, laughed and felt a small release from the pressure of his consequences; then it spread to his diaphragm, silliness without reason or cause, and to his belly, and finally, against his absolute determination to stop it, out of his mouth, light snickers, wheezing , then- boom! — one of the men shot up from his chair and kicked him hard in the side. But now he couldn't stop, the restrained laughter broke loose into loud full-breathed guffaws while he was being kicked repeatedly. Mr. Baseball walked quickly over to him and cocked the gun and pointed it for the second time at Chaccone's head. He held his breath and stopped, lifting his hand up weakly to signal, "don't shoot." Mr. Baseball fired clean through his hand and walked away, leaving Chaccone groping his hand between his thighs to try and suppress the pain and bleeding. Now it was the men standing around him who began laughing, with no illusion as to why.

After letting Chaccone bleed all over himself for a good while, one of them dressed and wrapped the wound, just between the thumb and forefinger, with clean gauze and isopropyl alcohol. A misshapen star-like scar would eventually form on his left hand. It would be the kind of star that rooted him closely to the earth whenever he attempted to float away. But for now, at least, he had a sliver of proof he'd be given sufficient time for that to occur: Why disinfect a dead man's wound?

The men worked busily outside his post in the Quonset converting coca leaves into cocaine over the

next two weeks and he was fed twice a day and allowed to use the outhouse when necessary. They also quizzed him daily — Mr. Baseball speaking very slowly and sometimes in broken English — about a nebulous mission. They revealed details about it gradually for him to commit to memory, and watched for weaknesses in his reactions. He was to be their mule to Iquitos. They had not told him explicitly, but he sensed they were also in some kind of trouble, some duress, which might explain why they had use for him in the first place.

When he let his imagination run away he came up with theories, most of them resulting in some version of this particular local terrorist clan having in some way or another wronged a larger group, maybe even the same group, more or less, but maybe a more powerful branch with more money. And he was the guy who would make the delivery to right things again. Why else did the men shout to each other in panicked tones and seemingly work from morning till night if not because they had a deadline, a deadline of some consequence.

There were no more armadillos, dolphins or albino caimans to look at; outside, the hothouse workers sped blindly toward the last item of faith worth killing and dying for — the deal, the payoff. The birdcalls he could hear from his station at the beam were alarm calls. The monkeys released jittery bursts of racket, as if, he half-believed, crazed by the spell of the white powder stirred from paste in this narrow clearing. Despite the heat, he felt better stationed inside the hut. The tan semi-circled ceiling of the Quonset took the place of the burning sky outside. The pre-fab walls beaded with water only slightly slower than the opened pores on Chaccone's arms. Remnants littered the naked interior, soda bottles, crumpled paper, cigarettes and joint roaches, spills of liquid on the concrete that Chaccone would monitor in their slow evaporations. But mainly he studied the abundant empty space of his enclosure.

It required an unfocused eye that would eventually be lulled to the peripheral trappings of scale. An un-centered gaze that refused any partiality for the near or far, the wide or narrow, an occipital convergence on sunlit dust. Chaccone could rest this way without pain in his body or mind. It was a process where he started big, say a 4'x4' square of space, and gradually collapsed it, but without any real intention. Where the reduction ended he never knew, because by that time he'd completely forgotten where he started. It was

a study in unlooking, and then a diminishment inside of his mind's eye. So: 4x4, 3x3, 2x2, 1x1, nothing x nothing, until the jungle was lost and then rediscovered from an interior vantage. He lost track of his breath and sometimes felt as if he'd stopped breathing altogether. There was only a swinging gate converting the air outside into breath inside, then releasing it as air again, over and over. "Chaccone," whatever that was, was excluded from the process.

Back home, his peers in Engineering and Anthropology classes, living at home or working dead-end jobs, hanging out and getting drunk, heading to the drive-in with their dates, might be surprised to learn what had happened to him, though he rarely concerned himself with such things, having grown accustomed the four walls of his small bedroom. There were times when he exercised this privacy by pacing around his bed from corner to corner, the way someone would go for a walk. An unnamable sense of expectancy overshadowed this solitude. He might break from a daydream to jot down ideas and plans in a notebook, or, during the many rainy days of Buffalo, stare out his window for at the robins hunting worms on the soggy grass of his backyard. He could watch the clouds roll in from the lake and the rain they brought for hours at a time. But as much as he felt moored in simplicity, he was too young not to wonder if there weren't different experiences, and if they only came to life when one chased them. He hadn't discovered the need to be more specific than that.

He was taken up river to learn to maneuver the outboard and steer the boat, walked through the exchange point and the password he was to wait for, only proceeding if he heard it, signaling if he didn't. Failure didn't leave him any option so he wanted to focus and learn the duties quickly. They fed him better food and he was allowed greater freedom to move about, albeit under the supervision and discretion of a guard who stayed with him at all times. Though the men were confused by it, he was allowed to wash his hands almost as often as he wanted.

The task was to deliver a boat hull full of drugs to safe harbor in Iquitos, but the plan contained no further contingency, no mention at all of what Chaccone did after this point. Whenever he brought this up, he was told there was nothing for him to worry about as long as he succeeded. Mr. Baseball was to lag behind alone in a smaller boat, close enough to make sure the delivery was executed, far enough away to

avoid attracting attention.

Chaccone wasn't sure which day or even how long after dawn it was when the two of them finally set out. But the whine of the electric outboard motor that he steered transfixed his attention for what seemed like a long time to him on the still brown water, intruding on the other jungle sounds in a way that made him feel even more foreign to the surroundings. Occasionally, he glanced at the sky to trace the thin sun's arc above him. They kept a rapid pace and the breeze it created provided the only relief from the heat. Once they were safely within a few hours from their destination, they stopped to camp for the night and review plans for the drop-off one last time. Thick crowns of trees in observant poses curved over the inlet where they anchored as the last violet light of the day slipped from the leaves. Chaccone felt eyes watching them in the branches but could see nothing — maybe Norberto had rubbed off a little on him, he thought. He still had no idea what had happened to his guide. Mr. Baseball Cap ordered Chaccone to start a fire, then began cooking a dinner of rice and plantains.

Chaccone tried to break the uneasy silence by speaking about the myriad ways he had learned to appreciate how plantains and bananas cooked, as well as commenting on the tree masts that loomed behind them, the relative difficulty or simplicity of their mission, the various calls of certain birds and the cooking time of rice on an open flame. It only seemed to agitate his partner and make him uncomfortable. He tugged his baseball cap and said little to nothing, taking off the hat to fan the coals with it intermittently. For Chaccone, seeing the man's thinning matted black hair slightly disarmed the image that

fear constructed in his mind. It made Baseball seem older and more frail, if not

necessarily less dangerous. He decided not to ask any more questions for a while but could not stop stealing glances at the man.

His eyes were inset by a protruding brow that smoothed into a lighter-colored forehead where the cap usually blocked the sun. He had not been clean-shaven once over a period of weeks but also strangely never quite reached what could be considered a beard and not stubble. Perhaps the hair had simply given up. He was large in build though his shoulders hunched inward and he walked with a bit of a limp, like a dog that had been injured in fight.

Two Capuchin monkeys had quietly descended and sat at the edge of the clearing. One of them locked onto Chaccone just as he looked up from washing his hands. As their eyes met, the monkey curled its lips back and brought its upper and lower rows of teeth together repeatedly as if to indicate that, while Chaccone's actions were not yet humorous enough to warrant laughter, they did merit the trill of a silent "t." The other monkey was almost as transfixed by the fire as Baseball. Or perhaps it was the hat, which Baseball had now tossed aside to crouch under the kettle and blow harder on the coals. This monkey may have interpreted his relative nearness to the hat as Baseball's shy invitation for him to give it a whirl and try it on for style. A few quick gambles on all fours and he had seized the fashion opportunity, hat in hairy hand and Baseball springing up after him. He easily beat Baseball to the tree and scrambled up it with the hat, his partner inspired by the action and hopping through branches to join him. Baseball was screaming. He began climbing the tree from some not-very-well-thought-out strategy and the monkeys calmly walked the plank of an upper branch to the safety of another tree. Baseball reversed himself and jumped down.

The monkey inspected his find on high: It didn't appear edible — at least, it didn't have much flavor. But it was sturdy. It felt nice wiped against various parts of the body. And it even seemed to fit on his head. No, it definitely did not taste good. But yes it did fit nicely on the head again, perhaps aided by the saliva that... A gunshot shattered the rustling of the trees and the monkey with the hat was on the ground and before it could look up, Baseball macheted off a hind leg. Both animals were shrieking incessantly. Baseball struck down with the blade on the other hind leg and blood bubbled in the grass. Slapping both arms into the ground, the animal instinctively made a doomed attempt to stand up on its absent legs. The motions and shrieking subsided some now from the fallen monkey but its partner was in hysterics, making charges toward Baseball, who fired at it with each opportunity. The legless monkey was still faintly breathing but in deep shock. Its arms no longer had the strength to pull it along the ground.

Baseball stepped the toe of his boot on the monkey's head as its arms weakly waved in the motion of a dying bird's wings, and took his blade to its ears, one side at a time. When he had finished cutting, he walked in the direction of the partner, firing again to stop its frantic retreat. He fired twice before it was well out of range, echoing its last few panicked shrieks more sporadically. When he turned he made a step or

two back to the fallen monkey, perhaps to finish the job, perhaps just to admire the work of his justice, then thought better of it and headed back for the camp. Speechless, Chaccone was shivering as if an Arctic mass of air had descended on their encampment. Baseball threw him an ear. It landed at Chaccone's feet.

"?Te gusta monos? Que lástima, buen provecha," he said to Chaccone, who could

barely assemble an answer to the question in his mind: No, he did not like monkeys when

they were like *this,* and he did not have an appetite, either. Baseball dished out the rice and bananas, but Chaccone did not touch it.

Neither spoke again for a long time. Yet there was only a momentary silence around them. As darkness filled the gaps from river to sky, the jungle chorus descended with a frenzied pitch, perhaps still registering at alert level, perhaps instinctually broadcasting their superior numbers in tones more bold than usual, or maybe simply feeling the excitement that death awakens in those familiar with killing.

When the river became a channel and the channel became a bay and the horizon dipped beneath the curve of the earth until the bay looked like a sea, the grand Amazonian island of Iquitos finally appeared before Chaccone in the distance, almost a full month after he'd expected to see it, and under very different circumstances. For starters, he would not have been alone but in a modestly sized passenger boat, almost exactly like the one chugging ahead of him toward the harbors. Fit for about a dozen passengers, the boat swelled over the mild crests with what looked to be about 30 men, women and children squeezed and crouching tightly along its floor. The pole guide stood starboard left at the bow and wore a water-weary expression on his dark face, seemingly content to coast into harbor with the minimum effort on his part while his partner manned the outboard in back. A river snake crossed their path, a long black serpent with yellow markings, more stripes than dots from Chaccone's vantage, and suddenly, it was snake-chasing time.

The guide and motor operator in the back must have communicated, “Let’s give these people a treat,” telepathically, and soon they were steering a path of circles around the traveling snake. Everybody was happily cheering now — they were chasing a snake, a black and yellow snake, chasing a snake in a boat, no less — meanwhile forcing Chaccone and Baseball into a wide detour around them where they could no longer see the target area at the marina.

Chaccone couldn’t help but remind himself that he might’ve been a passenger in that boat, which had begun its journey who knew how many tens of hours ago from who knew where, a boat that may have been simply adding one more notch to a hull marked with several reptile-chasing detours. And that would have been just fine with him today.

After a few minutes everyone bored with the chase except the small children, the boat resumed its course and the guides resumed their silent weathered stares. The people and the snake were fellow competitors, Chaccone thought as he tried to regain course, and so they felt compelled to have fun at the snake’s expense while he was exposed, the way an athlete might be heckled when visiting another team’s home field. Baseball lagged behind but called out to Chaccone and pointed him back to his left toward what looked like houses in the distance.

The hand-off was to take place at Venecia, which, along with its neighbor Belen, was a floating village. People traveled from shack to shack via canoe. The canoe lanes from Venecia and Belen grew gradually shallower until boaters eventually ran aground on the streets of Iquitos. The shacks themselves were made of buoyant balsa wood, so if the river ever rose high enough to lift them off their stilted foundations, they functioned well as floating houseboats steered by guide poles. Villagers, especially the children, frolicked in the water like seals, sometimes diving in with their clothes on from the portals of their living rooms. The kids played water tag while the teens experimented with underwater heavy petting safe from the view of their parents. Others bathed and still others navigated all this traffic by canoe as they went about their errands.

Chaccone looked back over his shoulder at Baseball crouching to conceal himself and his weapon like a panther ready to pounce, and again tried to relocate the “mark” ahead, the receiver. He finally spotted the

hand signals from a man standing in a boat anchored ahead of them at an Iquitos harbor. Again, the specter of mortality descended rapidly on Chaccone. He cut the motor almost completely and sputtered into the marina sector of Venecia. Baseball veered off to anchor at a gang-friendly house about 40 yards from the pier so he could observe the transaction from inside.

"Bienvenido pasajero amarillo," said the mustachioed man at the Iquitos marina with a tone of expectancy. He stepped out of the boat.

"Bienvenido pasajero amarillo," Chaccone replied as instructed. The man motioned with his hand and another man driving a pick-up with a covered bed backed up to the canoe. The truck had a light beacon on top of the center of the cab but Chaccone did not have time to ponder its function. The mustachioed man ordered Chaccone to begin loading his black trash bags of cargo in the truck, raising his voice, "!No! Déjale," when Chaccone attempted to unsnap the vinyl cover off of the truck bed. As he pushed the bags under the bedcover of the truck, Chaccone could feel that something was stopping them from reaching all the way to the base of the cab. But he wasn't going to point out any space constraints until it became absolutely necessary. He finished forcing all of the bags in with just barely enough room to close the gate.

As they pushed Chaccone into the truck, squeezed between the two men in the middle of the cab, he looked back for Baseball but saw nothing, the houses with their soaked wood all a maze of dark brown run under by the tan of the river. He saw only his empty canoe listing freely in the water with its load emptied, a boat that no longer retained an iota of his presence. It did not seem to have been abandoned by anyone he could remember anymore. Now that his time felt near it was an object freed from those associations — it was no one's boat, could never be anyone's boat, other than perhaps the wind and water tilting it back and forth. His breath shortened and his thoughts jolted back to the road ahead when the driver switched to second gear and the shifter hit Chaccone in the groin. Was it not dire enough to be killed during a South American drug transaction you knew nothing about, he thought, or did you also have to get emasculated by a stick shift along the way?

Here were 350,000 people on an island in the Amazon zigzagging in motocarros, sitting on corners and talking, sleeping on plaza benches, working, hustling johns, eating plantains, blissfully unaware a young

foreigner was about to be sacrificed. Every one of the actions lacked a purpose from Chaccone's point of view. Maybe one of the gang would cut open a bag of the cocaine as they did in film cliches, skeptical scowl planted firmly on brow and lips, lift a knife-full to his planked tongue, taste and smile ever-so slightly, extending a knife-full to Chaccone who would waste no time in snorting it like an addicted lab rat. This way his brain would already be pre-electrified for the heat of the bullet slug, there would be less thermal variance between metal and membrane. And if there were an afterlife, he thought, maybe he would have a bit more energy for the transmogrification, a slightly higher horsepowered engine for locating that shambalic glow.

This feeling buoyed him until they came upon a square monolith in the town's center, an iron monstrosity that towered over them with a slate gray finality. Rumored to be the dark American continent's distant cousin to the Eiffel Tower, the Iron Building, as it was called, was erected at the start of the 20th Century but bore no resemblance to the nearby government palace or its other contemporaries. It was massive unrefined block iron, smooth un-windowed iron, capped with satellite eyes and Medusan strands of antennae. Like death, it seemed solid and imbued with a density untypical of the earth, no holes for air, no variations, no avenues of return, just the oneness of an immensely heavy element. As they passed in front of the colossus, memories of his recurring iron flowers dream from childhood filling him again, the pallid wafer of the sun slipped into a pouch of sky and the clouds grayed with rain. "I never tanned evenly anyway," Chaccone thought to himself while picturing his face on the head of a corpse in some funeral parlor, knowing his fate was not sending him to such a place and unready to tackle the potential meaning of his dream in the present context. He had always sensed that terror, even the terror of death, could be chased from the mind momentarily by the sudden entrance of absurdity or humor, but at this point, all he could hope for was resolution.

Rain began to smear the windshield, but either the wipers did not work or the driver did not turn them on for whatever reason, and Chaccone watched the roofs and walls of the small squat homes waver and straighten, waver and straighten, the lilacs bleed soft purple and the broad leaves of palms bend in imaginary gusts as if, when viewed through the lens of death, his waking world dissolved.

They left the city, if it could be called a city in its slow-motion hush, left all the people sitting patiently

and still in the plaza while their children trotted around benches in the soft rain, the wayward toucan couple reporting in muted echoes from a tree by the bay, the motocarros weaving a network of patterns across the island with tiny, barely audible 60 cc whines fading and approaching and fading again. It seemed mathematical to him, a happy coincidence of crossing paths that likely repeated itself every single night. There were 350,000 people in this island city of the Amazon but it began to appear to Chaccone that he was not on a parallel stage with anyone here anymore, not even the two sullen men riding next to him in the car, who in his periphery began to resemble the faces of the people he saw in passing outside, one face imprinting itself on his retina only to be lifted and replaced by another with the same features; he wanted one last foothold in the endless stream, a farewell to all this verdant sensuousness he'd only fleetingly glimpsed, like some dark voluptuous woman who calls to you and then vanishes as you follow around a corner, to simply record these last impressions of the island in his mind while being swept away by this spiraling flow that was about to deposit him in who knows what abyss.

But what am I doing, he thought: I have not been Emilio Chaccone for very long and soon I will no longer be Emilio Chaccone, end of question. I should be readying myself, he thought, instead of daydreaming. He tried to regain a more detailed catalog of his situation. He could see they were leaving Iquitos proper and winding through a labyrinth of working-class neighborhoods, little brick ranches on small plots without grass, their colored interior lights synching to the approaching honeyed dusk, a stereo or TV occasionally heard, couples dancing in one or two homes; men along the dirt road fanning flames from small firepits; tired children walking home in no particular hurry, the whites of their eyes glowing from smudged faces; most residents already resigned to the shadow of the coming day, framed in doorways and asleep on sofas, swaying in back lot hammocks, vaguely aware of time passing.

They made it to Bellavista, a muddy parking lot of a town on the island's Nanay River tributary coastline. Almost all of the 20 or so buildings skirting the open lot were on the shoreline and several people who had set up the food stands common to these small pier towns were breaking them down for the day. A radio station in one of the shacks blared music from tin speakers posted on wooden poles around the lot. In a booth with what first looked like a picture window until one noticed the absence of glass, two DJs

stood inside announcing the time and temperature after every song, as well as the description of the music, the names of people who happened to be passing their booth, fishing conditions, the weather forecast, their opinions on national news items, the latest rumors about produce at the market in town and any other topic that seemed to afford them hearing their own voices for a few more seconds. His fate would escape inclusion in the electronic broadcast of these thoughts, and he felt grateful for avoiding that recital.

The pick-up climbed a narrow and muddy drive that led around the side of a house set away from the parking lot and out of view from the town. Three men came out of the house to meet them, two armed with handguns in shoulder holsters, the third an older white-haired man walking between them.

The mustachioed driver ordered Chaccone to unload the bed of the truck into the back of an old van. Until now, he had not uttered a single word after the initial code phrase. Unloading the bags was noticeably easier than loading them. After the first 20 or so, they were practically springing out from under the cover. As he reached under for the last of them, he jumped back with a start after feeling it move violently against his grip. The next grip was on his own shoulders, pulling him backward, the two guards moving quickly past him and dragging a man tightly bound and gagged from the bed of the truck near the cab. They let him fall out of the truck to the ground where he rolled like a lumpy loaf of bread. The driver produced a blade from his belt and roughly cut the gag, leaving the man gasping wildly for air.

The driver's black mustache spread into a smile, revealing a gold front tooth, as he looked to Chaccone and said two words: "Bienvenido pasajero amarillo." Everyone but Chaccone and the man on the ground laughed for a long time at hearing their secret password aired out publicly. The man on the ground looked about wildly, as if searching for a place to roll to and hide.

The longer this game played out, the less sense it made to Chaccone. It appeared neither the people the captive man represented nor Mr. Baseball's gang had prepared for what an interested third party might be capable of with the right information floating around Belen, Bellavista and the Iquitos harbor. The thought of this scenario raced circles inside his head and he grew nauseous. Playing a role without agency, without ever knowing what was going on, a vertigo had corralled such centripetal forces in him over the last few weeks that he finally felt his body about to implode. He did not intend to speak, the words just came out,

which explained why he spoke them in English.

"I haven't done anything!"

Hearing the words resonate in the silence that followed not only provided commentary on just how little he *had* done thus far in life, but also made their ring and their source real — they couldn't be unspoken. They defused the tension and forced a course of action, which, be it good or bad, he began to welcome — death could no longer be worse than the waiting for it.

"?Cómo?" the driver asked, looking to his partner.

"?Quién es este?" said the older man.

"No lo sé," the driver responded to Chaccone's delight.

Could it really be they hadn't realized he was not a gang member? Even in uttering the three simple Spanish passwords it should have been apparent he was a foreigner if they were listening. Perhaps the driver thought it too minor a detail to mention, the accent of a man who would be soon dead anyway. Chaccone knew he had to act quickly. He reached into his crotch — it was the only place he reasoned his most important documents would be safe — and immediately two guns were cocked at him. He froze and begged permission to pull his hand out slowly, which he did, under orders to keep his eyes shut until whatever he produced could be retrieved. As the old man reviewed his birth certificate and driver's license — Mr. Baseball had kept his passport — Chaccone chronicled his ordeal in halting Spanish, from Laguanas to Iquitos.

The man gave him back the documents and signaled toward the bound man on the ground. The driver kicked him violently in the jaw, drawing a rush of blood from his gums, then twice more to the midsection. Having only recently recovered his breath, the man on the ground was now chasing after it again in spasms. But he managed to confirm Chaccone's story insofar as he swore he'd never seen or heard of the American before in his life.

The old man appeared satisfied and did not signal his guards to beat the man for any more information. He'd already known enough to have his men shoot the original receivers of the shipment execution style with silencers as they sat watching Chaccone trolling it in from the front seat of their sedan. It appeared

the bound man's job was to kill the sacrificial victim who made the delivery after it had been loaded, an arrangement Baseball had surely known about. This is likely what the old man had initially planned, also, to cover the tracks of his interception of the shipment.

But the story he'd now heard from Chaccone so amused him that he began to smile broadly, his tan brow collapsing in its folds and his chest billowing with a quiet, wheezing laughter as he eyed the American and shook his head. As his two guards put away their guns, Chaccone noticed both shoulder holsters were identical. In fact, he only now noticed the mustachioed man was also wearing one. Did they standardize some of their look like Mr. Baseball's group, or were these standard issue items, as in government issued? Chaccone looked quickly at the man curled in the fetal position on the ground. His hands were barely visible but his feet were in plain sight to Chaccone: Handcuffs and leg bracelets bound them.

The old man stopped himself laughing with an intentionally deep inhale/exhale and then looked in Chaccone's eyes with a gravity that said he rarely found anything humorous for very long. For his part, Chaccone tried to soften his eyes so that tears might come to them, to master the look of a trembling American tourist kid. He thought of sad things, of losing his father, of the pain he caused his mother. He was so genuinely terrified that he began to *act* terrified — that moment of truth again, he thought. The old man finally opened his mouth to speak.

"Vete," he said.

Chaccone waited for more. But that was it, nothing more came. Just, "go." There had to be a catch, some trap waiting. He took a single tentative step behind him, unwilling to show anyone his back yet. The guns remained in their shoulder holsters. Everyone's hands were at their sides, save for the old man, who stood with his arms crossed and his head nodding ever so slowly from side to side in a mix of disgust and surprise.

Chaccone bowed his head slightly while keeping his eyes on them all and very slowly turned from the group of men, the house, the captive, their bags of white powder, and began the long walk back toward slumbering Iquitos, where his salvation would likely pass as unnoticed among the dreaming as his condemnation had. A half-mile down the road, when it was clear no one had been sent for him from any

reconsideration the old man may have had, the buzzing of the insects returned to him and he heard the sighs and greetings of birds he'd been deaf to just minutes ago.

As the fading yellow sun sank behind the black water, a silence between these calls revolved around him with a crackling charge he could hear like the pops and skips of a stylus on a record. In the dense spaces where the foliage blinded him from the water, he could sense the fullness of the trees crowd the air. He thought of Norberto's exchanges with the jungle. He wondered if his guide had made it out of his side of the ordeal alive. He felt his neck and elbows and thighs to make sure he was all in one piece and there were no festering wounds on his body, and to simply reacquaint himself with the free flow of breath and blood. He looked at the water's skin in the waning light. It remained unbroken while wide stretches of it shifted so imperceptibly he wondered if he wasn't still dizzy from all that had occurred. Yellows and blues settled on the horizons and the dark crown of the sky lift above them. A red streak followed the sun like the blood in an egg. He traced the subtle changes in the sky from one instant to the next.

To his left he spotted weak reflections patterned in a loose circle on the ground. He walked over and found an old rusted red bicycle on its side. The final few rays of yellow light shone inside a few brown beer bottles. Someone had dug a shallow fire pit. An old rag and some paper had been singed from the fire, a few bottle caps blackened. A prism of dull blues and violets splintered from pieces of broken glass in the middle of the pit. Print had faded from the white paper of tin cans that once held beans, perhaps, though he did not wonder about their contents or the motives of those who had left them here because nothing about what he saw seemed incongruous — not now, at least. He watched a rusty glint spread over the trash from the last of the sunset. He sat down next to the pit as if to examine treasures, every detail of his surroundings like parts of music not struck by any hammer, string, mallet or machine, but existing in a way he could not quite put into words or thoughts. Nesting birds dotted the treetops, scatterings of dark hues moving in the branches. Absent of another witness, he felt in the center of the quotidian and nocturnal shifts trading places, held by the pause between those calls fading away and those just beginning. From his spot on the ground he had a view to water on either side of the trail. The river rinsed on the shallow banks and turned the mud the same shade of anthracite as the water.

How long he sat there he didn't know — his senses couldn't register it, did not provide enough separation from his surroundings in order to do so, and, as if trapped, he tasted his own absence this time without any gun pointed to his head, without a gauntlet of pain or the compression of his will by others, but only the trees and the treasured trash strewn around him in the circle and the river's hush to confirm this comfortable and fleeting paralysis, this experiment that had given new evidence he was indeed alive. By the time this notion had formed his mind, the light had drained from the sky and been replaced by ink. By the time he continued walking toward the island city, he had already decided he would dedicate himself to discovering other opportunities to be the subject of such experiments.

June bugs came out ahead of him on his path and lighted on the sky's black curtains, and, through his eyes, mingled with the harbor lights of the city and even the stars on the horizon. He had no flashlight to navigate the sky like he and his friends did in Lagunas, letting the hours settle around them during all those nights spent in reverential whispers with Arturo's family. With a wavering sense of depth his focus reached its limit on the horizon and all the sky's reflections moved together like vertebrae in an endlessly curving spine, and he wondered if, like the speed of light, death meant a propulsion beyond both the near and far.

He might have never felt like walking away from his spot on the ground if the tension he had been holding in his stomach not finally uncurled. His belly convulsed and rumbled in protest of his having eaten no more than a few handfuls of rice over the last several days and nothing at all today. He was at least 20 pounds below his average weight. He would be able to eat now because he had not been eaten. The thought of fried plantains, boiled fish, even rice, made his mouth salivate wildly. Remembering the tang of fresh ceviche pushed him almost beyond himself. After eating such a meal, he would wash his mouth and hands lengthily, luxuriously.

He recalled the howler monkeys' repeated hollow strikes against coconuts in the semillas, sometimes accompanying their cracking of the shells with thunderous celebratory roars; or how the pelicans loaded their gullets with fish and insects and sat apart in carnivorous meditations; the slow grinding of a tapir's jaws as it chewed grass, an upper lip occasionally quivering in anticipation of the next bunch; the last involuntary muscle spasms of the mouse entering the hinged portal of the snake.

Eating was a natural state of being, he thought, and one only caught glimpses between bites. Each one consumed another and was eventually consumed through bonds as hidden as those of the tide and the moon; every day was on loan, putrefaction being the principal balance, and somehow he, Chaccone, 19 years old and never been laid, had waded through a peristalsis of shit and fire, saw the cape drawn away to reveal death's white horns and managed to laugh while it charged, and, almost by accident, before it was too late, resuscitated his youth to taste the flavor quickly fading from the contemporary palate — that of the moment.

To read the rest of "As We Used to Sing," send a request to sdeleo@samdeleo.com and you will be emailed a pdf.