Cells

Cell 2

Yesterday, Sergeant Barillo whittled a figurine as Jorge talked in his sleep, as he was prone to do when he took his daily 4:00 p.m. nap. Sergeant Barillo, who had made it a habit to sit in Jorge's cell during these naps, has heard Jorge's deepest sexual desires, usually involving a person named Lucinda and a garment with many buttons.

"*¡Botónes! ¡Botónes! ¡Lucinda tus botónes!*" Jorge would moan, again and again.

The shape of the figurine, which gradually emerged from the small block of wood, was, unsurprisingly, that of a woman of Pre-Raphaelite proportions. But before her glorious, grainy nakedness was revealed, Sergeant Barillo stopped at a layer that allowed him to fashion her wearing a bodice out of which protruded the outlines of several dozen buttons. In addition, he formed a garter belt about her thigh—also patterned with buttons—and placed a button on the top of each carefully carved foot. As Jorge undid each of Lucinda's buttons—or perhaps Lucinda undid them herself as Jorge's hands only clenched the edges of the bed while his moans steadily increased—Sergeant Barillo sliced off a button from the figurine's bodice. Within his hands, the figurine's nakedness was slowly revealed—the garter belt stripped away, the feet delicately shaped—prompted by the ultimately indecipherable gurglings of Jorge Salgo.

Today, Jorge Salgo quickly takes each step down into the bright vast space of the jail's steps. He is free, petty thief, headed east through a street of fruit carts and slabs of meat, his hand brushing bundles of petals until his palm closes on a twist of silver wrapping and ten, long-stemmed pink carnations are hidden within his coat.

He turns left, shadowed by Sergeant Barillo, who dreams now, every night, of Lucinda.

Eight blocks north and two more east, Jorge Salgo stops in the shadow of a shop awning. The awning drips soapy water through which Jorge can just see Lucinda down the street, moving in front of a line of men on stools. He does not see nor feel Sergeant Barillo behind him, crouched within the next doorway. He does not know that the sergeant looks at his skinny body, his slicked-back hair, and the bouquet of pink carnations now held in open air as the sergeant tries to trace Jorge's line of vision that must end at Lucinda. Sergeant Barillo feels he will know her by how she lifts her arms in the air and unwraps her hair from a bun as he heard her do time and again in Jorge Salgo's dreams. He wants only to walk close enough to see her face—her chin, her ears, any special markings, any rings on her hands, as he feels the small block of wood in his pocket. He will sculpt her again—in his office behind a closed, locked door—because Lucinda is his. She is a smooth surface over which his hands pass, and each night he sets her dainty feet on his bedside table, clicks off his lamp, and bids her goodnight.

Suddenly, Jorge Salgo steps out from beneath the shade of the dripping awning and runs. He holds the pink carnations to his chest, a gentle perfume at his nose, and darts across the street, between cars, dodging a bus, until he sees Lucinda holding a plate and piling it with meat.

¡Lucinda!

She looks toward him

¡Lucinda!

then she lifts a square of the counter

¡Lucinda! ¡Lucinda!

and as she unties her apron, Sergeant Barillo crosses the street and crouches behind a car, dripping sweat onto the dusty trunk, watching Jorge Salgo throw his arms around Lucinda, and put his lips to her lips. Sergeant Barillo moves one car closer, then another, then a bus, a jeep,

until he is in front of the burrito stand, watching as their kiss ends. He sees first a glistening corner of her mouth, then a strand of hair stuck to her chin, and two, symmetrical, deep lines in her brow. To run his tongue along the narrow strip of skin between those lines, to make a curl out of the hair on her chin.

He pulls the beginning of her body from his pocket—her rectangular legs, her arms of linked ovals, her lovingly carved circle of a head. As she lifts the carnations to her nose, Sergeant Barillo wants only to be one of the wilted pink petals, wrapped with its companions in shiny silver paper, which is pressed against Lucinda's downy nostril.

Cell 11

Don Lorenzo walks slowly along the walls. He has moved his bed to the center of the cell and has slipped his empty cup and plate through the bars, setting them on the cement hallway floor.

His small boom box now blares ranchero music from Sergeant Barillo's office; however, when officers Hernandez and Moreno approached Don Lorenzo sitting on the rock wall of the small bridge that spans the ribbon of water running parallel to Calle Medina, a recording of Kiri Te Kanawa's 1971 debut performance of "The Marriage of Figaro" at the Santa Fe Opera floated from its speakers. As Don Lorenzo basked in the sun, watching children play tag in the street, he remembered the performance and smiled. It had taken place during his tenth season working as a stagehand for the opera company, helping to construct sets and rearrange scenery during intermissions.

Working at the opera was the realization of a dream born early in his life; his mother, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, had been in the chorus of the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York for several seasons before he was born. His father, a native of Mexico City, had been a violinist in the pit. Though he left New York City at the age of eighteen for the mountains and expanse of the Southwest, he never left the terrain of the opera house. He had moved to Santa Fe and immediately landed the job at the opera company. During the off-season, he explored the small villages, sprawling cities, arroyos and mountains of New Mexico and Arizona, eventually stumbling into Juárez one afternoon where he was entranced by the colorful characters walking its streets. The city was strangely reminiscent of the backdrop to "The Threepenny Opera." Since his first visit in the winter of 1972, he has returned to Juárez every September, staying for as long as he can in a small hotel just off Avenida Benito Juárez. When he runs low on money, he stays at a homeless shelter run by missionaries from Utah.

Don Lorenzo is a tall, handsome man with a mane of gray hair that falls to his shoulders and a thin weathered face. He wears a blue woolen suit jacket and an orange scarf about his neck. He carries a large black binder of the score and libretto to "Les Contes D'Hoffman." He is soft-spoken and polite.

But there had been several complaints. First: He sat every day on the same wall. The music wasn't loud. He never approached anyone. But it was a respectable neighborhood, and he sat there for hours, singing softly, often with his eyes closed and his hands waving in the air. When his eyes weren't closed, he was watching people in the street and smiling. Second: He smelled. Third: He was often seen flipping though the pages of a large black book, singing in strange languages. Fourth: There had been a robbery at the bodega beside the bridge. All of the "D" batteries, several boxes of cigarettes and cookies, and two gallons of milk had been stolen. That same night, the two guard dogs in the yard across the street, who barked each afternoon at the old man as he took his seat on the wall and turned on his radio, had mysteriously vanished.

Officers Hernandez and Moreno didn't ask

any questions, so Don Lorenzo wasn't given the opportunity to tell them that he doesn't smoke, is allergic to milk, would have selected a bag of chicarron over cookies, is afraid of dogs, and uses rechargeable batteries that he refreshes each night either at his small hotel or at the homeless shelter, depending upon the state of his finances. As the officers escorted him to the awaiting patrol car, the gathered neighbors stared at him, whispering to one another and shaking their heads.

He turns his body slowly toward the right interior corner of the cell and the music of Tosca comes to his mind, specifically the music of Act II, Scene II in which Cavaradossi is interrogated by Scarpia's agents. As he begins to hum the opening notes, he envisions himself on stage, the cell wall he now runs his hand across recreated in wood and lit by a bright light set to shine through the barred window. His hum gives way to the words that he now composes as he sings:

This wall.
It is like an instructor.
If I put my ear to it,
I will hear things dropped,
footsteps, conversations
of people who live
thinking that soon it will be lunch,
and that they meet someone,
and later sleep together.
Sometimes it moves around me,
making sure I do my work.
I sit, with my book,
and pretend to read. It says,
What have you learned?
And I answer
it is a story about a man who is separated
from his son in a busy street
and calls to him in his birth name,
which the boy, only five, has never heard,
instead of his nickname.
And the father's voice is so full of fear,
which the boy has also never heard,
that the boy happily chases a rabbit
through the crowd
not knowing
he is growing lost.

Cell 4

His niece, when she visits, brings him small plastic flowers and squares of double-sided tape. He sticks the flowers to the bars of his window, like the bars over the front windows at the dress shop on Avenida Segundo where seven months ago he had taken his niece, who is hunchbacked, for her *quinceañera* dress. She had walked directly to a rack of blue dresses, trimmed with white lace and small pearls. He told her that a *quinceañera* dress should be white, so she spent the next two hours trying on white dresses with a variety of different laces, necklines, most with puffed sleeves, some with hoop skirts. She finally settled on one with a wide band of satin around the waist that tied at the back into a large bow. The dress would have to be altered at the zipper and right seam to fit her hump, which cost thirty pesos extra. After the dress shop owner took his niece's measurements, he told his niece to go to the shoe shop a block away and that he would meet her. After she left, he took a blue dress from the rack and told the shop owner that he would buy it also, altered, and he would return in four days to pick them both up.

He couldn't really afford a second dress, but watching his niece emerge again and again from behind the curtain of the changing room, her figure slightly changed each time by the varying cuts of each dress, he thought of the bent branches of the magnolia trees in his aunt's yard in California. The first time he saw their bright, open flowers, he went out after breakfast to smell them, and found within one the hard black body of a beetle.

Cell 8

After an eight-year prison term served in Los Angeles for armed robbery, Joaquin Hernandez was bused over the border into Juárez by the U.S. immigration authorities, handed his rucksack of belongings stashed in the cargo carrier, and told he was a free man. He had no money, no relatives in the area, and after falling asleep in a park only to awaken with a knife to his throat, which he was quickly able to turn into the cheek of his attacker, he was back in prison. This is his fourth day in jail and tomorrow he will go before a judge who his cellmate, Rudolfo Martinez, says will more than likely ask if he has relatives and tell him to go find them.

Rudulfo has been in and out of jail seven times for petty theft. He is in this time for stealing a crate of chickens from the open air market downtown, a scene which Joaquin is now executing with his pen on the inside cover of The Lives of the Saints—a book given to him by the chaplain of the L.A. Penitentiary upon his release. Among the many transformations that Joaquin undertook during his eight years of confinement, the one that he claims as the most significant is his newfound faith in God.

"Do you love, *vato*?" Joaquin had asked Rudolfo on their first night together.

Rudolfo had looked up from his crumpled copy of Vanidades and, with a puzzled expression, answered "*¿Qué*?"

"Do you love? Have you been blessed by the Word?"

"*Cállete, hombre*," Rudolfo had replied with disdain, dropping his eyes back down to the image of Christina Aguilera in a leopard print bikini.

In the drawing, the chicken Rudolfo holds in his carefully drawn hand is disproportionately large—more the size of a newborn calf—and from one wing is pinned a sign that reads, I am here. For all. A fruit vendor is in the background, throwing tomatoes—one of which Joaquin shows splitting against the side of Rudolfo's head. A cluster of *piñatas* hangs from a beam to the right. Most appear as donkeys or cartoon characters. Daffy Duck. Tweety Bird. But in between them, Joaquin works the figure of a sacred heart with flames emerging from its sides and a simple cross on the front.

"Do you believe in God?" Joaquin asks Rudolfo, darkening the fold of the chicken's wing. When Rudolfo doesn't answer, Joaquin looks up from his drawing and sees that Rudolfo is asleep. He moves closer, sits on the floor beside Rudolfo's bed, and studies Rudolfo's face. He sees the movement of Rudolfo's eyeballs behind the lids. The tuft of hair in his right ear. Beneath the lobe is a large, smooth mole sticking up from the skin. Joaquin shakes his pen, draws a few circles in the corner of the drawing, and lifts the pen to Rudolfo's mole. With the first stroke, Rudolfo lets out a faint sigh and turns his head, ever so slightly, to the left. With the intersecting stroke, Rudolfo doesn't move, and Joaquin adds nine more lines on the dark circle until a three-dimensional cross is clearly visible.

Remembering Rudolfo's prediction of the judge's verdict, Joaquin plops across his cot and thinks about his family. The only relatives he has aren't near. He has two second-uncles and cousins in the small mountain village of Las Rosas, near the border of Guatemala, and his remaining family—consisting of his parents, three sisters, four brothers, several cousins, aunts, and uncles—all live in South Bend, Indiana. He hasn't seen any of them for over ten years—not since he ran away from the field of grapes in the Sonoma Valley that his entire family worked each year since he was a baby. He was sixteen and exhausted by both the twelve hours of picking each day and the realization that he would most likely be back the following year in the same field, perhaps walking the same row. One moonlit night, he left a short note for his family, telling them he would call their village that winter when they were home. He then quietly

made his way behind the row of sleeping shacks, past the old pickup trucks and vans that carried them from state to state, past the rows of grapes that hung from their vines in shadowy clusters, and onto the dirt road. He was picked up the next day by two men heading to L.A., and to L.A. Joaquin went.

During the first two years away from his family, Joaquin had called his mother the last Sunday of every winter month. They had a scheduled time for her to walk to the Las Rosas medical clinic run by Señor Medina, who would hand the ringing phone to Joaquin's mother at precisely 1:30 p.m. so Señora Hernandez could tell her son about weddings, births, their family's plans for Christmas dinner, and when they would be heading north in the summer to pick. Joaquin would use the phone calls to sustain a lie. Upon his arrival to L.A., he told her he had worked as a dishwasher at an Italian restaurant in Hollywood (which was true); however, after his arrest and imprisonment, he told her he was taken in as an apprentice by his boss's brother who was a house builder—words that brought sobs of joy through the receiver. In reality, Joaquin was assigned to a prison carpentry job-training program where he learned the art of finish carpentry, drywall, and layout. He also made wooden shelving units and desks to be used by the Los Angeles Public School System. Joaquin told her, five years into the lie, that it took many years to become an official carpenter in the United States. She would tell him to keep working hard and that she would pray that his dream be realized.

After his mother settled in South Bend with his entire family, with the exception of those who refused to leave the mountains of Las Rosas, the phone calls became more frequent. At first, the family lived in a homeless shelter that had a pay phone in the lobby. After a year, they moved to an apartment and, for the first time, had their very own phone. Instead of once-a-month calls, Joaquin, insisting he would place the call in order to save them money, phoned every Sunday afternoon after the family returned from church and before they settled down to dinner. His mother had described each subsequent apartment: one-bedroom with telephone and refrigerator that made ice; two-bedroom with small yard where she grew tomatoes and cilantro; three-bedroom in an apartment building only three blocks from the St. Joseph River where the boys fished after church; and finally the three-bedroom house they bought on a small, tree-lined street after six years in South Bend. Also, she described the many jobs held by the Hernandez family members, giving both title and place of employment, which included, but was not limited to the following: Waitress at Azar's Bigboy; Busboy at Ming's Chinese Restaurant; Cashier at Martin's Supermarket; Janitor at the University of Notre Dame; City Garbage Man; Lunchroom Server at Riley High School; Bar-back at Coach's Sportsbar; Housekeeper at the Marriott; Deliveryman for Wygant's floral shop; Groundskeeper for Leeper Park; Film Sorter at Qualex photofinishing lab; Night Watchman for Bendix; and Soccer Coach for Clay Middle School. The house, his mother

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told him, was never at rest; when one person came home from a job, another headed out the door. When they were able to save enough money to rent a small storefront on Western Avenue, they opened up a Mexican grocery. They made and sold tortillas, tamales, and freshly made chorizo, and they lined the shelves with cans of posole, jars of mole, bags of beans and rice, mangos and plátanos. Eventually, they bought a long metal meat case, offering freshly slaughtered pigs and chickens supplied by the local Amish community, and built on a room and started a small taqueria that flourished and allowed them to open another across town. They had realized their American Dream. They owned their own businesses, their own house, and they drove cars that, although used, drove smoothly over paved streets.

While the darkness of the cells beckons the jail's inhabitants toward sleep, Joaquin resolves that, if the judge does tell him to find his relatives, he will recross the border and head toward South Bend. His new home. And lying across his cot and thinking of home, he suddenly remembers how as a child, before falling asleep, he would pretend he was a patient. The sheets tucked tightly beneath the foot of the bed, his arms flat to his sides. Nurses who wore their black hair in a tight bun, like his mother did, would walk in and out of his bedroom, sometimes putting their hands to his forehead, other times soundlessly placing a tray of eggs and chorizo on his bedside table. He was a bank guard shot in the neck. He was a bus driver who, though suffering from a broken arm and lacerated feet, had dragged several passengers to safety after a torrential rain had washed the bus down the side of a mountain. They would put their fingers to his wrist to take his pulse and he was a doctor who had contracted an unknown tropical disease while conducting research in the jungles of Oaxaca. He was the lone survivor of his village, destroyed by an earthquake. Sometimes he was tied down, a captain captured far behind enemy lines, beaten, and being restored.

Cell 3

With lipstick, Cesara draws a circle on her cheek. She sees it clearly in the small circular mirror of her pressed powder case. Moving the mirror to her mouth, her lips pursing, "Como está, mi vida?" Back to the cheek, she smears the circle into her powdered skin, the resulting glow a sunset, particularly spectacular, like when the sky is filled with dust.

As it had been when she had waited outside the door to Los Vaqueros, looking toward the Santa Fe Bridge. She had scanned the crowded sidewalk, waiting for the muscular figure of Private Raul Alanzo Escobar to emerge, when it did just that. Private Alanzo reached out his arm and grabbed the slim hips of the smiling Cesara.

"*Hola amor, mio*," he whispered in Cesara's ear before their lips met.

This evening was their six-month anniversary of meeting on the dance floor of Los Vaqueros. Six months ago that Cesara had danced with man after man in the dim light, each new shape that enwrapped her scented with a different cologne of equally powerful scent. She had moved in their arms without fear. Her appearance flawless, she caught the lustful eyes of cowboys and spawned envy in the women who clung to them.

When Cesara first saw Private Escobar standing in his green fatigues with another soldier beside the bar, lifting a bottle to his lips, she thought of bullets ricocheting off rocks. The men jumping into a foxhole. Of their tending to a wounded soldier—injecting a shot of morphine into his thigh. Of distant deserts and loneliness.

After their third night meeting at the bar, she handed Private Escobar an envelope.

"This is for you to read. Before you sleep, amor," she said softly.

Private Escobar had slipped the envelope into his back pocket and walked Cesara back

onto the dance floor.

Cesara was very happy. She had found herself and love. She was healthy and working steadily as the manager of a book and magazine shop. She was born to a wealthy family in Mexico City and given the name Cesar Alfredo Muñez. Her father was a prominent government official and her mother a lawyer. As a young boy, however, she had felt like a girl, and she was now one operation away from being a woman. Her family no longer spoke to her, and she hoped that his reaction wouldn't be the same. She loved him. She felt his kindness for her and the world. He was a brave and gentle man.

That's what she wrote to Private Escobar who reread the letter throughout the night. The letter also stated that if he wanted to see her again, he should return to the bar the next evening.

He didn't. Instead, he returned a week later after the letter had been crumpled and uncrumpled. Torn and taped back together. He thought about former girlfriends. He tried to imagine Cesara's naked body beneath her tight clothes. What it looked like between her legs. But when he did return to the bar, Cesara wasn't there. He returned night after night for weeks, driving from his base in White Sands to El Paso where he parked in a garage three blocks away from the bridge before walking over the Rio Grande toward Los Vaqueros. He wasn't sure what he would say if she was there. His stomach would clench with the thought, accompanied by a vaguely glowing hope.

Over two weeks later, Private Escobar watched Cesara walk into the bar with several friends. The vague glow grew brighter and flowed through him, relieving the pain in his stomach and lifting the corner of his lips until he called out her name.

It had been a glorious six months. Extended weekends in Mazatlán and Mexico City. Candlelit dinners at El Trajon. Nights spent in small hotel rooms overlooking Avenida Juárez, watching the weekend crowds from El Paso fill the street. Cesara found she had guessed correctly; Private Escobar was both brave and gentle. He allowed himself to love, and he passed his fingers softly over her body as they kissed. When Cesara wanted simply to fall asleep in his arms, his arms held her until she drifted off.

That is why, only hours ago, she had done what she did. After a late dinner at El Trajon, she and Private Escobar walked down Avenida Juárez and turned east onto a side street that ended at a small park. Across the park was a movie theater, and as they made their way through the park, the letters on the marquee coming into focus, she was grabbed from behind and yanked away from her love, who was forced to the ground by several other men. Hearing her lover's moans, and what could only be his face struck again and again, she was dragged behind a bench by two men who tore at her clothes. Her memory is as follows: her teeth biting into the hand of the figure above her head who held down her shoulders; the hand spurting a warm wet stream; her own hand, suddenly freed, swinging between the legs of the figure sitting on top of her, followed by his moan as she rose; his scream while she dug her long fingernails into his right eye that loosened from the socket with surprising ease. Then her knees and hands moving along the grass, across the pavement of

> They smell of damp clay. Their flat, bare feet resemble thickly grooved bark.
>
> The city frightens them, so they turned themselves in.

the narrow walkway, until her hands felt her lover, who lay motionless on the ground.

When the police came they found an unconscious American soldier missing several teeth and a semi-naked, strangely endowed person who was screaming. They would later find out that the soldier had also lost his watch and wallet. But his largest loss was Cesara, who the police said was taken into custody for questioning concerning the attack of an unarmed man who was now without an eye.

Cesara moves the mirror up to her right eye, which is blackened and bloodied. She can hear the guards discussing her body and the sergeant's idea of transferring her to a woman's prison. Looking up, she meets their eyes. She turns her head to the side and thinks of Private Escobar's strong arms. The soft hair of his chest against her back. One guard says he paid to see a naked dwarf once. She hears a key slid into the lock, the turn, the door opened, footsteps.

Cell 13

Solid, stacked, gray cinder blocks. Two bulbs that shine from black sockets in the ceiling and whose light just skims the cement floor. Eight bars set in the single window that prevent entrance.

Two brothers sit on the edges of their parallel beds. Though they are free to come and go as they please—their closed door remains unlocked—they will not leave.

Three months ago they walked out of San Luis, Guatemala, slipped quietly into Mexico, and hopped trains and took busses north to find that Ciudad Juárez doesn't have any horses in its streets. There are no fields to work, and no streams.

They smell of damp clay. Their flat, bare feet resemble thickly grooved bark.

The city frightens them, so they turned themselves in.

As published with their picture in the morning paper, the local government will give them bus tickets back to their village. It is the humane thing to do for two peasants who had never before left their home. There is a statement from the Mayor. There is another from Sergeant Barillo who insists they are being treated well.

In the picture the brothers appear as Siamese twins joined at the shoulders and hips. They stare into the camera without expression.

Hilde Konrad-Kunz stares back at their faces and understands. She cuts out the article with her silver shears, folds it in half, and places it into the diary on her lap.

Hilde Konrad-Kunz is the wife of twenty-one years to Frederick Konrad-Kunz, Chief of Operations and Finance for SiemensVDO Automotive's Juárez plant. Transferred from company headquarters in Schwalbach, Germany, they moved directly into their Mexican colonial style house, with large fenced yard, located at 45 Frederico Madera where they have lived for the past five years.

During the first two years, Hilde occupied herself with volunteer work at an orphanage located six blocks from her home. During the first few months, she would spend the mornings helping to bathe, clothe, and feed the children. Soon, however, she was spending her entire day at the orphanage helping with cooking and cleaning, and often arranging trips for the children to parks and movies. The orphanage was her haven away from her house of light, cacti, and two aloof cats.

But after her second year at the orphanage, her husband insisted that she cut back her volunteer hours. There was talk of a takeover and he was to lead the initiative. He needed her to plan the lavish parties that were held at their home at least twice a month in honor of clients and company executives. It would be helpful to him. One day, he promised, they would return to Germany.

So for the past three years she has slipped

off to the orphanage for a few hours after her husband leaves for work, returning in the early afternoon to confer with their maids, handyman, and gardener about maintenance of the house and gardens and to place calls to caterers and florists in El Paso.

But with each passing season, and each festive party for which she is complimented by all who attend, her disdain for Juárez has grown deeper. The summer's brown dust, blistering heat, interminable sun. The descent of winter before any hint of autumn. Freezing winds. Hail on Christmas. And now, with the arrival of what should be spring, the house is already hot and filled with flies, and there is another party to be organized.

She enters her husband's study and places a call to American Airlines. She will fly tomorrow morning, before she has time to rethink her decision. A ticket is promptly arranged: she will fly from El Paso to Dallas, Dallas to New York, and finally New York to Munich, city of her birth and residence of her dearest friends. She then arranges for a cab from El Paso to pick her up at 8:00 a.m., the time she usually leaves the house for the orphanage, a full hour after her husband leaves for work.

While she sits at her husband's desk, staring out the window for the last time at the small patch of struggling green that serves as a lawn, feeling a lightness to her body that reminds her of youth, the two brothers on the edges of their beds sit quietly with one another in the dim, even light, waiting to be sent home.