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Talia Yu April 9, 2025

Those We Lost in the Sand: An Original English Translation of Julia Wong Kcomt's *Aquello que perdimos en la arena* with Critical Introduction

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Abstract

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By Talia Yu

Although Peru has one of the largest Chinese populations in Latin America, there is little self-representation of Chinese Peruvians in literature and the few existing works are not considered part of Peru's literary canon. Julia Wong Kcomt was one of Peru's most prolific Tusán (Chinese Peruvian) authors, but she is little known outside of Peru, and only a handful of her poems have been translated into English. Her novel *Aquello que perdimos en la arena* features the themes of identity, self-discovery, and displacement, all framed within a travel narrative. This thesis aims to highlight multilingual and multicultural narratives in translation. While Chinese culture is a minority culture in Peru, both Chinese and Peruvian cultures are considered minority cultures to an Anglophone audience. Thus, the translator must carefully decide which elements of the text to foreignize and which to domesticate in order to emphasize the difference between the source culture(s) of the original text and the culture of the intended audience. In addition, this thesis hopes to highlight alternative Asian diaspora narratives and to encourage people to think about how they engage with translated works, as well as the process of the translation itself.

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Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Lisa Dillman. I could not have done it without your encouragement and guidance throughout the process. When I first enrolled in her translation class in the spring of 2024, my previous understanding of translation consisted of a rudimentary exchange of words from one language to another and I had very little appreciation for such a thorough and meticulous art. Needless to say, her class completely shifted my perspective and I'm so glad we managed to make this thesis come to life!

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Historical & Literary Context

Despite being one of the most prolific tusán[1] (Chinese Peruvian) authors of the 21st century, Julia Wong Kcomt (1965-2024) has had little exposure to international audiences, either in the form of translation or criticism. Born in Chepén to a Chinese immigrant father and a tusán mother of Hakka descent, she spent most of her childhood between Peru and Macau (López-Calvo, *Dragons* 108). Her first poetry collection, *Historia de una gorda*, was published in 1992, but she did not gain greater recognition until the early 2000s. She published twenty-eight works, comprised of seventeen collections of poetry—including one anthology—and eleven works of prose. Only two of her poetry collections, *Bi-rey-nato* (2009)[2] and *Un salmón ciego* (2008)[3] have been translated into English. She has yet to be translated into other languages. There is a general lack of literary criticism that focuses solely on Wong's diverse body of work; instead, her poems are usually examined in conversation with other tusán or other Asian Latin American poets. However, there seems to be a growing interest in Wong's work, as demonstrated by a recent increase in dissertations and theses.

Both Wong's prose and poetry portray themes of migration, identity, and travel, which reflect her personal experiences; they also include themes of body image, sex, nostalgia, love and eroticism, and stress a desire to belong (Phaf-Rheinberger). In doing so, Wong also strives for transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, and cultural hybridity, viewing herself as a citizen of the world rather than belonging to a single nation or culture (López-Calvo, *Dragons* 106). This is likely inspired by her experiences living in Lima, Buenos Aires, Germany, Hong Kong, and Lisbon (*El Comercio*). López-Calvo has noted that her desire to move beyond national borders is

[1] I use tusán here to primarily refer to the identity. I will use Sino-Peruvian and Chinese Peruvian interchangeably as well.
[2] *Vice-royal-ties* (2021)
[3] *A Blind Salmon* (2024)

demonstrated in her use of languages other than her native Spanish (*Dragons* 105). For example, in *Aquello que perdimos en la arena*, Wong utilizes English, Cantonese, German, and the tusán dialect. Her final book, *11 Palabras* (2023), details her struggles with cancer and was nominated for the Mejor Libro de Cuentos (Best Book of Stories) at the Luces Awards. This cancer unfortunately took her life in March 2024.

It is unsurprising that Wong remains fairly unknown both on a national and international stage, as Chinese Peruvian cultural production remains largely overlooked in commercial and academic spaces. Not a single tusán author or work of literature has been inducted into Peru's literary canon, even though early accounts of Sino-Peruvian literature first emerged in the mid-1920s. According to Ignacio López-Calvo, a leading scholar in Asian Latin American studies, even Peru's most famous Sino-Peruvian author, Siu Kam Wen, must primarily rely on self-translation in order for his works to reach the international market ("Worlding" 22).

Peru contains one of the largest Chinese populations in Latin America, although the exact number is disputed. According to Peru's 2017 Census, roughly 14,000 individuals[4] (0.1% of the total population) self-identify as tusán. Meanwhile, the Embassy of Peru in Beijing estimates that 15% of the population[5] has some Chinese ancestry (Espinoza). This is because roughly 100,000 Chinese are believed to have first immigrated to Peru after the introduction of *La Ley China* in 1848, which "allowed the introduction of an indentured workforce from China…[and] replaced the slave trade" (Lausent-Herrera 143). The 1876 Census registered slightly fewer than 50,000 Chinese, but Lausent-Herrera argues that this statistic is a gross underestimate for the total number of immigrants because nearly 50% of Chinese immigrants between the ages of 9-40 died from exhaustion, suicide, or mistreatment due to abysmal working conditions. *La Ley China* was

[4] Only includes individuals ages 12 and older.
[5] Written in *China Daily*, a newspaper funded by the CCP.

officially overturned in 1874 with the Tianjin Treaty of Friendship and Commerce. However, because the passage back to China was too expensive, a vast majority of the free Chinese elected to stay in Peru.

Therefore, the presence of the Chinese "made necessary the inclusion of a new racial component into Peruvian society" (Lausent-Herrera 145). Because the term *mestizo* was reserved for those of mixed Indigenous and Spanish heritage, the first generation of the half-Chinese Peruvians were not called by any specific name at all. The term *injerto* (lit. "transplant") only appeared in the early 20th century to describe children of mixed Chinese and Peruvian descent. Although the *injertos* made up the first generation of local-born Chinese, they were not accepted into either community. Similarly, the term *tusán*—derived from the Cantonese word *tousaang*, meaning local born—referred to the children who were ethnically Chinese, but born in Peru. Furthermore, the Chinese who were born in China were called *chinos legítimos* (lit. "legitimate Chinese"). With the arrival of Chinese merchants and representatives of Chinese cultural enterprises at the end of the 19th century, the Chinese developed an elitist hierarchy based on social and economic success:

> In the new community hierarchy we thus find at the top the merchants and owners of the big enterprises…sons or relatives of the directors who were educated in China and brought over by their parents. Below them were the children born in Peru of Chinese fathers and mothers, the famous Tusans or native-born; but their standing in the community would depend on their knowledge of the Chinese language as well as the level of their economic success. After them came the children born of a Chinese father and a half-blood mother. Last in the order were the children born of a Chinese father and a Peruvian mother. (Lausent-Herrera 147-148)

Up until the early 20th century, the tusán were excluded from institutional and political activities, while those with only one Chinese parent were not even considered part of the community. With the publication of the first Chinese Peruvian community journal, *Oriental*, in 1931, Alfredo Chang Cuan called upon the *chinos legítimos* to give more respect and consideration to *injertos* and the tusanes. As more and more Chinese entered Peru, especially after the rise of Communist China in 1949, the definition of tusán became increasingly broad. As the Chinese community continued to develop and evolve, the term tusán has expanded to include anyone of Chinese descent, thus rendering terms like *injerto* obsolete.

Although the term tusán now represents a collective Chinese Peruvian identity, Wong and her family members would still have been affected by social and racial hierarchies that impacted the Chinese and their descendants in Peru, both within the dominant Peruvian society and in the Chinese communities as well. Little is known about when Wong's family first emigrated to Peru. In *Aquello que perdimos en la arena*, the protagonist, Cristina, mentions that her father arrived from Macau to work in the fields. Both Wong and Cristina's father arrived after World War II, after Peru put an end to quotas that limited Chinese immigration. On the other hand, Wong's mother was a tusán from Trujillo. If Wong and Cristina share the same family background, then Wong's maternal grandfather immigrated to Peru sometime in the early 1900s, though we cannot establish this as a fact. Remnants of this discourse of *tusanaje*, or "tusan-ness," briefly appear in the novel. Cristina mentions that her mother faced discrimination from her relatives "con más porcentaje de sangre china que otras,"[6] emphasizing the positon of *chinos legítimos* at the top of this hierarchy (Wong 70). In contrast, Cristina's father, a *chino legítimo*, suggests that her cousin, Guillermo, is better able to assimilate into Peruvian society because both of his parents are tusán: "Mi papá decía que [Guillermo y su familia] eran criollos, que no eran como nosotros. Que ya

[6] "with more Chinese blood than others"

estaban mezclados…Había [...] una comparación ociosa en la que [Guillermo] parecía tener la ganancia, pero yo perdía"[7] (Wong 84). Having faced discrimination in Peru, Cristina's father views his Chinese heritage as detrimental to his children, whose upbringing has already been marked by cultural differences as children of a first-generation Chinese immigrant.

Along with the establishment of a collective tusán identity, the rise of tusán intellectualism in the 20th century coincided with early accounts of Sino-Peruvian literature. The mid-1920s saw the emergence of Pedro Zulen and A. Kuan Veng. Before the 20th century, the lack of Chinese Peruvian cultural production (at least in Spanish) was attributed to the fact that Chinese immigrants were forced to do manual labor and thus had no time for intellectual self-expression (López-Calvo, *Dragons* xii). However, after Zulen and Kuan, no other Chinese Peruvian authors of note were recorded until the 1970s, with the publication of poet Sui Yun's first collection, *Cresciente*, in 1977. Peru's most famous Sino-Peruvian author is Siu Kam Wen, whose works, such as his short story collection, *El tramo final* (1985), center on the Chinese community's difficulties with cultural assimilation in Peru throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Although Chinese Peruvian authors write across a range of genres and topics, most of them "draw a discontinuous picture of cultural hybridity and borderline existence" (López-Calvo, *Dragons* 4). Chinese immigrants and their descendants are often excluded from mainstream racial discourses and are therefore relegated to the outskirts or borderlands of Peruvian society, as even mutliracial tusanes are not viewed through the same lens as other *mestizos*. Therefore, Sino-Peruvian literature challenges the common conception of Peru as a bicultural nation divided between the *criollos*[8] and the Indigenous peoples and offers a third,

[7] Papá said that [Guillermo and his family] were criollos, native-born, that they were not like us. That they were already integrated…There was [...] an idle comparison in which [Guillermo] seemed to have an advantage, but I did not.

[8] Refers to the descendants of Spanish/European settlers and/or African slaves, not Indigenous. The definition has since expanded to apply to anyone who is "native-born" in Peru.

unique perspective. Because the tusán are otherized in their exclusion from the *mestizo* identity and its narratives, Chinese Peruvian literature comments on the tension between ethnic and national identity, invoking and renouncing elements of both cultures. These texts attempt to reconcile the two identities to craft a semblance of a collective diaspora identity, one that is as uniquely Chinese as it is Peruvian, and establish their place in Peruvian society.

Sino-Peruvian literature is a unique phenomenon in postcolonialist discourse, as China was never fully colonized by a Western power, and Peru itself was a former colony of Spain. López-Calvo argues that the Chinese in Peru faced internal colonialism, as the mainstream Peruvian society oppressed the Chinese through the lens of inherited racial prejudices from Spanish colonization (*Dragons* 6). In this case, Peru functions as the "West," which scholar Junyoung Verónica Kim argues is "a culturalist imaginary that can be transplanted onto other social entities and localities" (101). Even when the West is not present, it serves as a implicit point of comparison between cultures. Therefore, Sino-Peruvian literature adopts a postcolonial outlook, demonstrating how colonial ideology is still perpetuated by the greater Peruvian population, even as far as the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Sino-Peruvian texts generally emphasize the long-standing impacts of Spanish colonization on Peruvian society and the trickle-down effects it has on immigrant communities and other ethnic minorities, as well as the general rejection of a Eurocentric worldview.

Out of Wong's many works, I have selected her 2019 novel, *Aquello que perdimos en la arena*, hereby referred to as *Aquello*, to translate for my thesis due to its unique insight into how Wong's Chinese and Peruvian identities have affected people's perceptions of her, both at home and abroad, and her resulting disidentification with them. Although Wong shares similar sentiments with other Asian diaspora narratives—such as not being Chinese enough—her

Peruvian upbringing allows her to provide an alternate perspective, especially due to Latin America's construction of race, which differs greatly from that of the United States and Canada. The concept of *mestizaje* in Latin America refers to "the process of acculturation, integration, and transformation of the indigenous people, white settlers, and enslaved African populations" into a single postracial society that emphasizes a collective national identity (Chang 32). Because the existence of Wong and other Sino-Peruvian authors challenges this idea, they are often omitted from such discussions. Additionally, while the book does reflect Wong's cosmopolitan sentiments, she simultaneously explores tensions between the immigrant, the indigenous, and the colonizer—directing the reader's attention to the power structures that divide them to this day. At times, the novel is deeply philosophical and lyrical, drawing from Wong's background as a poet. The book comments on human relationships and the ephemeral nature of human life, reinforced by the recurring image of the desert and its ever-shifting sands. Wong utilizes this motif to emphasize the constant passage of time and to represent how powerless human beings are in the face of natural forces.

Aquello is a road novel or travel narrative that follows both the physical and emotional journey of the protagonist, Cristina. Like Wong, Cristina is the daughter of a Chinese immigrant and a tusán of Hakka descent. However, while it would be easy to assume this is autofiction, Wong states that only 5% of what happens to Cristina derives from her real-life experiences (Merino). Because the novel is told through a nonlinear narrative, the reader learns about certain events long before they occur, although they may not fully understand them at the time. While the overarching narrative hinges on Cristina's migration from Tijuana to the United States, in it Cristina recalls her experiences in Chepén, Chimbote, Germany, and Macau.

The book is divided into four sections. The first part, "Panamerican Velvet," recounts Cristina's summers traveling back and forth between Chimbote, where her cousins live, and Chepén, her hometown. Interspersed in these passages are Cristina's memories of her childhood, in which she comments on her bicultural upbringing in "una familia de chinos que la otra mitad del día practicaba costumbres peruanas"[9] (Wong 21). The prominent theme of loss is introduced at the beginning of the chapter, where Cristina addresses the three losses that have affected her the most profoundly: those of her childhood best friend Santiago, her husband Joerg, and her daughter Guillermina (Wong 11). The second part, "Blaue Sandrose" (lit. Blue Sandrose), is split into two narratives. The flashbacks primarily focus on her move to Germany from Chepén, although she does briefly address Santiago's disappearance and its effects on her. In the present, Cristina crosses the border between Tijuana, Mexico and San Diego, California. While Cristina continues to narrate in the first person, she sometimes narrates the events from a third-person perspective, as if she were an outside observer. This sentiment of disidentification is reflected throughout the chapter, especially through the introduction of Cristina's seven *locas*, who act as Cristina's alter egos and give her confidence. We are also introduced to Juancho, a friend of Cristina's cousin Guillermo and the eventual father of her child. The third section, "The Buddha of Tijuana," depicts Cristina's stay in Tijuana before crossing the border and her interactions with Guillermo and Juancho. The flashbacks split into two separate narratives. The first one describes the separation of Cristina's parents after the 1969 Peruvian Agrarian Reform and the subsequent fracturing of her family, as her father leaves for Macau and her brother moves to the United States. In the second narrative, Cristina briefly addresses Joerg's disappearance, which is the driving force behind her decision to go to Tijuana. The fourth section, "To Magreb" centers on Cristina's experiences in Germany and her marriage to Joerg. The novel also contains an

[9] a Chinese family that participated in Peruvian customs half the time.

epilogue, which ends with Cristina abandoning Guillermina, her infant daughter, at a rest stop in America as she watches the bus drive away without her daughter.

While identity is a key theme woven throughout the text, the novel also grapples with the themes of displacement, absence, and impermanence. The overall reflective and nostalgic tone, laced with melancholic yearning, mirrors this sentiment. Unsurprisingly, given her background as a poet, Wong also employs plenty of rich, varied, and descriptive language throughout the novel. Certain passages are more abstract than others and rely on figurative language such as personification and metaphor. For example, in the opening of the novel, Wong conjures an almost surreal picture of the desert and comments on its nature: "El desierto es un enigma inestable. Absurdo e inabarcable. No permitirá que lo descubras"[10] (Wong 10). The novel is mostly told through a stream of consciousness, allowing for both short fragments and more syntactically complex sentences. Wong also switches between tenses, blurring the lines between the present and the past. In the epilogue, Wong references Jack Keroauc, the author of *On the Road*, who was known for his stream of consciousness writing that blurred the lines between reality and fiction, and whose style may have influenced the writing of *Aquello*.

For my translation, I have translated most of Chapter One and the entirety of Chapter Three, as they are the two sections that highlight Cristina's childhood in Chepén and the resulting tension between her Peruvian and Chinese identities. I wanted to examine how the presence of a dominant Peruvian culture, both inside and outside of the text, influenced the language used to discuss Cristina's identity and cultural upbringing.

[10] The desert is an unstable enigma. Absurd and immeasurable. It will not allow itself to be discovered.

Translation Theory & Translation in Context

The process of translation is never as objective as exchanging one word in the source language for its semantic equivalent in the target language. In fact, it is an interpretative act that reveals an asymmetrical relationship between the audience and the translated text. Translation theorist Susan Bassnett states, "Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems" (*Postcolonial* 2). Even the simple act of choosing a text to translate into a specific language reveals the existence of a cultural hegemony. In his book, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*, translator David Bellos introduces the concepts of "translating UP"[11] and translating "DOWN. Translation UP refers to the act of translating a text into a language of "greater prestige than the source," while translation DOWN is often "toward [a language] with less cultural, economic, or religious prestige" (Bellos 168). The most obvious example of translation DOWN is translations of the Bible, as their purpose is to communicate the ideas within it to as many cultures as possible in the quest to establish Christianity as the dominant global religion. Meanwhile, translation UP essentially designates which works of literature are deserving of global acclaim, codifying their place in the literary canon, which is, of course, Anglophone. The relationship between translation and prestige is visible in the current publishing landscape. According to UNESCO's *Index Translationum*, roughly 27% of all translations published between 1979-2019 are from texts originally written in English. Meanwhile, translations *into* English only account for ~3.5% of all translations, even though English is the most spoken language in the world, with 1.5 billion total speakers (Ethnologue). In contrast, Mandarin Chinese is the second most spoken language in the world with 1.2 billion speakers—including the largest number of native speakers—but comprises less than 2% of

[11] Stylized as such in his book.

translations in either direction (Ethnologue, UNESCO). The sheer volume of translations sourced from English establishes the existence of an Anglophonic hegemony, which allows the language to remain culturally dominant in the global sphere. In comparison, all other languages are deemed minor languages whose authors now strive to attain English translations. Additionally, once a text is translated into English, it gives other languages the possibility to then translate the work by using the English translation as "bridge" across multiple languages. Therefore, the English-language translator has an even greater onus when selecting and justifying which works to translate. Only by acknowledging the presence of a cultural hegemony can translators disrupt it, either implicitly by providing a platform for minority culture writers or explicitly by deliberately selecting texts that explicitly challenge Western values.

There is a common misconception that a translator's end goal is invisibility or fluency, in which a translated text is given "the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer's personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text" (Venuti 1). To publishers, a translation should be read as if it were produced in the target language, rather than its source language. In reality, no translation can provide direct and unmediated access to the source text. Instead, the translator must decide how to approach the text, and whether to domesticate or foreignize a text (or possibly a combination of both). The 19th-century German scholar, Friedrich Schleiermacher, first defines these two strategies: "Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him" (Venuti 20). Domestication, in Schleirmacher's point of view, prioritizes the comfort of the reader, altering the text to suit the reader's understanding of it. On the other hand, foreignization "leaves the author in peace," and avoids making decisions that cater to the reader's understanding of the text.

In *The Translator's Invisibility*, Lawrence Venuti expands upon Schleirmacher's initial concept. He describes domestication as "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values" (20). Conversely, he presents foreignization as "an ethnodeviant pressure on [target language cultural values] to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text" (Venuti 20). Bellos' concepts of translation UP and DOWN are also closely tied to domestication and foreignization: translation UP tends to "[erase] most of the traces of the text's foreign origin," whereas, translation DOWN more often retains "a visible residue of the source, because…foreignness itself carries prestige" (Bellos 169). Venuti rails against the domestication of texts into English for the sake of transparency and fluency, stating that these texts "prescribe foreign texts with English-language values and provide readers with the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other" (Venuti 15). Although some elements of the foreign may remain in these texts, they are adjusted for the consumption of the target audience, even at the risk of substituting foreign cultural practices for domestic ones. At the same time, it is possible to over-foreignize the text to the point of exoticizing or even fetishizing certain elements of the source culture. Rather than choosing domestication over foreignization, or viceversa, the two strategies exist on opposite ends of the spectrum.

While the act of translation itself is inherently domesticating—it seeks to commodify "foreign" literature by offering new perspectives for Western audiences to engage with from the comfort of their native language—it is impossible to have an entirely domesticated or foreignized text. At times, a translation can utilize both domesticating and foreignizing techniques on the same page or even the same paragraph, taking into account key factors like the intended audience or the purpose of the text. As such, translation is a result of intentional interpretive choices, in which the translator chooses how information is conveyed to the reader.

This is especially relevant when one considers that the act of translation is an act of intercultural transfer, as the source text will encode elements of its culture within the written language. It aims to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between the source culture and the target culture by drawing upon a shared frame of reference. In André Lefevre's essay, "Composing the Other," he writes that "Western cultures 'translated' (and 'translate') non-Western cultures into Western categories to be able to come to an understanding of them and, therefore, to come to terms with them" (*Postcolonial* 77). However, by making them comprehensible for Western audiences, this practice also posits the target-language culture—usually American or British—as the norm and further isolates the source culture by presenting it as a cultural "other." Additionally, it brings us to the question: is it possible to completely and wholly understand the source culture in terms of the target culture? Postcolonial translator Maria Tymoczko addresses a similar point in the essay "Post-colonial writing and literary translation:" "The greater the distance between an author's source culture and the receiving culture of the author's work, the greater will be the impetus to simplify. A minority-culture or post-colonial writer will have to pick aspects of the home culture to convey and to emphasize" (*Postcolonial* 23).

Because *Aquello* is not firmly rooted within one source culture, there are additional complications for me when translating. For instance, Wong herself as an author engages in domesticating or foreginzing practices when conveying elements of Cristina's upbringing to audiences who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture. Like a translator, she sometimes utilizes both strategies in a single sentence, drawing the reader in close before mystifying them once again. Therefore, the crux of my translation strategy is a perpetual balancing act, navigating between what Wong has constructed to be the "other" and what she deems to be the "familiar." Not only must I avoid simplifying the domesticated elements of Wong's text even further, but I also must

resist the urge to provide too much exposition and context for the Anglophone reader. At the same time, I must take great care to avoid flattening elements of Peruvian culture—which serves as a cultural middleman—and resist the urge to simplify the distance between the three cultures. One example of Wong's self-domestication can be seen when describing Chinese dishes, she uses more literal descriptions instead of their names, so dishes like century eggs become "huevos 'echados a perder' en sal" [12](Wong 16). If the reader is familiar with Chinese cuisine, they are able to identify the dish from its description, but changing the name would reduce Wong's intended effect on the Peruvian audience, which is meant to "otherize" Chinese cuisine. Additionally, even though these descriptions are somewhat literal, the connotation of 'rotted' simultaneously exoticizes the dish more than the term "century eggs" would have.

I have already established that Wong's text deals heavily with the foreign. Therefore, to domesticate this text would be to minimize the displacement that the narrator, Cristina, feels in the Peruvian society that already "others" her due to her multiracial background. In Wong's original text, there is a preexisting distance between Cristina's Chinese upbringing and the Peruvian audience. However, when translating from Spanish to English, I must navigate both the distance between the Chinese and Peruvian cultures, as well as the distance between the Hispanophone and Anglophone audiences. Even if the Anglophone audience is more familiar with certain elements of Chinese culture than Peruvian culture, such as foods and medicinal practices, I must take care to maintain the balance. This tenuous balance is also further complicated by the presence of multilingualism and multidialectalism in Wong's novel. In a passage describing the Chinatown of Tijuana, for instance, Wong writes, "el olor a cebolla frita y kion (en español ya le llaman *jengibre*, pero para nosotros no puede dejar de llamarse kion) se

[12] "eggs 'rotted' in salt"

repite”[13] (Wong 67). Due to her upbringing, Cristina defaults to the loanword for ginger (from the Cantonese 薑 [goeng1]) that is predominantly used within the tusán community in Peru. She then provides an explicit translation for the term “*en español*”: *jengibre*. Initially, I was unsure of how to approach this passage. Because Wong provides the reader with a direct translation, I left *kion* as is, and I debated doing the same for *jengibre*. However, I wondered if the monolingual Anglophone reader would be able to deduce that the other ingredient was ginger simply from its pairing with fried onion (*cebolla frita*) without the presence of an interlingual translation. I also played with the idea of taking the *en español* portion and changing it to “in English,” but I ultimately decided that approach would overly domesticate the text and create a dissonance between the setting of the novel and the translated text, as the reader implicitly knows that Cristina is not talking about English, being from Peru. Instead, I added what translator Jason Grunebaum deems a “stealth gloss,” which incorporates contextual information that would be considered obvious to a source language reader but unavailable to the target language reader. This strategy combines domesticating and foreignizing strategies in one line: “It was already called *jengibre*, or ginger, in Spanish, but we couldn’t stop calling it *kion*.” Other minor adjustments I made include changing the Spanish phoneticization of Cantonese loan words into the Jyutping[14] romanization. For example, Wong writes “fai chi” for chopsticks, while English romanizes it as “faai zi.” Regardless of the written language it is presented in, the effect it has on the reader remains the same as both spellings are immediately recognized as foreign. Because I am translating for an Anglophone audience, I have chosen to use the English romanization, which better reflects English phonotactics.

[13] “the smell of fried onion and kion (it was already called *jengibre*, or ginger, in Spanish, but we couldn’t stop calling it kion) lingers”
[14] Established by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong in 1993.

In addition to chronicling Cristina's "otherness," Wong also depicts Cristina's experiences with the indigenous Andean culture, yet another cultural minority in Peruvian society. For example, when describing her childhood in Chepén, Cristina talks about the unfamiliar traditional medicine practices in her hometown. One of the words she uses is *curandero*, which *WordReference*'s Spanish-English dictionary lists as "healer," "witch doctor," "shaman," or "quack." In this instance, I decided against "healer" due to its feminine connotations. Although Spanish contains grammatical gender and defaults to the masculine, I interpreted the use of *curandero* to be relatively gender-neutral. Meanwhile, connotations of words like "witch doctor," "shaman," and "quack" lean negative and may conjure images of primitive and "uncivilized" cultures due to their historical usage. Due to the implications of such words, as well as the role they have played in stigmatizing Indigenous communities, I chose to keep the word as is in my translation. The reader, in my estimation, will be able to deduce the role of the *curanderos* based on context clues, which juxtapose them with doctors and herbalists. Additionally, by leaving the word as is, I am able to preserve the distance between Cristina's ethnic background and the other cultures surrounding her, as well as creating some distance for the Anglophone reader as well to subtly remind them of the text's source culture.

Another subtle translatorial decision involves how to approach familial terminology. In *Aquello*, Cristina uses both *madre* and *mamá* to refer to her mother (as well as the masculine equivalents for her father). Although Wong uses these terms interchangeably, I believe that translating both terms as "mother" eliminates the nuances in their definitions and usage, in addition to simplifying the original language in the novel. Instead, I chose to translate *madre* as mother and left *mamá* untouched. To justify my decision to do so, I reference the article, "Lost in Translation: What the First Line of 'The Stranger' Should Be" by translator Ryan Bloom, which

criticizes the initial decision to render *maman* into "Mother" in English. He writes that the word "mother" is a "static, archetypal term, not the sort of thing we use for a living, breathing being with whom we have close relations" (Bloom). In Bloom's opinion, taking an intimate familial term like *maman* and reducing it to the more generic Mother is akin to naming a dog Dog; it strips any personality from the word and alters the reader's perception of the narrator's relationship with their mother. However, the word *maman* seems to evade any other possible English replacement: "mommy" sounds too childlike, and something about the monosyllabic "mom"—which is notably American—does not have the same sonic effect as the two syllables in *maman*. Therefore, Bloom argues that the ideal solution would be to leave the term as is. Not only is the word's meaning easy for the Anglophone reader to parse, but it also has the effect of reminding the reader that they are interacting with a text from another culture (Bloom). *Mamá* could be translated as the unaccented equivalent of "mama" in English, but that can connote either Southern or African American English, neither of which are apt for the translation. I chose to keep the original accented form to once again subtly reinforce the novel's setting and source culture.

It is interesting to note that Wong sometimes uses both the more intimate term and the more formal term within the same sentence, referring to different parents. If the intimate form is feminine, the formal counterpart is masculine. Therefore, Wong's usage of the intimate form *mamá/papá* conveys a perceived closeness that may not be shared with the other parent at that moment. For example, when Cristina reflects on her upbringing, she states, "Papá hacía el trabajo de la limpieza con T.K. y luego conmigo; a mi madre no le gustaba tocarnos"[15] (Wong 14). If *Papá* were "Father" instead, the reader would not perceive the distance between Cristina and her mother since both parents are described using similar language. Another example occurs

[15] Papá cleaned T.K. and then me; my mother did not like to touch us.

after Cristina's parents separate and her father moves back to Macau: "Yo nunca aprendí a hablar el idioma de mi padre, porque mi mamá dijo que era una pérdida de tiempo y dinero"[16] (Wong 87). Because the focus of the sentence is on Cristina's mother's desires and wishes, Wong uses *mamá* to allude to her immediate proximity to Cristina. Meanwhile, Cristina demonstrates her unfamiliarity with the foreign language by calling it her "father's" instead of its name (Cantonese). Interestingly enough, however, Cristina subsequently refers to her father as *papá* in the following sentence, suggesting a constant balancing act between the two terms.

Similar to my treatment of *mamá* and *papá*, I employed a more foreignized approach to titles such as Señor and Señora or Don and Doña, not translating them as "Mr." or "Mrs." since I felt that doing so would strip the text of a key cultural feature encoded within the Spanish language. However, when the term was not used as a title, such as in "las señoras que cocinaban," I translated it as the more general "ladies" (Wong 20). The one exception was the section header in Chapter Three titled, "La Señora Ingeborg," which refers to Cristina's German mother-in-law. In this instance, I used the domesticated "Mrs." to draw a distinction between the two cultures. I chose not to use *Frau* because the cultural difference did not need to be exaggerated to that extent. Cristina uses "señora" in this context as a sign of respect rather than cultural background. The Spanish *Señora* paired with the German surname Ingeborg is domesticating for Spanish-speaking audiences, while the English *Mrs*. is domesticating for English-speaking audiences. As for the plural Señores, because English does not use grammatical gender, I translated this as Señor and Señora. Similarly, "los pastores Vigos" I translated as "Pastor Vigo and his wife" or sometimes "the Vigo family/household," as his wife is not a pastor.

[16] I never learned to speak my father's language, because Mamá said that it was a waste of time and money.

However, a translation does not solely involve cherrypicking which words fit the context the best. Translators must also look at the big picture, examining textual elements such as sentence structure and register before making individual decisions. Take the following passage:

> Un espacio donde se difuminaba la familiaridad con lo chino-peruano. Como abrir una cortina de terciopelo granate pesada, un tabernáculo que esconde misterios con resorte y cadáveres degollados después de mucho sexo. Entrar a ese bar fue como subir el volumen, como si eso mismo que parece el espejo quebrado de un corazón destrozado y en búsqueda, se viera iluminado con luces baratas, enrojecidas, entre el moho y un frío extraño. Pero se trataba de un espacio que yo quería explorar. (Wong 67)

The passage above takes place at the beginning of Chapter Three, where Cristina first enters and interacts with Tijuana's Chinatown. At the beginning of both Chapters One and Three, Wong employs plenty of descriptive and figurative language to establish a sense of place, providing a setting for the events that occur in this chapter. However, her descriptions are rarely straightforward and feature extended metaphors and abstractions. In the previous paragraph, Cristina mentions wanting to "dismantle the stereotypes" of Chinatowns primarily consisting of similarly decorated Chinese restaurants. Instead, she highlights its nightlife and alludes to Tijuana's infamous reputation for prostitution and sex shows.

My initial draft took a very literal approach, in which I looked up words I was not sure of and forced them to work within the context of the sentence. What occurred was a near one-to-one formal equivalence, a term coined by translator Eugene Nida "where the order of words and their standard or common meaning correspond closely to the syntax and vocabulary of the source" (Bellos 170). My early version was as follows:

> A space where the familiarity with the Chinese-Peruvian blurred. As if opening a heavy red velvet curtain, a tabernacle that hides spring-loaded mysteries and cadavers with slit throats after too much sex. Entering that bar was like turning up the volume, as if that very thing that seems like a broken reflection of a ruined and searching heart, finding yourself illuminated by cheap red lights, between the mold and a cold strangeness. But it was a space that I wanted to explore.

There are glaring issues with this approach due to the awkwardness in both word choice and sentence structure that results from formal equivalence. Phrases like "spring-loaded mysteries" and "cadavers with slit throats" immediately jump out to the reader as unnatural. Additionally, because Wong frequently uses *ese* in her writing in place of an article, a literal translation interprets the word as the demonstrative pronoun "that" instead of using context clues to determine when it is being used in place of "the." As for syntax, I lift the punctuation verbatim from the original text, thus creating awkward English clauses and comma splices. However, some of the issues in the previous excerpt are also the result of human error. For example, I use "ruined" for *destrozado* instead of the more familiar "broken" since I had already used it to translate *quebrado*. I also misinterpret the object *se viera* to be "oneself," which then becomes "yourself" in an attempt to smooth out some of the awkwardness. Instead, the object of the verb appears in the preceding clause as "that very thing."

The primary challenge I had with this passage was the presence of the participle *degollado*. The verb *degollar* refers to the action of slitting a throat, generating a visceral and violent image. My goal was to preserve the inherent violence in the word while also maintaining the metaphor. Cristina does not describe literal corpses but expresses that the participants have "lost their heads" after having so much sex. The participle *degollado* appears in idioms that

connote similar images as the English expressions of "puppy eyes" or "doe-eyed." While I played with the idea of contrasting the innocence suggested in these expressions with the explicit violence contained within the word, I found that the phrasing of "spent bodies, like lambs to the slaughter, after so much sex" remained awkward and disrupted the general flow of the sentence. Words like "silenced" also diminished or eliminated the violent action associated with *degollar*. Eventually, after plenty of discussion with my advisor and my peers, I settled on translating the phrase as: "bodies spent after so much sex, like cadavers with slit throats." This translation transforms Wong's metaphor into a simile in order to convey both post-coital disorientation and the violent imagery conjured by *degollado*. My current iteration of the entire passage is as follows:

> A space where familiarity with the Chinese-Peruvian is warped. Like drawing back a heavy red velvet curtain: a tabernacle concealing mysteries ready to leap out and bodies spent after so much sex, like cadavers with slit throats. Entering that bar was like turning up the volume, as if the very thing that resembles the shattered mirror of a broken and yearning heart were illuminated by cheap red lights, amidst the mold and the strange coldness. But it was a space I wanted to explore.

Most of the changes in the passage are lexical. Some words are heightened, such as "blurred" to "warped" or the adjustment of the descriptor "spring-loaded" to the more active "ready to leap out." Some words are modified to better fit the context; for example, one does not merely open a curtain, but instead draws it back. Although I do repeat "cadavers" again to preserve the point of comparison, I change the initial reference to "bodies spent" to emphasize both the literal and figurative meaning of "dead," the latter of which can signify both exhaustion and orgasm[17]. In addition to the aforementioned changes, I make minor alterations to the

[17] *Le petit mort*, or the little death, is a euphemism for an orgasm in French

punctuation usage. For example, because the clause after curtain in the second sentence does not contain a verb, I replaced the comma with a colon to reduce some of the visual awkwardness. However, it is important to note that Wong intentionally utilizes fragments, so while I deem slightly modifying the punctuation accetable, completely restructuring the syntax would impose standard English-language values onto the text.

What is also notable about Wong's text is her variance in sentence structure. Sometimes, her sentences are long and meandering, punctuated with multiple commas. Other times, she provides fragments. For example, when describing the layout of Cristina's house, Wong writes:

> Tenía pocas habitaciones: tres dormitorios y una oficina, pero tenía una enorme estancia que servía como sala comedor, una cocina gigante, donde sentías que te perdías, tres baños, uno para nosotros, los miembros de la familia, otro para los empleados de la oficina y uno pequeño para el personal de servicio, las señoras que cocinaban y el chico de limpieza. Un largo pasadizo…, un azotea— (Wong 19-20)

This list of household features is split into two sentences. While both of them consist of an extensive string of clauses, what stands out in the second sentence is that it continues the previous sentence without adding a phrase like "There was also a…" The resulting translation allowed me to play with punctuation, as seen below:

> It had few rooms: three bedrooms and an office, but it had an enormous living room that functioned as a dining room, a gigantic kitchen where you could practically get lost, three bathrooms: one for us, the family members; another for the office employees; and a small one for the domestic workers, the cooking ladies and the cleaning boy. A large corridor…; a rooftop terrace—

Instead of only commas, my sentences use em-dashes, semi-colons, and regular colons to create a visual distinction of where the clauses end, and to better clarify what items they are describing.

Finally, I have elected to translate the title of the novel as *Those We Lost in the Sand*. While *aquello* can be translated as "that which" or "the things," referring to a more abstract, faraway item or concept that is out of sight, I went with "those" since it highlights the people in Cristina's life who are no longer with her. The three losses in her life, Santiago, Joerg, and Guillermina represent her past, present, and her future respectively, and their loss defines her for a period of her life.

Even in this "final draft" stage, my translation is a living, breathing document comprised of deliberate choices that reflect my agency as a translator. The decisions detailed above are only a mere snapshot of the months-long process that occurred behind the scenes and emphasize how translation is not as simple as knowing two languages and having unmediated access to a dictionary.

An Excerpt of Chapter One: Pan-American Velvet

The vastness of the desert is the only thing that captivates me, not the dryness nor the vengeful force where natural order ends.

The desert is a mystery. It is enveloped in illusions and marked by bifurcations. How could the Atacama have been formed in the north of Chile? Its origin could date back to early erosions in the Sechura desert or perhaps even Mexico, where I began my journey. Ever since that day, I have been walking, placing my left foot in front of the right, and vice versa. I feel as though I have not arrived yet.

A mirage is a vision that manifests itself, making your eyes believe it is there: your very own delirium. You assume it will surely emerge if you get close, but that is not the case. As you move forward, you know that it is not for you, that it does not even exist.

Perhaps the absurdity began when the first grain of sand arrived in the valley, a tiny particle that crossed over from another continent—maybe the north of Africa, where Joerg also started his journey. Joerg's journey was conceived with the mercantile pretext used by many travelers to give meaning to their voyages; they tell themselves they are in search of riches, money, trade opportunities. But Joerg and I knew that his journey was intended to destroy the mirage for good. There were no hard feelings when he left and, even though we never expressed it with words, what we feared came to pass. Joerg never returned from the Sahara.

The desert is an unstable enigma. Absurd and immeasurable. It will not allow itself to be discovered.

There is no card in the Major Arcana that symbolizes the desert, is there?

In Peru, the sea seems to melt with the intense heat that extends to the shore. That same Peruvian sea soaks the stretch of restless sands, boiling by day and freezing by night. An even

hotter desert extends along the roads of Northern Mexico, where coyotes—dogs of dust—prowl and unusual animals flee the heat to keep from passing out and dying. The sun-bleached colors of much hotter sands abound. There, in the north of Mexico, the flora and fauna are intimidating, the breadth of that desert is unlike the masses of sand along the Peruvian coast. The desert of Tijauna is even more scorching. The differences between the two are not just because of the temperature, nor are they because of the unmentionable vegetation, or even because of the expanse of both deserts. There are ideas, images, apparitions that are part of Mexicali and its furies. They are the other entities that control the desert of San Pedro de Lloc.

The sand and the dunes of Algeria might look like the same fickle masses of minuscule grains as those of Chepén or the north of Mexico. Do not even try to compare them, because they sought, in a cruel and determined way, to have you feel the particularities of each desert in your bones to point out and judge them. Both near and far, little by little, the words will find the contrasts that define them. Believe it or not, as you pretend to equate them, you could die from a strange plague, a heart attack, or a rare skin cancer.

The desert is the guardian, the one that grants or denies. Everything depends on the desert.

Yes, that's right. The ghosts of every wasteland are the ones who control and represent the differences of their people. The members of the clans are putting on and taking off masks. That is how they have conquered the dryness and the restlessness of the dunes. Some have tried to understand those terrible winds, others have been buried by monsoons, and others—like Santiago, Joerg, and Guillermina—have simply disappeared without a trace.

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The things that I think about take the form of heavy objects. At this moment, they are floating in an enormous pool—I want to say it is the sea, but I can see its edges. The wind blows and creates an insignificant surge, so I cannot ensure that it is the sea. Since Joerg's disappearance, I find myself confronted by memories or ideas I do not know if I forgot or if I just invented them. Already, I do not feel the same immensity of the horizon, even though waves are formed by the wind. I would say they are small waves, waves that swallow themselves up in a space that grows smaller and smaller over time. A swell breaks at the end of an asphalt belt. It seems that inside this tremendous reservoir—which is smaller than the sea but larger than a lake—there is a passage that does not begin or end.

When I look at the ocean, on the other hand, it overpowers my gaze; the eye is what it sees: the water in my eyes is the water of the ocean. They say we are made of water. That's what they say. Swells or surges. Maybe the convincing evidence is knowing that, when faced with the sea, one is the only one who sees until they lose their way.

Some entities compel me to name them. They hover over their own importance, that is the sensation the desert gives you. What settles over the sand shall have the ability to save itself. I see another road as well, it is the Pan-American highway—it could be any stretch of it—like a lifeline. The only constant is an illusion of water that has finally befriended me. I suppose the water came from the sea or the clouds, but it has begun to take unexpected shapes.

This vision, made of images floating in a gigantic mental pool—similar to a mass of water that wanted to be the sea and whose wish had not been granted—carries me like a futuristic vessel. It is an impermeable capsule, that's why it does not soak me, even though I am in the middle of the water. It is something very strange. A bubble. Something I would consider empty.

Chimbote Highway

Thousands of kilometers go by before the unease begins to dissipate. I smell a strong odor. Between the daydreams and the motion sickness, I see a large sign that announces the name of the city. From above, the road resembles a winding intestine—unforgiving of your nausea—it demands to be seen to the extent of its whims, despite its indefinite length, and obliges us to think as to why they called it the Pan-American highway. Does it take up all of America? Cross it? Surround it? Is it so big that, in simple terms, it is said that neither the beginning nor the end can be seen? It is only wide in a few sections; mostly it's narrow, neglected, dry, surrounded by barren stretches where the mirage mimics water from a distance. All that sticks out, again, modest and unforgettable, is the old green sign with white letters that states: "Chimbote."

They always give awful pink plastic bags to us kids, because they know that we might vomit at any moment. They buy them wholesale at the market. It's as if the emptiness of the space compels our small, weak stomachs to empty themselves. We cannot hold anything in, everything turns in our stomachs. In the end, we feel better. Throwing up is no fun, but it calms you down.

The passengers' boredom is obvious. The adults give in to it easily. We do not. We cousins are aware of what is happening. The changes. I was counting poles and red beetles (the VWs that Mexicans call *vochos* and those in English-speaking countries call beetles… in reality, I don't think they look like any beetle—but that's another thing about city people, we associate animals with things because of their shapes. What's terrible is when there are no shapes to associate them with, only the void left by the people who were there before).

I counted 345 poles in the time since we left Chepén, but only three red beetles. I'm also getting a bit bored, as we have already traveled a large distance, punctuated by the sand that shifts from one side of the road to the other. As a child a few years ago (still quite young), I never got bored, I counted the poles without even missing one—attentive, very attentive. I admired the hills. I loved the colors of the sand, especially when they changed in the fading light. In the stretches where I could see the sea, I was bursting with excitement; the car was taking us away from Chepén.

I hated Chepén, its thirst, its backwardness, its lack of ambition to be anything other than a poor region defined by slippery sand and its grotesque apparitions. Although shriveled, it was a landscape of its own, like the scene of a lunar catastrophe. Sown fields of rice and other vegetables in the valley now dominate the landscape, but my gaze and senses were focused only on the desert that can be sensed firmly beyond the fertile lands. Many people believe in witchcraft and do evil unto others. There are numerous trinkets and objects used to harm or ensnare a human, from taxidermied animals to pieces of scented wood.

We grew up like Chinese kids, not like Peruvian kids. Our furniture was wicker and the dishes were fine blue and white china. In the mornings, we ate with forks and, at night, with chopsticks: *faai zi*. Our spoons were always glass or porcelain, depending on the occasion. We broke a lot of spoons over the course of a year, whether by accident or because they were so fragile. My parents took care to replace them. There was a drawer in the kitchen full of Chinese spoons.

Being Chinese children, we wash our faces with towels dampened with boiling water. When we were still little, the adults used them to scrub us behind our ears. Papá first cleaned T.K. and then me; my mother did not like to touch us.

There is an instilled tedium that sets in: the accidental tourist or the medical representative never perceive the enigmas that surround us. In Chpén, there are loads of pharmacies, the medical representatives are mostly tall, well-dressed, and fair-skinned, they look like models from advertisements. These medical representatives sell brand-name, official medicine produced in Swiss or American laboratories. In the ‘70s, the decade when I discovered and was greatly impressed by the medical representatives, they didn’t produce medicine in Peru, it was mainly imported. I could not help but associate the medical representatives with elegance, health, and foreign lands. But we lived with traditional knowledge: of women who charm men so that they stay by the woman’s side, fuck them well, or “meet their needs;” that of shamans who perform burials with garments and knit dolls to invoke evil desires, sickness, and bad omens. I grew up seeing two types of signs: those of the curanderos who serve strange liquids with indigenous names and those of the evangelical churches that offered salvation. Pharmacies, to me, represented gleaming hospitals, where the medical representatives arrived with their perfect leather briefcases to peddle healing pills and faultless miracle syrups. Chepén was a small container of foreign powers, with two pharmacies on every one of its four streets. I always wondered why there were two pharmacies on each street.

I also wondered why they peddled so much medicine. Were we that sick? Why did the people consult the herbalist, the curandero, the doctor? I don’t know if ours was a town of sick people, but it seemed we all needed something, that we were pissed off, we were hurting, we were not healthy. Why? Where did so much illness come from? Was it, perhaps, the desert and its dryness? Was it that we had been thrown into some kind of hell? Sometimes I looked at the surrounding areas of the city and it occurred to me that we lived amid trash. Was that why? What curse had expelled us from some green place and placed us here, where donkeys shit on stone

pavements and flattened paths, where dogs seemed despondent, like they were at death's door, and the signs offered either herbs or spells?

Maybe the ancient settlers established the tradition that remedies and health amid so much sand needed constant reinforcement. That our lives were in danger in a place founded on the inhospitable and the precarious.

There was a series of smaller Catholic saints of various apparitions, including those with African, Indigenous, Spanish, and Italian characteristics. In many houses, religious images are put up. It gave me an indescribable terror to see those martyrs' faces with swollen eyes or dreadful bags under their eyes. They seemed sicker than those devoted to them. I didn't think we should pray to them; thought that if they could barely maintain their own health, they could be no help to ours. Nearly all children have experienced a spiritual cleaning, either with an egg, with a guinea pig, or with a gob of spit from the dreadful, bony curanderos. But of all the cousins, I was the one who was bathed with strange herbs the most and who wore the most amulets to ward against evil.

"It's because she isn't baptized," my mother said, as if it were a secret, without remorse, but knowing that was why I would therefore be doubly affected by "evil."

In addition to rituals, Chinese children were treated with other remedies brought from China, *po chai* pills (tiny, dark, round maroon pills that cured a thousand ills), concoctions of kion (ginger), and, primarily, a change in diet, with plenty of vegetables, fish, and steamed dishes with mushrooms extracted from tree bark. The kitchens of Chinese migrants were like large pharmacies, full of vials and containers full of seeds and indescribable condiments. Also, eggs "spoiled" in salt, spicy fermented tofu, fish salted until it expelled worms, dried duck, and many other foods made according to thousand-year-old recipes.

I was entranced by the silver sea once one got out of Trujillo. At the end of every city along the coastline, the Pan-American highway looks majestic, as if coming out of hiding. It simply appears there, where the city seems to stop showing its vanity, surrounding it, suffocating it, crisscrossing it with sudden cuts. The sections where it spreads, straight and presumptuous, displays its superiority: without the Pan-American highway, towns would be cut off from one another. The highway is a long asphalt serpent that binds the continent together lengthwise. Without it, no one would know that there is anything aside from the valleys, nor whether the America that provided its name can actually be measured or is merely an invention. I shiver when part of the Pacific Ocean comes into view, when it is illuminated by the sun's forceful and obtrusive rays. The dry hills are probably inhabited by foxes, tricksters that know how to run to escape the heat or bullets. Some die crossing the highway, ignorant that the speed of the cars is beyond their skill. They have coats in shades of beige that they use as natural camouflage to defend themselves from threats in the desert. For me, those startling landscapes were the best.

The recurring image in my memory is one of a stubborn girl, left to her own devices, imagining anything that came to mind, with no direction or knowledge of herself. She would press her nose against the glass of her uncle's car and look at the desert. The car drove southward, the first gap at the exit of San Pedro de Lloc. Something magical happens when I observe the way the light distorts when it refracts against the extensive layer of sand and dunes, sprinkled with some scrubs and birds of prey, vultures.

The memory of this segment of the desert began in Pacasmayo and ended when we arrived in Chimbote. Some strange pine trees, the grotesque scent of foxes, which insisted on us smelling how they marked their territory. The stench of the foxes could be called "by-products of fish flour"... a few absent-minded people thought it was the smell of processed anchovy. Be it the

stench of foxes or dried anchovy, it is a northern city with its own enigmatic odor: Chepén begins and ends in its own scent.

The desert possesses an aristocracy where what is simple, the color of the sand, is light, clean. But there are also dark zones, precisely where the foxes do their thing and are accomplices to the mystery to which we humans—men, women, and children—are oblivious. Nor is there any space there for God, or for Saint Sebastian, the gay saint of Chepén, or for Our Lady of Guadalupe, and especially not for the saints of the capital, no matter how black or scourged they may be. There is only space for foxes in conflict: Chimbote seems to be protected by invisible foxes demanding justice.

There are sections where invisible currents of water revolt and then the desert turns green. Modest fields appear where the steel-blue sea forcefully cools the coastline. It makes the sands look seductive, with a certain opulence that imitates the dark and monarchic traditions of beauty. Cleopatra. The queen of Sheba. In Peru, there are no empires in the desert; the desert is an empire.

Some Moche people won battles. Of those wars, I have no tales. I only know of the terrible scars they left on the prisoners of war.

Perhaps my mother, as she cleaned the living room three or four times every day, confronted the sand as the integral element of all that was surrounding us. It was a struggle to control its movements and the fickle way it spread across the surfaces, that overshadowed everything. It, the sand, is the only sovereign. On the contrary, the best kingdom is one where the ruler remains unnoticed. At home, we have given up against the power of the sand, which seeps in everywhere. We don’t even think that our house is less dirty than other places. That’s the way it is. This is all we know.

The desert is elegant, made of sand and wind, and the sand is ever-present in our lives: in the horizon, in our cupboards, in our shoes, in our houses, in our bathrooms. At times, it even settles on our food, as if making known that we will not escape it.

As the car advances, a fox crosses the road. It's dull, a dark mustard color. It slips away before our eyes and makes us think it has vanished, as if the same mustard color of some desert areas had been trapped in that prismatic, quantum dimension that we humans are unaware of. I am still too young to understand the dance and the running of the foxes, but, even though I was frightened by their rapid movements and their way of both being present and absent, running and disappearing, I wanted to understand their different colors and sizes, their speed.

The car advances, and we arrive at Chimbote.

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I was born in the middle of a desert damp with diverted rivers, in a town where the waters could not bear to contain them. A rocky desert, one with no decorum. Fearful. The men and women seemed to mate only to reproduce, so the word "love" was cast out of the landscape. Only the valley of Jequetepeque saves us from starving and withering away. I was born in the midst of the sand and the wind, on the kind of day mothers regret having uteruses and placentas. I was born in a town where you can sometimes feel the periodic humidity, as if the sporadic rains were reassuring their own irony, but Chepén is too close to the sand. It's as if the gravity of the hills were bursting the bubbles we managed to create with the scarce moisture. I grew up running my index finger across the furniture and I could prove that the ground and the sand were fickle and obstinate: you could barely clean any surface before new grains appeared again. Chepén was founded on the slope of a low-level mountain. Its history is one of four streets and a train that transported sugar cane. Many Chinese arrived at the haciendas that grew sugar and rice, my

father among them. A town where a whistle rang every day at 2:30 PM. This was the announcement that the vegetable soup would be filled with the ashes of burnt sugarcane. Now, it is a city that has learned to converse with the fickle rivers surrounding it. Instead of sugar cane, they sow rice, corn, and even rose bushes and mountain grasses. But anything that is swallowed by the desert becomes, as if by magic, part of its own beauty, so much so that it can no longer be named. It simply disappears.

The North of Mexico

My parents rented out the second floor of our enormous house. It really was enormous. The people in our town called it a "street-to-street house," which was very true, because it started on one street and ended on another. The main entrance was on Lima Street and the secret entrance was on Arequipa Street. Those phrases mostly referred to the fact that it was a bigger house than the rest. It had few rooms: three bedrooms and an office, but it had an enormous living room that functioned as a dining room, a gigantic kitchen where you could practically get lost, three bathrooms: one for us, the family members; another for the office employees; and a small one for the domestic workers: the cooking ladies and the cleaning boy. A large corridor (which, once I grew up and came back to visit, I saw, in reality, wasn't so large and was rather narrow); a rooftop terrace, where it was easy to hear the sounds of the neighborhood, but you couldn't see the vicinity unless you got on a planter or a crate of fruit. Looking over the wall of the terrace was a spectacle, the same as the mirage that intoxicated me when I was little; I made up conversations between the couples that walked down the alley: some in love, others breaking up.

The house had a basement where my brother and my father kept a workshop for repairing machines. Its organization was second to none; behind every hammer, nail, and tool hanging on the wall, was an outline of its shape. That way, if it got lost, the outline remained empty, as if announcing that there was an object missing. We almost never went down to the basement, it was like an unspoken rule to not enter my father and brother's sacred space. They called it "El Taller." It wasn't easy for a woman to go in there. Plus, that world of tools and technical repairs, in addition to being prohibited, was built to be boring and unnecessary for a girl like me, who only wanted to be liked, offering fake smiles intended to show respect to the sharp wit of the clever boys. We sensed that life was passing by like a car crossing the Pan-American highway at full speed. You knew that you were going somewhere, but not exactly where or why.

This is the house that the Mexican tenants came to.

When Santiago disappeared, I noticed, for a long time, that his silhouette was etched in different spaces—so many of them in my house or his, in places we had frequented in Chepén. Chepén was still a village when he vanished into thin air. I frequented his house—everyone in our group frequented each other's houses—we visited each other often and felt united in the madness of loving the sand. Back then, I knew which seat he usually sat in, but it was as if his silhouette was etched on the walls, on the armchairs; his weight, like that of all things in the desert, was a figment of one's imagination that could be sensed, but not touched.

His silhouette had also remained etched, invisible, in Pancho's little truck, in every piece of furniture in every house he could possibly have visited. He was the only one who wasn't a regular visitor to other people's houses, like the rest of us were, but something from his scarce visits still remained on the furniture. Of the three missing persons, Santiago's silhouette was the hardest to erase. The void he left would never be filled again. Just as my brother or father drew

with great skill and force the outline of some expensive tool that seemed essential to them, maybe Santiago's silhouette was drawn like that while he was with us. That's why it remained constant despite the fact that he would no longer return to be part of our surroundings again.

The fact that my father and my brother were absent didn't give me the feeling of emptiness that Santiago's departure left. I knew where they were and why they had left. It's different when a person disappears.

The Evangelical Pastors Brought Mexican Sand

My parents rented out the second floor. That's not why they built it, but the enormous first floor was enough for us. But that second floor smelled more like a home. It was always inhabited by foreigners, even more foreign than us: a Chinese family that participated in Peruvian customs half the time.

Most of those foreign families had strong ties to Protestant religions. None of the tenants on the second floor were Catholic. They spoke ill of saints and the practices of local hechiceros. That year, the Vigo family arrived. They asked my mother to paint the home light brown. They put up pictures of Jesus Christ with a clean face, a Christ that wasn't crucified in any of their representations; he always looked cool and calm in his clean tunic. And they put up pictures of paradisiacal places. It was a very different living space from ours. Everything had its place and things were neat and tidy. I guess they were also dusting the furniture more than twice a day.

In the kitchen, they decorated the walls with medium-sized pictures in red frames. Inside them were portraits of women with pale, white skin, smiling. None of the women in the Vigo home's pictures were Indigenous, nor were they dark-skinned or with Chinese faces like me. They didn't have a single Chinese ornament and nothing was artisanal either. A lifelike,

well-executed painting of a heavenly scene hung presumptuously in the dining room, with a small waterfall of gleaming water and tastefully painted deer. It seemed like you could walk into it and cool off. That second floor had inviting spaces that smelled clean. It also smelled like tangerines, tea, and compotes. Their floors were replaced by beautiful mosaics with emerald green borders, except in the bedrooms, which had wooden floors. We never used those bedrooms. My mother explained to us that that house was exclusively for renting, but even when it was empty—and we could have used it when our aunt and uncle from Chimbote visited—we didn't use it, maybe because, until that day, not a single member of the family believed that they were entitled to occupy such a hygienic, well-arranged, and inviting space. It wasn't luxurious nor in any way frivolous, but it gave the impression that it was reserved for respectable people. That's why they rented it out.

So that Mexican-Peruvian family arrived. The father was named Manuel Vigo, a renowned pastor from the Evangelical Sabbatarian Church, which others call Seventh-Day Adventists. Señora Rosa de Vigo was Peruvian by birth, but like many evangelists, she had grown up in several cities: she lived in San José, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Los Angeles, where she had met the man who would be her future husband. The pastor was missing his left hand. In its place, he wore a prosthesis covered with a black glove. They were always traveling and moving "where the Lord Jesus Christ may send them": before, they had been in several Mexican cities to preach the Gospel. They arrived in Chepén to establish an institute of secondary education, and my mother rented out the second floor to them.

My mother never spoke of God, nor of religion. Nevertheless, she was always aware of what people were saying and thinking, regardless of their beliefs. Deep down, she wanted to understand her faith or believe in something or someone, even though she never expressed the

need to invoke a higher being to us. On the other hand, she made us feel that our small lives in Chepén depended on how we decided our insignificant destinies, whether we were studying or learning Chinese or making an effort to be good children. There was no one above her who could have punished us. Only the sand when it insisted on settling on the ledges or the window frames.

Once Pastor Vigo and his wife settled down in the city, I felt very comfortable with them, as if I had known them all my life. Señora de Vigo played the piano and told us stories some nights. By day, her stories referenced Biblical characters, but come nightfall, she recalled tales of the curanderas that she had to convert. I believe the pastor's wife was fascinated with the strange things the witches told her. Even though she preached against Catholicism, she loved curandera saints, miraculous saints, spells, and witchcraft.

Her European piano, perfectly in tune—a good brand, I guess—was simple in style. She performed mostly Christian hymns for church, save for "The Blue Danube," and sometimes the tango "La cumparsita," since it seemed like other melodies weren't allowed. The pastor was notable for being very serious and quite frugal. When Doña Rosa de Vigo polished the keys of her piano, she concentrated harder than when she tried to get music out of the instrument. They didn't have a maid or anyone to help them around the home. Doña Rosa was constantly obsessed with cleanliness. My mother, however, was not; our home was always disorganized. I remember my mother wetting a rag to clean the dust off our belongings or throwing the rag away because she got tired of wiping and realizing that, in a minute, that surface would be full of sand or dust once again.

Both the pastor and his wife had very pale skin, reddish. The pastor even moreso. Us, yellowish. Pastor Manuel had a mustache like many Mexican men: small firm bristles stuck to his upper lip and carefully cropped facial hair. His absent hand was my first obsession. I was

infatuated with observing his brightly-colored plastic prosthetic. When we all sat down around the table, we looked like multifarious beings, searching for a reason for fate to have brought us together.

Señora Rosa was always wearing black—if I asked her if she was in mourning, Mamá told me to shut up, that I shouldn't be such a gossip. But she responded with a proud smile, which infuriated me because it didn't explain anything. But regardless, she continued wearing the same clothes. She told me that she learned to wear black lace from her godmother who lived near Piura, in a province where the women were required to make dresses with that kind of embroidery. So I searched for photos in magazines and newspapers of women in Piura, and I saw that many of them liked wearing black garments, as if it were an honor. I only thought: How hot, to be in the middle of the Sechura desert, with such ugly clothing.

It gave me the impression that each person expressed themselves through their clothing, that it could tell stories. More than their gestures or their words, how they dressed was important. Fashion and clothing spoke of happiness and sadness.

One day, she finally told me that she was in mourning for life because her parents had died young. It was like always having them in her mind. Nevertheless, she sometimes launched into sermons about death, she said that it is holy and arrives when God commands it, although it was also a punishment to die young.

The color black absorbs the heat, that's why so many women in the desert cover themselves up entirely in black. Are these women doomed? When I looked at Señora Rosa, heard her play Christian hymns she didn't like, or take care of her Mexican husband who was missing a hand, I thought: Señora Rosa must also be doomed.

Their strong Mexican accent really differentiated them from us. I enjoyed imitating them. Sometimes I wanted to be like them and repeated what they said—I learned words like "*Órale*," "*Mande*." Their food was also different. In my house, we were lucky to have a glorious variety of dishes: there were two cooks in the house, apart from Mamá, who were always improving what they made. In the morning, they prepared criollo stews with Peruvian flavors, with seasonings like ground garlic, cumin, cilantro, and escabeche—or pickled peppers—and at night, they served Chinese soups with a base of kion, seeds, and mushrooms brought from China. On Sundays, we went out to eat, and sometimes, Peruvian and Chinese vegetable soups were brought to the table, or the place created new stews. However, the Vigo family's food was from their homeland: plenty of tortillas, vegetarian picadillo, or "chicken"—or an imitation meat with soy—stews swimming in fat and crystallized onion. Rosa prepared her own dough in order to make homemade tortillas. They didn't eat very spicy food, even though they said that, in Mexico, everyone loved chili peppers. But they always had salsa verde and salsa roja. Through them, I discovered vegetarian meat, gluten, and toasted grains. What we called *ají,* they called chile. For me, until that moment, Chile was the name of a country and a type of bean that grew in the region.

Doña Rosa Vigo sat down at the piano wearing her mantilla, a black lace veil. She was ceremonious in playing the keys. She didn't sing, but she hummed the melodies. It was a little spooky to see her there discreetly. I was fascinated by the sound of that piano. It was like it arrived from another country. The moment she touched the keys, it opened up a musical universe, as if in that instant, the veil of time was broken and another level of hearing and perfection was captured through her music. I confessed to her that I wanted to learn how to play piano. I made a fool of myself and ran my fingers through books by Hanon and Anna Magdalena

Bach. She taught me to read some music and always told me an evangelical story of a girl named Noelia who converted to Evangelism and saved her entire city from being crushed by an earthquake.

"Don't you want to be like Noelia and convert?" she asked me.

"Oh no, Señora Rosa, I want to be a pianist like you," I told her. But the truth is that the only thing that I wanted to see was the plastic hand of the pastor, the prosthetic that was only covered by a thin leather glove.

Pastor Manuel Vigo always wore a tie. He sat very straight in the dark armchair—as if he were posing for a photo—and listened, entranced, when Señora Rosa played the piano wearing her black mantilla. Initially, I was very afraid of that ritual, but after I got used to it, they let me be part of their theater of peace and quiet. She carried out her hymns and he, with his whole hand over the amputated one, with his eyes closed and his head leaning into the back of the furniture, and me there, small and foolish, bearing witness to their love for music, for black mantillas, absent hands, and tortillas.

What was really extravagant, almost spectacular—though I never told them—was that they had a daughter named Ana Magdalena. Spectacular as in it was a spectacle, because no one I knew personally was named Ana Magdalena, and when she played those musical notes created by Bach's relative, it seemed to me that Chepén was important, that I also was, that even our house covered by windblown sand was. Maybe we meant something to a higher God. Ana Magdalena seemed like the name of a queen, of an accomplished artist, of an angel. Not like me. I was named Cristina and I liked secretly looking at the forbidden. The forbidden was the plastic hand.

Ana Magdalena Vigo, the pastor's daughter, worked as a nurse and traveled to the Andes, a place that seemed exotic and far away from my desert. When Pastor Vigo and his wife said the Andes, it seemed like a faraway place, and not the sierra, as we called them. Many people in Chepén make fun of those who come from the sierra as if they were ugly, lowlives, or imperfect. But it was nothing like that, the people of the Andes had no ugliness or imperfection, only that the people from the desert didn't connect with them, nor did they understand their silences, their expressions, or their accents. Ana Magdalena Vigo treated the sick and attempted to convert the curanderos to Christianity so that they would buy medicines from the medical representatives and not use their own mixtures, spells, and herbs. She was like the princess of the home. She also made tortillas. She was hardly ever in the home physically, even though I believe she was the owner of her father's heart since she seemed to be the soul of the second floor. I understood that you don't have to be present in order for everything to revolve around you.

How I would have liked to touch that plastic hand. Pianos and hands were like a combination that clicked in my nature. Two elements that incited something that nothing else has ever provoked. Could Señor Manuel Vigo pull off a piece by Anna Magdalena Bach with his plastic hand? I don't believe so. Therefore, a peculiar equation occurred, which became the fundamental pillar in my way of understanding society: serious men have plastic hands, men don't know how to play the piano. So men would never understand any woman named Ana Magdalena, unless she was a nurse. Could they understand the curiosity of someone named Cristina?

When Pastor Manuel Vigo looked at his daughter, he had a world of questions in his eyes, but I believe Ana Magdalena lived oblivious to her father's unanswered questions.

I couldn't help but be excited by the tenants on the second floor. So the Vigos were my favorite.

I grew up a bit obsessed with Papá and his special interest with my brother, the workshop, and the tools with their drawn outlines. There was an obstacle that didn't allow me to ask him the things that came into my mind, which numbered in the thousands: Pastor Vigo has questions that Ana Magdalena doesn't want to answer and I have questions that my father doesn't know how to answer. Should I approach Pastor Vigo and tell him what's going on? I had never risked talking about the spell that the desert casts on me, nor had I risked asking about gods and men, herbs, and medical representatives.

Ana Magdalena saw for the first time the light brought by the sands in Mexico. In the four years they rented our house, she visited her parents seven times. She had pale skin, and her hair was almost blond. I say almost, because it depended on how the sun hit her hair, and sometimes she looked more like a brunette. I liked looking at her almost yellow hair. I put my dark forearm next to her white, rosy skin and I admired how, being so different, we could be part of what her father called "the flock of sheep." Nothing in the world attracted me more than blondes. She sang so beautifully. Her name was inspired by the second wife of Johann Sebastian Bach, the pianist. They say that, in Mexico, not being named María or something biblical is almost like blasphemy. Perhaps that's why she chose to go to the Andes. That word, "blasphemy," I heard for the first time at the Vigo household and it took me many years to understand it. Ana Magdalena wanted to return to her homeland to study medicine at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. I don't know why she didn't go back, maybe because she wasn't named María like all of the Mexicans. Ana Magadalena knew how to make ice cream from canned milk with vanilla extract. She knew how to do many things that I would

have liked to do. Most of all, she got along with her mother, they never argued. Her father gazed at her with an admiration that Papá would never have thought of offering me.

Don Manuel Vigo read Bible verses out loud, and sometimes I repeated them. He tried to explain them to me, but he knew that I wasn't paying attention to him. I had a lot of fun with them. I felt safe. I'm convinced that the Vigo family loved me in some way. A soft spot that neither Mamá nor Papá, much less my brother, could inspire in me.

"Where's Clistina?" asked my father when my absences were long, with that funny pronunciation of the L in place of the R. He couldn't say Cristina, like those of us who speak Spanish say. Sometimes it made me feel embarrassed, but then I respected my father a lot for not knowing how to pronounce the Rs in Spanish. People laughed as if it were a mistake. They mocked him. I thought that Peruvians were ignorant, mocking, hypocritical—they mispronounced the words of their own language. It made me hate the way we were perceived.

I knew since I was little that it was an enormous responsibility to defend my father from the taunts of employees and customers at the store.

"He isn't Peruvian," I thought. "They should have more sympathy."

I developed an immense animosity for sarcastic people and wished with all my heart that every Peruvian could go live abroad to experience firsthand what it meant not to speak a language correctly and how difficult it was to adapt to a different world.

Perhaps that's why Anna Magdalena Bach didn't speak, she knew that there was another world after the words and she only produced sounds with the piano. And the sounds of the piano are always the same around the world. If one presses the wrong key, it is an error that doesn't rely on pronunciation.

"Learn how to play the piano," my father requested before he returned to China. He said it out loud so that I would hear him and come back to the first floor since he was very uncomfortable with my visits to the pastor and his wife. He was waiting for me, more than anyone else, because I was the youngest and his only daughter, or because, tacitly, I was the person in charge of continuing his bloodline. Maybe, without saying a word to him, I admired his silent courage and ease. His patience with the people who were making fun of him.

"Cristina is with the pastors," Victoria, Mamá's account assistant who worked in the store would say. Tiny and chubby, like most Mexicans, she used to visit Pastor Vigo's home. I supposed that the Vigo household attracted people who looked Mexican, but Victoria was Peruvian. I teased her with the idea that a spirit, brought by Doña Rosa from the north of Mexico, had invaded her body and that's why she was fat and tiny, and she would strike me down with her gaze.

Mamá used to comment sarcastically, "Cristina should be adopted by the Vigo family, she seems happier with them than with us." Victoria nodded, her prominent double chin swinging back and forth. Mamá said it with bitterness: my preference for the neighbors on the top floor of our house was obvious, I felt that they had arrived as a gift for me, especially because they let me be part of their routine, their simple prayers with no litany, and also because of their different food. I could spend hours exploring the books and objects in the pastor's home, instead of seeing the business-like movement in my house. I was not interested in my mother at all. She was a lady who spoke Spanish a little poorly and another language from my grandfather's homeland, Hakka. I didn't understand it completely, I even laughed at how poorly she used the words, but it didn't occur to me to correct her. What did occur to me was to make fun of her. Not my father. I believe

that I was very mean to my mother. Maybe you had to understand everything a mother says in order to respect her? But I don't know why I refused to respect her.

My father seldom spoke. It's possible that he wanted to avoid being laughed at, or maybe he didn't like Spanish.

The final equation that hatched out of my visits to the Vigo household was: Do you need to be blonde and study medicine for your papá to look at you with affection (and for your own mother not to force you to eat thousands of weird things and take potions at night)? Do you have to become an evangelical to be respected and happy?

A very strange thing was that Señora Rosa Vigo had as much passion for the Gospels as for the stories of wizards, and with time, I discovered she also read books about shamans and herbal remedies. But I believe that Pastor Manuel Vigo never knew of that.

Chapter Three: The Buddha of Tijuana

It was already late when we entered the bar. The space swelled until it became threatening. The bar, not very neat, the smell of burning wind, the people whispering, and life as I had known it, up until that very moment, changed. Something inexplicable and invisible, something that's intensity you can only feel under the skin, told to me that, after that visit to Tijuana, life would never be the same.

I was in danger of who I was, of what, and who I believed in. The familiar was lost in the restless sands. I tried to convince myself that border cities look more or less the same, but in that bar, there was something very close to ambiguity and nausea; one could call it, "a picturesque local color" (Ricardo Piglia dixit). Opposing aesthetics were woven together, unrecognizable flavors with each other, antagonistic values combined. In the city that seemed to emerge from the dark, I felt a je ne sais quoi, an oxymoron of Hispanism in a turbulent duel with its origins.

This is Tijuana. The place where universal parallels become more complex and dissolve in their own monstrosity. The strange thing is that the buildings which—although ugly—were nondescript, they could be buildings in Lima or another Mexican city or Chimbote: peeling, badly painted structures that make their ugliness plain. The women looked tough and were not excessively made up. They weren't fat or thick, but colossal. And the men, with their olive faces, gave the impression that they were holding old grudges that were beginning to cleave through the air. Those sands were swept up in a constant whirlwind of human beings speaking in two languages: they'd been brutally intertwined for decades without mercy. In every Spanish sentence, there were interstices in English and the gringos wandering around could not hide their fascination with Spanish.

Crossing into Tijuana was to put aside that little "everything is all right and perfect" and open your ears to "*mande mija*." Giving your brain permission to admire those walls painted with murals of a punk Frida Kahlo and Our Lady of Guadalupe with the face of a skull, dressed in iridescent green. Murals in the colors of hatred and shit. The other world that gringos considered ugly, in their fixed-up living rooms with their imported rattan armchairs from whichever Southeast Asian country via Pier1 Imports, all the vintage and stylish decor remained was forgotten. Your eyes began adjusting to iridescent green, to matador red that raised the temperature. Orange, lilac, purple, warm turquoise. All of the colors had another temperature and gave off scents. The colors smelled of plastic and blood.

And in that bar, that "something more" was unfolding—for the first time, you faced it with a new attitude in order to forget that seemingly tidy and happy other world, depicted in well-shot photographs in the pastels and cheery tones of decorative magazines: Here the story ends and here the ecstasy begins.

•••

I didn't recognize myself.

Another person lived inside of me and others shared my life without making their presence so evident. The other woman who made herself known in the bar in Tijuana convinced me that her spite had the power to bring me back to life from the rubble.

Erica Jong seemed to whisper to me that this was "my night." Her masterful use of words gave me permission to do what I wanted. Finally, I would be able to give myself free rein over what I had long hoped for. I believe that Erica Jong knows more about what I so desire, she knows what I hope to accomplish.

The border between any part of the city and Chinatown tends to be an arch, with its bases painted with strong colors—often red, because, in China, red is the color of life—with gold decorations and Asian lions standing guard on either side. The threshold used to beckon me to cross it, but that night it did not. Taking that step into the bar was a decision that had more to do with dismantling the stereotypes of Chinese restaurants, where the smell of fried onion and kion (it was already called *jengibre*, or ginger, in Spanish, but we couldn't stop calling it kion) lingers. The short statures of my fellow countrymen are seen over and over. It is an ethnic search for recognition of how far we've come.

A space where familiarity with the Chinese-Peruvian is warped. Like drawing back a heavy red velvet curtain: a tabernacle concealing mysteries ready to leap out and bodies spent after so much sex, like cadavers with slit throats. Entering that bar was like turning up the volume, as if the very thing that resembles the shattered mirror of a broken and searching heart were illuminated by cheap red lights, amidst the mold and the strange coldness. But it was a space I wanted to explore. Conditions that are so important, like health or well-being, fade away in that environment, flaking off like dry skin. I felt as if I had returned to a place I had already been, as if I had come back to cash out an unpaid check or seek revenge.

No, I didn't go to Southern California in search of a better job or to pursue the American Dream. I came to find Santiago. What space did he fill in me that made me so empty when he left? That is what I thought I had to make others believe. In the end, we all know it, you are only searching for yourself.

Guillermo and I were complicit in our strange enjoyment of visiting bars in Tijuana. He had immigrated to the United States nine and a half years earlier. Like a good Chimbotan, he learned to drive, to lie, to fake it, to sleep with girls he didn't like, to try various drugs, and to

work off the books to avoid paying taxes. At one of his loading jobs, he met Juancho, a boy of Mexican descent who would become his best friend.

How complicated it was for me to understand others at that time. People's relationships didn't make sense to me, I saw everyone as vapid bodies. The way I understood them or, rather, the way I didn't understand them, was also difficult. It was assumed that everyone was supposed to carve out their path, and this was more than a profession: they needed to create a strategy for *existing* in the world as well as *being* in the world. To survive?

Joerg wasn't here either. But Joerg wasn't part of the language I spoke with Guillermo and with the American territory. I couldn't say his name in front of Guillermo. I didn't reveal anything about what I found in his boxes and his notebooks, about the other Blaue Sandrose group, which he belonged to, or about the student migrant groups in Germany that also belonged to the Blaue Sandrose.

How does one become a wanderer? How do I sidestep my search for extreme pleasures? Tijuana was happy to show me, like a little school that would teach me sugar-coated truths, with real chili and spice. Vital, that is the word for the first time your life is torn between a *before* and an *after*. It happened at the time of day called *Abend* in German. *Abend* isn't night, nor is it afternoon, nor is it English tea time, nor is it the Spanish siesta. *Abend* is exactly what I felt when Tijuana got into my blood forever. You know the night will come soon and it starts to get dark, but your eyes can still make out the sky, the sea, and the sand. It's a preface, a border where your vision starts to blur. You know that, at that moment, another story begins. Something that will suck you into an unknown shadow.

Tijuana and its peripheral deserts were to-tal-ly vi-tal. Full. Of. Life.

In that garden of moments, where everything uncertain took on the shape of tangible structures, I was afraid of becoming a limestone statue (not salt) and, at the same time, I was feeling incomparable pleasure. Tijuana was like a stage where, upon touching your hands, you felt them come undone like clay that is not ready to take shape. The environmental erosion is so violent and aggressive that it forces you to understand its destructive force, everything your hands try to shape will disintegrate. An environment where you already know that everything is an illusion.

I had heard it said by several people, not only from relatives who had immigrated to Southern California: Tijuana is the worst border in the world. In response to my comment that Macau-China, Arica-Tacna, or Chuí (Uruguay-Brazil) were also borders, some more difficult than others, where "the Line" made its differences stark, Guillermo stared at me, his gaze both sarcastic and pedantic.

"Tijuana is not just any border," he said, sure of himself. "It's 'The Border.'"

That other woman who lived inside of me, the one I couldn't talk about, appeared. No, she wasn't one of the seven locas from my diaries, who wielded intelligence like a weapon of war. On the contrary, the other Cristina who lived inside me was the only sane one, and she seemed to want to pull me out of that chaos. The only woman who thought for herself recklessly, she was so idealized and her standards of perfection so high that she turned me into a border being, someone who was rendered useless in comparison. I always saw myself like that: a human being grown in the desert with an unquenchable thirst for water. Two experiences marked me: the exorbitant amount of water I secretly consumed, and that other woman who whispered words in my ear when I least expected it. I cannot confess the liquid urgency running through me, because it was not an ordinary thirst. Nor can I explain my despair when, as a child, people

shouted at me, “China girl!” I was aware that I had something that the others didn’t have, and though their taunts were not catastrophic, to me they were hurtful, like nails in my skin, like lice in my hair, like mosquitos buzzing above the streams at night. That other woman who lived in me or with me was unmentionable.

I lacked the finesse of the Han. The Han are the Mandarins who have held political power in China for a long time. Sometimes, I felt connected to the darkness of the small farm and the sand that surrounded us on the dirt paths of Chepén, to the pasture of Santa Rosa. I identified with the character of the savage peoples of the south—the Miao, the Hakka—though I knew that they all came from some Mongol gene from the inner steppes of another, even greater and more spectacular desert: the Gobi.

My mother told stories of being discriminated against by her own beautiful and graceful relatives, some with more Chinese blood than others, who whispered about her in secret. Skin color was as important to the Chinese as it was to the Peruvians, with their discriminatory attacks against the people of the Andes. Cantaloupe skin, peach skin, silk skin, hamburger skin (for those who had acne), and carpet skin (for those often sunburnt). My mother was not like those ladies. Several of them, elegant and brilliant, lived in Lima or came to visit from China.

They wore real silk. Their embroidery was creative and meticulous, their blouses bought from warehouses in Hong Kong or Macau. Mamá wasn’t that lucky and neither was I. My brother T.K. looked like my papá: both had the caché that Mamá and I lacked.

When I looked at my brother and my father, who had the demeanor of proud warriors, light-skinned and somewhat conceited, with mental agility unknown to me and a natural elegance, it didn’t occur to me to think of anything except that we came different places—not

only because they were men, handsome, and proud of their Chinese ancestry, and I was dark-skinned and *huachafa* (as the Peruvians call people with no style). I was timid, elusive.

Another factor that marked a great difference is that I dove headfirst into Buddhism and left no room for any other religion. They, on the other hand, were devout believers in the Christian God. When Pastor Vigo and his wife arrived to live on the second floor, they convinced my brother to get baptized in Chepén's Seventh Day Evangelical Church. I did not agree. It was terrifying to see those throngs of people knocking on doors and trying to convince residents that they were sinners "and they must convert and repent." I never allowed them to baptize me, that was brainwashing. Although the Catholic Church blessed us both when we were very little, in our house we didn't talk about the God of the Bible, and my father didn't hesitate to introduce me to Buddhism, the religion he followed with rituals he learned in China.

From a young age, he showed me images of unscathed soldiers who had given their lives for their country. After they returned from Nirvana, they enlightened the mortals and showed no signs of suffering. Spiritual cards of Buddha were used as bookmarks in his dozens of books. In this way, Papá passed on to me the idea that the Buddha was the true guide and not a punisher or mafia boss.

That was when those two people that lived inside me (and had nothing to do with my seven locas) were born. Only one of them tried to identify herself with the God my brother and the Vigo family embraced. I began to attend Bible studies and I bought various little books to try to comprehend verses like, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want[18]," or "Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped." Honestly, I didn't know what they meant. I didn't have the mind to interpret the things they seemed to believe without question.

[18] All Bible quotations are taken from the King James Bible

In 1969, we all left to go live in Macau.

My mother had received a notice from the government of Juan Velasco Alvarado—known as "El Cojo," or "The One Legged"—which informed her that our leased lands, a 43-hectare pasture, had to be returned to the state of Peru, along with everything within its boundaries: cattle, buildings, warehouses, crops, sown fields, and machinery, with a clear deadline to collect personal belongings and to notify all staff and anyone living inside its boundaries of this decree. It was a trial for the new distribution of wealth. From that moment on, it was announced that the land belonged to those who worked it. This was the first of what were called the cooperative moments, but they were more like violent expropriation than a technical and adequate guide for the redistribution of land ownership. They recited a series of declarations and published other decrees that would start the development of a troubled phase for the country. Our small farm was known as the pasture of Santa Rosa, but, as of that moment, was renamed "The Cooperative of San Ildefonso."

"Viva el Perú," said my mother, and Papá gazed at her in sadness, I guess like a Chinese potter whose best piece had been shattered. Because my mother saw herself as fully Peruvian, my father believed he remained outside the spectrum of her affections.

Mamá was a sympathizer, and believed in the idea that Sandoval, Uncle Andrés, López, Cabanillas, Lucio Rojas, and the women in the shack would become the true owners of the small farm. "They were the ones who worked the most," she said, "and Papá didn't exploit them, because his capacity for restraint was great." Still, his loving gaze towards her became darker.

For my father, that was crazy and it was even crazier that Mamá's face would light up thinking that the result of all those years of work, that is, the small farm would change hands without any further retribution.

Papá didn't know how to show his disagreement. When the telegram saying that Velasco had assumed command and that we must remove our things from the farmland arrived, he was overwhelmed by a mix of indignation and outrage. He grabbed my hand and took me for a walk on the pier of Macau. That day I knew that we would split up. That Mamá, despite the expropriation of land, was very happy with what was happening. For my father, it was a betrayal on the part of my mother and the Peruvian State, which the poor man thought he had done a favor planting rice near the Jequetepeque valley. He felt that the greatest betrayal was that of "El Cojo" and his ambitions, even though he saw everything as structural and could sense that these were global changes reacting to new policies in Latin America guided by the United States.

"This is always the way," he said, "you see what happens in Chepén or Chimbote without suspecting that it's the result of decisions made by politicians in Washington." President Belaunde had already begun the reform, though without enacting it, and this new organization of land ownership was already brewing. It was "El Cojo" who carried it out. My father knew that Velasco was only a general following orders. The idea of the reform had been developing for a long time and did not come from Velasco's Pro-Indigenous thinking, like Mamá romantically and justly wanted to believe. This was an achievement in the process of creating a new order for South America and its idiosyncratic form of farmland ownership. The ghost of Marx's ideas, translated into the concept of *caudillismo* in Latin America, Communism on hold because of the Cold War, and its counterpart in free market ideas were being tossed around at tables with academic ideas from North America and Wall Street. What was happening on my parents' small farm was like one tiny flea that had been shot out by jet propulsion from algorithms of another flight that—in a desert shit on by vultures, like the ones that surrounded us in Chepén—couldn't have happened any other way.

Mamá already knew that this would happen. Papá was not expecting this outcome, he thought that they would not be so affected. They were not plantation owners or landowners, but nevertheless, they paid their rent with profits earned from the harvest. The farm was a type of family inheritance. My mother thought they could hold on to the equipment, a vehicle perhaps, that at least they would give back the harvested grains, the thousands of kilos of stored rice.

We were barely able to even keep our little old green truck, the same one that got stuck in the sand a thousand times on the way to Cherrepe.

"This is the desert's revenge," said my papá.

We dislodged the truck that was stuck in the potholes to continue on our way. No trace was left in the sand. No trace of the effort spent to remove it from where it had gotten stuck. The wind would shift the sand so that, after a few minutes, nobody could imagine that the wheels of the little truck had been buried in it, and that nine boys had sweat their last drop to extract a vehicle that left no trace behind.

Since I didn't understand what was going on, I kept quiet. But I realized that the desert was alive and that it curses, casts spells, and takes revenge. Later, I also understood that the desert speaks, heals, takes away, and delivers, like the South China Sea.

In light of this new situation, my father sent my brother T.K. to study in the United States. I still haven't gained an understanding of how adults handle their business and the standing of their children in the world. I believe that my father had contacts in the Chinese Beneficiary of New York and they helped him bring my brother over. Pastor Vigo and his wife had already warned us that, in the United States, they practiced another religion, that the differences between the people and their food are very different from those of Peru. Thanks to the Mexican pastor and his wife and my visits to the second floor I knew that the world was

divided into religions. They were like puzzles filled with steps to follow, and it was fascinating to understand those rituals and the words with which they expressed their devotion. My brother easily aligned with them. That's why they promptly and easily chose an evangelical university in the Midwestern United States for him. (The Midwest refers to the states of Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin—states that also have vast expanses of barren land; perhaps they thought that there was no God there and that He had to be brought by hardworking and God-fearing migrants who followed absurd and impossible laws to a T). I never missed him, I don't remember us having anything in common. I hardly remember him. My brother T.K. left as soon as we returned from Macau. I know that my mother frequently wrote him letters. She sent him money and faxes and telegrams if there was any pressing need. Many, many years later, she visited T.K. regularly in New York. T.K. got married and now has a very successful hardware store; and yet, he was an absence that never meant much to me, much less I to him. There was something about our parents, they never made us bond as siblings. I remember a photo of T.K. in my mother's room and that he once wiped the corner of my mouth when I made a mess of myself with the fish stew during our stay in Macau. I don't know why I was never interested in him, nor why my parents never explained his final departure to me. Perhaps that was the only constant I grew up with, that there were people I interacted with and they could be pastors, siblings, friends, cousins. The intensity with which they popped into our lives could vary. Likewise, the time that our vital relationship lasted also varied. Then, for whatever reason, they set off, departed, died, traveled, and walked out of that empty space. Some left behind great pain and many questions, others weren't even noticeable, like my brother. The one who I could never forget was my cousin Guillermo.

One conclusion came to light from our different ways of life as Chinese migrants. We didn't live together like Peruvian families and we didn't try to form a community. We were always looking to leave for another place, fathers and sons, uncles and cousins were separated. Separation was a constant, not reunion. What were we searching for in our departures? Why did we keep at such great distances?

After the trip to Macau and my brother's departure for the United States, we returned to Chepén. That broke my father. Without saying a word, something withered in him, his demeanor perhaps. My father became the guardian of my brother's tools and the janitor of his workshop. My brother was going to be better off studying under the protection of good evangelicals, but I supposed that, for my father, it was like losing a part of his body. They say a son is like a light for the Chinese. If he leaves your side, something in you extinguishes. My parents never owned land again and Mamá continued running her grocery business. My father stopped speaking in his bad Spanish, reading, and walking in the desert. I think he missed his son a lot. It was because of this that he decided to return to Macau and separate from my mother. She accepted his decision without any major reproach. Now that I think about it, I believe it was the solution that she found the most appropriate for strangers, without the same God, with different languages in their hearts. We weren't happy as a family again. The house on Lima Street got bigger without my brother; it got so, so big that not even all the sand from all the deserts could have filled the space he left. For weeks, I thought about my brother and Pastor Manuel Vigo's missing hand, and I couldn't help thinking that my father and the pastor had something in common, both were missing crucial elements for survival: a son and a hand.

But I was more interested in knowing what happened after turning down the curve of San Pedro de Lloc and discovering the mysteries of the desert. Mamá, Papá, and my brother

disappeared from my memory like when the wind picked up and blew the sand away: their shapes lost forever.

It wasn't difficult to decide to leave everything and go to Macau. We complied with my mother's order, or suggestion, fully aware of the political and economic consequences that the chaos brought. My mother felt guilty for the first time in her life for having put up the picture of Velasco instead of the photo of Papá (she lamented Papá's inability to understand Peru). She began to feel guilty about everything, as if one guilt led to another and formed a chain of guilt; she felt guilty for having defended the farmers and she felt guilty that I hadn't been baptized. She felt forced to agree, without great resistance, to give up, to throw in the towel. I became an only child at seven years old. Everything relating to my father and my brother was difficult, and our connection became almost nonexistent. It was like they were loaned out to me, we didn't even speak the same language: my papá spoke Cantonese with T.K. and my mother spoke to him in Hakka. He was the oldest son. My parents also seemed to be loaned out to me, even though I could at least connect with them sometimes. After that stay in Macau, Papá said something: that it was better to be in New York until everything settled down in Peru. The process was going to take about five years.

But from that moment on, Papá and T.K. began to resemble those mirages on the Pan-American highway: they appeared and disappeared, they had shapes and were shapeless. They were untouchable, distant, shining, and imaginary.

Years later, I found out that my brother had become an American citizen. I saw him once, but I don't remember when. We looked at each other as if we were distant relatives. It was not only the different languages we both spoke when we were children, but our body language. He had a paler complexion, and took great care in his appearance; I was still burnt by that terrible,

unpredictable North Peruvian sun, covered in small welts and bug bites, kept short hair to avoid lice, wore blue jeans from my childhood and messy polo so I could run around through streets filled with dust and sand. Always like the mirage that seems to get closer and then—boom!—it disappears, without even having given you the time to rub your eyes. Papá and my brother were much more foreign and distant than my cousin Guillermo, Santiago, and the Vigo family.

My mother also had family in the United States, but they moved to Southern California, where the population has fought for its Latino heritage for decades. They feel different and proclaim their freedom in another way. The southwest coast of North America was the most like the Peruvian ocean. The same ocean scent. The overlap between flavors and food must have been the main factor in Uncle Alfredo's decision to move to San Diego. Mamá's family didn't have as many economic opportunities as my father's relatives. But both families felt a fervent desire to get away from Peru.

Only my mother attempted to stay, in a kind of stoic solitude, sharing her life with the former workers and laborers of the small farm. She opened a grocery store with them without an air of resentment, envy, or desire to own other land; she remained amongst the hot sands that began in San Pedro and almost ended in Piura, in the Sechura desert. Only my mother accepted the immense failure that led others to major lawsuits and lifelong political antipathy. That led to madness itself.

"It isn't ours," she said. "The pasture of Santa Rosa never was ours. It isn't a loss, a burden has simply been taken off our shoulders."

When my father told her that he would not go back to Chepén, she cleaned the floors with bleach, put on a light blue dress that had twenty-seven buttons lined with the same fabric down her back, and took down an enormous frame where a charcoal drawing of Papá, drawn by a

Taiwanese illustrator, was hanging, and in its place she placed a print of “El Cojo”: General Juan Velasco Alvarado.

My father didn’t stress about the change to our wall, a small betrayal that he conceded to my mother. But he wasn’t the type to make a scene or fight over domestic matters. Plus, he was convinced that pro- or anti-revolutionary political ideas could hardly be cooked up in a woman’s head out of the blue. He said that everything was cultivated at indecipherable mathematical levels in political laboratories to conquer the universe and the stars. That numbers governed life, numbers, and chance. That’s why he submitted completely to Mamá’s Peruvian hierarchy and let her decide how to run the household finances. What he didn’t let her decide was what he was going to eat and how he was going to spend the rest of his life. That’s why he chose the least Chinese place, but one that was closer to the Chinese mainland. In 1972, the year he left, Macau was still a Portuguese colony with a flashy, Bohemian, religious cultural life, with exchange between nations—a place worthy of a colonial enclave, full of casinos, brothels, and human trafficking and, above all, so much Chinese food. My brother, who had gone to live on the East Coast of the United States, never went to the West Coast to visit my mother’s relatives. He was not a man of the desert. Or he refused to be one ever again.

My education and my immediate future were also decided on without any major trouble. I would study at the school in Chepén and during the breaks, I would go visit my father in Macau. These decisions were made in a vertical and arbitrary way, with no possibility of my opposition: “You, Cristina, go this way, and you, T.K. go that way,” “I take this away from you, this from you; you have the right to this relationship, you don’t.”

Papá told me once that while they still had the land in Santa Rosa, he felt the force of the sands, and he could sense that the desert was unpredictable, that if you aren't vigilant, it can swallow you up. But that mystery drove him mad, showered him with delusions of grandeur.

No questions asked, my life suddenly changed. Now I had a divided family and, more than that, the enormous uncertainty of not knowing if I would see them again. I did find great comfort in the idea of seeing my father every year. I even liked the idea of not seeing him in order to miss him and then being able to play with him more and tell him about my adventures and my doings, but something died in him, it was like he was absent. I never really knew if he processed what I told him, but at least he pretended to listen to me, didn't ask questions, didn't smile, and didn't move from his place. He simply told me not to move my hands so much sometimes. I could not have taken a final goodbye.

None of us learned how to say goodbye. Perhaps that's why my three greatest loves were taken from me without warning.

I used to watch my mother when she cleaned the house. For more than ten years, I was a witness to her ritual. She had established a sort of silent conversation with the sand. The sand was idle and fickle. Sometimes it coated the plywood frame and the cheap glass stamped with the blue and sepia image of the soldiers from Piura.

When she got bored of doing the daily cleaning, she asked Doña Augusta, a toothless woman who was loyal to the strange habits of my mamá, to do it. I never understood what she was doing in our house—if she was keeping the books, if she was trying to accompany us in that strange solitude, or if she didn't have anything better to do with her life. What's certain is that, until I left to live abroad, she was an important character in everything that concerned household chores and the daily decisions. My mamá ran everything by her. Everything.

Only much later did I understand why Velasco's poorly planned implementation of cooperativism hadn't been a loss to her. For her, it was a debt that the desert was collecting in the face of the terrible injustices that had been imposed by foreign capital on the ignorance and the misfortune of the Peruvian farmers. For my mother, nature found paths that human reason and politics would never find.

I knew that my mother wasn't well. But no one, none of us were ever okay. So there was nothing to worry about. The spiritual suffering that hounded my family could only be reflected in the opaque and dark mirror of an increasingly terrible reality.

Treachery is the greatest blemish on politics, politics is the artifice of power and power is a word greatly misused in Peru. Peru has sought to empower itself in the international community, recording its imperial roots. It speaks of the sun that never shines on its vastness, of the nobility of its race. But when faced with the uncertainty brought on by the desert, you know the things they say are not true. Even with the dark skin and olive complexions of 70% of the population, the Inca blood everyone claimed to respect is hard to find on the sandy slopes of the coast. The people of the *hacienda* chose to seek refuge in a different type of transaction: Señor Ruiz, Señorita Rodríguez, Señores Balarezo, Tío and Tía Vera, the Hornas, shopkeeper Guzmán. They want their Spanish heritage to stand out. We, the Tongs, were split up, segregated from the idea of merging from very early on. Each one of us was sent by the wind to another place where we would find ways to continue living without the memory of the small farm and the noises of the fields of Santa Rosa.

Only my mother and I had other intentions, or maybe I should say, strange illusions.

Only I tried to understand the desert and blame it for the tragedies and the disappearances.

Only she continued cleaning, with infinite patience, the sand that got into our house every day.

One day, the picture of Velasco fell off the rusty nail and shattered. Fifteen years had passed since he expropriated the lands. My father had left and stationed himself close to the dampness of the river Perla in Macau, and my brother T.K. was learning to live in a world without us and us without them. Once I asked my father if the loss of his lands had bothered him so much that he sought revenge on my mother.

He told me: “It wasn’t land, it was sand. It’s not the same thing.”

My brother chose to create an academic life in English. Communication with me never flowed. I couldn’t understand it, because I didn’t have another parameter to compare it to. So that’s how it was between us and there was no reason to ask if it could have been any other way. It was only when Santiago disappeared that I was able to understand, up to a certain point, his decision to change his language and his life.

I continue to be convinced that Romance languages carry the necessary strength for life. I was convinced that I had something alien in me. In any case, I believed it out of necessity. Coming from another planet was a discourse that calmed me, it fed into my grave fear that I didn’t belong anywhere. It was the only thing that allowed me to cope with our differences as a family. Even more alien were my idiosyncrasies regarding what I thought or felt, which I struggled to put it into words. So I could confirm that other people didn’t feel that unusual thirst. That my Chinese brethren—even though they were more Chinese than me, more foreign in their manners—didn’t feel defenseless or excluded at high school. So I discovered early on that the way that I named my problems and the language that I used, that was what gave rise to my problems.

Guillermo seemed to understand me. Soon enough, we realized that those family moments were refreshing. In reality, families rarely find harmony. Guillermo and I managed to talk about difficult things a few times without hurting each other: DNA, cultural heritage, topics that my brothers and the other cousins didn't understand. Behind the door of his room in Chimbote, he had, in a very organized way, a stack of *El Tony* magazines, an Argentinian comic that I loved. He let me come in and flip through them. He also had a collection of 350 toy cars of various models. A red Lamborghini stood out, because it was the only one that he kept inside the original packaging.

"That's going to be the first real car that I buy when I move to the United States," he told me hopefully.

Mrs. Ingeborg

I only saw Joerg's mother four times: the day of our civil marriage ceremony, once when we celebrated Joerg's birthday at the Schloss of Tübigen, the time we visited her for Mother's Day—when the three of us went to the zoo for coffee—and the day that I handed her the box of things Joerg had left in our apartment. The saddest and most terrible day occurred six months after Joerg left for the Sahara and they called to notify me that they were terminating the search. They had located the whereabouts of the buyer of the Station Wagon that Joerg had driven into the Sahara. Apparently, real criminals—and not some petty politically motivated conmen like Joerg—found out about the money he was carrying and kidnapped him. Roby helped with the investigations. He recalled his journey, step by step, up until they were separated. It seems they argued a lot during their journey and Roby decided to come back earlier, on his own. According

to them, after mugging their random victims, they dumped the bodies right in the desert. Nine weeks after we had last heard from him, the investigators knew that this was what had happened.

After handing over every one of Joerg's belongings to his mother and signing a power of attorney for divorce, in case he ever returned from the Sahara, I was left with a marriage license, the widow of a man who had pierced my body and mind with his fervent desire to build a "better world," utopian and ethereal.

I said goodbye to Nürtigen with great anguish. Inside, I felt a desolation worse than the one in Chimbote, a shock stronger than the disappearance of Santiago. A mix of unease and devastation. A sorrow so great, that it had taken hold of every molecule in my body. Often, I found myself crying inconsolably for hours on trains, in the street, in public bathrooms, parks, on forest trails. I cried for hours, days, weeks, and months. Until I knew that I had to leave Germany and not turn back, for any reason. I must not look back.

My next destination was the cousin who grew up with portside tenderness. Guillermo was the first person that I wanted to visit. A person who has grown up in a port is lovingly and amicably chaotic, everything is restless inside him and that allows him to not require anything from anyone who arrives. He only welcomes it. In Guillermo, there was an instinctive anchor. Guillermo's papá was Mamá's younger brother. He had married a tusán lady from Piura. A beautiful woman who could dance waltzes and an Andean folk dance called *marinera* and who knew how to cook Peruvian dishes. Her best recipes were with green plantains and pork. Papá said that they were criollos, native-born, that they were not like us. That they were already integrated. He never mentioned the words purity, race, or ethnicity. There was, however, an loose comparison in which he seemed to have an advantage, but I did not. They raised us with the military-like strictness of children from the first generation of Chinese immigrants. I was always

excited to have Guillermo come visit Chepén. Peruvian dishes were cooked and Guillermo even convinced my mamá to play a vinyl record of Leonardo Favio: "O quizá simplemente te regale una rosa." Even a criollo waltz was okay. Those were good years. Making that journey across the Panamerican North, from Chepén to Chimbote, four or five times a year, was a healing movement.

It's because of my Buddhist nature, I want to believe, that I need some source to nourish my life, even though in this case the term "faith" was too ethereal. I was scared of knowing that I had made my existence too complex because I was part of a Buddhist lineage. Living so much inside of myself, uninterested in the economy, conventions, awards, and praise, instead only paying attention to what goes on in my mind, my feelings, my pulse. I was never considered selfish, but I knew that I wanted to follow the philosophical teachings of my father and not the crucified God that the entire nation worshipped. The liturgies, the ecclesiastic hierarchies, the steps to salvation.

In contrast to my father—the distant Chinese man who taught me the slightest bit of Buddhism—I'm a woman and I don't want to be a nun, nor do I seek spiritual perfection. I only want to believe in something, in someone. Siddhartha Gautama was a man, could I even think that, as a woman, I would have access to the privilege of being a Buddha? What is a Buddha's nature? What is a Christian being? I grew up hearing about the Buddhist nature and later on about the Christian nature of being, but Buddha and Jesus were men; prince or carpenter, they were men. They were not women.

The revelation presented itself almost in the form of an epiphany: I knew that the people who surrounded me would look at me as if I was crazy, stupid, antisocial, or narcissistic. It was an imminent danger. Asian religions weren't discussed a lot in Peru in the 1970s. On the other

hand, lofty ecclesiastic spheres made their affiliation with Rome clear, and their dogma prescribed salvation: attending mass, confession, taking communion, and helping thy neighbor. The Chinese, on the contrary, we were associated with the fast food business, gambling, a few vices, the slimness of our bodies, rice—lots of rice—and with the generalized idea that we loved bets, money, and superstitions. Buddha was not yet in the plans for mass dissemination.

My brother and I didn't have the same God or anything that brought us closer. Santiago and I, by contrast, had a lot in common. He studied engineering, he wanted to build wells, bridges, airports. That's why I believe he took a little bit of T.K's place when he left. With Santiago, sometimes we played together, he participated in my or cousin Guillermo's follies when we were kids. Sometimes, relatives come to visit Lima and tell us about T.K., how well he's doing in New York. On those occasions, we go eat *chifa*, it is a very important ritual for Mamá. I suppose that, for Peruvian families, it's like going to mass. They speak to Mamá in Chinese. I understand some things in Cantonese, but nothing in Mandarin. It is terrible trying to express yourself, it's so difficult to manage to say what one truly intends. Sometimes, I believe that the history of humanity could be synthesized in this attempt to translate the images that form in our brains into words that the other person can understand.

My mother suggested that I study German and understand the West.

She insisted: "The Germans will help us achieve a free spirit."

She told me the Chinese world and Papá's business were very complicated, that it was better to not look back. That my brothers could help with the business. She added that this was a difficult world where there was only room for difficult men. My father and brothers were difficult men. All of us had to learn a third language. We learned basic English. My brothers improved until they could express themselves with the fluency of thriving intellectuals. I

remained at the intermediate level, I chose to study German in depth, because there was a song in Gerrman that I heard at the Adventist church's summer camp. It was called "99 Luftballons." Mamá supported me, she told me that the best classical music was the kind composed and played by Germans, that this was a cultured and profound nation, and above all, they were free, choosing their destiny. That song was hummed by an exchange student named Tobias, who was from Offenburg. The truth is that I liked Tobias more than the song. German boys seemed the most handsome: something in the shape of their bone structure, their profiles, was so attractive to me that it took my breath away. "*Churros*," we called them in school, but I felt I was too unattractive for Tobias to feel something for me. They preferred Latin American beauties. I never learned to speak my father's language, because Mamá said it was a waste of time and money. She decided that I would stay to take care of her in Peru when she was old. With Papá, we assumed he had a parallel life, but we didn't dare talk about that.

Peru was considered a bad country by the Chinese. There was certainly still resentment over the way they were treated upon arriving at the harbor at Callao, after long and torturous voyages. It was better to try one's luck and work in the United States, Canada, Australia, or even Spain, in the worst-case scenario. I still didn't really understand why the successful Chinese immigrants preferred English-speaking countries. The quest to leave the continent (that's what they called China, because it was on solid ground and was not an island like Taiwan), was to amass a lot of money, they were seeking to obtain great fortunes. Education and political power didn't attract them much. They got addicted to casino games, dice, betting. There was a tendency to think that money came by chance. So I understood that, among the Chinese, the idea of the architecture of destiny, or working to cultivate the future was not widespread; instead, chance was the one who decided everything. Everything, from life to the compass that could guide you

to better worlds. Peru had only served as a transition, while they imagined a better future. And the future of a better world was always related to the English language.

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When we arrived in Tijuana, my cousin Guillermo told me that, yes, I could speak Spanish there, the residents understood it, even though some might answer me in English. I really liked speaking English, but my foreign accent was obvious and embarrassed me. My brothers and my cousins already expressed themselves with no accent. “Like natives,” and they felt proud and important because of it.

By having chosen German, my accent in English was terrible. They made fun of me a lot. I had to fake a sense of humor that I did not possess so that their jokes would not affect me, but I felt extremely uncomfortable.

In Tijuana, one entered a different phonetic-auditory world: the Mexican accent was different, the English accent contained other sounds and made new words and expressions. Every border has its cadence, its rhythm. Tijuana didn’t have a rhythm, it had jet propulsion and its destiny could only be to explode.

“Never ever tell your aunt and uncle that I brought you to Tijuana,” said my cousin Guillermo. “They would never forgive me.”

I didn’t respond, it wasn't necessary. My parents no longer cared about who I was with and where I stayed. I remember their reaction when I told them that I was in love with Joerg, a German I had met at school.

“Ha, a German,” said my papá, dismayed. “That’s all you need, to fall in love with a Nazi.”

To link any German with Nazism was the easiest argument that came to mind.

“You’re not going to learn German and you’re going to forget Spanish, you’ll be mute,” one of the boys in our group quipped when I spoke to them about the exchange program and my next trip. “Though being mute would do you some good, because you talk a lot of crap.”

Those remarks were a reflection of what they thought. I was the only girl that attended the Blue Rose frequently. My doubts, comments, and questions were sometimes childish and sometimes dumb, as if I didn’t understand the point in all of us getting together and following whatever Santiago proposed to us.

But I also know that they were full of protective fondness. As if, with their sarcasm, they relieved me of the real pain, which was remaining alone and impoverished.

In the face of those remarks, I turned around, and I took them like it was a friendly swat (“At least they talk about me, even though it’s to make fun of me. But they don’t ignore me,” I thought).

We were at the half-dirty counter of quite a noisy bar. I didn’t know if we were waiting for someone. Guillermo had already planned to meet one of his best friends without notifying me.

“This is Juancho,” he said.

A tall, sexy man, whose figure I barely saw, came closer and pressed a soft and strange kiss close to my ear.

“He’s my best friend,” Guillermo said, pleased.

I managed to see that he had glasses.

Thet wet kiss flustered me, but his touch was captivating.

I didn’t know whether to confront Guillermo either, because he had not told me that we were going to run into his famous friend Juancho.

"Hello Juancho," I said. "Guillermo has told me a lot about you."

That was true.

"What are you guys drinking?" he said with a very different accent from us. It wasn't a completely Mexican accent either. He spoke as if he had a hot potato in his mouth. My older brother, who was better suited to languages, would have explained it like that.

"Margaritas," responded my cousin.

He loves margaritas, even though he doesn't like them if they're too sweet.

"Your name is Cristina?" asked Juancho, running his finger across my mouth without a hint of shame or the respect I would expect from my cousin's friend in another time and another place. Then he put that same finger in my mouth.

I nodded.

"They're too sweet. Let's go to another place," he said when they served us the margaritas.

The drinks remained half-drunk, the glasses were enormous. I had never seen that kind of glass for cocktails. Everything was extravagant, grand, remarkable.

Guillermo and I followed him, as if we had understood that he was the king of the turf we were in. We had fallen hopelessly into his hands.

We entered another club, darker, newer, cleaner. We sat down at a glass table. The decor wasn't similar to the previous place at all, but it was just as ambiguous. It was like being in two places at the same time, as if we were starting to sense dormant fluids in our bodies that wouldn't let us stop being teenagers. The fantasies combined.

Juancho was the only one who was at ease, Guillermo wore a sly smile, but something in his body couldn't let go. In my family, we used to say that we all felt watched by our damned

grandfather. I was the worst, the youngest granddaughter of nine cousins: seven men and two women.

We were worthy descendents of Chinese-Peruvian migrants, where being a man was more important. Us girls were sort of like decoration.

Juancho laughed with everybody. Guillermo looked at him out of the corner of his eye and Juancho checked me out when he thought I wasn't looking. I couldn't take any more margaritas. I tried to imitate the confidence of other girls by rearranging my hair, doing and undoing my bun, asking Guillermo the time, and smiling at Juancho once in a while, the great Indian chief of the night.

Some guy approached, barely visible, moving to the rhythm of the music. They played "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and I felt capable of moving to the rhythm of the song. But truthfully, I was dizzy and my stomach clenched.

I wanted to be like the girls with red lips and big eyelashes that shook their asses on the dance floor. A Latina beauty, that I wanted to be.

"Do you dance?" asked the guy.

He didn't look Mexican based on the clothes he wore, more like a *gavacho* (that's what they called the gringos). My cousin had warned me that in Tijuana anything was possible, absolutely anything. Then I saw the image of the Our Lady of Guadalupe hanging above the bar and I thought about my brother's sadness. His wife and baby dead, just after they got married. They died in an accident close to New York. My brother was left with serious injuries, but he was the only survivor. Confucius seemed to be on his knees begging me to help my brother.

"There are no more descendants in our family," my mother declared harshly. It was as if fate hit her time and time again. T.K. had moved to New York and my mamá would have

difficulty staying in touch with her descendants. And there I was, smelling of margaritas, cigars, the cheap cologne of a horny Chicano, and the overwhelming feeling that life was worthless.

"I dance," I told him and pressed myself against him, who smelled of good cologne, marijuana, and fancy booze.

"My name is Confucius," he said with an exaggerated North American accent.

I didn't faint because I know how to act. I am a sham. A fraud. Why did he say that to me? How did this guy know that I was thinking of Confucius? He said it because of my Chinese face, I thought, and with forced, sarcastic giggles, I responded:

"And I'm the mother of Shiva or some white elephant."

He buried his mouth in my unwashed hair and I felt comfortable, as if the extravagance of the border, the proximity of the Spanish-speaking gringo were the only things that would save me from the mystical terror that had begun to invade me.

Meanwhile, when I looked at the table, Juancho and my cousin were kissing under a red and black spotlight. And they kissed as if they had done it all their life.

… Flower of Sand

Juancho was born in the year of the tiger. There are certain characteristics that a tiger has, according to the Chinese horoscope, that are not the ones that would occur to me upon seeing the animal. Traditional descriptions, like pride, vehemence, supremacy over others… Juancho should represent those, but the anthropology of Levi Strauss won the dispute there. In an article about race and culture, the distinguished anthropologist wrote that humanity doesn't flourish under a system of uniform monotony, but through the extraordinarily diversified ways of

societies and civilizations. This intellectual, aesthetic, and sociological diversity is not united by any cause-and-effect relationship to the biological level.

But diversity stems from two important characteristics. First, there is diversity in the order of values. Furthermore, there are many more human cultures than human races, given that the first is numbered by the thousands and the second in single digits. So, I had before me the Tiger from Tijuana or San Diego—a tiger regardless—but with distinctive features so different that it almost smelled like another animal. The snow leopard or the white tiger is the most beautiful animal there could ever be in the wild. Its coat and its awareness of its difference were its marks.

Juancho possessed the same characteristics as the enormous beast that I wished I had inside me, the gene that prevented coloring. But for the entire history of our behavior, being outside of the range of acceptance, coloring was a problem. From the outside, we looked like normal humans, with eyes and eyeglasses, inhabitants of the Third World, and, like all people who grew up surrounded by sand, we were always thirsty. In our historical DNA, however, something recessive cried out to express itself with another name to set a new course for our existence. We were not a separate species due to being such strange border creatures, impatient, unable to adapt anywhere. There was a color trying to form from the two of us. Not royalty, or some subtle skill, but something was struggling to emerge in us, something that could be compared to an energetic action, a mortal slap, a definitive footstep. I was afraid of the lonely, endless road; of taking that immense step that would profoundly change my arid gaze, the one in love with the desert. Many years later, in China, I found out that a snake and a tiger, should never get together.

From some relatives who were in touch with the Chinese chiromantic traditions, I learned that ghosts, cleansing rituals, positioning one's writing table to face southeast, and many other things, are common tricks that allow one to bear the ups and downs of life. Also, it's important to know the precise year of your birth to be able to predict the kind of relationships that two people will have. Whether the couple will love one another or, like the white tiger, the male will kill the female while making love to her.

Juancho and Guillermo met at my cousin's first job, delivering pizzas, an odd job that only employed foreigners. They say that it was love at first sight for them.

"I'm crazy for Asians," Juancho confessed to me. "I grew up watching kung fu movies, they're graceful and elegant. We Mexicans are annoying, vulgar, fat, unruly. Asian-Americans have a lot of style in the way they dress and all the men are feminine, and aren't ashamed of it, unlike us Latinos."

Little by little, I found myself immersed in a strange trio. Juancho made love to me behind closed doors and maintained such a special friendship with my favorite cousin. I was on cloud nine. I never had an ounce of fear about what could happen. Despite having seen Junacho and Guillermo kissing multiple times, I never spied on them or asked about the depth and extent of their relationship, how many times they made love, or if they were only affectionate friends.

I ended up pregnant because that's what I wanted, I never used condoms, nor did I use any birth control. I dreamed of a belly the size of the earth. As if the new life was going to right all the wrongs of the desert and my mamá's need to know that she is a grandmother. I didn't understand why people used contraception. Mexico was the mother of fertility. Obviously, I sensed that my ovaries were crying out to be used, all of me was screaming to be the oasis, a home for some sand being that had gotten under my skin. I felt victorious with the fetus living

inside of me. All of Mexico lived inside of me. All of Mexico, Tijuana, San Diego, Chepén, and the Sahara lived inside of me. A rose of sand grew in my belly. It's a girl, I knew. It's a girl and her name is Guillermina of the Sand. My daughter, yes. My daughter named Guillermina of the Sand. Finally, I was going to show my parents that our family name would carry on. I don't know why people seek eternity in names. Tijuana is eternal, it doesn't need a new body.

Santiago's black Converse All-Star was also eternal in our gaze, like the symbol of a forced good-bye.

The womb has questions and answers that neither the heart nor the deserts know.

•••

I don't know who the woman crossing the border is. A young woman? An old woman? Does she carry a child in her arms or a sandbag?

After that intense, bright sunny day on the Greyhound, I squeeze Guillermina, I give her more of my tit. Even though she doesn't want to continue breastfeeding, she plays with my nipple. It hurts, blood comes out of my breast. I arrive in San Diego, I have a small light-blue bag with painted clouds on it. I look for a place to relax, it's very late. I remember the night Guillermo, Juancho, and I were sprawled on the beach. We were naked, some guys tried to chase us. We returned to the bar and wore clothes that belonged to Junacho, he was the cautious one of the group, for he had brought polos, shorts, and extra pants. We drank coffee. We looked at one another without saying a word.

We didn't touch. They looked at me more intensely than I looked at them.

They accompanied me to bathe me in a public shower. Juancho also had clean towels.

They held hands as a sign of complicity and I felt that my womb was full.

“Don’t worry, Juancho,” I told him. “Neither you nor Guillermo will ever hear from me again.”

“You’re crazier than I thought. First, you mess around with your cousin’s friend,” said Juancho, “and then you get pregnant. And now you want to disappear. If I had known… You just destroyed my life.”

“I haven’t destroyed anything,” I answered, victorious. ”No one will know that it’s your child, or that you and Guillermo are a couple of homos.”

“Chinese bitch,” he insulted me for the first time. “You’re just doing it to fuck with me, to make yourself interesting, you’re a butch, you’ve been on the verge of committing suicide, your German husband left you because you were incapable of making those eggs work, and I, being an alpha male, made the wrong female work. Get an abortion, please, get an abortion.”

I felt that for the first time in my life I had won the war against my family of serious men.

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