

## Clinging to the Light

One particular day springs from the past like a sleepless hound unwilling to give up his prey. Mendoza is buffing a car, standing at the MoneyGram line, walking home with take-out food when he feels it again, that vibration in his bones, as though he were still sitting at the back of the Unimog breathing the dust rising from the gravel road. That distant morning he had been so absorbed in his thoughts—his mind circling around the ferrous trace of blood on his fingertips—that he didn't notice when the truck downshifted from the painful groan of the past three hours to a low rumble because they were approaching their second destination of the day. Only when the Unimog shuddered into a full stop did he realize they had arrived. He absentmindedly peered through the rails, relieved at seeing just another Andean village—a dusty central square with a crumbling church and a few adobe houses stubbornly clinging to the slope—but his body tensed when he saw that, unlike most of the villages they had been to, this one hadn't been deserted.

Locals, perhaps fifty, crowded in the opposite corner. The wind must have fooled them, casting the approaching engines across the valley, but now, understanding their mistake, they were turning their heads to gape at the truck and the armored jeep emerging from a cloud of dust. Their surprise didn't last long.

They all launched themselves into a run—the elderly leaning on walking sticks, the women carrying babies on their backs, the youth sprinting amidst warning shouts. They turned the corner in a flurry of ponchos and a thumping of sandals and they were gone.

Mendoza heard the safety locks around him but his eyes remained on the dust lingering in the air. The locals were fleeing to hide somewhere in the slopes—a cave behind a boulder or a creek concealed by a cornfield—where they would lie low, waiting. In a couple of days, after the engines were long gone, they would be back in their houses sharing pork rind soup and celebrating with bouts of nervous laughter the fact that they had seen the troops right on time. Their lives would resume as they had for generations, weathering one war after another, even those fought in their names.

“False alarm, you guys,” Urbay said, pushing his safety lock. “Just civilians.”

Gamarra mocked Urbay’s Andean Spanish, “*Jest cevilians, the insurgent says.*”

“Insurgent, your mother,” Urbay said.

The quibble over the word “insurgent” stopped when sergeant Galván, who had climbed down from the cabin, dropped the tailgate and threw a contemptuous stare at them.

“What the fuck are you sissies waiting for?”

That was the moment when Mendoza would tune out. It was easier to follow orders imagining he was watching a movie—that one about a platoon in Vietnam, for instance—the realistic, gut-wrenching scenes confined to the screen. But that day, he simply let his mind wander to the scent on his fingertips as he joined the others, already forming a line near the Unimog.

They were in a more or less straight formation when the captain clambered out of the jeep, the Browning bobbing behind him as he gripped the side and jumped down, landing hard with a wince. He quickly straightened up and fixed

his Raybans and walked towards them, his left foot leaving a trail in the dust. He was about to shout the usual orders—pair up and all of that—when Gamarra pointed at the largest house in the square, the communal house.

The deep midday shadows under the eaves had prevented them from noticing the fresh writing across the facade: TEN YEARS OF POPULAR WAR. The glimmering bottom edges of each letter still oozing heavy red drops.

“Not there,” Gamarra said. “On the rooftop, captain sir.”

In the brief moment that it took for the captain to raise his eyes, they all heard the rhythmic sound, like that of two hands clapping in the open. It was a common experience. Only when the low rumble of the engines had died inside them could they hear the lunar silence that magnified distant sounds—boulders rumbling in a river, a donkey hi-hewing in a cornfield, flies buzzing above a pool of blood—sounds that came sharp, undiluted, freshly minted for their hearing ears.

That midday it was a red flag flapping against the blue sky.

The captain examined the flag perhaps thinking that it would be useless to give chase. The insurgents who had hoisted it had had enough time to hide their weapons under a pile of corn husks. Now, they must be running among the fleeing civilians, indistinguishable from them. The fact that they spoke Quechua—or pretended to speak only Quechua—made it impossible to get straight answers. The captain turned to the Unimog where Silva still sat at the back pointing his weapon at three insurgents handcuffed to the bulkhead.

They had found them earlier that morning at their first destination, sitting in the middle of another central square, their ankles and wrists tied up with *cabuya* ropes like offerings to the gods of war. The captain walked up to them—his left

foot lagging on each step—and after crossing his arms he examined them with the annoyed expression of a motorist looking at a flat tire.

Three teenagers in shirts with logos—Coke, Inka Cola, Pilsen—who could have gone unnoticed in a crowd. Their dusty faces crossed by streaks of sweat gave the impression that they had just been playing soccer, until you looked at the oldest, old enough for the Andeans to address him like a man. His right eye was a narrow slit on his swollen cheek.

Sergeant Galván said, “*Rondas*, captain sir?”

Tired of years of being harassed by both sides of the war, locals had begun forming *rondas campesinas*, groups of mostly men armed with machetes.

“Who else, Galván?”

“But—they—they’ve left them alive.”

“Who knows why the Andeans do what they do, Galván—do you?”

“Me? Of course not, captain sir.”

The youngest insurgent stared at the captain with clear eyes, like those of a priest brimming with uncrushable faith, and then he glanced at his comrades. The three of them began chanting something in Quechua, though the refrain predicting their illusory final victory was in Spanish: *Del pueblo será la victoria final*.

The captain stepped back and pivoted on his good leg and delivered a hard kick that landed on the young insurgent’s stomach. The thud echoed in the empty square as the boy curled up like a snail pulled out of his shell. Sergeant Galván flicked the flap of his holster and the captain turned to him, stooping to meet his eyes.

“What the hell you think you’re doing, Galván?”

“Trying to help, captain sir.”

“Do I look like a moron in need of help?”

“No, captain sir, you don’t—I mean, my apologies, sir.”

In the past two weeks, since they left command headquarters in Castrovirreyna, they had been going from one deserted village after another. They had stumbled upon stray chickens in the streets, half-eaten bowls of soup in the kitchens, smoldering embers in open-range stoves, even a blind mule still turning around a stone mill, but never a single soul. Until that day.

Curled up with his forehead on the ground, the young insurgent was breathing with clenched teeth, his flapping nostrils blowing puffs of dust. The captain stared at him, perhaps considering another kick, but instead, he said, “Galván, bring me the satellite phone.”

Then he turned around. “What the hell are you all waiting for? Pair up, make sure we are alone in this godforsaken village, and bring me any Andean you find, by the balls if you have to.”

Mendoza had paired up with Saldaña, the driver, to patrol the unpaved street that climbed the western side of the village. For a while, they advanced in short spurts, one going ahead with his weapon at the ready while the other covered, ending each maneuver with their backs against adobe walls worn out by decades of rain. But when the captain could no longer see them, they switched to walking side by side, until they reached a corner with a low stone wall. More houses laid ahead, scattered along a well-trodden path, but technically that was the end of the village.

“Professor,” Saldaña said. “I gotta unload.”

“What the fuck, Saldaña?”

“Fuck yourself.”

“I’m not gonna wait.”

Saldaña nodded at the path. “By the time you’re back, I’ll be done.”

Mendoza hesitated.

“Oh, shit, professor. Don’t tell me your balls are shrinking.”

Saldaña didn’t wait. He jumped over the low stone wall and his boots landed softly, as though on a bed of dry corn husks. Mendoza reluctantly took the path. The solar silence magnified the rustling of his boots on the dust and the chirping of a bird nearby and the creaking of the eucalyptus trees swaying with the winds behind a row of agaves. Feeling the high altitude as a numb pressure on his temples, he walked into a couple of one-room houses where he found gourds with roasted corn, a distaff hanging from a thread, a rag doll staring at him with dry corn kernels for eyes, but no signs of life. The last visible house stood across a field where lavender flowers rolled in the wind.

He kept going, his boots sinking into dried out mud now, until he reached a rain gutter filled with weeds that separated the path from the house. The door was a flattened out calamine sheet fastened to the frame by rusting nails. It seemed useless to go in. He would see a larger house, perhaps a kitchen with guinea pigs scurrying under a wooden bench, but nothing more.

He glanced at the village. The distant rooftops were a shivering red line under the cerulean sky. The unpaved street, with some patches of green *ichu*, remained empty all the way to the low stone wall. Saldaña was probably still engrossed in one of those comic books he always carried with him. Mendoza pushed the calamine door.

It opened to a hard soil corridor. He examined an orchard with yellow flowers on his left and an open-range stove with some embers further down and an open door at the end of the corridor. He waited, his weapon heavy in his hands, the high altitude throbbing in his temples, the crisp air bringing traces of hot

eucalyptus. He was about to turn around when he heard, or thought he heard, a faint moan coming from the open door.

He inched along, softly landing each foot, his forefinger grazing the trigger. Cold waves swept up his legs on each step. His breath slowed down. His heart raced. He was a few steps away from the door when the moan became distinct, a woman in pleasure, or in pain. He stopped. One part of him wanted to turn back. The other wanted to get closer. He was still undecided when a flurry of ponchos and glimmering machetes emerged from the door and charged at him giving him barely enough time to fire his weapon.

Pushed by the close-range shot, his attacker dropped on his back, the machete clanging on the stone at the bottom of a pillar. It was an old man with unruly gray hair, a few white whiskers around his thick lips and tiny eyes in the midst of a nest of wrinkles. Mendoza had aimed at chest level but the shot had reached the old man under the jaw. From the wound, that resembled the exposed gill of a fish, blood oozed in dying spurs, dampening the mended shirt collar. The tiny eyes sparkled for an instant before they turned opaque like wax.

Mendoza felt a tingling sensation in the back of his neck as he pointed at the door, waiting, ready to fire once more, but no one else came out. He could hear now his own breathing and the distant rumbling of a river and from up close a faint but distinguishable moan.

He stepped over the dead man, a sense of anticipation flooding his mind like when he used to descend the narrow, dark staircase to The Cathedral. Guided by the moan, or perhaps attracted by it, he reached the door, stopping with his back to the wall next to the frame. He silently counted to three and turned to the door and pried the interior. For a moment, it was only a flat darkness filled with hot air redolent of eucalyptus, but soon he could see a steaming pot at the back and on the right a recumbent figure that gradually resolved into a woman lying on a

straw mat with her multi-layered skirt rolled above her hips and her legs spread apart.

She whispered something, calling him with her hand, a gesture that elicited an irrational fear in him, a need to run away, or perhaps shoot at her, shoot every round in his magazine. But he didn't. Her gesture, which meant, *Come, help me*, moved him. It was a call he had often ignored at The Cathedral.

Still aiming at her, his eyes fastened at the encounter of her legs, he stepped closer, trying to understand what was going on. He was a couple of meters away when he realized that he was looking at the largest vagina he had ever seen in his life. The woman waved her hand, calling him, and he inched closer. The vagina was not only large but it was also filled with a black, glimmering, wrinkly thing that looked like an enormous prune.

"Help, please," she whispered in Spanish, her voice pushing through a wall of pain, her forehead glistening with sweat.

Mendoza hesitated, a wave like hunger traveled inside his bones, but seeing the woman in need shifted something inside him, an inner center of gravity that tilted, pushing him to drop his weapon and kneel next to her on the moist soil. Breathing through clenched teeth, her nose flaring, she quietly waved him towards her vagina.

He crawled on his knees to face the big wrinkly thing bulging out. Unsure of what to do, he rolled up his sleeves and cupped his hands, ready to receive whatever was coming out. The woman groaned, a long, painful whispered groan and the black wrinkly bulge grew, gradually becoming a head, a big head smeared with a yellow substance. Mendoza hadn't taken a good hold of it when the woman groaned again, a long whispered groan, and a tiny shoulder popped out and suddenly, as though pushed from inside, a tiny body slipped out and landed in his hands. It was heavier, stickier than he expected.

The tiny body stretched out with tentative, jerky motions, a slippery marine creature exploring a waterless world. The diminutive mouth gasped for air and a bubble appeared under the tiny nostrils and it grew until it popped giving out a nutty, ferrous smell.

“Give it to me,” the woman whispered, and Mendoza passed it to her, the umbilical cord following the little body like a tether follows a deep sea diver. She turned the newborn around, holding the cord out. “Cut it.”

He pulled his field knife and held the rubbery cord with one hand and inserted the blade into the loop. One tug was enough to sever the only physical link that would ever exist between those two human beings. The other link, the invisible one, will grow as strong as the time the newborn spends with his mother. Perhaps one day, when the newborn was old enough for the Andeans to address him like a man, his mother will tell him that an unknown soldier helped him come to this world.

By the time Mendoza had closed the rickety calamine door behind him, Saldaña had jumped back onto the street and was running along the path towards him with his weapon at the ready, his helmet dangling from his utility belt. Mendoza was still emerging from the moment—the trace of blood on his fingertips, the nutty smell of life, the invisible bond he knew nothing about—when Saldaña shook his arm.

“What happened, professor?”

“Where?”

“The shot—I heard the shot.”

They would have to drag the old man’s body to the central square. Mendoza would have to inform the captain about the woman, the newborn. It was un-

predictable what the captain would do. The invisible bond might never stand a chance.

His tongue clicked when he spoke. “Just—guinea pigs.”

“You hunting guinea pigs, professor?” Saldaña turned his mistrustful eyes to the calamine door. The camouflage bandana on his head squeezed the veins in his temples. “Nah. You’re just busting my balls. Let’s take a gander.”

“I just did,” Mendoza said, stopping him with his hand. “It’s clear.”

Saldaña slapped his hand away. “Okay, professor, what is it?”

Mendoza shook his head but Saldaña kept staring at him. Mendoza noticed then the three fresh drops of blood on his right cuff. How did he get them? He remembered rolling up his sleeves and rinsing his hands and rolling his sleeves down on his way out.

“Guinea pigs my ass,” Saldaña said. “Shit, professor, you’ve fucked an Andean, haven’t you?”

Mendoza started towards the path and walked in silence along the field with lavender flowers rolling in the wind. Saldaña caught up with him and gripped his arm.

“Come on, professor, speak.”

Mendoza slapped Saldaña’s hand away.

In the central square, the three young insurgents had been handcuffed to the bulkhead in the back of the Unimog. The captain had called Castrovirreyna to appraise the commandant, perhaps hoping for a recall, but instead, the orders had been to continue to the second destination of the day where a special-forces convoy would rendezvous with them the following morning.

Now, three hours later, they were in that second destination, carrying the prisoners in the Unimog and facing the fresh lettering on the communal house and the red flag flapping on the roof. The captain called out.

“Domínguez!”

Domínguez stepped forward. “Ca—Ca—Captain sir?”

In other circumstances, the exchange would have elicited a round of barely restrained chuckles, but that day, perhaps feeling the weight of the red flag flapping above them, no one felt like laughing when Domínguez stood to attention in front of the captain.

“Domínguez,” the captain said, nodding toward the flag. “Take that shit down.”

Domínguez was ill at ease with spoken language but gloriously fluent in the language of the body in motion. He could juggle four loaded magazines above his head, walk on a tightrope with his weapon at hip level, stand on his hands with folded knees. He seemed to perform all of those feats not so much to entertain them as to calm some inner force, the restless demon that had made him leave Tarapoto, his hometown in the Peruvian jungle, to join the circus from which he had been plucked to serve in the army.

He slung his weapon on his back and ran around the communal house, leaving a silence ruled by the flapping flag, until he emerged a couple of minutes later atop the red-tile saddle roof. He stood on the ridge with outstretched arms and inched towards the pole, the handkerchief tied to his arm fluttering in the wind.

He groped for the flag and tugged at it but the flag didn't budge. He tried again, pulling with his whole body now, and the flag snapped out of the pole and he waved it above his head eliciting a round of cheers. Had a photographer been tagging along, like in a conventional war, that victorious Domínguez atop the roof would've made the front page.

Perhaps drunk with his small victory, he misstepped and his boot dislodged a heavy roof tile that slid down grinding on the roof and came over the eaves and landed with an ominous thump that echoed in the empty central square. Domínguez flapped his arms, trying to keep his balance, but he too came down, his boots cracking the tiles on each whirl, his body coming fast towards the edge. They were convinced that he would resort to his superhuman flexibility and catch the edge of the eaves at the very last second but he twirled beyond the roof and fell head down, landing with a crisp crack.

He lay splattered on the dust like a marionette whose strings had been cut with a single blow. Under the red flag wrapped around his head, they heard a gurgling sound, like that of a man quietly drowning in shallow water. Only at that moment, in that silence, they realized that the loud thump that preceded his fall had been the single shot of a lone sniper.

One hour later, they came back to the central square bringing the news that, as they had expected, the village had been thoroughly abandoned. The sniper, perhaps a barefoot teenager who had patiently waited to take his shot, was gone too.

The last to come back was sergeant Galván, followed by Urbay and Rodríguez, each carrying a shovel. Sergeant Galván stood to attention in front of the captain.

“Done, captain sir.”

“Did you dig deep enough?”

“No need, captain sir.”

“Are you fucking pulling my leg, Galván?”

“Impossible, captain sir—I mean, we found a grave, dug already by the river.”

They had found plenty of fresh graves before but never one still open. The captain pondered for a moment. “What about the red shit?”

“Burnt, captain sir.”

Mendoza was right there, standing next to the captain, aware that Domínguez, perhaps the most endearing of his comrades, was gone, but a part of him kept going back to that morning, to the meager weight of the slippery newborn in his hands. He had steadied the rubbery cord, squeezing it between thumb and forefinger, almost feeling the blood running through. He should’ve clipped it, somehow, perhaps with a shoelace. He forgot.

The captain turned to him. Mendoza saw himself twinned in the Raybans while the captain zeroed in on the cuff with the three drops of blood, dried up now, the color of chocolate.

“What’s that?”

“Captain sir?”

“The blood in your cuff, Mendoza. Don’t play stupid with me.”

Saldaña was standing behind the captain, following the conversation, like someone waiting for a silence to chime in.

“My nose, captain sir,” Mendoza said.

The captain shook his head, perhaps considering a disparaging remark, but sergeant Galván interrupted his train of thought.

“Captain sir?”

“What is it, Galván?”

“That door, captain sir.”

“What door?”

Sergeant Galván pointed at an open door in the corner where the locals had been gathered.

“What’s with the door, Galván?”

“Look carefully, captain sir.”

Everybody turned to look. Under the bright sunlight, fiercely bouncing off the whitewashed adobe wall, the door seemed at first just a neat, solid rectangle, but on close inspection you could see yellow spots inside, faint like stars of a distant constellation. The captain started towards it, followed by sergeant Galván, and everyone else tagged along in a cautious semicircle spiked with barrels.

They had seen plenty of doors open to nothing of interest inside—a few potatoes on a table, a hardwood bench, piles of burlap bags—but as they got closer to this one, the yellow dots resolved into candles, perhaps sixty-four, lined up along the edges of a large table, their flames quivering around a dead man who lay on his back in a white shirt, clean burlap pants and recently mended shoes. But it was not the dead man who elicited a collective gasp.

There was a woman sitting on the hard soil floor, near the table, her folded legs covered by a multi-layered skirt and her shoulders wrapped in a black shawl. She was holding a rosary made of heavy stone beads. The captain took his Raybans off and examined her like someone trying to read a sign written in a foreign language. She carried on, as though rather than armed soldiers they were nothing more than a pack of stray dogs.

“What do you think, captain sir?” Sergeant Galván said.

The captain glanced at him. “What do I think about what?”

“You know, captain sir—with all due respect, it’s been weeks.”

“Weeks?” The captain turned to sergeant Galván, stooping to meet his eyes, and Mendoza thought he’d have to tune out, perhaps picturing that movie in which the *droogs*, clad in white pants, groin protectors and bowler hats, walk into a house. But there was no need. The captain clasped his Raybans back on.

“Whatever you’re thinking, Galván,” he said. “It’s not gonna happen. I don’t want anyone laying a finger on this woman. I’m making you personally responsible.” The captain seemed to reflect for a moment. “One must respect the dead.”

“Captain sir?”

The captain stared at sergeant Galván.

“Yes, captain sir, of course.”

In a way, Mendoza had managed to tune out. In the shuffle, he had ended up standing a few steps away from the door, close enough to smell the heavy redolence of burnt wax as he looked at the strange scene inside. The young woman with her black hair drawn in a braid, a rosary in her hands, sitting on the floor with a straight back and a paper bag with roasted corn and a bottle of water at arm’s length because she intended to mourn for hours, perhaps days, the man with shiny nails in the soles of his shoes.

The captain threw a last glance at her and shook his head and then started towards the armored jeep, perhaps to pick up the satellite phone. For a few moments, they saw him walking under the mute sun, his syncopated gate leaving a trail in the dust, the silence making him look like a skinny lunar walker. It seemed that he would just keep walking beyond the jeep, all the way out of the village, never to be seen again.

They spent the early afternoon setting camp in the central square before they turned their attention to the prisoners. Looking for a good place to hold them, they broke the rusty lock in the communal house and the doors flung open to what seemed to be an abandoned school redolent of moldy corn. Some hardwood benches were piled against a wall with a faded map of Peru. On the back wall, under an unframed portrait of the president of the republic, they found a heavy

table loaded with burlap bags filled with corn. They dragged the prisoners from the Unimog and handcuffed them to the legs and gave them some water before they closed the door.

Then they set up the folding table at the other side of the Unimog, where the captain sat to eat, solicitously waited by Panta, his driver. Only then they all gathered around the *quina* tree and took turns to warm up their beans on the Rogers burner and sat down in a circle to eat.

That was the time of the day when they would fool around sharing sips of pisco on the sly. Domínguez would walk on his hands. Rodríguez would pull the unexpected piece of sweetbread from his map bag. Gamarra would talk about his parents—his mother who spoke Quechua, his father who carved models of hubcaps that were later manufactured in the USA. Silva would boast about his feather-weight fights when he was still a promise. Even Mendoza would reluctantly speak about The Cathedral—the days going out to scrounge money, the days going in to stay for as long as possible—but never about the black dogs that once drove him to the sea. Their conversations were peppered with gross remarks or blunt jokes or even farting contests. That day, perhaps thinking about Domínguez, they ate in silence.

Once in a while, they stole glances at the door in the corner, catching glimpses of the candles that, as the silent afternoon grew darker, seemed to flicker with a brighter, warmer light. In the cobalt sky, some stars began to sprout, hesitant at first—Sirius near the horizon, Betelgeuse above it—and then they suddenly filled the ultramarine darkness above them, giving them the false impression that if they reached far enough they could grab a handful of stars.

The names of the stars, the best corners to find a mark, the unknown faces of his parents—those were the kinds of things Mendoza thought about at the end

of the day. Sometimes, when there was a light source, he would read a few pages from the small leather-bound book he had found in one of the villages.

That night, soon after they had finished their rations, down to the leathery nougat at the bottom of the box, sergeant Galván stood in the middle of the circle.

“You all heard the captain,” he said. “Not a finger on that woman, understood?”

They all muttered a reply, which they had to repeat until sergeant Galván was satisfied.

“Now,” he went on. “I want Rodríguez and Panta first, then Saldaña and Urbay from midnight to four, and Silva and Gamarra from four to eight.”

You didn’t have to be in the army for sixteen months, going from one small Andean village after another, to understand that if you were to sleep only four hours, the best ones were from midnight to four in the morning. Stay up through that time, if you managed to stay up, and the next day your legs would burn and your temples would throb and your backpack would grow twice as heavy. So, as soon as sergeant Galván walked away, Saldaña stared at Mendoza, barely pointing at him with his head.

Saldaña woke him up before midnight. Mendoza opened his eyes, his head still tangled up in a dream, and was about to send him packing when he remembered. He had walked out of the house, leaving the newborn on his mother’s bosom, right when Saldaña had reached the door. Mendoza hadn’t said a word about it but Saldaña knew he was entitled to at least one favor.

Mendoza sat up, steeling himself for the Andean night that reached him as a cold, crisp wave.

“Wake me up,” Saldaña said. “Right before four.”

“Sergeant Galván never checks.”

“Just do what I say.”

Mendoza didn't reply. He picked up his jacket, which he had laid over the blanket, and put it on and closed the zipper to his chin. He put his helmet on and grabbed up his weapon, ice cold to the touch, and walked to the communal house where Rodríguez leaned on the wall next to the double door.

“Where's Saldaña?” Rodríguez said.

“Go to sleep,” Mendoza whispered.

“But sergeant Galván will—”

“Just shut up—Saldaña was here.”

Rodríguez seemed puzzled but he simply shrugged and walked towards the camp where the others were fast asleep. Mendoza stationed himself next to the double door to guard the prisoners. In the jeep, Urbay sat behind the Browning and wrapped himself in a blanket and lit a cigarette. The silence of the night brought the distant rumble of a river, the insistent chirping of crickets and once in a while the hooting of a couple of owls. The pale moonlight outlined the roofs around the central square and the starry sky was now crossed by the faint trace of the Milky Way. The only terrestrial source of light was the glow coming from the open door in the corner. It reached the central square as an elongated living trapeze that quivered with the flames burning around the dead man inside.

For about an hour Mendoza tried to ignore the cold by letting his mind wander like a fox circling under the Moon. He thought of the scent of life on his fingertips. The sound of a twig breaking when Domínguez fell. The unfathomable depth of the ocean seen from the pier. The strange stillness that sometimes befell The Cathedral. Then, again, his mind went back to the newborn.

Soon the cold began to sip through his triple-layered jacket. In the jeep, Urbay looked now like a big bundle behind the Unimog, perhaps fast asleep already. Mendoza began to pace in front of the communal house kicking his legs and stopping once in a while to do some squats using his weapon for a barbell, but the cold kept creeping up his bones. He extended his walk, getting gradually closer to the open door, almost feeling the warmth of the candles burning inside.

He wondered whether the woman he had helped that morning had been able to muster the strength to walk out of the room holding her newborn in her arms. She would've found the old man—perhaps her grandfather—dead on the ground, a pool of blood caked around his head, flies buzzing above him. He pictured her going back to the room to set her baby down in an improvised crib and then coming back to haul the old man by the arms, pulling him all the way to another room, the one with a table, and after clearing the surface, laboriously hoisting him on top. Only then, panting, she would've rummaged for some candles to guard the old man's descent to the lower world, as the Andeans call the place where you go after death.

He was picturing such a scene when he reached the open door. The warm redolence of wax had grown stronger and the woman had moved to a fleece set closer to the head of the table and her paper bag contained now a baked potato and a sliver of cheese, but she was still holding the stone rosary and still mourning the dead man.

He glanced over his shoulder. The central square was covered by a pale-blue lunar dust. The communal house was a deep-blue rectangle, its roof outlined by a silver line under the stars. Everything else—the Unimog where the captain slept, the armored jeep where Urbay looked like a bundle, the camp—it was all quiet.

Perhaps that was the moment when his life took a turn, so that later, many years later, after he had endured solitary confinement, military prison, uncer-

tainty in the streets of Lima, he would find himself accosted by the sleepless hound as he tried to eke out a living in a foreign land. He would never know. That night under the stars, without thinking of the consequences, he simply turned to the inviting warmth inside.

He realized now that the candles had been refreshed. Their irregular flames—some tiny but steady, others long and shivering—shed flickering lights around the dead man, casting moving shadows on the walls. The air was warm, heavy with the smell of burnt wax, a smell that reminded him of the moment when he reached The Cathedral.

The warmth wrapped around his legs as he pulled out a cigarette. He stooped down to a flame, feeling anticipation, like when a candle opened his heart to the light, an inner light that filled his bones with the steady, warm glow that preceded the luminous abandon that sometimes lasted hours.

“It’s bad luck,” he heard, or thought he heard. He could as well be hearing someone in The Cathedral. Or the woman of that morning, speaking over her shoulder, her newborn already breastfeeding in her arms. He turned to the woman sitting on the ground. She added, “It’s a dead man’s candle.”

He put the cigarette back into his pocket and squatted next to her and her female scent reached him, eliciting a strange confusion inside, a flicker of desire blinking in some distant corner of his mind, a craving that so far demanded no action. He dropped his weapon on the hard soil floor and turned to her. The candlelight outlined her profile with a thin golden line.

“He wouldn’t mind,” he said.

“The candles shouldn’t be touched,” she said, without looking at him. “To *Uqhu Pacha* they belong already.”

She spoke the Andean Spanish of the south, her Rs rolled, her double Ls marked, her syntax infused with the flavor of Quechua.

“How did he die?”

“What do you care?”

“Was he killed?”

There was a long pause. The flickering candle flames set the dead man’s shadow in motion again. He seemed to be flying in a cerulean sky. Perhaps he was, to the lower world, guarded by the woman he was leaving behind in this world.

“It was fair,” she said, startling him.

He had almost forgotten his own question. His mind had gone from the shadow on the wall to the growing attraction, still not fully realized, but already throbbing somewhere, a distant rumble about to take over, like the power that used to pull him back to The Cathedral.

“Who killed him?”

“A machete.”

“Ah, you mean a machete against a machete is fair, but a rifle against a machete is not?”

She didn’t reply. He glanced at her again and now he saw the woman of the morning holding her newborn against her bosom and sitting on a bench near the table where the old man lay amidst a few lit candles. She would be waiting, guarding life and death.

Mendoza wondered who will light candles around his body. Who will sit next to him? Who will dig a grave for him, perhaps near a river? The pangs of desire subsided at the thought of his death, a death he will face alone, without close kin around him, most likely in a village like this one. For a moment, he imagined marrying the young widow and settling in that village.

Perhaps, for a while, people would avoid him, crossing to the other side of the street in fear of his strange appearance. Then, after a while, they would make fun of the few words he would have learned to sort out the essentials. And one

day, with luck, he would be able to speak their language and understand their jokes. He'd dress like them. Cut his hair like them. Eat their food. By then he'd be working in the fields or tending chickens or even running a small grocery store. One night, after closing up and cleaning the hardwood floor stained with aguardiente, he would walk back home under a sky full of stars, just like this one.

He imagined all of this, still looking at the shadows cast on the walls, still aware of the scent coming from the woman. He turned around struggling to put in words the crazy thoughts bursting in his mind, flashes of possible futures, but perhaps he moved too suddenly, because, as he turned, he saw that the stone beads wrapped around the woman's hand were attached to the handle of a machete that emerged from under her shawl. The glimmering blade came at him, giving him barely enough time to push it away with his forearm, but the blade cut through his sleeve and grazed his skin.

The woman pulled the machete back and was about to strike again, when his training, or the primal drive that took over when he was in danger, made him spring at her and bring her to the ground and grab her armed wrist. Her breath, heavy, salty, reached his face. He wasn't quite sure what he was fighting for. There was much confusion inside him.

He was trying to shake the machete off her hand when the first shots hit the adobe wall with heavy thuds, and without thinking, he sprang to his feet and picked up his weapon and ran towards the door. He jumped into the darkness, seeing more shots coming at him, giving him barely enough time to dive onto the ground, his elbows landing hard, dust rushing into his lungs. Sudden flashes, like instant yellow flowers, blinked above the jeep as the heavy .55 bullets swept towards the corner dislodging chunks of plaster behind him. Some shouts came from the camp where the others were scrambling to their feet. In the short silence

that followed, Mendoza heard, or thought he heard, the thumping of sandals running into the darkness around the corner.

He jumped to his feet, intending to pursue them, but at that moment he heard a deafening ding in his helmet, a sound that flashed like an inner yellow thunderbolt. He stumbled forward, the ground shifting under his boots, the loud ding ringing in his skull, more shouts coming from the camp, but garbled, as though in a foreign tongue, when he heard another shot, this one simultaneous with a burning pain in his chest. He stopped and let go of his weapon and began to fall, endlessly it seemed, into the lower world, but as he fell, tasting the dust in his mouth, he smiled at the thought that all his life he had been clinging to the light.