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# SOUTHWEST REVIEW

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• S I N C E I 9 I 5 •

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## 2015 David Nathan Meyerson Prize for Fiction



V. H. Hernández's "The Many Deaths of Zaragoza Matjeel" at times feels like a wonderful amalgam of Elmore Leonard and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Hardboiled and poetic. Deeply empathetic. Mr. Hernández is especially good in capturing the vagaries of aging and moments of human connection that are fleeting but eternal. The lyrical precision of Mr. Hernández's language is often striking and enviable. He knows how to tell a story about people we care about and captures hard-to-grasp emotional states, always with an eye to what keeps us human, under any circumstance. "The Many Deaths of Zaragoza Matjeel" is a tremendously moving and, at times, darkly funny story about what it means to fight for what's necessary: the attempt to tell your own story in the face of more powerful ones, to put off the dying of the light even while stuck in the gloaming.

—Scott Blackwood, Judge  
*Southwest Review*  
2015 David Nathan Meyerson  
Prize for Fiction

Named for the late David Nathan Meyerson (1967-1998), a therapist and talented writer who died before he was able to show to the greater world the full fruits of his literary potential, the David Nathan Meyerson Prize for Fiction consists of \$1,000 in prize money and publication in the *Southwest Review*. With the generous support of Marlene, Marti, and Morton Meyerson, the award will continue to honor David's memory by encouraging and taking notice of other writers of great promise.



## The Many Deaths of Zaragoza Matjeel

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THE MAN, THE LOVER, THE HUNTER, THE SKY  
—ALL OF THESE THINGS COMBINED.

Many a rancher is trying to make sense of the meaning of life  
amidst the War on Drugs, a conflict fueled by American fun,  
Mexican politics, the Hand of God?

Nobody knows the first name of Zaragoza Matjeel who tried hard  
to live an uncomplicated life.

Nobody knows what would happen if Latin America  
stopped paying, yet profiting,  
from its rich & blind neighbor's drug problem.

Who wins glory in the war against a word?

This man would, if given the option, declare war not on Terror  
but on Embarrassment and not on Drugs but on Distant Suns.

Yet another full-out war against the unkillable.

Cuando Nixon entró al templo, this whole show was already finished.

*Alios ego vidi ventos; alias prospexi animo procellas.*

« Feast of Saint Catherine the Clear 2015 »

## I

With his index finger frozen on the trigger, Zaragoza reminds himself that a deer, from an environmental standpoint, is nothing. A piece of metal going through an animal's boiler room is not much of a danger when placed in the long and various list of things that threaten the whitetail. From a nutritional point of view the animal pales in comparison to other more savory, more efficient, sources of substance. Yet, in that chilly November air, Zaragoza frames with the rear sight of his Ruger No. 1 Varminter that secret peace two hundred meters away from him. He envies it.

Is the deer ever aware of being hunted? Could hunting be a theatrical relationship based on consent? As the animal lowers its head to the grass Zaragoza's time slows to a dropper pace, satisfying a primitive and arterial need: that something ancient, something precious, something man lost when he ran to the city without stopping to look back or ponder why. It's embarrassing, he knows, to aim at game from the windowsill of his own home, technically still placing him inside his ranch's rustic living room. Be that as it may, come sunlight, it is not deer what Zaragoza is hunting.

## II

Like everybody else, Zaragoza believed that if the violence of the Mexican drug cartels somehow came to lick him he'd know, better than all those countless victims, how to respond. This certainty, this *I-will-save-myself*, quickly diminished with the racing of the needle toward the more rapid parts of the speedometer: his new Ford Lobo struggled to outrun the men following him closely, in a white, and probably juiced up, pickup truck. He just couldn't get rid of them. They chased him along that everyday road that led to his ranch—from all places—the San Judas Tadeo. He was close to home but because Zaragoza had little Miriam on the copilot seat he had never felt so defenseless.

"Move to the back!" He shouted at her pointing to the cabin's backseat.

The white truck was now closing in on the Lobo. Outside Zaragoza's window, an adolescent brandishing an unmistakable cuerno de chivo, the goat-horned AK-47, sprang from the white pickup as from a diabolic toy. Pointing at Zaragoza, the boy shouted:

"¡Párate cabrón! ¡Párate!"

"Stay there," Zaragoza murmured to Miriam behind him while he let his foot off the gas pedal. The powerful Lobo shivered towards the side of the road.

"Please, just stay there."

They were a sledgehammer. Three young men surrounded his truck, and to Zaragoza's horror, they were unmasked. Either they were going to kill him, which could explain why they were unconcerned with being recognized, or they were untrained kidnapers—something that could be worse than death, for if torturers, they could be clumsy or savage. As if witnessing an explosion, Zaragoza immediately covered his eyes. One of the adolescents yanked him out of the Lobo and onto the road.

"Encuérate pinche viejo."

He had to take off his boots first before he began to strip, before the hot pebbles of the road pressed themselves against his bare knees. To die like this...naked and kneeling after seventy-nine years of living a more or less dignified life. A sculpture of Byzantine patience, the old man had his shoulders forward and his head bowed down. Looking destitute with his hiatal hernia and open-heart operation scars, Zaragoza heard one of the assailants open and close the doors inspecting the Lobo. Didn't seem to find Miriam.

Danger reassured Zaragoza he still wanted to live, even when he sometimes doubted it—he was now sure. When Zaragoza heard the electric sound of the Lobo's sunroof opening, honoring that clear Tamaulipas sky, one of those bastards playing with it, most likely, he realized it could all be a car robbery instead of a kidnapping. This belief strengthen him so he began to plead for Miriam.

"Please, just let me ta..." he said before the butt of a rifle hit him on the right side of his face.

"¡Cállate, pendejo!"

The pain in his jaw, the teeth dangling over his tongue, the metallic taste of blood, something wet and humiliating stopped him from talking now, maybe the fear of more. He had pissed himself a little

with the impact too, he who just three days ago shook hands in the Ford dealership, a new man buying a new Lobo, though he could only fare it with a loan.

Of the three young men who seemed coked-up and in a frenzy, only the eldest, twenty-two at most, spoke.

"Stand up," he said putting the barrel of his AR-15 on Zaragoza's nape.

"Por favor, no..."

"You are *fucked*, viejo, if we can still see you after fifteen, fourteen..."

And by the count of thirteen Zaragoza was flying, forgetting the pain in his knees, his arthritis, his truck. The old and loyal adrenaline pump made him run and lift his right foot on top of that wobbly fence that ran parallel to the highway and that he almost successfully jumped.

By the count of ten he was already on the agricultural side of the fence, the side of life. By eight he was a force, running desperately, his arms moving back and forth almost like a young man's, except he felt every piece of his skin bounce.

"Dios, Dios, por favor, Dios," he muttered without knowing it, wanting to dive into the crops—the count was down to five—but his feet and his eyes reassured him of the worst: the harvest was alfalfa, the shortest one he had ever seen. Alfalfa! Useless thing, you wouldn't hide a dog! And when he heard the rifle bursts behind him, the unstoppable TAKATAKATAKA of the AR-15 and the two AK-47s, which happened not at zero but at the count of three, Zaragoza knew he was dead.

Those last precious seconds slowly bled. There was drumming in his temples. The phantom cold circle of the barrel still felt pressed against his nape. The cold texture of the leaves ran sticky between his calves. Death smelled like the potassium and the phosphorous that fertilized the field. It smelled like shit. Pieces of metal whistled above his head while he crouched and kept on running. So bad they were, shooting above him with no aim and now around him.

To die like this...

His only hope was a cornfield an impossible minute ahead of him, and that only if the world kept on galloping below his feet and towards them at its incredible and manic speed. He thought of zigzagging, but all of a sudden, in the back of his head, he was struck by something hard and cold that began to expand and engulf the whole of his skull and the inside of it too: it was hope.

What if they were deliberately missing?  
What if they were just playing with him?

While Zaragoza ran toward the cornfield in an almost perfect straight line—his bet placed—he heard amidst the sonic booms of the high-caliber rounds what sounded a lot like guffaws, and even a howl. That blessed corn was drawing near until it embraced Zaragoza completely. Yes, they had humiliated him, but they had also spared him. He felt grateful to the maize, grateful to his attackers, incredibly grateful to everyone and everything, in fact. The adrenaline waning, it was not until the cornfield's blanket became a dozen meters thick that Zaragoza understood he had really survived. It was then he remembered Miriam.

### III

The field ran toward the limits of the San Judas Tadeo. He had to cross irrigation canals, interminable rows of alfalfa, and fields of soybeans covered with manure until he got to that no-good plain where nothing grew and which bled into his own ranch. Almost, he was home.

"What are they going to do to Miriam?" Zaragoza asked once in his home.

"*Soo*h," Genaro answered, as if to calm a horse, "try to relax."

"Genaro, you," Zaragoza's hands climbed on his foreman's arm, "tell me..."

"Don, I..."

"... what am I going to tell Silvestre?"

"... don't think you should worry now."

"He's going to tie me to the back of his truck soon as he hears they took Miriam..."

"Relájese."

"... from me. They took her from me..."

"Don, hey. Hey! Look at me. Try to..."

Zaragoza had told—no... he had promised—Silvestre he'd take care of Miriam as if she was his granddaughter. He could still see her dark-brown sentimental eyes worrying as the engines roared. It had to be her, who, as soon as Zaragoza entered Silvestre's ranch, had come out to greet him, all love and tenderness, circling the new Lobo. She had

always liked pickup trucks, the air messing up her hair while riding in the trunk, the purring of the cabin, the chromed details and the aggressive headlights, the...

"Was there?" Genaro asked.

"¿Qué?"

"Something that could lead them to the ranch, inside the truck?"

Zaragoza closed his eyes and ran his twiggy fingers across his torso. Yes, there had been. Oh no God have mercy.

"In the glove box," Zaragoza said, "I had all the documents for the loan... financial statements, payrolls. Everything."

There was also something else he didn't tell Genaro. It was none of his business, a document Zaragoza had asked a public-notary friend of his to certify wrongly "as a favor," showing he had a third more heads of cattle than in reality, exaggerating his assets... not a big crime, really, cheating a bank, if one sees it from an ethical standpoint.

Zaragoza sat in a wickerwork chair covered by a wool blanket Genaro had given him in the house's only bedroom, remembering. Had the ambush not happened on the unpaved road that led to his own ranch, had it not happened in whore daylight—in that shadowless hour of noon—had those bastards not lingered after the robbery, smoking a cigarette, talking on their radios while Zaragoza spied on them behind the cover of the maize, it would have all been less humiliating, even digestible. Now they had an exaggerated version of his income, not to mention his address. It just took imagining the opening of that plastic compartment, absurd and grey, for Zaragoza's throat to close dry. With three yellowed and useless teeth still clenched in the hand with which he had yanked them, Zaragoza felt like a child again as he ran his tongue inside the new holes in his gums, feeling them bleed.

"Don? Don?" Genaro was asking him something.

Being robbed was like swallowing chunks of marble.

#### IV

That afternoon, after sundown, a call shook the pale-green Ericsson phone that Zaragoza kept in the kitchen, an old rotary dialer. He looked at the phone with distrust, as he always did, and answered on the very last ring. It was Pamela, his youngest daughter, who after

the long traditional greetings of Mexican telephone courtesy asked:

"How have you been, papá?"

"I've been good, *mija*."

"You sound strange."

"I do?"

"Haven't been hunting have you?"

"Nah," he said, too much in pain to even enjoy his own lie.

Zaragoza had an infinite patience for his children, all whom lived in the United States. He listened to them even when they recommended he do yoga, chai tee, or Omega 3, as if he didn't live in the Middle of Nowhere, Mexico. He also wasn't terribly offended when they forgot to call. They were all busy with their free guggle at home and filling their two fridges, one in the kitchen, the other one full of beers and gaytorades by the garage door. He had visited. He saw himself as a good man, had taught the few Chicano grandchildren he'd met how to give people the finger as "a tool for good health and life," he had told them with a chuckle. Why was this happening to him?

"Are you listening?"

"I'm here."

"Mario wants to visit you soon," Pamela said, "I think in a week or two."

"Is he coming alone?"

"No. I think Zulema's going with him."

He was a box of treasures, that boy. And as for Mario's second wife, Zulema, she was Cuban—and pretty too. Zaragoza liked her sometimes more than his son, because she was *uncomplicated*. In Pamela's background noise Zaragoza could hear a TV set, children shouting, and, perhaps, a warning?

"What does he want, Mario?"

"He..."

"¿Sí?"

"He wants you to come live with us, in the States."

"Gracias."

Zaragoza hung up. He appreciated the heads-up. Always had loved her the best, Pamela, because of that exactly, her loyalty. Some business, with that son of a bitch, that Mario, coming to visit him with shackles...he was only missing the cage!

Zaragoza stood up and went to the door of his ranch home. What

would Zaragoza do as a parasite in one of his sons' stucco, no-good, suburban, wooden houses? What would he be in an inner-city barrio? To add insult to injury, almost no houses were made of brick in the U.S. of A, nothing made to last, except perhaps its institutions, and even those... No! How long till he was put in a retirement home, to age with those racists he'd known on that trip up north, getting as far as Memphis in the summer of '59? World, world.

"San Judas Tadeo spare me," Zaragoza murmured, touching the wooden doorframe that lead to the serene view of his ranch.

## V

To the rumble of *I'll-die-whenever*, the humble and orange F100 pickup truck, new in 1980, left the Rancho San Judas Tadeo driven by Genaro, who was taking Zaragoza to the justice of Ciudad Victoria, the state's capital. Outside the graffiti-ridden offices of the Policía Municipal, around 7:15 AM, they joined a line of people who were there early to make sure they would all get to declare.

"Nineteen eighty-six..." the police clerk told Zaragoza. "Yeah, that won't do. Can't take it. These type of old drivers' licenses are cloned all the time, sir. It's for your safety."

"Please..."

"Do you have a voting ID?"

"No," Zaragoza said, "what for?"

"Birth certificate?"

"Already told you it was in the loan folder, inside the glove box."

"Look," the officer said, "without the certainty that you are who you say you are I cannot file a report on your stolen Lobo. It's nothing personal."

Zaragoza was sent to line up in a sort of court in the Civil Register, on the other side of town. He was in a bureaucratic limbo, having lost in the robbery the only copy of his birth certificate. The original record of his 1933 birth had been long lost in the havoc Hurricane Caty created when she deviated from Houston and fulminated Cd. Victoria without so much as a warning—a true catastrophe at the time. After he gave a foggy account of his own birth—Amish mother, poor revolutionary father—he was given a new birth certificate, at

last proof he was born and therefore existed.

Zaragoza and Genaro returned to the police station and sat next to a jupiterian mother whose children orbited her frantically. She asked Zaragoza what crime he was going to file a report on.

"Somebody stole my truck," he said without even mentioning Miriam.

God knows who was paying that woman for her questions.

"If that's the case I wish there weren't so many Feds in the street so they would find your truck sooner."

"¿Qué?"

"You know the Federal Police doesn't trust the Municipal Police. The papers said the Feds gunned down six municipal police officers yesterday, some local cops who were caught protecting that awful narco, el Nazarino, in Nuevo Laredo. Every cop here's having kittens, afraid they might get canned, fired, or shot. You don't read the news, señor?"

He didn't and because of that precisely: it depressed him. Zaragoza didn't want to know a thing about no Nazarino, no Pablo, and no Juan, or who got shot protecting whom and why. Before he said anything to the woman an officer with her index finger asked him to approach her station.

The ballerina-bunned officer looked tired. She had a midafternoon coffee on her desk and had taken off her shoes. As soon as Zaragoza described his assailants, the officer knew immediately which drug cartel the gang belonged to, which neighborhoods and towns they were based in, and, most important, whom they answered to. They were under the command of her own boss, the tragically and recently disappeared corrupt Chief Padilla.

Normally she would follow protocol and direct people like Mr. Zaragoza into Commander Padilla's half-lit mahogany office, a lair of sorts that perpetually smelled of intrigue and cheap tobacco, but Padilla had vanished as soon as he heard his officers had been caught red-handed, that they were given a bullet for truth. Usually, in that vacant office, rugged men could *come to an understanding*. If the old man could pay to *accelerate the investigation*, good, if not, well, tough luck pop, tough luck. Nobody asked the old man to be poor.

Genaro whispered something to Zaragoza's ear and slowly the senior nodded.

"Lady," Genaro said, "please don't be offended but we'd like to address this with... someone with whom we could reach an *agreement*."

"Yes," Zaragoza said, "at least we'd like to be heard by a man."

"Look," the officer said, now sure she could send the old man to la chingada, to fuck himself, "there is not much we can do. You have already filed your report..."

"Please," Zaragoza said, "what about Miriam?"

"As I said before, your dog has already been listed as one of your stolen possessions, see?"

She showed him an item on the inventory that read: VACCINATED GOLDEN RETRIEVER.

"She isn't mine, ma'am. The puppy isn't even mine, ma'am."

The officer looked sternly at Zaragoza and in sotto voce and bureaucratic confidence said:

"I recommend you keep that hope of finding your vehicle," she fumbled with her shoes below, perhaps trying to put them on, "and place it in the hands of God."

The next day Zaragoza filed his report with the Public Ministry, where he suffered an almost identically humiliating and patronizing day. After Zaragoza realized everyone in the Ministerio Público was trying to weather the nightmarish and labyrinthic paperwork that follows cops killing cops, he remembered the officer's advice about surrendering his Lobo to Providence, and did that exactly.

## VI

On the agreed day for Zaragoza to return Miriam, Silvestre sat on his porch and looked as an orange spec closed in on his ranch. He was expecting Zaragoza but that couldn't be... the old F100? What happened to the Lobo?

When Silvestre saw there was no barking golden flash of panting honey in the pickup's bed, that nothing darted out of the cabin when the doors opened, he stood from his rocking chair and very slowly went on to meet Zaragoza, who was just getting out.

Silvestre grabbed his friend by the shoulders. He stared at Zaragoza's face directly, the craggy and earthlike wrinkles that made him, and noticed immediately the unmistakable countenance of grief. Had the

two of them been alone instead of being watched by a dozen ranch hands Silvestre would have fallen to his knees, grabbed the soil with fury, but instead he gave Zaragoza the customary abrazo, the hug given as a greeting between all Mexican gentlemen.

"Tell me," Silvestre said very slowly, "tell me you personally dug the grave, that you yourself carried her and said a word, something solemn..."

Half a bottle of tequila later, the two men watched the sky paint itself the color of mandarins, bruised mangos, tangerines, and other fruits Zaragoza knew he had seen before but by that point of the evening their names he could not remember. Silvestre brought an ashtray made out of a conch and served Zaragoza more tequila.

"I thought you had killed her, somehow. Not as in *murdered* her, but just killed her—you understand me?—ran your Lobo over her while backing up or something." Silvestre breathed with relief once more. "God damn it, don't get me wrong. Tragedy what happened to you. I am glad you are alive, so very glad about that, but you understand me. I am glad Miriam's alive too, somewhere."

"Right."

"Hell, that bitch was so smart, Zaragoza, so smart... that fire in Soto La Marina, remember that? All the dogs were like '¡Fuego, fuego!' running around like crazy, trying to alert everyone, but Miriam, ran to the flames, barking, as if to defend us. Jejeje."

"Weird dog. I loved her."

"Me too. When I listened to the news. I always felt she was displeased with the establishment. One day, by the way she looked at me, I even thought she was becoming an anarchist or some shit."

A long laugh grew on both men very slowly.

"Believe you me, Zaragoza, that bitch's going to outlive us both. You just wait and see."

"Sorry, Silvestre."

"For what?"

"For," it was taking Zaragoza a superhuman effort, "you know..."

He made a sad gesture of losing Miriam.

"Sheeeeit," Silvestre said, "don't be sentimental here, man. Please. No need."

Silvestre slapped Zaragoza on the back, let his hand rest there and

shook him gently.

"Courage, man! Nobody died. What more do you want from life?"

"That's a poor man's comfort."

Silvestre sat upright, looking at Zaragoza's eyes.

"Ah... there's something wrong?"

Zaragoza looked at his friend, the easy glow of the drink abandoning them.

He told Silvestre what was in the glove box. His friend's nostrils flared with disgust and he said nothing. Both men somewhat angrily looked away from each other and straight into the distance. The underbrush around Silvestre's ranch was thick with many huizaches, mezquites, and matorrales; anybody could be hiding there.

"What you are trying to tell me..." Silvestre said, "w-what you are trying to say... is they know where you live *and* how much money you *don't* make."

"Agh! I don't know anything, Silvestre. It all depends if they opened the glove box, no? Too soon to tell if someone will show up."

Silvestre nodded painfully and took out his pack of cheap unfiltered cigarettes. They both sat in an increasingly deepening silence, trying to conjure an ace up their sleeves, a word only, one that could shed some good light on Zaragoza's situation, something that he himself—intoxicated by the stench of his own problem—was barred from thinking, something so simple and clear that if it didn't mean life it would at least mean the promise of life. They spent more than an hour with their finger on the blister, without either knowing well how to break the silence, examining and re-examining the meager resources at their disposal. After an hour and a half Zaragoza was already thinking of excuses to make Silvestre talk but his friend was still in that fierce and wordless combat. After much of that icy silence Zaragoza begged:

"Just say it, Silvestre."

"You're fucked."

## VII

To occupy himself with something productive, his only method of facing the unsolvable, Zaragoza decided to repurpose the orchard at

the back of the house to plant three nogales with the help of a couple of his ranch hands.

When he heard the noise of a car parking in front of his home, Zaragoza thought it'd be Genaro, who had gone to the ranch's warehouse for his track blade, but instead he saw a tall woman approach. She was folding a map, brown hair showering her to the waist.

"Hellooooo!" she said in English. "¿Cómo está uste' Don?"

"I'm caked in dirt."

Zulema walked around the trees, baffling his hands, and hugged him.

"Who cares! It's good to see you, Papá."

Behind her came Zaragoza's son, Mario, who kissed his father's cheek.

"Did they change the country road that lead to Gabriel el Ahogado?" Mario asked pointing towards the ranch entry. "It used to head south, right?"

"Maybe," Zaragoza said saving his son some face. "They are always changing things around here."

"What are you doing with that shovel, Dad?" Mario asked sounding amused. "Look at you! Let them dig the holes. Don't go hurting your back."

It had not been a minute. Not even one fucking minute, and there he was... *at it. Get out, let them, do not, make sure, will you*—for God's sake, stop!

"Why are you planting nogales here anyways? Can't you get walnuts from the Téllez Ramirez for..."

"I am not planting these trees for me, pendejo," Zaragoza insulted him. "I am planting them for México."

Then he threw the shovel to the side and went toward his house, leaving Mario and Zulema aghast, as he stepped on his own shadow.

He tried to make it up to them, in his own way; he let them stay in the ranch house's only bedroom; ordered Genaro to go barter and kill a goat for dinner, but Zaragoza's efforts did not seem to alleviate the tension that had unfolded over the San Judas Tadeo, nor did they dispel the rumors of senility that lingered over him.

For three days Mario and Zulema tried to subtly propose to Zaragoza the idea of him joining them in the U.S., but with a scathing dryness every gesture Zaragoza made shouted he'd not leave, nor was he in

the least willing to discuss it. He was born there, damn it. He was going to stay.

The night before they left, Zaragoza decided to settle the matter with an eighteen-pack of light beer. A nervous Mario grabbed the deck of cards Zaragoza had purposefully left lying around. The three of them sat at the kitchen table as Mario shuffled the cards, ran cuts, and heated the deck as if they were going to play, though nobody had talked of doing so, or which game. An aluminum lamp hung over them and seemed to sway to alleviate the unpleasantly definitive pressure that emanated from the unmovable Zaragoza, whose only action, while deeply staring at Mario, was drinking beer with a stiff, almost tyrannical, arm.

"I don't feel like playing," Zaragoza said.

The sound of Mario shuffling cards lingered.

"We don't have to," Zulema said.

Mario purposely avoided his father's eyes and said:

"You don't want to play, Papá?"

"No."

"What do you want then?"

"No, Mario. What do *you* want?"

"I want to play cards."

"I'm sure they have cards in Texas, no need to come all the way down to San Judas to play."

He'd been waiting all afternoon to say that, ever since he stumbled on the cards inside his kitchen drawer. Mario looked at Zulema as she partly covered her eyes with her long ringed fingers.

"Don't forget yourself, Mario," she whispered.

"No! That happens to him!" he pointed to his father using his chin. "You are choosing not to see *all the things* that are happening around you, old man. How good if your situation..."

"And who tells you I need..."

"...was as you say it is, 'living in the middle of nowhere.'"

"...some help, boy? My father and his father are buried here."

"Aha."

"Your own grandfather..."

"Listen to him," Mario told Zulema, "he's gonna mix the two songs. He says my grandfather was born under this roof but in an incredible family mystery the story *also* says my grandfather helped

his own father build this ranch house, with his unborn hands, I suppose, bec . . .”

The cement floor seemed to tilt and rush to Mario’s face but that was only after the unopened Tecate hit him between his left eye and ear. His right arm barely kept him balanced on the chair while his knees bumped on the table. Zulema had stood up and was shouting as Zaragoza grabbed another beer can to throw to his son but desisted.

“¡Pero qué hace!” she shouted.

“Being an adult gives you a lot of rights, Mario! But insulting me in my own house is not one of them, hijo de la chingada!”

“Please!” Zulema shouted, though Zaragoza had returned to being a stone.

“Oh-oh my . . . Jesus . . . am I bleeding?”

“Shut up, you are just a jackass who didn’t deserve to crawl . . .” but then Zaragoza looked at Zulema and stopped.

“You. If you ever plan to give a son to this ingrate first you need to tattoo this ranch’s name on your tongue, understood?”

“Papá . . .” Zulema said.

“Bargh!” Mario said to his wife. “I-I-I, told you he’s not used to drinking!”

“I think we are, huh, going to go to sleep now! Okay?” Zulema said walking Mario to the bedroom by the arm. “We are all going to sleep now! OKAY?”

Zaragoza banged his fists on the table, spilling even more beer:

“No!”

It took Zaragoza two minutes to finish his beer. He crushed everybody’s empty cans and put them in the trash can with the deck of cards, foamy and soaked with spilled beer. Zulema came out of the room wearing a long T-shirt and silk shorts. She leaned on the doorframe between the living room and the kitchen.

“I don’t want to ever see you do that again.”

“I’d rather hit Mario than another inmate in the prison-home.”

“In our home, you’d stay in our home! If you are not comfortable in Elgin you can switch. See if you like life in Tucson, San Antonio, or Salt Lake City—with the others. All the siblings have already talked about it and you can always return here if you don’t feel at home over there. At least *try it*. There’s no pressure.”

“Chzzt,” Zaragoza said disparagingly.

"Why don't you come with us? Really . . . please Papá. Look how we found you. All beat up. You shouldn't go hunting anymore."

"I *have* been hunting, many times in fact. But *this*" he drew his hand to his face, "is *not* because of hunting. Do you understand that? I told you I fell from a horse at Silvestre's."

"Look, alright. I just want you to know that at the end of the day, you are loved, ok? Loved well. Neither Mario nor I are going to force you to do whatever you don't feel like doing."

"That's right."

"But even if . . ."

"That's good, *mija*. Go get some sleep. You got a lot to drive in the morning."

She looked to the floor, bit her lip, and went toward the bedroom, where she gave the old man one sad last glance before closing the door.

Good. He now wanted them out of the ranch as soon as possible, even feared for them, but was unable to express it. Zaragoza made his way to the house's entrance, stepped out and down the porch's stairs and sighed. Enough cold had set in for Zaragoza to see his breath against that black and punctured sky that revolved madly above his humble ranch and self. The air felt damp and the soil was loud. He walked to Genaro's house, where Zaragoza was staying, and thought of his daughter, Pamela, in that stupid city, Salt Lake City. Who ever came up with distances?

In the morning, he refused to bid them goodbye, but before leaving San Judas Tadeo, Mario and Zulema left him a present on his kitchen table: it was a leather box of sorts. Inside, it had some expensive tequila from one of the last Mexican-owned distilling houses, in a decanter designed by a foreign designer who, on top of being famous, must have been legally blind or something. Limited run of a hundred, the box said. Zaragoza unperceptively shook his head. Inside the box there was also a note with Mario's terrible handwriting which Zaragoza read slowly: "You can always change your mind, old man."

## VIII

"A what?" Zaragoza asked on the phone.

"An urgent officer meeting," Silvestre said.

"What's that?"

"I am not joking. You have to come."

"I am not joking either. Meet in late October? I don't think so," Zaragoza said gloomily. "Who died?"

"Marcelo," Silvestre said. "They've killed him."

Marcelo, Marcelo... precisely one of the sharpest-toothed dogs in the troika that ran the Confederación de Agricultores y Ganaderos de Tamaulipas, the corrupt or otherwise useless livestock and agriculture organization, of which Zaragoza was a not only a member but an officer. The group existed to perennially support the ancient and pustulent PRI political party. In exchange for meager farm subsidies, the ranchers allowed buses to pick up their hands and their families and led them to voting booths or paid rallies. Marcelo, the mastermind behind the carousel, had been an enemy of Zaragoza, whom he had disliked so much and so often that Zaragoza had even grown fond of him. They were also neighbors: Marcelo's ranch, to the south of the San Judas, was the one through which Zaragoza had escaped after being assaulted. They had measured each other since adolescence, fighting water rights, letting rumors of each other slip—most of them true.

Marcelo swore constantly, even once joking about it mid-assembly, that Zaragoza and Silvestre were *putos*. He loved to privately celebrate them as "not just regular homos" but "putos como los de antes," old-fashioned, he meant, "machos unafraid to be fucked or fucking a man, because, let's face it—it's no business for the faint of heart, the whole man-loving thing." And whoever was present would laugh hard.

"Don't tell me they've killed him," Zaragoza said sadly, but quickly saved face: "His life was mine, damn it!"

At Las Mañanitas, a hearty morning buffet, it quickly became apparent that before his murder Marcelo was no longer living in his ranch, but betraying ranchero ethics, he had begun life in an apartment (!) in downtown Tampico. His debacle started after his wife was kidnapped at a military checkpoint, which was not a military checkpoint at all but a decoy set up by one of the violent drug cartels that fought for Tamaulipas. Some of the gunslingers were ex-marines or Mexican military who had been trained in the U.S. and Israel and wore military apparel virtually indistinguishable from the armed forces, especially at night.

Marcelo had been receiving packages addressed to the group's offices

containing pieces of his wife: a slice of muscle taken from who knows where, a toe, a nipple, the left ear. In those maddening days Marcelo lived a solitary and terrible hell that he could only keep secret with the help of the poor, and now psychologically scarred, office's cleaning lady. They wanted his ranch, the narcos, but faced with the very real possibility of losing both woman and property—the two most important things in the *ranchero* profession—Marcelo called the state's elite anti-kidnapping unit. It was that unit, precisely, which found Marcelo three weeks after he reported his wife's kidnapping, his head badly eaten by the coyotes and the ants, buried neck down in a sorghum field in the outskirts of Matamoros.

Why didn't the narcos buy Marcelo's ranch the same way they had already purchased an eighth of the state, publicly, through a hired lawyer or a name lender? Why the vicious approach and the secrecy? Amidst the many rumors in Las Mañanitas, there was one that focused on a geographic peculiarity of Marcelo's ranch that bled into the San Judas Tadeo, a possibly very good reason to keep everything outside regular intrigue mechanisms and the black public record. Both ranches shared a plain where nothing grew, a long, boring, half-hidden plateau that was almost perfect for a clandestine landing-strip.

## IX

Before Zaragoza answered the phone call he already knew it would be bad. Three AM is never the right time. He hesitated and answered on the last ring, as usual.

"¿Señor Zaragoza?"

"¿Quién habla?"

"This is Officer Obed Martinez from the Municipal Police. I apologize for calling so late."

"Christ."

"We've got news for you. One's good the other one's not so good."

"Give me the bad news first," Zaragoza said with his eyes still blinded by the aluminum lamp in his kitchen.

"We found your truck, that's the good one."

"Okey..."

"We found it in ashes, still smoldering on the outskirts of Córdoba."

It was used in the kidnapping and assassination of a local news photographer."

"P-please give me a minute," Zaragoza said leaning on his fridge passing his free hand over his anguished face. "Córdoba? In Veracruz? Was the photographer inside?" he asked and immediately regretted it.

"I can't talk much about the subject. Let's just say when the police found him they found him in many different places."

Zaragoza started to feel nauseated. Poor man, poor, poor man, Zaragoza thought.

"Did you find the corpse of a dog in the back seat? A Golden Retriever?"

"¡Jajajaja! ¿Qué?"

"I said did you..." but Zaragoza stopped himself. Stupid question. Of course they wouldn't joy-ride Miriam to commit a murder that south into the Gulf. What for?

"Could you please tell me if your team found paper inside the glove box?"

"¿Papel? ¿De qué habla Señor Zaragoza?"

"Please, can you get your team to look for traces of paper? Ashes perhaps?"

"I don't know. Don't think so. I am calling you from Cd. Victoria, half an hour away from you. What happened, happened in Córdoba."

"Please, officer, it's very important to me."

"I'll tell you what is very important to us, Zaragoza."

"¿Qué?"

"We want to ask you some questions."

"Questions? Ab-bout what?"

"Your truck."

"I don't see why. I reported it stolen—you've found it."

"It's routine."

"Ask me over the phone then."

"There is a hotel downtown, La Isadora, across from the steel manufacturing plant. Know which?"

"..."

"¿La Isadora, lo conoce?"

"No, no. I mean yes, I know *of it* but..."

"We want to see you there."

"Why not ask me to go to the police station?" he said shaking.

"What are you implying, Zaragoza?"

"There must be some confusion, I..."

"Usted is the one who is confused, old man. This is an official call. Are we not calling you to your private domicile? We are calling to your ranch, correct?"

"Please, just ch-check if there was paper in the glove box."

"Tomorrow at exac..."

Zaragoza hung up. He was now unsure of whom he had talked to. The phone rang again and kept ringing for the following seven minutes until Zaragoza disconnected it. He wasn't even sure why he mentioned the papers that last time. Of course they must have known about them? He thought of running to Genaro, telling him to pack everything. But no, he decided to stay inside his home in case they were watching him. Breath. Ufff. Once more. He had been scared many times in the past and it had always ended up being nothing, right? He got into bed hoping that hazy border between dreams and consciousness would blur the nightmare he had just lived.

## X

Zaragoza woke up exhausted. He walked barefoot to the kitchen to brew himself some coffee but stopped when he saw the disconnected phone lying on the floor like a ravenous animal or a bad joke. There, standing in front of the harassment and fear of the night before, he felt the floor move, the San Judas Tadeo drifting in a massive ocean of moving plateaus and hills that fell and rose in the distance threatening to bury his ranch. There was an urgent knock on the kitchen window.

"Don, you have to come to the entrance," Genaro said.

"No. Why?"

"They left something with your name on it."

"Pinche madre..." Zaragoza cursed as he sat on his wickerwork chair, putting on his boots.

He walked toward the ranch's entrance very slowly. Whoever left the white-and-red cooler at the entrance of his life, that ranch, must have jumped the ranch's fence. When he got in front of the generic IGLOO cooler he found his gigantic name written with a brown marker over

the lid. He stood a couple meters away from it and sighed. *Oh God, oh God, oh God.* He soon decided against approaching the cooler at all. He turned around and started walking back to his house.

He would find someone to open it. But who and for how much? He struggled to find a name, not to mention a price. That giant ZARA-GOSA written on the white plastic was oppressive and made him realize he had no moral authority to order somebody's hands inside the dirty and icy water where purple and pink chains of intestines that smelled like death floated between golden hairs and soaked cigarette butts, as he ended up doing himself. There was a piece which seemed to belong to the muzzle, strings of blood falling, there a hind leg still attached to the tail. The message inside the white lid said: "LIVE BEFORE TOMORROW SUNRISE OR WE'L FUCK YOU PENDEJO DO NOT CAL ANYONE WERE WATCHING YOU."

## XI

After Genaro rallied them, Zaragoza counted seventeen men in his living room. They were good for when the heifers were calving out, enduring long days as the weather dictated, leading pasture changes—and that was pretty much it. The oldest of them, men who worked at the San Judas with Zaragoza's father, were there too, seated on armchairs, being ancient.

"You are all fired," Zaragoza said.

Nobody was surprised. They had been following the development of the problem since day one and probably understood the forces involved in it better than him. Genaro started reading their liquidation envelopes in alphabetic order: "Arreola! Casas!"

The oldest hands and the most loyal ones—they knew who they were—stayed behind as the others exited to count their money. Silently, they wanted to know what Zaragoza was going to do with the cattle. Well, give it to them, he supposed.

"Thank you, don," Genaro said.

"Bah!"

He didn't have that many head anyhow. His fortune never amounted to much. With the help of their neighbors, brothers, and cousins, the ranch hands loaded everything that breathed into rented cattle trucks

with cross slating on the floor to prevent the animals from slipping and with a sincere handshake and a short abrazo—nobody said thank you very much, just enough—all parts said goodbye, silently wishing to the old man, more than to each other, good luck.

## XII

When Silvestre arrived to the San Judas later that evening he barely saw light oozing between the boards that covered the ranch house's three windows, the ones that faced the ranch's entrance.

"Were you robbed, compadre?" he asked as Zaragoza hugged him.

"No," he said, "not yet."

They sat on the porch and talked about nothing until Zaragoza took out the fancy decanter and two caballitos from under his wickerwork chair. The decanter looked odd in his hand. It was made of Belgian crystal and had an elaborate and "modern" design.

"You are going to excuse me," Zaragoza said very seriously, "but this is a Jaquez Medina—best agave there is, aged three years in charcoal French oak casks."

"Almost all tequilas are the same, masonry kilns, copper pot stills."

"This one's different."

"How so?"

"It just is."

"Alright, then. When did you become such an expert?"

"What do you mean? I drink this every day."

The two friends looked at each other solemnly and then quickly broke into a guffaw, the sierra louder than ever before. As Zaragoza poured the spirit Silvestre walked to the edge of the veranda, half covered by a tangerine tree, and grabbed two fruits, plump, still in season.

"You know," Silvestre said peeling them, "on my way here I saw Genaro leaving in your old Froo. He let me know how grateful he was towards you. Said—what did he say?—ah, that in the beginning 'he thought you were a degenerate and through many years of working with you he realized how right he was.'"

"¡Ja! How come? Genaro barely talked."

"Well he said it as he was driving, very quickly actually. I crossed him on the road and saw him do this expression with his arm, as if

throwing a stone, but I know that's exactly what he meant."

Zaragoza smiled and said:

"We've always been poor devils you and I."

They both toasted. Zaragoza, though enjoying the tequila and the tangerines, kept his ranch's entrance in the corner of his eye at all times. Silvestre spaced out constantly and when he did look at Zaragoza he looked nostalgic.

"She'll turn up somewhere," Zaragoza said.

"I wasn't thinking of her."

Zaragoza served his guest more tequila, then himself. Both of them looked away, trying to pierce the darkness that hardened as obsidian.

"You are leaving tonight?" Silvestre asked.

"Yes," Zaragoza said, "I'm leaving."

"Hm..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Silvestre..."

"Let me help you."

"I have some perishables, if you want them."

"No. I mean *help* you."

"No, no, no. Just take the produce, matter of fact... I'll bring it."

Zaragoza entered his house and almost stumbled on his loaded Browning T-Bolt rifle, which leaned on the kitchen window facing the ranch's entrance. He also had the Varminter in the living room and a bunch of ammo hidden around the house. He stumbled not because of the tequila but because of the tremendous sadness of saying goodbye to Silvestre. With closed eyes he opened his mouth but no sound came out of it; he put his fingers on his stomach as to appease some pain but nothing happened. He never really knew well how to cry.

Zaragoza grabbed the crate with its pungent smell of fresh tomatoes and celery and carried the heavy box from the kitchen towards the porch, slowly. Once outside he saw Silvestre pouring diesel on the three huizaches that were between the house and the ranch's entrance that led to the highway.

"Silvestre... the hell!"

"Compadre," he said, "these are the *ugliest trees* I've ever seen."

Zaragoza thought Silvestre was just blind drunk but then understood: anyone coming in could take cover under their shade. As they burned,

Zaragoza carried the crate to Silvestre's pickup truck, the poor plants singing a terrible chorus of inaudible howls.

"Here's everything good," Zaragoza said putting the crate on Silvestre's pickup's bed. "What's left is for the dogs!"

"Our corrido's over, mi Zaragoza," Silvestre said, and very gently, as old lovers do, kissed him. Zaragoza put his hands on Silvestre's neck and on the back of his head. He would miss this son of a bitch more than anyone. They stayed that way for a while as the moon above them with its quiet craters seemed like an uncomfortable witness, floating uselessly over the sierra.

Silvestre got in his truck and very slowly turned it on. He lowered his window, gave Zaragoza a nod. He looked at his friend one last time and said.

"¡Hasta siempre, Zaragoza!"

Zaragoza saw the truck pass through the entryway and then closed his eyes. He heard the sound of Silvestre's pickup leaving, softly biting the gravel as if not wanting to leave. It dissipated like a whisper into the night.

### XIII

Before the killing, Zaragoza called Mario:

"¿Papá?"

"..."

"Everything alright?"

"Yeah, Mario," Zaragoza cleared his throat. "Good morning."

"What time is it?"

"Let me see," Zaragoza said, his voice calm and slurring. "Six twenty-five."

Zulema woke up as warm Mario moved to turn his nightstand lamp on.

"We've been trying to reach you but your phone was out."

"I disconnected it for a few days."

"Tell him we were worried," Zulema murmured as she turned from the light.

"We were worried, Dad."

"I...I shouldn't have called," Zaragoza said.

"No, no, we are glad to hear you are alright. Everything's good?"

"Yes."

There was a silence in which father and son heard the other's breathing, and for a moment they felt less those absurd distances that separated them.

"I just saw the most beautiful beast, Mario."

"..."

"Here at the San Judas Tadeo, a deer."

"..."

"It was everything."

"Papá?"

"I... wanted to tell you that tequila you brought me was good. Didn't think so at the beginning, but yes, it was good. Thoughtful of you."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"Ey."

"..."

"You, ah, turned out not too bad."

Looking at her husband's face, a mixture of pain and something else, Zulema couldn't tell what was happening. Was something wrong? Mario looked overwhelmed.

"You still there?" Zaragoza asked.

"Sí, Papá."

"Tell Zulema and your brothers I send them my best, alright?"

"Yes."

"Tell Pamela, especially."

"..."

"You heard me?"

"Sí, Papá."

"Good."

"..."

"Well, then, that's all."

"Good night Papá."

"It's already morning. But sure, son, good night."



## Contributors

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STEPHEN GIBSON is the author of five poetry collections, *Rorschach Art Too* (2014 Donald Justice Prize, West Chester University), *Paradise* (Miller

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KAY HAREL lives in New York City with companions of several species. All speak a lingua franca. Harel likes to practice her English.

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