

Creative Writing Manuscript:

THE MONSTROUS FROM 9 TO 5:

Short Story Sci-fi Collection

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## ABSTRACT

*The Monstrous from 9 to 5* is a collection of science fiction stories that take place in Puerto Rico. The stories are written from multiple points of view to allow a plural round of perspectives.

This is an experimental work that employs code-switching between Spanish and English as its means of narration. Poems are embedded in the collection to provide an alternate mode of narration with a musical tone. The stories combine the day-to-day struggles Puerto Ricans face in their jobs and lives with the fantastical inclusion of monsters, in order to portray the horrifying colonial state to which the island is constantly subjected.

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I am a firm believer that acknowledgments and achievements should always go hand in hand. All the achievements I have accomplished have been made possible thanks to the education I have received, the setting and the people that surround me.

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## **The Monstrous from 9 to 5**

They used to hide under our beds,  
creeping in from the dark.  
Their evil is composed of threads.  
They left an aching mark.

Now they are everywhere.  
So beware,  
for they bring despair,  
and unleash it in the open air.

Start the race and clock in.  
Reap your wage  
before you come of age.  
Finish the race and clock out.

**Science Fiction Story Collection**

**Alondra Sofía Acevedo Pérez**

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is one of the many art forms that convey messages in a universal scope. Its multiplicitous nature allows it to transcend through generations and spaces. I am a humanities gal through and through. I love music, acting, and art performances. Although I love to immerse myself in multiple arts forms, my favorite medium of expression is literature.

Why is literature important to me? To me, literature is what gives a face to history. I have always been aware of how significant it is to know the history that preceded us, to understand our current context and to better plan for our impending future. I have always known the importance of knowing history, yet I used to find history books a bit tedious to read. Dense historical articles or books packed with timelines of events and dates made it a bit hard for me to focus on and absorb the import of the sequence of events.

What drove me to truly appreciate history and its role is literature because it made history more accessible for me. One can always read a book for the sake of just reading it. But if one wants to read a book with an analytical perspective, one must explore and study the context in which the book was written to truly understand it. History is no longer boring homework to me; it is the instrumental aspect that aids the full comprehension of the reading at hand. I like to say that literature puts a face on history because history books traditionally give a general scope of events, while literature has the power to delve into the specifics of an era by exploring the feelings and lives of the people involved in the portrayed events. Literature creates an empathetic relationship between the reader and its characters. In other words, literature has the power of creating connections that transcend time and space.

To read and understand literature is to read and understand the world that surrounds us. One of the professors who first welcomed me into the university when I came in to pursue

my bachelor's degree was Dr. Ivette Martí Caloca. She was the first professor to assure me that pursuing studies in humanities is as valuable and important as any other branch of study. I took two Spanish literature classes with her, in which she taught me how to love classic Spanish books such as *La Celestina*, *El Cantar del Mio Cid*, and many more. She once said something that really stuck with me: "Once one is able to read, decode, and analyze poetry, one will be able to do so with people." At the time, I was not quite sure how reading people could be directly tied with the skill of analytical literature reading.

As time passed, I grew to understand literature is often purely based on humanity. The writer is a humanitarian field researcher. For a writer to be able to come up with ideas and scenarios, they must go out into the world, see it, and experience it. Through the immersive exercise of experience, the writer will be able to study closely how lives are being developed. In the same way, a writer can write a book, the reader will be able to understand the people and world that surrounds them. Writing and reading create a symbiotic chain reaction that enables a higher empathetic understanding between people.

Literature is one of my favorite methods to access knowledge. Through literature, I have been able to immerse myself in multiple cultures, histories, and themes that have shaped who I am. My interest in literature started at a very early age. When I was a little kid, my mom would take me to book fairs and let me pick out kids' books. She would read the stories with me repeatedly, no matter how many times I would ask her to re-read a book for me. She would do it in a sweet and patient manner. She is the first person who exposed me to books and encouraged me to read as a fun hobby. Thanks to that, I was able to learn how to read in English and Spanish at a very early age.

My Nuyorican mom, Sylvia Pérez Wegerle, is the person responsible for me knowing English. She exposed to me the language through television, books, and most importantly

herself. Whenever I encountered a new word and wanted to know its meaning, she would be my point of reference, and for that, I am eternally grateful. My mom is without a doubt the person responsible for me being an English Literature major and a writer.

Literature, most specifically fiction, is something I have always treasured. As I was growing up, books became my escape. I would insert myself in the worlds described in short stories and novels, often fantasizing about the endless possibilities that fiction gifts its readers.

I am grateful for literature because I have been able to build a lot of meaningful relationships because of it. I thank all the professors, friends, classmates, and family members who have lent me books from their personal libraries or gifted me written works. This generous act has made it possible for me to immerse myself in a diversity of written works without having to incur economic expenses. My favorite part about reading books is being able to discuss them with those who have similar interests to me. I am particularly grateful to the English department, its faculty, and its students, for gifting me with the opportunity of being part of open discussions about written works and how their conveyed messages are still relevant to this day.

Although fiction has been present in my life, up to a point, I never thought it was something I could pursue academically or career-wise. When I first arrived to *La IUPI* (The University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus), I was enrolled to pursue a bachelor's degree in English Literature but often wondered about studying clinical psychology instead. Having that itch, I decided to take an introductory psychology course. Thanks to that class, I was able to learn the basic concepts of how the human psyche works, which gifted me with the proper tools to analyze characters and literary works from a psychological perspective. After a lot of introspection, I realized that psychology was not the right fit for me.



After taking the general requirement courses, I was caught at a crossroads and didn't know how to tackle the English literature curriculum. Luckily, when the time for class enrollment came, I was well-aided and advised by the department's director at the time, Dr. Alma Simounet Bey. She helped me pick out my first literature courses which ended up being English literature in the 14th and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and Caribbean literature. Simounet particularly assured me that I would enjoy the Caribbean coursework and the professor conducting it. She could not have been more correct. By enrolling me in that class, she had inadvertently set me on my path.

The first Caribbean literature course I took was with Dr. María Quintero. We explored the development and evolution of the field. I loved every bit of it. Her course took me down memory lane of when I was in high school, when I often served as an English tutor for my classmates who struggled with the English class. I realized that I had always unconsciously served as an English facilitator, which had always brought me great joy because I knew I was helping others.

I am perpetually grateful to Dr. Quintero for introducing me to the Caribbean through postcolonial theory and for continually pushing us to question our surroundings. The class left me with the hunger for more; hence, I decided to immerse myself in as many Caribbean courses as I could within my coursework.

I was no longer in the middle of a crossroads. I finally visualized the route I wanted to follow academically and consequently career-wise. The goal was clear and that was to eventually pursue a doctorate in humanities with a specialty in anglophone Caribbean literature.

The journey that I commenced in my bachelor's degree was only the first step. The following one was a master's degree, which I pursued in the same university. Pursuing the

master's degree allowed me to further immerse myself in the Caribbean within its theoretical framework. I found myself studying themes like language, discourse, culture, violence, beach significations, history, power dynamics, queerness, memory, identity, and many more that play intricate roles in the Caribbean's narrations.

I must confess that I did not originally plan on doing a creative thesis. I didn't even know it was a possibility when I entered the program. I don't know if I should call it fate, luck, or a glitch; nonetheless, I am grateful for it. When course enrollment season hit, my name mysteriously wound up on a list of students interested in taking a creative writing class with Dr. Loretta Collins. I decided to go with the flow and take the class. That same semester I took a course on myths and monsters with Dr. Marian Polhill. The fact that I took both courses together is what enabled me to develop short stories that would use monsters as metaphors.

I have always liked to write; it is the medium in which I best express myself. When I was a little girl, I would come up with stories and write them. As time progressed, I stopped doing it. I started the stories but never finished them. The opportunity to take a creative writing class inspired me to make into a reality a dream I had locked away.

The creative thesis is not only a requirement to fulfill my degree, but it has also become a challenge and a promise I've made to myself. This time I have developed every idea I have thought up and written to completion each story I started. This creative thesis is my first official debut with creative writing.

The remainder of this introduction is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on my literary influences. The second part provides an analytical overview of my short stories with references to the works that have directly inspired them.

## Part I

The collection of stories is the product of my immersion with English literature, gothic literature, American and diasporic literature, Caribbean works, nonfiction, fantasy, science fiction, and graphic novels. I have immersed myself in the genres of drama, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, drama, and prose.

There is a whole library worth of books that have influenced my way of thinking and writing. I won't be able to mention them all because if I do this introduction to my project would never come to an end. The books I read while growing up were usually a mixture of romance, gothic, horror, fantasy, comedy, and science fiction. I particularly liked reading books about vampires such as *Dracula* by Bram Stoker, *The Vampyre* by John William Polidori, *Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice, *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu, and many more. I became fascinated with vampires, because aside from them being bloodsucking undead beings, they serve as agents that push paradigm shifts in conservative societies. Their open and free expression of sexuality is seen as a threat to patriarchal and religious beliefs. My favorite vampires are Lestat de Lioncourt from *Interview with the Vampire*, Pam Swynford Beaufort from *True Blood*, and *Carmilla*, because their queer, bold and daring nature is a force not to be reckoned with.

My favorite historical and supernatural beings are witches. I grew to love them because of the series *The Secret Circle* by L.J. Smith. I read the books when I was a teenager and fell in love with the way witches could connect with nature and harness its energies. My fascination for them never ceased and consequently, I became one. They were victims of a patriarchal society that did not want resourceful and knowledgeable women. For that reason, I believe that it is important to keep them alive through media representations and to ban the ideologies that condemn them.

One of the stories that I drafted in a preliminary manner for this collection centers around a witch. The story couldn't make this cut, but it will be included in the complete collection once it's ready for publication.

The novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, the book that originated the science fiction genre, holds a special place in my library. I have studied it multiple times, applying different theories. The novel's depiction of Victor Frankenstein and his creation transcend the power dynamics of monster vs. victim that can also be interpreted as colonizer vs. oppressed. But most importantly it depicts how the roles can switch with a creature's attainment of knowledge through literature and language.

In Victor's perspective, his creature is a monster because his overall appearance does not fit within the margins of what society defines as beautiful. It is true that the creature's crimes can be interpreted as monstrous acts because he killed people. Having said this, I can't help but feel for him. From the creature's point-of-view, he was created, rejected, and abandoned by his creator, who did not even give him a name. The creature, cast out by his maker and society, was forced to educate himself by mimicking a family he saw from afar and by reading literature. He rose from being an unknowing abandoned being into a supernatural being with great strength and intelligence.

In other words, Victor Frankenstein is the initial monster and colonizer who abuses his knowledge and power against the creature. When the creature rises, he shifts the power dynamics and becomes Victor's monstrous colonizer. This relation I established between the terms colonizer/monster and oppressed/victim is the inception that birthed the idea of developing monstrosity as a mechanism to fight colonialism.

## Part II

“The Monstrous from 9 to 5” is a manuscript of science fiction stories. They are written in a multiplicity of points-of-view to allow richer and plural perspectives.

For the creative thesis, I chose the structure of short stories as the main mode of narration. Although the stories have monsters in them, this does not mean that this collection of stories is specifically directed at a young audience such as children, but that does not mean they cannot be exposed to it. I am a firm believer that literature that expresses culture and history should be accessible to all of those who wish to encounter it. It is never too soon to start learning.

I decided to write stories because I wanted to test the waters with creative writing and convey messages of smaller scope in comparison to novels. I also wanted to create a quick, simple, and accessible reading for all of those who do not have the time and flexibility to read extensive works. Poems are embedded in the collection to provide an alternate mode of narration and inner consciousness through an immersion in lyrical tones.

### History

The colonization of the Caribbean is an atrocious event that needs to be put into context to understand the stories I created. Aimé Césaire, explains in his book *Discourse on Colonialism* as follows:

Colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal and accustoms himself to treating the other like an animal...

I look around, and wherever there are colonizers and colonized face-to-face, I see force, brutality, cruelty, sadism, conflict, and, in a parody education, the hasty manufacture of a few thousand subordinate functionaries, “boys,” artisans, office clerks, and interpreters necessary for the smooth operation of business. Between colonizer and colonized, there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, and degraded masses.

No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. (Césaire, P.41-42)

Césaire and many other Caribbean theorists certify that colonization was an atrocious abomination that destroyed civilizations. Its aftermath and discourse are still being reproduced. In Puerto Rico’s case it is still present because we are a U.S. territory, better said a colony. Puerto Rico has been exposed to the Spanish and United States colonization. As Césaire states, the colonizers justify their cruel actions by seeing and treating the natives as savages, animals, or as my reconceptualization term them: monsters.

## Language

Language plays an important role in the stories because it is the means of expression of the culture that is being depicted in them. To get a better grasp of how language and culture coexist one can read Claire Kramsch, in her book *Language and Culture*, in the chapter “The Relationship of Language and Culture” where she defines language as:

... the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. Language is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as symbol of their social identity. The prohibition of its use is often perceived by its speakers as a rejection of their social group and their culture. Thus we can say that language symbolizes cultural reality. (Kramsch, P.3)

Kramsch, states that language is an extension of cultural identity. Identity fragmentations or hybrids can occur when someone's language or culture has been attacked and forced into assimilation. Considering that Puerto Rico's, socio-political state has been tossed from Spain to the United States, its cultural identifiers have suffered greatly. One can say that Puerto Rico is caught at a crossroads because the Spanish and English languages have been imposed by its oppressors.

While they are both colonial languages, they are the ones at our disposal. A mixture of both languages has become one of the means of communication, especially among the younger crowd that is more exposed to English culture in comparison to previous generations. Spanglish, the hybrid between both worlds was born. I often do code switch and use Spanglish with the hopes of connecting a bridge between both languages while making my prose accessible for the speakers of each language.

### Violence and Language

In the same way that language and culture go hand in hand, it is safe to say that the language and violence do, as well, given that the history of the culture has been a violent one. To better grasp both concepts and their correlation, I visited the following theorist for a closer

read. Daniel Silva in his book *Language and Violence: Pragmatic Perspectives* in the chapter 4: “The Circulation of Violence in Discourse” states:

Violence and language relate to one another in such a dialectical way that one cannot state that the narration solely heals or counters disruption. On the contrary, the talk of crime causes violence to circulate even more. It also creates stereotypes and undermines public security policies. Language heals, but also wounds. (Silva, P.109)

Silva explains that language can often be misused as a weapon that denotes violent discourse. Once that discourse has been created and imposed it will unleash a chain of reactions that will reproduce it. It may be difficult to break off from it, but it is not impossible.

### Monsters and Culture

Monsters are beings usually depicted as villains. Monsters have a reason for existence, and each culture births its own monsters for several theoretical reasons. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in the book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, formulates seven theses concerning monsters and cultures. I wrote these stories bearing in mind the following theses:

“Thesis I : The Monster’s Body is a Cultural Body”:

The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically ‘that which reveals’, ‘that which warns’, a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always



inhabits the gap between the time upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. These epistemological spaces between the monster's bones are Derrida's familiar chasm of *différance*: a genetic uncertainty principle, the essence of the monster's vitality, the reason it always rises from the dissection table as its secrets are about to be revealed and vanish into the night. (Cohen, P.4)

“Thesis IV: The Monster Dwells at the gates of difference”

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as a dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic sexual (Cohen, P.7)

Cohen theses states that monsters are the creation of culture, oftentimes as a means of caution. A monster reflects the views and norms of the culture that created it. What is interesting about this phenomenon is how monsters are mirroring the subconscious, yet one usually chooses to deflect from it out of fear to stray away from the norm. Monsters are created to scare you back into subjugation. Monsters deviate from the norm because they are portrayed as the other or different. This same notion is the one Europeans assumed when they first arrived in our lands. The natives were called savages because they didn't have the same performative or aesthetic attributes. In other words, the natives were the monsters by default that needed to be civilized through religion and assimilation.

Monsters are mostly portrayed under negative connotations, but they serve as cultural signifiers that portray society's repressions and submission. I use monsters in my stories to warn against subjugation, assert identity, keep memory alive, and overall, as an instrument of self and collective empowerment.

“The Monstrous from 9 to 5”

“The Monstrous from 9 to 5” is the title of my collection of stories. It is meant to signify the monstrosity that lies within jobs that, in one way or another, are tied to Puerto Rico's colonial state because they revolve around producing for or serving our colonizer. The capitalistic world we live in has conditioned us to work for our earnings till the day we die.

The title is followed by a poem that serves as a prologue that sets the tone for the stories to come. The stories are inspired by lived and shared experiences with friends.

“Dialed Wailings”

“Dialed Wailings” is my shortest story of the collection, and it is mostly moved forward through dialogues. The story is narrated from a third-person point-of-view to purposely take away from the main character control of his discourse. Osvaldo, the main character from the story is a young man fresh out of college. He is stuck working at a call center for the U.S. medical system where he assists U.S. citizens with their medical insurance. The call center is a U.S. corporation that is being run by locals in Puerto Rico, who mostly attend to U.S. citizens. Osvaldo, to make his interactions more bearable with callers, gives out the English version of his name, Oswald, because people would often insult or question his credibility on account of his Spanish name. He loses his sense of identity by assimilating his name to U.S. discourse.

The idea to use a call center as the job for the story is to portray a job where locals must attend to U.S. citizens. Call centers specifically can be alienating jobs due to their office

setup where the workers are placed in cubicles and cut off from their coworkers and surroundings. The job is a mechanical performance with a specific script that dictates the discourse to be carried out. A discourse completely flawed and designed to purposely avoid giving out information. Calling public agencies can be quite draining because of the time that one spends in the wait line to be answered, only to then get transferred to another department and have to do it all over again. That vicious cycle is what I wanted to highlight with this story. The story was mainly inspired by Antonio Benítez-Rojo's *La isla que se repite*. I wanted to capture the analogy of an island repeating itself by portraying how colonial discourses can be present in every worldly dimension.

The story's monster, the banshee, is meant to warn Osvaldo about the impending death anyone can be a victim of if one does not break away from imposed norms, that only seek to dehumanize, isolate, break, and alienate the spirit.

“Oceanic Escape”

“Oceanic Escape” is a story that is told from two perspectives: Camila's and Sue's. Camila's perspective is mostly narrated in the third person, as an omniscient narrator is the one managing her discourse. Towards the end, a shift places her in control of her present discourse. Sue's perspective is narrated in the first person point-of-view to reflect how she is in charge of her voice. The story is mostly narrated in the past tense to portray how certain narratives and discourses should remain in the past. Towards the end, the narration is repositioned and is told in the present tense to portray the importance of the now.

The story tells of how Camila comes into her own and is self-empowered through a soucouyant conversion. This story is inspired by four written works: *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla: The First Vampire* by Amy Chu and Soo Lee, *Unburnable* by Marie-Elena John, and *A Small Place* by Jamaica Kincaid. The name Camila is a direct reference to Fanu's

*Carmilla*. What truly inspired me to write this story is the graphic novel *Carmilla: The First Vampire* by Chu and Lee. It is a reconceptualization of the classic tale, portrayed from a modern perspective with layers of dark Chinese folklore. It is set in 1996 in Manhattan's Chinatown. It follows a Chinese American social worker who turns into a detective when young, homeless, LGBTQ+ women are being murdered and nobody cares, most importantly the police. A series of clues leads her to a mysterious nightclub called Carmilla's, where she meets the next likely target. I was inspired by this graphic novel because it took a classic tale and retold the story by focusing on another cultural aspect. It inspired me to write the Caribbean version of *Carmilla*.

The novel *Unburnable* by Marie-Elena John, one of my favorite Caribbean novels, directly inspired me to write this story. The novel follows the character Lillian, who had escaped Dominica as a young child because of the violent discourse that was directed towards her mom and grandmother Iris and Matilda in the form of Creole songs known as “chanté más,” with songs such as: “Matilda Swinging,” “Bottle of Coke,” “Naked as they Born,” and “Something take Icilma Baby.” The songs are direct references to the violent brutality of Lillian's history and memory. The songs would evoke death, rape, and violence in all its aspects. The songs would constantly be played on the radio and performed at carnivals. When Lillian comes back to Dominica, she faces and understands her past, deciding to take her discourse in her own hands:

She had spent her life in atonement, practicing self-sacrifice and self-denial, in the hope she would one day pay for her inherited sins. But now she was going to allow herself an indulgence: she would do this for herself. In the public aftermath of her death, she would not disappoint the people of Dominica. Let them sing another song about another woman whose life had not fulfilled its promise. Let them sig on her—she wanted her own song, it was her birthright.

A *chanté más* to guarantee her place in history, alongside her grandmother and her mother.

She had put time and thought into it, over the last day, to help them with her song... But Lillian had decided that it would be best to be the worst of the lot, a soucouyant: a woman who takes off her skin at night and flies around in search of victims whose blood she sucks. Yes, she would give them that pleasure, and it made sense for her to go back to where the maroons had jumped; she would fly through the air for her country people—and at the bottom there were enough trees and branches to tear off her skin, so that when they found her she would be exactly what they wanted her to be: their nightmare, a soucouyant. It would be perfect for her song. (John, P.291-292)

*Unburnable*, is the novel that first introduced me to the soucouyant folklore. From that moment on, I studied the folklore and was moved by how it reimagines the figure of a vampire through the horrors of the middle passage slave trade experience. I specifically like how John used the soucouyant as a female empowerment symbol, which is what inspired me to the same. At the end of my story, once Camila has been converted into a soucouyant, we get the first glimpse of her taking control of her own discourse. Her discourse can be interpreted as a manifesto that promotes a stance against colonization.

The story takes place in a hotel in San Juan. What inspired me to write this story the way I did is *A Small Place*, by Jamaica Kincaid:

That the native does not like the tourist is not hard to explain. For every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere. Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and

depression, and every deed, good and bad, is an attempt to forget this. Every native would like to find a way out, every native would like a rest, every native would like a tour. But some natives—most natives in the world—cannot go anywhere. They are too poor. They are too poor to go anywhere. They are too poor to escape the reality of their lives; and they are too poor to live properly in the place where they live, which is the very place you, the tourist, want to go—so when the natives see you, the tourist, they envy you, they envy your ability to leave your own banality and boredom, they envy your ability to turn their own banality and boredom into a source of pleasure for yourself. (Kinkaid, P.18-19)

I personally liked the way Kincaid is unapologetic and tells the reader the truth. Her comedic and sardonic tone hits the reader. It specially made me self-aware for the first time of how I have played the tourist role as well as the native one. Her stylistic choice of narration is the one I wanted to evoke when writing this story. I wanted to pose a critique of how hotels keep posing a threat to Puerto Rican's wealth and development. Many United States citizens continue to buy our lands and deny our access to our natural resources and patrimonies. In this story the monster, the soucouyant, serves as the ultimate protector of the land.

“Coño el caño vive”

“Coño el caño vive” is a short story that is told from the perspectives of Mirna and Marcos and their narrations are told in the third person. The story has poems embedded within dialogues and narrations to portray the lyrical memory of Mirna’s mother.

Mirna and Marcos are beings from different contexts but they both have the same mission. They both want to keep alive the memory that represents the history and culture of

the communities surrounding the Martín Peña canal. It is a story of how communities came together and demanded the dredging of the canal and their territorial permanence. It's important to keep alive the memory of resilience, which is why Mirna and Marcos want to do it permanently through creating a museum. The story develops as the canal's dredging process is about to begin.

Through an interview process for memory recollection Mirna and Marcos come together and create a special bond. Despite their connection, they will each have to face in their own ways the monstrosity that the industrial era brought upon Puerto Rico. The story is a sociopolitical and environmental critique of the pollution and poorly unplanned informal settlement that the communities surrounding the Martin Peña have been exposed to through the years. The residents who live in the area of the canal also face displacement as gentrification is constantly knocking at their doors. The monster of this story, whose identity remains a mystery, to be revealed in an upcoming story, is inspired by H.P. Lovecraft's *Cthulhu Mythos*.

## Dialed Wailings

\*Ring\*

- Good morning. This is Osvald, from Med Swipe Support. How may I be of service to you today?

- Thank God! Jesus, I have been on hold like forever and transferred to various departments and getting recorded messages. I need to talk to somebody, not a machine.

- I'm so sorry to hear that. How may I help you?

- I'm Doris. I'm calling because I renewed my card, but I haven't received it yet.

- No worries. I'll check in the system. What's your last name Doris?

- Smith.

- What are the last four digits from your social security number?

- Hold on a sec Mister. Why are you asking me that? I'm not comfortable sharing that.

- Ma'am this is just used to help me look for you in the system a lot quicker. Don't worry I just need the last four digits.

- Well, I suppose that's alright. It's 7629.

- All right, Doris. I checked the system, and your card was successfully renewed. It seems the mailing department has been a little behind due to a new safety measure they are implementing. Your card should be arriving by mail in the next seven workdays.

- Oh, that's good to hear. Thank you so much for your help. I was getting worried. You see, I've been feeling a little under the weather.



- I'm sorry to hear that. Hope you feel better soon. Is there anything else I can help you with today?

- No, that will be all. Thanks.

- Happy to be of service. Have a good day.

\*Hangs up\*

\*Ring\*

- Good morning, this is Oswald from Med Swipe Support. How may I be of service to you today?

- Hey, it's Robert.

- Hi Robert. Good to hear from you again. How can I help you today? (He says forcibly. He hates having to deal with Bert the Perv. He always calls to ask about the weirdest things).

- I was just wondering... Can I use my Med Swipe card to buy condoms? Thing is I need to buy specific ones for my magnum dick.

- Sorry, Robert, but no. The Med Swipe card can only be used to pay for doctor's consultations and prescriptions.

- Ah damn it! I was really hoping the card would cover them. I wanted to be ready. I'm living in a motel, and the lady staying next to me is always bringing men in. I can hear all the moaning, screaming, and bed banging against the wall. I never fancied myself going for sloppy seconds. Considering my situation, it's the best I can hope for. Better than nothing, am I right?

- Um, I suppose so... Sir, is there anything else I can help you with today?

- Nah, I guess that's it for today.

- Hope you have a wonderful day.

\*Hangs up\*

- Pfft "I suppose so" ... goddamn it. Bert the Perv, never fails to creep folks out.

Everyone in the office nicknamed him that for obvious reasons. He always calls with the weirdest inquiries.

Osvald, better said Osvaldo, goes by Osvald because most of his callers are English speakers, and are put off by a Spanish name. He works for the U.S. government, Department of Health, to be exact. Working at a call center is not what he had pictured for himself. Living in P.R. and having just graduated with a BA in foreign languages, his options career wise are pretty narrow. He is stuck in this job, going through the motions, call after call. A vicious cycle that never reaches an end. Osvald always tells himself to hang in there, the job is shit, but the pay is good. He has a plan to save up as much as he can, so that he can travel and broaden his language skills.

\*Ring\*

- Good morning, this is Osvald from Med Swipe Support. How may I be of service to you today?

- *Mira, nene hace tiempo que no se de ti.*

- *Ay mami, lo sé.* My bad, I've been meaning to call you. I have been stuck doing a lot of overtime lately. By the time I make it to my place, it's late and I just take a shower and go straight to bed.

- *No estás cenando?*

- Sometimes, when I have the appetite for it.

- *Cuando vienes? Pa' cocinar algo.*

- *Voy a tratar de bajar en una semana. Mami, perdón pero te tengo que colgar. Me está entrando una llamada.*

*\*Ring\**

- Good morning, this is Osvald from Med Swipe Support. How may I be of service to you today?

The moment he finishes introducing himself, he hears a high pitch scream, that gives him goose bumps and makes him shiver all over. There is an uncontrollable cry on the other end, and he cannot make out what is being said.

- Hello? I cannot understand what you are saying. Try to take a breather and tell me how I may help you.

- *\* sobs\* I'm, I'm Dee. \*Blows her nose\* Please, I need your help.*

- Of course, ma'am. How can I help you?

- *Time is running out. He doesn't have much time left.*

- Who doesn't have much time left?

- *My husband. He needs quick attention. All of the specialists we have sought out are not covered by Med Swipe, she says between sobs.*

- I understand ma'am. What illness does your husband have?

- *Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.*

- No worries, ma'am, we have a grand variety of pneumologists that are covered by Med Swipe. If you give me your zip code, I can look in the system, to see which one would be the best fit for you.

- My zip code is 96162.

- All right ma'am. I just looked in the system and there are four specialists that are covered within your area. Would you like me to transfer you to the closest specialist, so they can schedule an appointment for you?

- Yes please, she says between sobs.

Just as Osvaldo is about to transfer the call, the power goes out for two minutes, until the generator is up and running.

- Hello? Dee? Are you there!?

As much as he tries calling out for her, there is no use. The call was lost the moment the power went out. This was one of the shitty parts of the job. He always feels empathic, and it takes a toll on him when he isn't able to help a struggling customer. After two minutes of his dwelling on the circumstances, the internet and the whole program are up and running. He puts his headset on, but there's a high-pitched scream, similar to Dee's scream.

- That's weird. There's no caller, yet there's an uncontrollable shriek.

The screaming is starting to give Osvaldo a headache, so he is about to take the headset off. The moment he puts his hands on the headset, a scream blasts through the headphones.

- Don't take them off! Look at your monitor and follow instructions.

The monitor shows a message: “You have been reached by a banshee, because you ignored its warning and failed to help. Now, this banshee will be stuck in all your landlines and phone calls. To remove the banshee, you must file a petition for consideration. For further help you may contact us at 1-800-755-4748.

- A banshee? What kind joke is this? I'm going to have to call my supervisor and let her know something is off with the system.

\*Dials supervisor extension\*

- Good afternoon, Margaret. This is Osvaldo. I'm calling because there seems to be something off with our system.

All he hears from the other end is wailing. Screams start to go off all over the office. He takes his headset off and runs from his cubicle to see what is happening. A few workers are crying, others have terrified looks. Osvaldo approaches the nearest worker to ask what the matter is.

- It's Margaret. She's dead. We don't know what happened. Could've been a stroke.

Weird thing is she was found with her hand clutched to the phone.

Osvaldo is completely horrified. Was this his fault? There is only one way to find out and that is by calling the number shown on his screen. He returns to his cubicle, puts the headphones on and dials the phone number as quickly as he can, for there is still a bloodcurdling shriek emanating from the phone. A few seconds after dialing the number, a recorded message says: "You have reached the Banshee landline. If you already know the extension press (1) followed by the extension. If you are calling because you have been warned by a banshee, press (2). If you are calling because you have a banshee stuck on your landline or phone press (3).

\*Presses #3\*

- Hello, you have reached the Pardon Department. If you wish to file a petition to remove a banshee, you must hold and one of our operators will help you as soon as possible.

- Guess what, instead of ambiance type music, it's an endless scream that goes: "Lalalalalalaa!" pretty much similar to the one Spongebob Squarepants makes when he is posing as Squidward's clarinet.

- What kind of a sick joke is this? Just what I needed. To be stuck waiting on a call center loop.

THE END

## Oceanic Escape

Camila's first day of work started off with stress that grasped her body and bones in a chokehold. Sleep had been impossible the previous night. Troubling scenarios replayed in her mind. This would be the first time she would work directly with the clientele. She told herself she had to make it work. There was no way she would go back to her old job.

Her previous job was as a cook in a restaurant. The busy lunch hour provided an adrenaline rush that she enjoyed. The open access to the bar gave her the much-needed push to keep going for hours without any breaks at times. The kitchen did not have air conditioning, and there were constant power outages, forcing the personnel to work in the dark without a functional extractor hood. It became suffocating not only on her lungs but her limbs, as well. The physical drain resulted in her having multiple asthma attacks. Her body was on an endless pain spiral that never seemed to stop. She ended up having to attend physical therapy for her troubled knees, spasms in her shoulders and neck, and finally carpal tunnel syndrome. She had to leave. It was too much for her body to bear.

She was quite skeptical about this new job. For starters, she was hired on the spot, and that was always an apparent red flag. One of the advantages of working in the kitchen was not having to attend to complaining customers. One only had to deal with waiters and a boss constantly rushing you, but she had seniority, so she was often left alone. Now, she would be working at a boutique at the Oceanic Escape's hotel. Knowing that she was going to be working at a hotel known for privatizing one of Puerto Rico's many beaches brought on feelings of disgust. It had become a pandemic, with more and more hotels and Airbnb's getting built on maritime terrestrial areas and prohibiting locals from accessing them.

Deciding that her manic sleeplessness had to be tamed with scorching hot caffeine to keep herself as awake as possible, she gulped the coffee down and got dressed. She got in her car and arrived at the hotel with the grace of getting ahead of the traffic that always clogged up the streets of El Viejo San Juan, or how tourists like to call it Old San Juan, followed by: “Where’s the Morrow”? There were times that she didn’t even know how to answer- ‘how am I supposed to explain to a gringo that El Morro *está en el carajo cuando ambos estamos parados en Bayamón?*’ The good thing about the hotel was its location in the outskirts of EL Viejo San Juan.

The hotel employees directed Camila towards their designated parking area. It seemed a bit unfair and pointless to make employees start parking from the sixth floor and up in the ramp when the first floors had only a few cars, a complete waste. She had to drive all the way to the roof because the upper floors were filled to the rim with employees’ cars.

Once parked, Camila made her way to the boutique as quickly as she could. On the way, she scanned the hotel’s attempt of achieving “tropical” aesthetic. It seemed like the designer of the hotel googled the most generic Caribbean allusions, combined them all up, and called it authentic. The palm trees that lined up the driveway to the lobby were strange ones that she had never seen. They were clearly brought in from another dimension.

She clocked the store quickly because it was next to a cage with parrots. Tourists and kids were gazing at the *guacamayos* in wonder, getting excited each time they said *hola*. Camila always loved animals, because she grew in the countryside where most of the animals roamed free. Seeing caged animals always pained her, and she hated when animals were used as an attraction. She passed the imprisoned *guacamayos*, and the herd of tourists hovering over them and went into the store.



- Hi, I'm Camila, the new girl.

- Hi, Camila! I'm Lisa, and I'll be the one to train you. Come follow me.

Camila trailed her to the back of the store, where Lisa opened a door.

- This is the backroom where we keep the rest of the inventory. On this side we keep the shoes, and the sizes are in order. Next to them we keep cups, shot glasses, and souvenir knick-knacks. On this end, we keep the extra sizes for bathing suits, dresses, and coverups. This over here is the safe where we put the cash and sales of the day, I'll show you in a bit how we markup sales. We always leave the key attached to the safe.

Lisa motioned for Camila to follow her out of the back room. This section was Blanca's bathing suit line. Next to them were the Bohos clothing lines. Linda went on to explain all the designer lines that were being sold in the store and how to best display the new clothes they would get in.

- Come over here I'll show you how we charge and write up tickets.

\*Did she say write up tickets? I guess it must be an expression, I doubt we'll actually be writing up tickets. \*

- This is where we keep the cash register.

She opened a drawer that revealed a box where bills and change were placed. Camila suppressed the urge to laugh out loud. She could not believe this was the "cash register."

Lisa went on to explain how the cash register was always kept at \$200, and she showed Camila a small bag where extra petty cash was left, for when needed. She pulled out a pink slip of paper, that was used to markup the amount of money made in each day. She explained how to fill in the date, the amount of sales, and times of first and last sales. The total of cash and visa sales were written in.

- Now I'll show you how to write up a ticket.

Lisa pulled out a notebook with numbered pages. It was one of those old school notebooks with papers that transferred what was written. She explained how to pull half of the tag and write in information such as: size, style, company, color and price, adding the total plus the tax at the end. It was also required to write the time the item was sold and the form of payment. Next, the tag was stapled to the ticket. The information would be transferred onto three colored papers: the white was kept for visa card sales. The yellow paper would be the customer's receipt, except if they paid in cash. In that case the customer was given the white paper, and the yellow paper kept as the receipt. The remaining pink paper would be kept with the others that were stacked in another drawer in case the administration asked for them. Finally, Lisa showed Camila how all those receipts were placed with the pink slip paper along with the cash and credit card sales invoices in the safe box at the end of the shift.

- I know it can be a bit much to get use to at first, but you'll get the hang of it.
- Yes, I guess, so, said Camila with an awkward laugh.
- Here's the contract. Have a look and take pictures because they don't give us a copy of it.
- Thanks. I'll skim over it during break.
- Almost forgot to show you how to get your parking card, said Lisa.
- Do employees get free access to the parking?
- No, not at all. Employees... Well, we pay \$5 for parking.
- So, what's the card for?
- The card allows you entry and exit to the parking. You have to constantly refill your card, said Linda as she rolled her eyes.
- The most important thing is that if the bosses are here, you need to be on top of the customers. They want you to make conversation with them the moment the clients

step into the store. Yes, we have to be those annoying salespeople. The thing is people always run off whenever the bosses get annoying, yet they still can't comprehend that it's their annoying behavior that drives people away.

- Thanks, for the heads up.
- Yeah, just mentioning it so that you're ready if they dropped by unannounced, which they often do. Try not to take anything they tell you too personal. Sometimes they can be quite mean. But they'll be happy as long as you make good sales.

\*\*

I wondered who I should be today as I inspected myself in the mirror. My worn -out skin was saggy all over with intertwined wrinkles that caressed my skin. I ran my fingers under my eyes and massaged an oily substance on my inflamed eye bags. The dark circles hula-hooped around my eyes, a rich black laced color that tunneled the eyes almost out of sight.

It was always fun to scavenge the playing field before making a conscious decision. The best time for that was during daytime hours when the sun gave me the proper clarity to make up my mind. At night fall, the moonlight poured through the window, providing the proper confidence and direction to pursue the mind's will.

It had been a while since I had fed. You may call it fasting, but it was far more than that. I liked to be precise about what I ate and when, because there was always had a different reaction on my body.

\*Well, sure my body. Let's call it that for now. \*

\* I was looking not only for a lil' pick me up.

\* Actually, that might just be it. \*

It would be a new hope, a new flowering if you will. But that would take even longer and more careful consideration. So, I left that option at ease for now and just focused on what was really stretching my stomach into scorching, gapping hounds.

I thought the best way to find out what I wanted would be to insert myself deep and hide within the crowd. I figured tourists represented the best way to blend in.

I checked the cabinet where I kept my vials, each one with a specific purpose. I always made sure to keep it fully stocked. I decided to go with the vial that contained *gringo* essence, those were the most abundant in my collection. They were also the easiest ones to find. Let me tell ya, *gringos* were not my favorite flavor, but they were most abundant ones and the most fun to hunt. I know you are not supposed to play with your food, but I couldn't help myself. I taunted them a little, but didn't go for the kill, unless provoked. Especially, because if I'm not careful to do it right, they might not stay dead.

So, I looked for the vial and directed myself to the mirror. I always liked to look at myself while it happened, taking in and studying every detail that would be mine for a limited amount of time. I released the vial's contents in my mouth, but didn't drink it all, leaving half of it behind, in case I need it later. The warm, mahogany red, viscous liquid slid down my throat with ease, knowing where to go, as if it were a choreographed entrance. My skin began to rip out of the skeleton that held it in place. In a matter of seconds, the bones began to disintegrate, and turned into a pile of dust. The roaring wind picked up the pile of dust and carried out any trace of the evidence without a hassle.

As if I were a phoenix rising from the ashes, I was whole again. Porcelain white lathered on my skin, I had green eyes and blonde hair. I grabbed some casual clothes, put some coconut sunscreen on, sure that I would blend in perfectly.

I headed down to the lobby, enjoying the sea breeze that always flared my nostrils with such tranquility, the salty mist cleaning my pipes. I never got asthma or congestions thanks to this lovely aroma therapy I was gifted with every morning. Having clean pipes was most important, help to sniff out a lot better.

I sat at the lobby gazing over every wandering system of organisms. The parrots' caws were the ongoing background sounds as I placed myself in the playing field. I could hear them cawing *hola*, while the other one *screamed sucu, succu, sucu*. Those caws were always the perfect symphony for my own play. Most people would find them annoying or the perfect distraction for every wandering and wonderous self-proclaimed *gringo*. Which, let's face it, was the true reason why they had those beautiful creatures caged in there.

I had lost count of the number of times that, no sooner had I successfully set them free, the cage housed a new pair of *cotorras*, as if they were dispensable, *es un cabrón descaró*. *Las cotorras, las aves, con sus bellos plumajes son para ser libres y volar los cielos*. Instead, they were here caged in to perform for the gawking *gringos*, now and forever it seemed.

The little secret that they didn't know until it was too late is that the *gringos* were the most dispensable ones, and they kept coming all by themselves, the tourists I mean. The pandemic did slow down a bit the traffic of the herds coming in and out, but that was quickly

solved. The hotel came up with a discount to attract the foreigners, and it was like nothing had happened.

This particular hotel never truly experienced the full lockdown. It only remained closed for a few weeks, and shortly thereafter, employees were demanded to come to work and expose themselves every day, with no safety or protection guaranteed. Many of the employees got COVID, and that was the only chance they got to have some time off.

Oftentimes, I heard the workers joke about actively trying to get COVID, because it was the only way they could get a week off. All of that joking quickly stopped when the staff lost one of its members, due to complications of the illness. I couldn't blame those poor fools for having to joke like that and then having a rude awakening thrown into their faces, but to work long hours at a hotel can take a toll on anyone's lucidity.

Sorry for the little derailment there, but bear with me, please. The pandemic was quite hard on all of us, and I, for one, loved to talk and relate to other beings. At the beginning of the pandemic, that was quite difficult because nobody went out. Not only did that cause a social strain on my life, but it also ruined my diet.

I had to be especially careful when I wanted to eat, because I had to make sure my meal wasn't covid-infected. I once feasted on someone that was infected but was not showing any signs. That completely messed me up. It made my blood boil, and it pained me awfully. Sorry to unload all of this on you, but at this point we both know what I'm talking about, and I might add, you can probably relate to it more than you may think.

Let's get down to business. I had a craving for something adventurous. That would give me the proper jump start I needed, and I knew exactly where to go look for it. I took a gander by the concierge's stations, where they keep the brochures for all the tours and thrill-seeking adventures for adrenaline junkies.

As I started to make my way to the brochures rack, an enticing scent pulled me in. The aroma floated along a path that seemed to lead my temporal feet without any obstacles. I finally reached the source of the exquisite smell. Not only was it pleasurable to the nose, but it was quite a remarkable sight, as well. Tall, and with a toned build, he could have been European, I thought.

\*I won't know for sure till I engage with him, I said to myself. \*

He looked through the Toro Verde brochures. I studied his moves, trying to anticipate them in order to insert myself into his scene in an "accidental manner." Just the thought of opening up a conversation with him made my mouth water a little. I noticed that once he finished with the Toro Verde brochure, he grabbed the next brochure for a tour of *Las Cavernas de Camuy* (one of our sold-off patrimonies, as much as it pains me to mention).

\*Snap out of it, Sue, and go for it. \*

I reached for the brochure at the same time he did, our fingers lightly brushing each other's. His fingers tasted of rum.

- *Entschuldigung*, said the man as he backed away from the brochures.
- *Nein, entschuldige Sie. Mein Deutsch ist nicht sehr gut, aber ich spreche English und Spanisch.*
- English it is, said the man with a charming smile that perfectly contoured his fine face.

- So have you found any tours that have peaked your interest? I said.
- Yes, there are a few that have caught my attention. I like tours that are more inclined towards nature, or the history of a place. I'm not a big fan of heights, but I'm trying to convince myself of doing the Toro Verde Zipline.
- Oh, you should definitely do it! I did it yesterday and it was so much fun and liberating, being able to fly. You almost feel unstoppable.

Now this was not a complete lie. No, I hadn't gone yesterday, but I had been to the area many times before. I just didn't need a safety net or line to secure myself while soaring like everyone else.

- Well, when you put it like that I definitely will have to go. By the way what's your name? I'm Luka.
- It's a pleasure to meet you Luka. I'm Sue. This isn't my first time in Puerto Rico, so I'd be happy to point out some good visiting spots.
- I'll take you up on that offer. Would you perhaps like to meet by the bar? I would love to hear what you'd like to suggest.
- I'd be delighted. Does 8:00 pm sound good to you?
- That's perfect. I'm looking forward to it.
- Till then, have a good one, I said.

Just like that a scheme was already underway. He seemed quite nice, actually. I even felt a bit guilty targeting him. But that small interaction with him was so invigorating. I heard his streams of blood rushing to his beating heart.

\*I won't toy with him. I'll just grab what I need and might make it worth his time, gifting him something back. I'll make up my mind when the time comes.\*



I had a scheming date, but he didn't know that. I had a date nonetheless, and I made the effort to dress the part. It had been a while since I had purchased something nice to wear.

\*Maybe this is the perfect excuse to go out and get something cool.\*

I usually liked to go to town and support the locals, but considered making a quick pit stop at the hotel's boutique to either get an idea of what was in fashion or laugh at it. It would probably be the latter, but I couldn't help myself. They always sold stuff at ridiculous prices, and the workers were the poor bastards that suffered the consequences of it. I had seen how the tourists were nasty to them and complained about everything to them as if it was their fault. Their bosses were the worst ones of them all. Those *pendejas* were from Texas and were Trump supporters. Enough said.

\*

- I gotta hand it to you, Camila, it's been a busy day, and you've caught on pretty quickly. I saw how well you interacted with them, especially with the snobby ones, I admire your patience. There are times that I don't have the energy for it and could care less if I make a sale or not, says Lisa.

- Thanks, and I don't blame you, to be honest. I got some pretty ridiculous complaints.

- What would you say was the most idiotic complaint you got?

- Well, a Karen-type was complaining about the weather, saying it was too sunny and that she had gotten a terrible sunburn. I tried really hard to not laugh in her face, but I managed to sell her a sunblock and an after-sun aloe gel, so that it wouldn't happen again.

- Oh my God, yesterday I had one complain to me about the rain, asking me what could be done. I told her to check the weather app and take an umbrella. Her dumbfounded face was

too much. But, like, what do they expect us to do? As if we had a magical remote that could control the weather.

- Since I came in an hour earlier, would you mind if I took my break first? Asked Lisa.

- Not at all, go for it. *Buen provecho!*

- *Gracias! Te veo en una hora.*

Camila thought that for it being her first day, she had managed pretty well. It had been busy, but it didn't compare to how busy the restaurant had gotten during the lunch or dinner rush. She took advantage that there weren't any customers in the store at that moment to make sure everything was in its place. She examined the racks, checking the order of garments that went from size small to extra-large. While at it, she noticed that a new client had come in.

- Hi welcome, can I help you with anything?

- Yes darling, I'm looking for a pair of flip-flops. I forgot to pack some.

- Sure, come over here where you can see the selection we have.

The client picked up a pair of fuchsia sandals with a pattern of white flowers on them. She studied them for a couple of seconds.

- Ma'am I like these quite a lot. Do you happen to have them in a size 8?

- I sure do, give me a quick second, and I'll grab them from the back.

- Sure, thanks. I'll wait right here.

Camila walked to the back room. It took a moment to locate where the fuchsia sandals were stocked. She found them and grabbed a size 8 pair. Just as she was about to leave the backroom, she heard a loud scream coming from the inside of the store:

- Lisa, Camila!

The parrots in the background screamed *puta puta, sucu sucu*. Camila hurried out of the backroom with the pair of sandals. The first thing she saw were the bosses, Lauren and Lucy, among a couple of new customers.

- Where the hell is Lisa? Asked Lucy.
- She's out on her break, said Camila.
- Where the hell were you? There's a boutique full of customers and nobody to tend to them.
- I was in the backroom, get-
- I don't give a flying fuck what you were doing. If there are customers in the store, you need to be present to welcome them in and help them with their needs, said Lauren.
- But that's what I was trying to do.
- Don't you dare backtalk us. Do as you're told and get back to work.

Camila could not believe what just happened. She was so enraged at the absurdity of it. Her anger was about to burst into tears. But she wasn't going to give them the benefit of seeing her break down. She took a deep breath and went to look for the client who had requested the flip-flops.

- Here you go, ma'am. You can sit over here to try them on, and there's a mirror next to this rack so that you can see how they look.
- Thank you, so much. I'm so sorry for how they treated you. That was just not right. I'm going to tell the hotel's manager.
- That's ok, please don't, whispered Camila.
- Don't worry I'll be slick about it. By the way I love these. I'm going to get them.
- I'm glad you like them. Let's go over the counter so I can check you out.

Camila, wrote the ticket in as fast as she could, knowing that the bosses were staring daggers at her. Camila, proceeded to get a bag to put the sandals in.

- Darling don't mind getting a bag for me. I'll just grab them.
- All righty, your flip-flops come to a total of \$32.34. What will be your method of payment?
- I'll pay with my Visa.

The payment transaction was carried out successfully, and Camila wished the client a nice day.

- Can you walk me to the door?
- Sure, no problem.

Camila proceeded to walk her out of the store, and as she opened the door for her to walk out. The client exclaimed:

- Thank you, darling, for your help today. I wish more salespeople had your charisma, said the client with the proper tone so that the bosses could hear it.
- Thanks for your kind words. I hope you have a good time on your vacation.

Camilla attended to the other customers as actively and engagingly as she could because Lucy and Lauren were still there. But let me, she thought to herself that their way of trying to make sales was ridiculous. They would hover over the clients, asking annoying questions up to the point that the clients would drop what they were looking at and would just leave the store. Camila tried to steer clear from their way and was able to chat with the clients in a positive manner and made some good sales.

Lucy and Lauren decided to leave, without apologizing and only said: "carry on" when they finally left. The moment they went out of the door, a huge weight lifted off of Camila's shoulders that only dropped around her neck again in the moment Camila heard them scream out for Lisa and her. She tried to distract herself with the customers to not show that she was still a bit shaken by that lousy interaction.

- Hey Camila, I just came back from lunch and crossed paths with the bosses. Is everything ok? They didn't even acknowledge me as I walked past them.
- They basically screamed and cursed at me in front of the clients.
- What? Why?
- Because I wasn't at the front door greeting new customers. When I was in the backroom getting some shoes for a client, they didn't even let me explain myself.
- Camila, I'm sorry that happened to you. But it does not surprise me at all. They pull shit like that all the time.
- Really? How can you take it.
- Up to this point, I've been able to numb myself to it. I've been trying to find another job, but I haven't had any luck.
- I hear you.
- Don't let it wear you down too much. You must be hungry. Why don't you go take your break?
- I will. Is there a microwave around?
- Yes, there are a couple of microwaves by the laundry room. You'll notice the signs for the laundry room once you leave the store, make a right and walk past the Starbucks.
- All right, thanks.
- Don't forget the contract, so you can read it over.
- Oh yeah, thanks.

\*\*

I could already hear the *cotorras* go *sucu sucu*, as I made my way to the boutique. When I was in the middle of them, they were screaming *sucu*. Then they started to scream

*puta*. They only screamed *puta* when annoying tourists hovered over them too much, but especially when the boutique's bosses came by.

\*Shit, that must be it.\*

I heard the boutique was having a new worker start that day. Those bitches were always making everybody miserable. It seemed like my meal would be served sooner than anticipated. They were two of my regulars. I always tried to suck out the poison they carried deep within, but sometimes it was too much since it was already embedded in their core. After I took a portion of them they ended up acting civil, but the effect quickly went away, as if I never had done anything. I debated multiple times whether I should just finish them off once and for all, but I knew deep down that wouldn't fix anything. Instead, I tried to reform them, but they were the only targets that have resisted the most, I wondered if there was any redeemable qualities to them...

*Las cotorras* were too riled up, probably sensing something was off. I approached them to try and calm them down. I would get a good view into the boutique from where they were anyways. I stood next to their cage and in that instant *las cotorras* calm down.

- Thanks lovelies, I "gotta" hear what's going on inside.

I heard Lucy and Lauren screaming and giving shit to their new worker.

\*Right on script, I do have to say. The new worker took the beating without flinching.

Almost every new worker had cried and quit on the spot. This one didn't talk back, but I didn't assume it was a weak spot, but, more strategic. I could see how she stopped herself, took a breath and carried on with the task at hand. She was not impulsive. She stopped and thought things through.

\*I like her, I like her a lot. She might just be who I'm looking for. \*

I decided to have a talk with her, evaluate, and perhaps present a proposal. I would leave that for later, though. The pressing matter at that moment was Lucifer and Lauren. I waited till they were out. They usually stuck around for a half hour. When I studied someone, time flew by. I had to admit, I admired the new girl's work ethic. Even from afar, I saw the dark circles around her eyes. I could tell she hadn't slept well.

When I least expected it, Lucy and Lauren left the store. What ended up pushing me off the edge was how they completely ignored Lisa. I couldn't understand how they could be so nasty and rude to people. Technically, I was not supposed to hunt during the day because it could expose me. That was why I set the date up with Luka at 8:00 p.m.

Luckily for me they always left their car in the underground floor of the multilevel parking. It was the loneliest of floors, hence the perfect spot to do it. I took a shortcut, giving me more time to get comfortable for the hunt.

\*Perfect, I thought, the car was at the usual spot. \*

I took a quick look to make sure nobody was around. I removed my clothes. My skin began to burn, flames consumed me, left a pile of ash behind.

I became my true self, a floating flame. I waited for Lucy and Susan to come by. They left the elevator and headed to the car. I flew to where they were, circled around them, and cut off the air flow. I kept flying until I saw them both drop in a faint.

Once they were on the floor, I sunk my fangs at the back of their neck, drawing blood. I didn't bother to store some of it. This hunt was purely for feeding and trying to extract some evil from them. As soon as I was done, I flew quickly to my room, before anyone saw my true self.

I looked through my cabinet to find some more gringo essence. I had to keep the same appearance to get some things in order. I drank it and was quickly restored into the human I had resembled earlier. Once I was ready, I returned to the lobby, determined to find the new worker.

\*

Camila sat by the lobby while she ate and read through the contract. There were a lot of crazy stipulations in the contract that she had to read through twice and out loud because she couldn't believe the audacity of them.

- The language to be used at the store is English, unless a situation calls for another language. It's considered rude to talk in a language that the customers may not recognize.

\*I'm not allowed to speak Spanish in Puerto Rico? They dare call it "rude"?



When we go to the U.S., we are expected to speak in English, but if it's the other way around it's considered rude. \*

- Workers are not allowed to wear jeans or sneakers.

\*Wait a damn minute, you mean to tell me that in a store where clients come in barefoot dragging in sand, I'm not allowed to wear jeans and sneakers? This is a stupid joke.\*

While Camila continued to go through the contract, she was suddenly interrupted by someone.

- Pardon the interruption, but is this seat taken? May I? said Sue.
- Yes of course.
- Thank you. I'm Sue.
- Hi, I'm Camila.
- It's a pleasure to finally meet the boutique's new worker.
- I'm not exactly sure about that, said Camila as she fondled the contract nervously in her hands.
- Are you having second thoughts about working here?
- Damn, is it that noticeable?
- No. You are hiding it pretty well actually.
- What do you mean? Who are you?
- I may look like a tourist to you, but I like to call myself the keeper of this area. I tend to it and try to keep it pure for the locals.
- What do you mean by that?

- We both know this hotel is an aberration. They put a gate at the beach to keep locals off. Colonizers that call themselves investors keep desecrating and polluting our lands for profit. I'm only one and can only do so much, but I try to redirect their intentions.
- How can you possibly convince narcissistic people to change their minds?
- A simple ritual that I do reforms them... temporarily...at least while they stay here.
- I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I don't understand what you are saying.
- I know, but you will soon enough if you'd like to join me.
- Join you?
- Yes, now let me ask you. Do you feel that there's still hope for Puerto Rico?
- I do, I really do... but what can be done? With macro situations where locals keep getting displaced, and most of the available jobs have to do with servitude to our colonizers, one can feel quite impotent. I'm tired, I feel worn out. Sometimes I want to just give up.
- What if told you that impotence would no longer be an issue?
- That would be a dream come true.
- What if I told you that your new bosses would bend to your will, well within reason. It's important to know that my job is about cleansing and reparations.
- All of that sounds unbelievably amazing. It sounds too good to be true, what's the catch?
- Ascending to power does have its quirks, you would undergo some changes. For one your diet would completely change.
- My diet? What does my diet have to do with anything?
- Everything.
- I'm sorry, I'm so confused.

- I know you are but, soon you'll understand. I have to admit I saw you work earlier and even from afar I could feel your strong spirit.
- You really think so?
- Yes, that's why I'm considering you.
- Considering me? For what?
- To join me, of course, and when the time comes you will carry on.
- Carry on with what?
- My legacy. Let me ask you, have you ever heard of a soucouyant?
- The soucouyant? Do you mean the Caribbean vampire myth?
- What if I told you it's not a myth?
- Wait? What?
- You may not believe me right now, but perhaps after you are shown, you will.
- Shown what?
- What I am, and what I'm capable of, and what you could also be capable of. Camila, I've been looking for a successor, and I want it to be you, if you'll accept. You don't have to give me an answer right now. I want you to think about it first. I want you to see for yourself.
- See what?
- What I can do. Tonight at 8:00 p.m., I will meet a man at the bar. I plan to take him out to the beach and perform a small blood extraction. I won't harm him or anything of the sort. Instead, I will do a fair trade off with him, I will extract his fears from his blood and convert it into an elixir of bravery. I invite you to stay by the sidelines and see how it's done. If you are fully convinced, I will turn you into a socouyant, gift you the elixir of bravery, and show you the ways of a socouyant.
- This all sounds intriguing, but I'm not sure I could be a...

- Don't worry, as I said think on it. But I will ask for a small favor.
- What?
- As I said I would like you to sit by the sidelines and see me perform the extraction. I need you to hold this empty vial for me till then. When the ritual is done, the contents will be safely stored in it. This way we can both test each other to see if we can trust each other. What do you say?
- I'm in. This is definitely something I have to see and experience for myself.
- Precisely.
- Till then.
- Till then.

\*\*\*

They both parted their ways, and just like that, Camila's break was over, and she was due to clock back in. She couldn't believe the talk she just had, with a soucouyant out of all beings. She knew what soucouyants were thanks to her affinity to Caribbean folklore. But she never thought they were real, and now she had gotten to meet one. Most importantly she had never felt any fear. Instead, she felt hopeful and understood. Being a soucouyant sounded fun, and all, but it would be a great sacrifice.

\*I would basically have to leave my life behind and feed off blood. Well to be honest is not like she has much going on in her life. Her body is a simple vessel, and it aches everywhere, but if I were to be a soucouyant I could be anybody. \*

Camila already imagined all the sorts of shenanigans she would get into. But that was the thing, if she were to be a soucouyant, it would be to serve a real purpose.

\*I would serve and help my fellow people... instead of bitch ass *gringos*. \*

Camila's shift flew by quicker, now that she had something to look forward to. She imagined what her life would be as a soucouyant. She began to clean up the store because closing time was coming in 20 minutes. As Camila swept the floor, she noticed a client who kept dropping on the floor each item she went through.

- Excuse ma'am, could you please not drop the clothes on the floor?
- Who the hell do you think you are? snarled the client back at her.
- I'm the store clerk, I'm asking you nicely to please not drop our items on the floor.
- You can't tell me what to do.
- I can ask you to leave the store if you keep throwing stuff on the floor.
- Oh, yeah, who's going to make me?
- I can happily call security to escort you out, said Lisa, as she came in to help with the situation.
- Don't bother, said the rude customer. I don't like any of the shit you are selling here anyways. It belongs in the crapper.

On her way out, the rude customer knocked over a clothing rack that toppled over a display of crystal figurines. All of them were completely shattered. Camila tried to run after her, but she was completely gone, almost as if she had disappeared into the thin air.

That does it, thought Camilla to herself, I'm done with this bullshit. She caressed the empty vial that was in her pocket, and she felt more decided than ever that she was done with being run over. She hated the feeling of helplessness, but knew it was just about to be over.

She took a breath and composed herself once again.

- Don't worry about it, Lisa. Go and closeout the cash register. I'll take care of clean up.
- All right, thanks.
- Sure, no problem.

It took a while to get everything back in order. She wanted to be done with it as soon as possible.

Lisa and Camila closed the store together and parted ways.

Camila directed herself to the bar, where she saw Sue with a man. It seemed like they were hitting it off. They were both laughing and having a good time. Camila thought to herself that was very humane of Sue. She would have never thought that soucouyants would care about their targets. She thought they would just hunt them in cold blood, but that didn't seem to be the case.

She saw them stand up. The man walked in the direction of the beach, and Sue walked in the opposite direction.

Camila guessed Sue would meet him there. She kept her distance and followed him to the beach. He sat on the sand as he star-gazed.

Suddenly there was a shooting star. It looked like it was pulling in closer by the second. Wait a minute that wasn't not a shooting star. It was Sue! It looked so beautiful and bright.

The fireball reached the man, circling around him until he dropped. Camila felt like it was safe to come in to get a closer look. Just then, the fireball revealed a pair of fangs that sunk into the man's neck. The fireball turned into a man, but not just any man. It was the man who had been on the floor.

The man motioned to Camila to come closer. She understood and handed him the vial. The man spit the blood into the vial.

- Sue, is that you?
- Of course, I've got a new look.
- I see that, said Camila in wonder.
- Have you given any thought to my offer?
- I have, and I'm done with feeling impotent and helpless. I want to be strong and help others in need.
- I'm glad to hear it. It's why I chose you.
- This vial is my gift to you. It's a bravery elixir. You'll know when you'll need it.
- Thanks, I don't know what to say.
- You don't have to say anything. Just be ready for soucouyant training tomorrow. I will show you the ways.
- I promise.
- You'll feel a slight pinch, but don't worry I'll be gentle.

Camila took a step forward to signal affirmation. Sue grinned and revealed her fangs. Sue walked towards Camila and sank her fangs into her neck. It felt like a sting at first. Camila felt all her insecurities be sucked away, replaced by a fiery passion that consumed her whole body.



All of these thoughts and compressed memories are encoded in the blood that is now firing through my veins. I see myself intertwine with the rescales of prerogatives that mandate a new order to be set forth. To be a soucouyant is to renew, out with the sold and in with what was already in here. Reclaim what is



rightfully ours. Sue uses her gifts as a defense. Her intentions are noble and mark a step towards change. But I think it is a waste to wield these powers solely on intruders. I think it is about damn time that we don't let it get that far. It is time we head forward with a strong stance. I say we retire the complacency that fuels collective subjugation and put to hire our desires.

THE END

## Coño el caño vive

- Ay coño, qué calor, says Mirna to herself as she throws water in her face in an attempt to cool herself off.

Washing her face is how she always marks the beginning of every day. But today she feels the urgent need to do it because the heat is too unbearable. She sees her reflection in the mirror, and her hazel eyes follow the wrinkles that lay on her cheeks. She grabs her favorite moisturizer, which is actually a lavender lotion that her dear friend Rita always makes for her. She dips her long and skinny ring fingers, takes a small dab of the lotion, and proceeds to gently massage her eyebags. She then moves her fingers and traces the expression lines that mark her forehead. She does this until her fingers triumphantly reach each crack in her face. She rinses her face and lets it air dry to keep it feeling fresh and cool. She brushes her teeth quickly because her stomach is starting to rumble, and her hunger is kicking in. She leaves the bathroom with the mission of getting her coffee and breakfast ready.

She walks through her hallway, and her eyes revisit the three paintings hanging on the wall on her right. One of them is a landscape resembling her mom's finca, with a small turquoise wooden house and a big mango tree behind it sheltering it from the sun's rays. In front of the house her mom's younger self with her prima are playing with *gallitos* made out of *semillas de algarrobo*. The dry dirt serves as a flat surface for them to draw up a table where they add each of their winnings and losses. Her mom and *tía* are tending wet clothes by the left side of the house. She was able to conjure up this painting with her mom's intricate descriptive directions.

The second painting is a portrait of her mother Consuelo. It is a gift she had made for her 48<sup>th</sup> birthday. She decided to keep it after her mom's passing, and every morning when she passes it, she kisses her hand and plants the kiss on her mom's right cheek. It's her way of acknowledging that her mom is always with her.

Next to the portrait, there's a painting she recreated out of a photo that captured one of the many protests for the dredging of el Caño Martín Peña. It portrays the residents and her neighbors chanting in unison. Front and center you can see Mirna with her friend Rita holding up a banner that reads: "El caño vive y la lucha sigue." She reads it, and it's like she can still hear the chants ringing in her ears. Seeing it and hearing it brings tears of joy to her, as what once was a dream would now come true.

Mirna removes herself from her painted realities and goes to the kitchen. She turns her gas stove on, bringing two cups of milk to boil in a saucepan, adding sugar, vanilla extract, un clavo, and a spoonful of butter. Lastly, she adds the farina and stirs, combining all of her ingredients together. She lowers the temperature and proceeds to make her coffee in a greca. After the coffee and farina are ready, she serves herself, sitting at her kitchen table to eat. She takes a spoonful of farina and blows onto it before eating it.

- *A mí nada más se me ocurre desayunar farina con café con la calor que hace*, she says to herself between laughs.

As she eats her breakfast, she revisits the newspaper *El Nuevo Día* on her table. The headline reads: "*El Dragado Llegó – La primera pala.*" Below it there is a picture of the community leaders with the executive directors of the ENLACE project and a couple of phony politicians all standing with shovels to symbolize the beginning of the dredging.

- *Esos cabrones políticos nos ignoraron por años*, and now they're soaking up the glory. *Es un descaro*, she says to herself as she starts to draw mustaches and horns on the politicians.

Drawing always calms her. Fun fact about her is that she was able to draw before she could write her own name. She looks at the red wall clock and sees the wands mark 9:25 am.

- I better get ready if I want to make it to the interview on time.

Mirna goes into her room and picks out one of her favorite flowy dresses, an orange one with maga flowers all over it. She dabs a little powder on her cheeks and puts on a light burgundy lipstick. She brushes her hair, tying it up in a bun to keep it from falling on her face.

She goes to her nightstand where she keeps her mom's journal, sits on the bed, and gives it one last look. She holds the journal in her hands. Her mom made it out of an old carton. She covered it in a silky burgundy fabric, which made it look like new. It's surprising how long this journal has lived without it getting torn or having loose pages. But then again that would be an insult. How could she even dare question her mom's fine craftwomanship, as she likes to say, as opposed to the real term. She looks for her poem, the one that was written specially and only for her.

Mi arcoiris

Cuando todo era blanco y negro,

Llegastes tú.

Todo en mi vida se alegró,

porque el color lo trajiste tú.

Entre teñidos y pinceladas,  
te formaste y me fortaleciste.  
Siempre juntas y afortunadas ,  
me entendiste y me sonsacaste.

Me enseñaste amar.  
Contigo aprendí a soñar.  
Crecimos para luchar.  
Unidas siempre sin dudar.

Her eyes begin to tremble and sting, she feels her neck get stiff, and the weight of those words, of the years that have passed by are starting to sink into her head. She can no longer contain herself as tears begin. The sweat and teardrops meet each other as they work together to help wash away the burning pain that aches deep within. She cries for her mom, who never got to see a restored caño. The pain behind her cries begins to seize and transform. As the tears leave her eyes and navigate her face, it is creased, marking a new stream that flows some hope through her. Her tears are now of joy and refreshing.

-Who would've thought *que con llorar uno se refrescaría*, she says to herself between laughs as she feels the light breeze and tears kiss away the pain from the outside and seep in tranquility inwards.

She kisses the poem and gives it one last sniff. The rusty old smell of the pages tickle a sneeze out of her. This always happens, but it doesn't bother her because for her it is like giving a kiss to her mom. She takes the journal and wraps it in a green satin cloth, proceeding to put it carefully in her tote bag, a multicolor patchwork her mom made for her out of scrap fabrics.

Knowing that it's ten minutes to 10:00 a.m., she walks out of her house in Calle Chile with the tote bag and an umbrella to shield herself from the sunrays.

\*\*\*

Bang, the sound of the alarm goes off.

- Ay coño, no escuché la primera alarma, says Marcos as he realizes he overslept.

He jumps out of bed grabs the first pair of jeans he finds, pairing it with his favorite tie-dyed shirt. He puts his purple Converse on. He goes to the bathroom, pees, and washes his hands. He moves on to wash his face and brush his teeth. Just like that, he gets his bookbag ready, packed with his laptop and journal, and leaves the house.

Marcos always drives through el puente Martín Peña where the murals that Mirna did along with the communities are portrayed. He focuses on the Parada 27, because the vibrant blues, reds, and yellows that cover the boats are so inviting. It makes him want to jump in and join the workers to help them with their fishing nets.

He drives through Calle Haydeé Rexach street and passes a couple of Vietnamese piglets running along with their mother into the Buenos Aires Street, which he finds cute and funny because of the irony of it. He loves the idea that nature will always claim its land, as it should, which is precisely the point here. Calle Buenos Aires is where the Fideicomiso de la

Tierra del Caño Martín Peña's headquarters is located. He continues his drive with a content notion that the pigs are a good omen marking a great day yet to come although it began with a messy start for him. He finally arrives to the ENLACE's's Corporation parking lot. He looks at the time, and it is exactly 10:00 a.m. He hopes that Mirna hasn't arrived yet so that he can have a little wiggle room to go into the kitchen and grab himself something to eat, since he didn't have time to get breakfast.

Marcos steps into the lobby, and to his luck, Mirna is already there waiting for him.

- Buenos días, Mirna. I'm Marcos, I'll be interviewing you.
- Oh, nice to meet you Marcos, says Mirna.
- It's a pleasure to meet you. Come and follow me.

Marcos directs her to the small conference room, where she sees maps of the district hanging on the walls. Pictures of the kids and elders engaging in the leadership development programs are hanging on the wall opposite to where the maps are placed. Mirna focuses on the photo of the kids were doing máscaras of vejigantes with her out of recycled materials because that was one of her favorite crafts to do.

Marcos directs her to the table, pulls out a chair, and signals for her to sit. She sits and carefully places her tote bag on the table. He finds it curious that she doesn't hang it on her chair back like most women do. Instead, she puts it gently on the table, where she can have a clear vision of it at all times. It seems excessive for him to want to have your eyes on something so trivial like a bag.

- Mirna, I have to apologize. I overslept this morning and didn't-... *bueno cuento largo corto, no he desayunado*. Would you mind if I run quickly to the kitchen to grab something quick to eat while I interview you?

- *Ay mijo, claro que no*. You can't start your day with an empty stomach.

- Can I get you anything? *Un cafecito, agua, algo pa picar?*

- Just a cup of water please.

- You got it.

Marcos arrives back to the conference room after 8 to 10 minutes.

- Sorry, there was a bit of a line for the coffee.

- *Ay mijo*, stop apologizing.

- I know you only asked for water. But Marta brought her famous strawberry bread. It's so delicious. I couldn't let you go on without having you try it, so I just had to get you a piece.

- *Ay, qué lindo, gracias*. It smells so good. I appreciate the thought.

- I know, right? *¡Buen provecho!*

- *Gracias, igual*.

- Mirna, as you well know we're working on getting "El Museo del Caño" up and running. I'm already working on a proposal to get funding for it. I want to hear your artistic perspective to help me envision the culture of the communities. Do you mind if I record our talk?

- Not at all.

Marcos proceeds to get his phone and turns the recorder on. He grabs his blue synthetic leather journal, unbuckles the belt that holds it close, and settles on the page where he has written questions for the interview. He takes a quick glance at them and realizes they are a bit on the generic side, so he decides to wing it a bit.

- So, Mirna, can you tell me about the murals? I drive by them every day, and I especially like the Parada 27 one.



- Oh, really? You know that's my community. I'm curious, what about the mural do you like?

- The vibrant colors are the first elements to pull me in. But what really gets me is the portrayal of the people working together. I think you show the unity that binds these communities together beautifully. The way you depicted the workers by their boats and their nets is so vivid that it makes me want to join them.

- I'm glad you were able to see that. Those were my intentions when I tackled that project.

- Tell me, what was it like working on that project?

- It was a gratifying experience, *pero mira que me sacaron las canas esta gente*, she says as she lets out a hard cackle.

- What sort of challenges would you say you faced when you were working on those murals?

- I led the project, but it was a community effort. Like every democratic process, many people will be happy, while others will reproach the decision made. Al principio fue un pero indeciso trying to settle on what the murals would be.

- Hubo mucho tira y jala?

- Sí, but that blew over quickly. Luis de Israel y Bitumul gave the suggestion of commemorating important people who emerged from the communities. Tita said to commemorate our working nature. Everybody was on board with these ideas, and from then on, things went more smoothly.

- How many people worked on the murals?

- It's hard to give you an exact number. But, I would say it's close to 15 residents.

People of all ages worked on it. El grupo LIJAC y RIE came to lend us helping hands. It was lovely to see the integration of our youth and elders working together for their communities.

- What made you want to incorporate mosaic patterns in the murals? I see your bag and it also reminds me of a mosaic. Is there a correlation there?

- Oh my God, am I that obvious? Toy jodiendo, Mirna says between laughs.

She picks up her tote bag carefully to show Marcos the patterned patchwork that constitutes the essence of the bag. He keeps studying how carefully she handles her bag, assuring him that this is not a simple bag as he had thought and there's more to it. He follows her motions with an attentively.

- My mom made this bag here. She never liked to throw away anything. Although she struggled sometimes to get herself new stuff, she believed everything deserves a second chance. That is why she never parted with what could be considered scraps, because to her they were the missing pieces of a puzzle waiting to be built. Mosaics became her signature design for the clothing that she would sew. Eventually, I started to adopt her technique and incorporated mosaics into my artworks.

- I think it's lovely how you are keeping your mom alive through your art.

- Thanks for saying that. But my mom's story doesn't end here with this bag or the sewing, it merely starts.

- I had a feeling about this bag, he says, with a proud smirk that crooks the edge of his lips' righthand crease, pushing out a dimpled void in his cheek.

- Oh, did you know really? she says in a playful attempt to drag him down to a leveled playing field.

- My bad, I didn't mean to read you.

- Yo sé, mijo. I know you mean well, pero es que a mi me gusta cucar al diablo, she says while she laughs.

- Ay, sí yo me lambí contigo, he says, but thanks. Me mantienes humilde.

- Esa es la idea.

Mirna reaches into her bag and pulls out a satin green cloth that is notably wrapping something. Marcos has no idea what is being covered, but the fact that it's a green satin cloth assures him that whatever it is, it is definitely something of great importance to Mirna. He studies how she carefully unfolds the fabric, revealing what looks to be an old journal. He notices how carefully she handles it as if it's the most fragile thing in the world.

- This journal belonged to my mom. She made it herself. She took an old piece of cardboard, covered it with a cloth, and made it into a journal. She was a closeted writer. She always dreamed of being one, but she never dared to show her writing to anyone except me. Instead, she became a great seamstress out of necessity. I could tell you all about it, but I think it's better if you see for yourself. I will help you fill in the blanks.

- Sounds good to me, says Marcos, with the same keen excitement a kid would have if he were receiving a new toy to tinker with.

Mirna releases the tight grip she has on the journal, a grip that has transcended the four walls around her. The walls begin to shrink and close in on her. Her legs shake anxiously as her feet hit the floor with stomps in an attempt to wake what's underneath and stop the walls from caving in. She looks back at her picture with the kids and realizes it's the same situation. It's about allowing herself to give a piece of herself to the world, so it can branch out for the wellness of others. With that thought, she allows her lungs to exhale out her worries and pushes the walls to break open. She hands him the journal and allows him to look through it.

After going through the pages, he settles on one that has a poem.

Una dulce piña

comía la niña,

el fuego se la llevó,

y todo quebró.

La piña ya no era dulce,

aun con azúcar quedaba agridulce.

Todo cambió como un impulse,

llegué a esta comunidad que ahora me conduce.

Así la comunidad se introduce,

y el cambio se produce.

Sin duda resulté, en un ambiente que dulce luce.

Creo que por eso le dicen Santurce.

-CSO (5/12/1932)

Marcos eyes quiver as he fights the urge to keep in sealed tears, but one tiny drop manages to escape his hold. His first instinct would have been to brush it off, but he allows the tear to roam freely on his cheek as a sign of his deep appreciation for the poem.

For one, he is completely surprised. He was not expecting this poem to make him feel anything. But it touches a nerve. Pineapple is his favorite fruit to eat. Most of the time he likes to add chili flakes the same way he had them when he visited DF city in Mexico about

two years ago on a friend group vacation trip. He feels bad for the girl whose pineapples were taken away from her and wants to know about her journey. The play on words in the poem is so fun and smart that it makes him want to read it again out loud so that he can actually hear the melody with which the verses were crafted. He reads the poem again but this time out loud, and he feels the rhythm travel from the paper and take flight as it sprouts open out of his mouth. He tries to gather his composure again for the interview.

- Truth is Mirna, I don't even know where to start. There is so much here, he says with an excited tone.

- What's the first thing that catches you? Asks Mirna with great determination, as if taking on the role of the interviewer opposed to the interviewee.

- The pineapples, they're my favorite fruit. A fire took them away?

- Yes. My mom was originally from el barrio Miraflores de Arecibo, where her family had pineapple crops. It was their one and only source of income. But a fire took out her family's finca, so she was forced to move out here for necessity.

- That's what you mean by her having to become a seamstress out of necessity?

- Así mismo, como lo dices. Let me show you something, says Mirna with open hands.

Marcos understands Mirna's hand motions from the get-go and gently returns the journal, now knowing that what is being handled is not only someone's memory, but also a piece of history. Mirna takes the journal in her hands and looks for a specific entry that will further explain her mom's sown traces. Once she finds it, she hands the journal back to Marcos so that he can see for himself.

3/3/1933

Today has been a hard day. I miss mi finca. I miss my pomarrosa tree and being able to eat its sweet fruit whenever I want. I long for those days when I could sit under

the tree and enjoy its juicy fruit while its protective tree shade would shelter me from the sun rays. I was rich then, and I didn't even know it. I shouldn't complain too much about my current situation. I make do... Well, we all do because we have to.

- I have met a lot of amazing people, who I now hold dear to my heart. I have to say I love the creativity that spurs people to come up with solutions. Last month Tito's kid, Tony, found the hood of an abandoned car, and you wouldn't believe me if I told you what he did with it. He flipped it and used it to float en el caño, and just like that he was able to move through the canal. Not only did he sail through the canal on a hood of a car, but he was able to fish! He caught several fishes! That Tony is so sweet. He gave me one of the fish he caught. I gave him two peppermints as a reward. It was the only thing I had to spare at the moment. But, I promised him I would make him a hat so that he could protect himself from the sun. He was so excited when I told him. His excitement reassured me that I should finish homing in the sewing skills I have been working on lately.

- Just as I'm thinking about further pursuing the sewing, ideas are surging as to what I can make. Por ejemplo, Luisa always brings pasteles, and as soon as she brings them, I cook them and we eat them together in my balcony entre chismes. She's pregnant, and she's due in five months. I think this gives me enough time to learn how to make un ropón for the baptism. I feel with sewing I'll be able to make dignified trueques with my people.

- Ay coño, vete pal carajo, says Marcos, just as he finishes reading the journal entry.

- Qué?

- I can't believe it! This is amazing Mirna, says Marcos with an uncontrollable enthusiasm that makes it hard for him to stay still in his chair.

- What do you mean?

- The car hood and the kid. I know what your mom is referring to. This will go perfectly with the picture of it!

- Mirna's eyes get glossy as her smile widens. You really think so?
- Of course! It would be criminal not to have the picture alongside this entry. It's a match made in heaven.
- Ay Marcos, this would mean a lot, especially to my mom.
- Now the world will know of her as the great seamstress of letters.
- Ay, coño, it's as if you already know.
- What do you mean?
- There is another poem that I would like you to read if you allow me to point it out.
- Please do, says Marcos, as he hands her back the journal.

Mirna grabs the journal and once again looks for a poem that she knows will shed light on her mom's thought process. She finds the page and hands over the journal to Marcos, as she sits patiently and waits for him to read it.

#### Entre tejidos

Un hilo y una aguja,  
juntas explotaron la burbuja.  
Desprendida de lo conocido,  
me hallé entre un tejido

Tejidos con sentidos,  
entrelazados por los tonos coloridos,  
creando bellos vestidos,

forjamos todos unidos.

(CSO 1/2/1934)

Marcos finishes reading the poem and takes a breather. He needs a moment to compose himself. Right now, he is full of emotions that he wouldn't have imagined he would have going into this interview. He feels a bit anxious because he knows that what he is about to ask is a lot, so he proceeds with a gentle tone.

- Mirna, this journal is a piece of history.
- Do you think it would work for the museum?
- It's perfect! I was just trying to muster up the courage to ask you if you would consider donating it to the museum. I know it's very important to you, and it's a piece of your mom.
- Ay, coño, nene. Why do you think I brought it here in the first place?
- Mirna, I am so happy I got this opportunity to meet you.
- Me too, I'm especially happy I get to share with the world who my mom was.
- Is there anything else you would like to add concerning her?
- Her name was Consuelo Sánchez Olmeda, and she was the most resilient person I have ever met. She taught herself how to sew by hand and eventually was able to save money from selling clothes to her neighbors. Thanks to that she was able to buy herself a Singer sewing machine, and her inventory grew. She was making so many pieces of clothing without having the proper space to store them. Then with much dedication, she was able to open a small shop selling fabrics and clothing.
- Is that shop still around?



- It is... But it's not what it used to be. Nowadays people like to go to the mall to get their clothes. That small shop is so special to me. It's where I honed my first artistic skills.

- How so?

- The same way that lovely shirt you have on got made.

- Thanks, my sister made it for me. Wait you dyed textiles?

- Yes. My favorite thing to do at the shop was to dye the fabrics. It's where I first started to work with colors, and that is how everything started out for me.

- Now that I have an idea of your artistic background. Why do you think it's important to have El Museo de Caño?

- We are century-old communities, and our accomplishments should be an example for everybody. Everybody should know about how we all came together, after being ignored by the government. We came together and fought for the dredging of el caño, and we fought for our permanence. Everybody should know that when communities come together a lot can be accomplished.

- How do you feel now knowing the dredging process is scheduled to start in a week's time?

- I'm overcome by emotions. It's still a surreal thought. It pains me to know that many of us who fought for it don't get to live it. But that's precisely why we need the museum. It's important to keep the memory alive for all to see. The museum will go beyond being a place for a display of memories.

- Beyond, how?

- Well, as you very well know, the museum will have a workshop. A lot of artists like me struggle with having a space where they can work on their artistic projects. The museum will have an area that would serve as a collaborative studio, where artists can come and produce.

- How do you think this would benefit the communities?
- The communities have so much to offer and show to the world. This way we get to share our culture with everyone while simultaneously promoting local economic development.
- Precisely. I couldn't agree with you more.
- If I'm not mistaken, the residents want to see the dredge process firsthand.
- Yes. A bunch of us will meet in the José Pepe Díaz recreative area by the gazebos.
- I was wondering if I could accompany you and take pictures. I want to have a section in the exhibit where pictures of the dredging process will be on display. Is that possible?
- Tell you what, you can swing by my house, and we can both go together.
- Qué chévere, me gusta. Mirna, I want to thank you for giving me your time and donating a piece of history.
- No. Thank you, young man, for taking an interest in our communities and helping us show our heart to the rest of the world.
- Bueno. I won't steal anymore of your time.
- Coño, I told you to not be so apologetic, says Mirna with a smile that stretches from ear to ear.
- See you next week. Take care.

### One Week Later

It's an early Friday morning, and Marcos is already on his way to pick up Mirna at her house, so that they can both walk together to the recreational area, where all neighbors will meet. His camera dangles from his neck. He fiddles with the lens as he walks through the

streets to make sure he has them on a good setting. At Chile street, he walks up to Mirna's house to knock on the door. She answers the door with excitement and greets him with a kiss on the cheek.

- Good morning, Mirna. This is for you, he says as he extends a folder with a manuscript.

- What is this?

- I couldn't bear the idea of you parting with a piece of your mom. So, I made copies of your mom's journal so that you could still have her with you.

- ¡Ay, coño! Marcos you didn't have to do this. She says as she wipes away tears and gives him a tight hug.

- How are you feeling? Today is the day says Marcos with excitement.

- I'm so happy Marcos. I was so excited, I woke up at 5:00 am, and I couldn't go back to sleep. So, I got up and painted a couple of banners for the neighbors and me to hold up.

- That's great. Bring them out, and I'll help you carry them.

- Thank you. Such a helpful young man.

Mirna brings out the banners, and they both walk together to the recreational area.

They reach the gazebos, where a herd of residents is gathering. Marcos and Mirna say hello to everyone and start giving out the banners that Mirna made. Marcos starts to take pictures of the residents with banners that read messages like: 'El Dragado llegó,' 'El Caño vive y la lucha sigue,' 'Comunidades unidas son invencibles,' and 'Los residentes somos autores de nuestro futuro.'

One of the engineers approaches the crowd and instructs them to stay under the gazebo, as a safety measure. Everyone agrees, and with that, the engineer leaves and returns to his post. A contractor blows a whistle as an indication to start the procedure. Since this is

the first time this work is being started in el caño, only one excavator will be used to test out the surface. An excavator is ignited, and it starts to drive to the edge of the channel. One of the contractors raises the flag and waves it, as to signal it's OK to let the arm and bucket submerge itself into the water. The steel arm sinks in. It comes out with a bucket full of trash covered in gooey moss. The arm directs itself to a huge container labeled Toxic Waste and drops the contents into it.

The residents gasp when, the pungent smell of the trash reaches them. But this doesn't crush their excitement. If anything, it makes it more enticing, because it means that all that stinking trash will forever leave the canal.

The crowd watches as the arm moves back and sinks again into the water, but something is off. The arm doesn't come back out. The arm looks like it is struggling, maybe it is stuck on something. The excavator proceeds to reverse to get more momentum to lift the bucket back up. But the excavator isn't moving backward. Instead, it looks like it's being pulled forward.

Everyone in the crowd is concerned. They talk amongst themselves to try to come up with an explanation of what's happening. Marcos comes closer to the fence that separates them from the excavation site. The arm starts to creep out of the water, and Marcos adjusts the lens of the camera to zoom in in order to see what's going on. He spots a mossy matter gripping the arm of the excavator. It looks like a grimy hand.

- But, it can't be, Marcos thinks to himself.

The excavator keeps trying to reverse to free itself from whatever is holding on to it. The ground starts to tremble. The mossy hand gripping the excavator reveals its arm, and another arm surges out of the water. The whole crowd starts screaming. The person driving

the excavator jumps out and runs away from the canal. The ground starts to shake harder, and the residents hold on to each other as if to secure themselves. Marcos runs into the site to take more pictures and videos of what is happening.

The huge mossy arms drop and grab the edge of el caño. It looks like they are bracing themselves to lift a being out of the canal. A huge bulge of compiled trash comes out of the mucky water, letting out a huge scream that makes everyone run away from the site.

It's a beast, a monster of some sort. Marcos looks through his camera, zooming in to make out what this monster is made of. He spots toilet seats where one would usually have eyebrows. Its eyes look like a black empty void. Its lips are made of moss, algae and fungi, its arms look like terribly assembled car and human parts. Its legs are made of plastic and beer cans. Marcos manages to take pictures of everything as he sees it.

Police cars make it to the scene as the residents start to rush away from the gazebo. The police start to shoot at the mossy monster. It proceeds to grab garbage from the caño and hurl it at the cops' cars. The police pave the way for residents to leave the scene safely.

Mirna pulls away from the residents and runs towards Marcos. The cops scream at her, but she doesn't listen to them. She is determined to reach Marcos, grab him, and pull him to safety. Marcos seems to be in a hypnotized state. It's like he is being pulled in, determined to capture the monstrosity that is revealing itself in front of him.

The monster looks like it's inhaling, but it proceeds to shoot poop out of its void eyes. The poop showers over the cops, but that doesn't stop them from shooting at it. The beast grabs one of the cop cars, lifts it up, takes aim at the cops who are still shooting, and flings it over. The car hits the cops and crashes into the ground, its parts shatter and fly in different directions.

The car's hood looks like it is about to hit Marcos, but he doesn't notice. He is focusing on filming the monster. Mirna runs and pushes Marcos out of the way, but the hood lands on top of her and smashes her to the ground. Marcos screams and runs to Mirna. He tries to pick her up. She cries in pain as he tries to lift her.

- I can't get up, Marcos.
- It's okay. Just let me grab you, and I'll get us both out of here.
- No, Marcos. You save yourself.
- What are you saying!?
- I'm saying it's too late for me. You go and save yourself.
- I can't leave you.
- Yes, you can.
- But
- But nothing. You have to go now. You have to go on and tell our story. Tell everyone about us.

Mirna's breathing becomes labored. Marcos lets out a high-pitched cry that stuns the monster. The monster stops in its tracks and looks at the mess and pain it has made. It looks inquisitive, but most importantly, ashamed of what it has done. It takes one last look at the wreckage and leaves the scene to hide from the mess it has made. Coño el caño vive, says Mirna through her last breath.

- Y la lucha sigue.

THE END

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