

EDUARDO HALFON

DISTANT

Translated by Lisa Dillman

I was pacing among them, moving up and down rows as if trying to make my way out of a labyrinth. The dual nature of the story, we read from the Ricardo Piglia essay, and it didn't surprise me to look out over a sea of faces covered in acne and heartfelt bewilderment. A story always tells two stories, we read. The visible narrative always hides a secret tale, we read. The story's construction makes something hidden appear artificially, we read, and then I asked them if they'd understood it, any of it, and it was as though I were speaking some Bantu language. Silence. But rash, undaunted, I stepped further into the labyrinth. Several of them were dozing. Others were doodling. An overly thin girl toyed with her long blonde locks, absentmindedly coiling and uncoiling a strand of bangs around an index finger. Beside her, a pretty boy eyed her lasciviously. And from within that vast silence, I heard the drone of tittering and whispering and gum chewing. Then, as I did every year, I asked myself if this shit was really worth it.

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I don't know what I was doing trying to teach literature to a horde of college kids who were, for the most part, illiterate. Each fall, they'd register for their first year, still emanating a sort of doleful puppy-dog air. Looking like lost sheep, yet smugly convinced that they weren't, that they knew everything there was to know, possessed the most absolute understanding of the secrets governing the universe. Who cared about literature? Who cared about one more course with one more stupid jackass, spouting even more stupid bullshit about books, and oh books are so wonderful, and books are so important, yeah, whatever, dream on, but me, I'm fine with no books and no jackass who still thinks literature matters. Something along those lines was running through their minds, I suppose. And I suppose, too, that seeing them sitting there year after year with that same self-satisfied expression, that haughty yet ignorant look on their faces, I understood them perfectly, even conceded their point almost, and recognized in them a trace of myself.

It's like the stars.

I turned around and saw a thin, dark-skinned kid whose fragile features made me think, for some reason, of a rosebush—not a rosebush in bloom,

but a sad, spindly bush with not a single rose on it. Several students giggled. Excuse me? It's like the stars, he said again, softly. I asked him his name. Juan Kalel, he replied, just as quietly, without looking at me. I asked him to explain what he meant by that, and he sat in silence for a moment, as if ordering his thoughts. Well, stars are stars, he said timidly, and again came the tittering, but I asked him to please continue. I mean, the stars in the sky are the stars that we see, but they're also something more, something that we can't see but that's still there. I said nothing, giving him space, giving him time to elaborate. If we arrange them, they become constellations, he murmured, which represent zodiac signs, which in turn represent each one of us. I replied that was all well and good, but what did it have to do with a story. He fell silent again, and in the duration of his silence I sauntered back to the desk where I'd left my café con leche and took a long, tepid sip. What I mean is, he continued falteringly, as if each word pained him, a story is something we see, something we read, but if we arrange it, it becomes something else, too, something we can't see but is still there, between the lines, implicit.

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The other students sat there in silence, staring at Juan Kalel as though he were a freak and awaiting my reaction. I considered the metaphysical and aesthetic ramifications of his words, the many implications of which even Juan Kalel himself probably wasn't aware. But I made no comment. Instead, between sips of coffee, I simply smiled at him.

After class, back in the faculty lounge, I poured more coffee into my paper cup, lit a cigarette, and began leafing through the newspaper distractedly. A psychology professor by the name of Gómez or González or something sat down beside me and asked what class I was teaching. Literature, I said. Wow. Tough, the woman replied, though I have no idea why. She wore too much make-up, and her hair was dyed a weary shade of ochre, the color of a kinkajou or an abandoned doll. The rim of her glass was already all kiss-marked red. And what are the kiddies reading? she asked a bit too jovially. She actually called them kiddies. I stared at her with as much solemnity and intolerance as I could muster and, exhaling a cloud of smoke, told her that for now we were doing a few Donald Duck and Pluto stories. Well, she said, and that was all she said.

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I spent the next few days thinking about Juan Kalel. I'd managed to find out that he was on a full scholarship, in his first year, and majoring in economics. He was seventeen years old and a native of Tecpán, a beautiful city of artichokes and fir trees in Guatemala's western *altiplano* region, though calling it a city might be a bit of a stretch and calling them fir trees might be a bit optimistic. Everything about Juan Kalel was out of sync with the other students in my class, and, of course, the whole university. His sensitivity and eloquence. His interest. His appearance and social class.

As is the case at many private Latin American universities, the vast majority of Francisco Marroquín University's students come from wealthy families, or families who think they're wealthy and therefore also think they've got their children's economic futures all sewn up. As a consequence, their degrees become simple mantelpieces used to substantiate the idea that some family custom or other has been followed, and to stifle gossip. You could even claim, with no hesitation, that the disdainful, pedantic attitude you see there is actually more pronounced, more marked, in the first-year students whom I, with obvious fatigue, had to accept into my classes each year. I'm generalizing, of course, and perhaps recklessly; but the world can only be understood through generalizations.

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From time to time, amid all the falsehood and hypocrisy, there appears (to expand on his metaphor) a shooting star like Juan Kalel, whose vocation and devotion and passion for all types of learning stem from a genuine need, not some pathetic and deplorable sophism. And just by saying a few words, he exposes the falsehood and hypocrisy not just of the other students but maybe even of the professor and his stuffy ivory tower.

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The first author on the syllabus was Edgar Allan Poe, a logical jumping-off point, I think, given that it was a contemporary short story class. I'd asked them to read two of his stories, "The Purloined Letter" and "The Black Cat," thereby enabling us to cover both his detective stories and suspense fiction.

At the beginning of class, a pudgy girl raised her hand and said she hadn't liked the stories at all. All right, I said, that's your right, but tell us why. To which she simply replied, making a disgusted face, they're just really gross. A few people laughed; others seconded her opinion. Indeed, really gross. So I explained to them that taste had to be accompanied by more refined

understanding, that most of the time we dislike something simply because we don't understand it, haven't really made an effort to understand it, and the easiest response is just to claim we don't like it and wash our hands of the whole affair. You've got to develop criteria, I said, exercise your ability to analyze and synthesize, and not just spit out empty opinions. You've got to learn to read past the words, I said, rather poetically I believe, though no doubt all I did was confuse them further. I spent the rest of the period fleshing out the intricacies of both stories, the almost invisible network of symbolism Poe had cast just beneath the surface of each text like a supporting framework. Any questions? I asked after wrapping up. And a boy with long hair asked, as someone does each year, if authors like Poe did that on purpose, like, wove a second storyline, a secret narrative into the cracks of the visible one, or if it just came out spontaneously. And as I did every year, I said that you'd have to ask him, but that in my opinion therein lay the difference between a writer and a great writer, the ability to be saying one thing when in reality you were expressing another, the ability to use language as a means of accessing a sublime, ephemeral meta-language. Like a ventriloquist? he asked. Yes, I suppose so, I said, although later, when I gave it some more thought, I regretted having said it.

After class, the pudgy girl came up as I was gathering my things. I still don't like the stories, she said. I smiled and asked her name. Ligia Martínez. That's all right, Ligia, neither Poe nor I are offended. But I will say, Professor, that I understand them better now. I reproached her for calling me professor. I'm sorry, Doctor, she said, and I chided her once more. He doesn't like to be called doctor or professor, said a girl waiting for her by the door, a girl I hadn't seen before. What should I call you then, Ligia wanted to know. Just call him Eduardo, the other girl said with a slight smile, and I saw that she had eyes the color of molasses, or at least that's how they looked to me at that moment, in that light. So listen, Ligia said, I wanted to ask you why there aren't more women writers on the syllabus. There's only one, Eduardo, this O'Conolly or whatever. Doesn't that seem, like, politically incorrect, she asked with a trace of malice. And I gave her the same reply I give every year. There are also no black writers, Ligia, or Asian writers, or midgets, and, as far as I'm aware, there's only one gay writer. I told her that my courses were politically incorrect, thank God. In other words, Ligia, they're honest. Just like art. Great short story writers, period. She said fine, she was just curious, and left with her friend.

Juan Kael was waiting for me outside the classroom, leaning against the wall, alone. Do you have a minute, Halfon? he asked, pronouncing my last name in a very odd way, as if it were somehow stressed on both syllables. I said of course, and then I said I was surprised at how silent he'd been in class. I wanted to speak to you, he said, ignoring my comment and staring down at the ground. I saw then that he had an enormous purple scar on his right cheek. Like he'd been whacked with a machete, I thought. And then I thought briefly of the white lash marks on that black wall at Auschwitz that my Polish grandfather had told me about. Juan took a folded-up piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and handed it to me. It's a poem, Halfon. I asked him if he wanted me to read it right then and, startled, he said no, backing up a couple of steps—later, please, when you have a little time. I'd be happy to, Juan, and I was going to shake his hand, but he kept backing up, slowly, as he proffered thanks without ever looking at me.

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From Maupassant, they read "The Horla."

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Before I began, I asked all those who hadn't liked the story to put up their hands. Six hands rose timidly. Then seven. Eight. All right, you eight come up to the front of the class, I said, and casually, leisurely, they sauntered up to the front until at last they formed a sort of crooked line of suspects. Tell us what you didn't like about it. First one: I don't know. Second: well, I didn't finish it, so I just didn't like it. Third: it's totally impossible to understand, the author doesn't make any sense, and I don't like people who don't make sense. Fourth: too long. Fifth: too long (laughter). Sixth: I felt sorry for the crazy guy. Seventh: I only like positive stories, stories that inspire me and make me want to live, not just depress me. Eighth: yeah, same here, it made me feel bad, and who wants to feel bad? I remained silent, glancing from them to the rest of the class, trying to let something sink in without my having to say it outright. Not a chance. So I thanked them, told them they could sit down, and slowly proceeded to analyze the story, point out the most important elements and recurring themes, the many phrases that were like beautiful doors leading into a secret story. A difficult one, elliptical, perhaps incomprehensible, but magisterial nonetheless.

See you next week, I said when I'd finished. Señor Kael, would you stay behind, please. And after answering a few individual questions from other

students and gathering my things, I asked Juan to come with me to have a cigarette in the cafeteria. He simply nodded. Not a big talker, Juan Kalel.

We walked in silence, a pleasant silence, natural, like in a silent movie when it's not actually silence but just the normal state of affairs. I bought two coffees, and then we went and sat down at the farthest table. I lit a cigarette. Maupassant's really good, Juan whispered as I stirred in my sugar. An architecture professor walked over to say hello, but I didn't stand so he left right away. Juan had burned his mouth on the coffee and was gingerly fingering his lips. I really like that image of the stalk bent by an invisible hand, he said with such overwhelming sadness I thought he might be on the verge of tears. Me too, though I'm not sure why, I replied, reaching for the ashtray. So, Juan, I read your poem, and then I stopped and took tiny sips of my coffee. He was still blowing into his. I told him it was really quite good. Juan looked up and said he knew. We both smiled. I bit down lightly on my cigarette so that I could pull the poem from the pocket of my green leather bag and then reread it, in silence. What about the title, I asked. It doesn't have one, I don't believe in titles, he replied. They're a necessary evil, Juan. Maybe, but I still don't believe in them. He paused. Like you, Halfon, he added with a wry smile, you don't seem to believe in personal titles. Touché, sir, I replied, and as I stubbed out my cigarette I asked him if he had other poems, if he'd written any more. He was still blowing into his coffee. Without looking up, he told me he'd written that one in my class the other day. While I was discussing Poe's stories. He said he wrote poems whenever he felt something very strongly, no matter where he was, although the poem was always about something very different from what he was feeling. He said he had notebooks full of poems at home. He said I was the first to read one.

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Two days later I got an e-mail from the girl with molasses eyes. Her name was Ana María Castillo, but she signed off with a syrupy Annie. Immediately I pictured the red-headed orphan with ringlets, even though this girl was tall and pale, with straight hair, astonishingly shoe-polish black.

Her note was short and, to my surprise, flawlessly redacted. In it, she said that she hadn't liked the Maupassant story either, but that she'd been ashamed to admit it in front of the class. That's why I'm writing, she said. To explain why I didn't like it. First, I want you to know that I read it twice,

just as you say we should, and that I understood it, or at least part of it. But that's not why I didn't like it. The reason I didn't like it is because I identified so strongly with the protagonist. Sometimes I feel that lonely, too, and I don't know what to do about it, how to handle it. I suppose we hate recognizing ourselves.

I replied to her that same night, and the tone of my e-mail was more pedantic than I'd realized. Congratulations, I wrote. That's the correct way to read a story: letting yourself be dragged along in the author's wake. It matters not whether the waters are calm or stormy. What counts is having the courage and confidence to dive in, headfirst. And that's when literature, and art in general, becomes a sort of mirror, Annie, a mirror in which all of our perfections and imperfections are reflected. And, yes, some of them are frightening. Others are painful. Fiction is curious that way, isn't it? A story is nothing but a lie. An illusion. And that illusion only works if we trust in it. The same way a magic trick impresses us even though we know perfectly well that it's a trick. The rabbit didn't actually disappear. The woman hasn't actually been sawed in half. But we believe it. The illusion is real, an oxymoron. Plato wrote that literature is a deceit in which he who deceives is more honest than he who does not deceive, and he who is deceived is wiser than he who is not.

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Next came Chekhov. They read three relatively short stories, and I gathered no one understood a word. Or maybe no one read them. Frustrated, I gave them an exam for the remainder of the period, then sat before them enthralled, reading one of Juan Kaleb's notebooks.

After class, Juan was there when I left, leaning against the wall again, waiting for me. We walked to the cafeteria, and this time he insisted on buying the coffee. I thanked him. Once we'd sat down, I pulled out his notebook and placed it on the table and lit a cigarette. I asked him what he was doing studying economics, but he just shrugged, and we both knew it was a ridiculous question. What does your family do in Tecpán? My father tends an orchard in Pamanzana, just outside of Tecpán, he said, and my mother works in a textile factory. No siblings? Three sisters, all younger. He told me his scholarship covered housing, too, paying for a room in a student residence in the city. What about you, Halfon, why did you study engineering? I said

because I was a fool, and then we sat in silence for a few minutes, drinking coffee while I smoked and wondered about his family life. He was incongruous, Juan Kalel was. Sometimes he seemed to emanate the most absolute innocence, utter naïveté, as genuine and obvious as the scar on his cheek. But other times he gave the impression of understanding everything, of having lived and suffered through things that most of us only come to know through reading or supposition or puerile theories. Without smiling, he seemed always to be smiling, and without crying, he seemed to have indelible tears on his cheeks. I asked him who his favorite poets were and he said Rimbaud and Pessoa and Rilke. Especially Rilke, he said. I don't see much Rilke in your poems, Juan, or at least not the ones I've read so far. Rilke is in all of my poems, he said, and I didn't ask him why, although much later I understood perfectly. You don't write poetry? he asked, and stubbing out my cigarette I said never, and I was going to say that I didn't believe myself a poet, that in my opinion, to be a poet, you had to believe you were one, be born one, whereas a narrator can slowly evolve, but in the end I didn't manage to say anything at all. Someone greeted me from behind, and when I turned, I found myself looking into Annie Castillo's molasses eyes, which is simply a figure of speech, because the only thing molasses about them was a mistaken memory. Still, I stood.

How are you, Eduardo? She was clasping her books to her chest, like a life vest, I thought, and asked if we were busy. I said we were, a little. Oh, well, I just wanted to thank you in person for responding. No need, Annie. And to say that maybe one day if you're free, we could meet up and talk, she murmured, blushing. I said of course, I'd love to, and she smiled nervously. All right, we can e-mail, then, she said, holding out a hand that was long and thin and too cold.

After I sat back down, I lit another cigarette and noticed that as Annie walked away, Juan Kalel seemed particularly focused on her ass.

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Nothing *happens* in this story, declared an emaciated boy by the surname of Arreola. What, so, some guy has a few drinks with an old friend, and then he goes home. I mean, what's so great about that, he scoffed, same thing I do every Friday. A few students laughed self-consciously.

I told them Joyce had to be read much more carefully. They had to know a little about the history of Ireland, the religious conflict. They had to grasp the context of each story, its structure and rich symbolism. But more than anything, they had to understand his epiphanies.

Anyone know what epiphany means? A feline-featured girl said it was sort of like the epiphany of Jesus. Pretty much, but what does that mean? Oh, I don't remember, she said. All right, pay attention: rustling of papers, readying of pencils. In Greek theater, the epiphany is the moment when a god appears to impose order on the scene. In the Christian tradition, the Epiphany refers to the revelation of Jesus' divinity to the Magi. So, it's a moment of clarity. And in the Joycean sense, an epiphany is an unexpected revelation had by one of his characters. A sudden spiritual manifestation, as he himself called it, I enunciated slowly. Does everyone get that? Absolute silence, which of course meant no.

Let's start with the title. In Spanish, it's called "*Una Nubecilla*," a small cloud, almost a cloudlet, but that's not a very good translation, I said. None of the story's Spanish translators, including the great Cuban writer Cabrera Infante, did a good job on that. The original title is "A Little Cloud," which we know Joyce took from the Bible, Book of Kings. Anybody remember what happened in the Book of Kings? One girl started to say something and then faltered, stopped. I explained in very general terms that the people of Israel had been led away from God. Elijah prophesied a drought that would last until the people stopped worshipping false prophets and returned to Jehovah. And after two years without so much as a drop of rain, after the fall of Ahab and the false prophets, the people of Israel returned to God, and Elijah's servant proclaimed: Behold, there ariseth a little cloud out of the sea, like a man's hand. In other words, ladies and gentlemen: Watch out, it's about to rain. Think about it. Not a *small* cloud, but a *little* cloud. Why is that distinction so important in the context of the story? Pause. Why am I insisting that Cabrera Infante and company not only did a poor job translating the title, but actually translated it in a way that leads the reader astray, further from the story's true meaning?

Juan Kalel raised his hand and said that there could be some sort of relation between the cloud's optimistic approach in the Bible and the false optimism of "Chico Chandler," as he was called in Spanish. Because in English, he continued, it would be "Little" Chandler and "Little" Cloud, right? Which in Spanish should have been "Pequeña Nube" and "Pequeño Chandler."

The repetition draws a parallel that we miss in the Spanish, he said. Quite pleased, I walked back to the desk for my coffee. What I mean is, Juan went on, Chandler is all talk. He talks about all the things he's going to do, all the poems he's going to write, and how one day he's going to get out of Dublin, too, and live as free and fully as his friend Gallagher. But then when he gets home, all he can do is yell at his son and make him cry. It's sort of pathetic. And ironic, too. The relationship between the story's two littles, the cloud and Chandler, is ironic, because it's obvious that he's never going to do the things he wants to do. Unlike the biblical cloud, he's hopeless. It's as though he's paralyzed, Juan said, gazing at me absently, as if something much more personal, but equally unattainable, had dawned on him.

Smiling, I asked them if they'd understood. Annie Castillo raised her hand. Well, I think there's something more to it, she murmured. I said that there was, that of course there was something more. I mean, she began, I don't know, but I don't think the irony in the title is gratuitous. And then she fell silent. Precisely, I replied, but why not? Why isn't it? What other irony do we get a glimpse of in the story, Annie? But Annie simply shook her head and shrugged. I turned to glance at Juan, hoping to prod him into bailing her out, but he was engrossed in his notebook, scribbling furiously. A poem, perhaps. I don't know, Annie hesitated, I guess Chandler's attitude itself is ironic. Why? I probed. Well, she went on, because Chandler envies all the wrong things, all the immoral things, for want of a better word, that Gallagher represents. And there's irony in that.

Without another word, I picked up a piece of chalk and wrote a Joyce quotation on the board: My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to me the centre of paralysis.

So, I said with my back still to them, where in all this beautiful Joycean turmoil is the epiphany?

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The following week they read two Hemingway stories: "The Killers" and "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." I talked about Hemingway's style, so sparse, so direct, so poetic. I talked about Nick Adams. I talked about the three waiters, who become two, who become one, who become nothing. I had them write a brief essay on the points of reference of the two titles: what have they killed?

who? is there really a clean, well-lighted place, or is it a metaphor for something else? And as they wrote, I watched them, pretending to read the newspaper. Juan Kalel didn't show up that day, but I didn't give it much thought.

Annie Castillo and I had agreed to have a midmorning coffee in the faculty lounge. When she approached, I was smoking a cigarette and riling a neoliberal econ professor with Marxist jibes. But I said excuse me, this young lady has come to see me, and he immediately stood and left.

Annie sat down. I asked her if she'd cut her hair. Fingering her bangs, she said a little. Shall we get some coffee? I asked. All right, she said, and we walked together to the coffee machine. I saw that not only had she changed her hair but she also had on more make-up than usual. And she wore a tiny turquoise blouse that revealed her belly-button ring and showcased her bust and shoulders. Sugar? Please, she replied, and lots of cream.

Once we'd sat back down, we chatted about her other classes and, of course, the predictable uncertainty about her professional future. Her way of staring directly into my eyes made me so self-conscious that, from time to time, I was the one who had to glance down into my coffee, or look for another cigarette or a piece of paper. She said she'd been thinking about the Joyce story. She said that a lot of the things he was pointing out about Dubliners she found to be true about Guatemalans, too. She said she'd never really liked literature, but my class wasn't bad. Well, thank you, I said, and then asked why she identified so strongly with Maupassant's narrator. I'm not sure, she replied after pausing to concentrate, as if trying to recall a memorized answer. I surround myself with people in order not to feel alone, Eduardo. But whether they're there or not, I always feel alone. Like the protagonist, I suppose. It's almost unbearable, you know? That was all she said. And I decided not to ask any more.

Seeing the time, she said she was late. Algebra, she confided almost frantically. So we both stood, and I asked if she knew why Juan Kalel hadn't come to our last class. Who's Juan Kalel? she asked, and I just smiled. Annie stood there quietly but nervously, books clutched to her chest, eyes darting around. I asked her if she was all right. Of course, she replied, why do you ask? I said nothing, toying with my cigarette, and she opened her mouth slightly, as though she were about to say something important or at least revealing, and then didn't.

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Who can tell me what an “artificial nigger” is, I asked in reference to the Flannery O’Connor story they’d read. Juan Kalel’s seat was vacant, again. A very tall girl’s cell phone rang and, without my having to say anything, she picked up her things and left. What does the term “artificial nigger” actually refer to? I repeated, slightly irked. I was just about to explain that this was what those black lawn jockeys used to be called, and that they were very common in the South, and an unequivocal symbol of racism and slavery, when from the back row came perhaps the most literary response they could have given. It refers to Michael Jackson, said a kid with a shaved head.

After class, I went to the school of economics and asked the secretary if something had happened to Juan Kalel, because he hadn’t been to class in two weeks. She frowned and said she didn’t know who Juan Kalel was. I nearly shouted that he was not only a first-year scholarship student, but also a true poet. Juan Kalel withdrew from the university, I heard the dean say from his office. Tell Eduardo to come in.

138 I was about to call you, he said as he shuffled some papers. Please, take a seat. He answered a phone call while responding to an e-mail, and told the secretary to give us a few minutes, that they’d talk a little later. How’s your course going? he asked, signing something. I said fine. I was about to call you, Eduardo, he repeated. I’m afraid Juan Kalel has withdrawn from the university. I asked if he knew why. Personal problems, I believe, he said, and it was obvious that he was going to give no more away. We were both silent and I thought, stupidly, about some sort of tribute or homage to a fallen soldier. A few days ago we got this, he said, handing me an envelope. It came in the mail and I gave it to my secretary to pass on to you, but I imagine she simply hasn’t had the time, Eduardo. The envelope was a grubby white and there was no return address, though the purple postmark was, of course, from Tecpán. I slipped it into my inside jacket pocket and, thanking him, stood. A real shame, the dean said, and I agreed: yes, a real shame.

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Saturday I climbed into my car at seven a.m. and set off for Tecpán. I had Juan Kalel’s letter and his notebook of poems with me, and nothing more. I’d sent him an e-mail to let him know I was coming, but it bounced back immediately. At the university they’d refused to give me his actual address or his phone number, claiming that, officially, he was no longer a student and

therefore his information had been, officially, deleted from the files. It was as though, officially, Juan Kalel never existed.

On the way, I decided to stop for breakfast at my brother's house. He lives some twenty kilometers from the capital, in San Lucas Sacatepéquez, in a small village with the literary name of El Choacorrál.

I rang the bell for so long that he finally woke up. What are you doing here? he asked, propped in the doorway, still half asleep. I told him I'd brought sweet rolls and *champurradas* and that I was on my way to Tecpán. He looked confused, or maybe annoyed, I'm not sure, and stepped aside to let me in. Still in his robe and slippers, he showed me a few sculptures he was working on, white marble, and then a plaster cast mural he was going to show. Are you going to paint it? I asked, and he said yeah, maybe, he wasn't really sure yet. He made a pot of coffee and we sat down to have breakfast on his terrace. It was cold, but mountain cold, which is different from city cold. More chaste, more radiant. The air smelled clean, naked. I felt warmth on my face and saw that the sun was just beginning to peek out timidly from behind a green crag. I said I was on my way to Tecpán to try to find a student. Well, ex-student. Why's that? he asked, refilling my coffee. He dropped out. First year? Yeah, I said, and I was going to add that he was an econ student who also wrote poetry, but then I thought better of it. Why did he drop out? I said I didn't know, but that was exactly what I wanted to find out. I'm guessing he's not just any student, he observed discreetly. No, I said, he's not. And we finished our coffee in silence.

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Guatemalan place names never cease to amaze me. They can be like gentle waterfalls, or beautiful felines purring erotically, or itinerant jokes, it all depends. Back on the road, I drove through Sumpango, and every time I drive through Sumpango I feel obliged to read aloud the sign that says Sumpango, I don't know why. I went through El Tejar, which means place of roof tiles (where, unsurprisingly, they make a lot of roof tiles), and through Chimaltenango and then through Patzicía, which I also feel obliged to say aloud. All of these names are like charms, they cast some sort of linguistic spell, I thought as I drove, and I recited them like little prayers. Perhaps my favorites are the tenangos: Chichicastenango, Quetzaltenango, Momostenango and Huehuetenango. I love them as words, as pure language. Tenango, I've been told, means "place of" in Cakchikel, or maybe it was Kekchí. Then there's Tonicapán, whose heavy rhythm makes me think of an old warship, and Sacatepéquez, which sounds like the Spanish for "take

it out, little guy” and makes me think of a woman masturbating. And I love Negaj and Chisec and Xuctzul, so clipped and so raw, almost violent, though I’ve never been to any of them and would be hard pressed even to find them on a map. But there are also towns with rustic, common names, names that have been prosaically Hispanicized so they mean something to those who don’t speak indigenous languages: Bobos is “fools,” Ojo De Agua means “eye of water,” and Pata Renca is “lame foot.” And in what’s now a dangerous, war-torn area is Sal Si Puedes, “get out if you can.” But in my opinion, the Guatemalan town with the most characteristic and most (or perhaps least) creative name has got to be El Estor, located on the edge of Lake Izabal, where a couple of centuries ago, a foreign family owned land and ranches and a famous store that all the local indigenous folks called El Store, imitating the English. But of course they pronounced it El Estor, hence its current name. I supposed when it comes down to it, Guatemalan place names are the same as Guatemalans: a mix of delicate indigenous breezes and coarse Spanish phrases used by equally coarse conquistadors whose draconian imperialism was imposed in a way both ludicrous and brutal, and always recalcitrant.

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When I reached Tecpán it was almost noon. I parked the car and walked into a place called Tienda Lucky. A plump woman was patting tortillas onto an enormous *comal*, but they were purple, or maybe deep blue. She must have noticed the look on my face because immediately she whispered that they were called black tortillas. Ah, I said, and took a seat.

A ranchera song could be heard in the distance. On the walls were three framed photos: what looked to be a Swiss cottage, a couple of white horses on a lawn, and a blond cop standing beside his shiny cruiser, complete with German shepherd at his side and a huge caption that read Beverly Hills Police Department.

Out of nowhere, there appeared a girl who looked about ten, had beautiful features and was decked from head to toe in traditional costume. She said hello. I ordered a beer and was about to light a cigarette when she tsked and pointed to a sign that said no smoking. But I can ask my aunt, she said in heavily accented Spanish, as though each word took a huge effort to pronounce. No, no, that’s fine, and I put my cigarettes away.

At another table, a man in a hat and boots was drinking a bottle of India Quiché cola. He wore a piece of black cloth, a sort of apron-looking thing, hanging from his belt. He waved at me, but without looking.

The girl returned with my beer. I asked her name. Norma Tol, she said, smiling. That's pretty. How do you spell Tol? Tee, oh, el, she responded, drawing each letter in the air with her index finger. Tell me, Norma, is your aunt here? Yes, she said, and that was all she said. Could you call her over for me? and she ran to a door leading to the back. To the kitchen, I supposed. A bus overflowing with people crossed the road, leaving a thick trail of dust and noise in its wake. Good morning, said a very short woman dressed in black, and I saw that Norma was directly behind her, barricaded, protected. I said pleased to meet you, and apologized for troubling her. It's no trouble, she said in an accent even more marked than her niece's. Her hands were covered in some type of red sauce and she wiped them repeatedly on her skirt, rubbing hard. You must be Doña Lucky, I'm guessing. That's right, young man, how can I help you? I explained that I was from the capital and that I was in Tecpán looking for a student. I'm his professor, or, well, I was his professor. Ah, she said frowning, I see. And your student lives here? Yes, in Tecpán. And what's his name? His last name is Kalel. Juan Kalel is his name. She thought for a moment and then told me that there were a lot of Kalels in Tecpán, that it was a very common last name. I know his father is in charge of an orchard in Pamanzana, I continued, but she shook her head. And his mother works in a textile factory. Doña Lucky turned to the man in the hat and boots and asked him something in Cakchikel. I was going to say that Juan had a big scar on his right cheek, but decided not to. Go to Pamanzana, the man told me. Yes, you go there, young man, Doña Lucky echoed, it is close and I think they will know him there. And then between the two of them they struggled to give me directions.

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I placed a few bills on the table and stood. You don't want to eat something, young man? Doña Lucky asked, and I said thank you, no. Some pork rinds or a little *estofado*, maybe? No, thank you. You know *estofado* is the local dish in Tecpán? I said no, I didn't know. How do you prepare it, señora? Four different meats, she replied, pig, chicken, cow, and goat. You cook it in a big pot until the meat falls apart, with some thyme and laurel and orange juice and vinegar and a splash of beer and a splash of Pepsi. She smiled, but I couldn't tell if she was joking or not. Excuse me, I said to the man, who was still sitting there, what's the name of the cloth you have hanging from your belt there? This? he asked, holding it up. It's a knee cloth, he said. Very typical, he said. The kids don't want to wear them anymore, he said. I asked him what the Cakchikel name was and, cradling it like a wounded dove, he

replied *xerka*. Excuse me? *Xerka*, he repeated, barely parting his lips. With an X? I asked, and he shrugged and said that much he didn't know.

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142 Technically, Pamanzana is a hamlet, though calling it a hamlet might be charitable. Half a dozen adobe and rusted sheet-metal shacks lined the road, looking like they were about to collapse. I parked my car and walked to the tiny shop with the Rubios Mentolados cigarette sign on its door. Outside, a dog napped contentedly in the only spot of shade. Inside, a girl sat behind a metal grille looking incarcerated, and she stood when she saw me. Good afternoon, I said. She just smiled uneasily. There was a strong smell of dehydrated sardines and, instinctively, I took a step back. I'm looking for the Kalel family, I said, for a young man named Juan Kalel, but the girl just smiled, more fearfully than pityingly. Do you know Juan Kalel? Crossing her arms, she murmured something unintelligible. His father tends an orchard here in Pamanzana. No response. I stood silently for a few seconds. I thought about all the barriers that stood between us, so many barriers, and I felt helpless. I bought a pack of cigarettes and, after lighting one, went back out to the street.

I walked toward the shacks but there was no one in sight. The dog had woken up and was barking at something. A snake, maybe. Or a rat. I leaned against the car and, for some reason, thought of Annie Castillo, of her eyes that had once struck me as molasses-colored, of her pallor, of her loneliness, and for a moment I felt a mixture of love and disdain and apprehension. I thought of all the students like Annie Castillo, who lived so close to hamlets like Pamanzana, but also so blindly unaware of hamlets like Pamanzana. And staring at the shacks and the dust, I thought about all the stories that, cloistered in a more perfect world, we read and analyzed and discussed as if reading them and analyzing them and discussing them actually mattered. And then I didn't want to think anymore.

I lit another cigarette. I was about to start reading some of Juan Kalel's poems when I heard footsteps behind me. It was a woman dressed in black, carrying a big bag of fruit or vegetables. She wore a fine white mantilla on her head. She stopped just beside me, solemn. You must be Señor Halfon, she said with no expression whatsoever, pronouncing my name the same way Juan Kalel did. I smiled, perplexed. She still looked somber. Her face

was cheerless and weather-beaten, like that of an old sailor. Juan has a book of yours, she said, I recognized you by the photo. Are you his mother? She nodded the same as her son. I told her I was very glad to meet her, that I'd come from the capital to speak to Juan a little, but I didn't know where to find him. Without looking at me, she said I was lucky, she had only come to Pamanzana to get some cauliflower from the orchard her husband tended and that she was on her way back to Tecpán now. I offered her a ride and, without saying so, she accepted.

Sitting uncomfortably in my car, she asked me if I was there to convince Juan to come back to school. Not at all, I said, I just want to speak to him. I decided not to mention his poetry. She was quiet for quite some time, staring out the window, holding her bag of cauliflower. I can assure you he won't be coming back, she said suddenly. I was going to repeat that wasn't why I'd come, but instead I said nothing. We need Juan close now, she faltered. I didn't turn to look, but from the tone of her voice I could have sworn she was crying.

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The Kalel house was in the outskirts of Tecpán, on the road to the Mayan ruins of Iximché. Once, as a kid, I'd visited Iximché with the family of a school friend, and the only memory I have is of eating green mango with lime and ground pumpkin seeds, and then vomiting it all up by the stones of who knows what temple or altar. I also remember my friend's mother fanning me with a magazine as she gave me sips of tonic water.

A black doll hung disconcertingly on the front door. Please, sit, Juan will be back very soon, his mother told me. The house looked clean and comfortable, in spite of everything. In one open area were the kitchen, a small table-cum-dining room, and a rustic, black leatherette sofa. Candles cast a hazy light in one corner. I went over to look at a shelf with framed photos of the children at their first communion, not realizing I'd been toying with a cigarette until Juan's mother brought in an ashtray. You can smoke, she said, placing it on the table. I thanked her and sat down, but decided to slip it back into the pack. Without asking, she brought me a cup of plantain *atol*, a drink made of boiled plantain, sugar, and cinnamon, and then sat down beside me. I'd never tried plantain *atol* before, and asked her how it was made. She didn't reply. Do you know, Señor Halfon, why Juan left his studies? I said

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that I did not, that at the university they wouldn't say anything other than he left for personal reasons. That's what we asked them, she said, looking down, but in an exaggerated way, as if her eyes would bore through the floor and into the ground. She remained like that until suddenly the door opened and Juan appeared in the doorway, holding hands with a girl of perhaps six or seven. Over a too-small white shirt, he wore a too-small black vest. The girl looked like a miniature version of her mother: dressed in black, with a white mantilla on her head. I turned and saw that, in the corner, around the candles, were wilted flowers, a rosary, some old photographs, and all of a sudden everything made sense.

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144 For lunch we had a soup made of turkey—which we call *chompipe* and they called *chunto*—and sweetened crookneck squash. Then, as we walked to the Plaza Central together, Juan told me that his father had been sick for many years, that he had prostate cancer and eventually it spread all over. He said that his father had refused to go to the capital to have a doctor look at it, that he preferred to keep working. My father died in the field, he said, and that was all he said. There was nothing else to say, I suppose. But the image of his father dying in an orchard, on the land he tended that was not his, stayed with me.

Juan bought me a cup of coffee. The best in Tecpán, he boasted, paying a woman who had her little table set out right in the center of the plaza. She poured a squirt of coffee extract, a little hot water, and a little milk into two plastic cups. When she said something in Cakchikel, Juan just smiled. In silence, we walked toward an empty bench.

This is yours, I said, handing him the notebook and the poem he'd mailed me. I thought he'd try to refuse them, but he took them with no comment whatsoever. A barefoot woman passed by, selling cashews. I read your books, Halfon, Juan said looking over at a group of men shining shoes beside the fountain. And then for a time, neither of us said anything. I wanted to tell him that it made perfect sense to me why he'd dropped out, that he didn't have to explain anything. I wanted to tell him how much I missed him in class. I wanted to tell him to keep writing poetry. But there was no need for that. Someone like Juan Kalel could never give up poetry, even if he wanted to, mostly because poetry would never let him give up. It wasn't a question

of form, or aesthetics, it was something much more absolute, much more perfect, that had little or nothing to do with perfection.

A girl came up and said hello to Juan, and the two of them began speaking in Cakchikel. It sounded beautiful, like drops of rain falling on a lake, perhaps. When she left, I asked Juan if he wrote in Cakchikel, too. He said of course. I asked how he decided whether to write in Spanish or Cakchikel. He was quiet for a time, looking off at the shoeshine fountain. I don't know, he finally said, I've never thought about it before. Then we fell back into that natural silence we had, as if neither of us really needed to say anything, or as if everything between us had already been said, whichever. It smelled of roasted corn on the cob. In the distance, a boy was selling baby chicks, and people were ignoring a preacher. Halfon, do you know how to say poetry in Cakchikel? Juan asked suddenly. And I said no, I had no idea. *Pach'un tzij*, he said. *Pach'un tzij*, I repeated. And I savored the word for a time, taking pleasure in it purely for its sound, for the delectable lure of its pronunciation. *Pach'un tzij*, I said once more. Do you know what it means? he asked and, although I hesitated, I said no, but that it didn't really matter. Braid of words, he said. It's a neologism that means braid of words, he said. *Pach'un tzij*, he intoned, giving it an elegance that could only be gained through non-skeptical spirituality. It's like an embroidered blouse, like a *huipil* of words, he said, and that was all he said.

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It had gotten late. The sun was starting to go down, and we decided to walk back to Juan's house. Near the colonial church, an old man stood before a small white cage. We approached. He had a yellow canary in it and was whispering or singing softly to it. Juan told me that the canary was a fortune-teller, and I smiled. No, really, he said. How much? I asked the old man. He raised two fingers. I took two coins from my pocket and handed them to him. But it's for him, I said pointing to Juan, I'd rather know his future than mine. The old man took a wheel full of colored slips of paper and then whistled softly to the canary, placing the wheel in front of the bird. With its beak, the bird pecked out a pink slip of paper. Then the old man took it, whispered something to the bird, folded it in half, and handed it to Juan, who was staring fixedly at the canary. There was no tenderness in his look, no compassion. Instead, he seemed angry, almost violent, almost furious, as if the canary were divulging some dark secret. Juan unfolded the pink paper and read it in silence. I simply watched, also silent, and maybe it was the streetlight, or maybe it was something else, but I could see the purple scar

clearly on his right cheek, and now it looked like much more than the blow from a machete. And then very slowly, as if emerging from a nightmare, Juan began to smile. I thought of asking him what the paper said, asking him what future the canary had predicted for him, but decided against it. Some smiles, I suppose, are not meant to be understood. Juan said something to the old man in Cakchikel, slipped the pink paper into his shirt pocket and, looking up at the sky, said that it would be getting dark soon.