MICHAELA DJANGO WALSH

Diablas Por Siempre

Lupe lived behind a slaughterhouse on a dusty, uneven road marked with rocks and potholes. We became friends on the soccer field and then, later, on side streets where we'd sit on the concrete drinking tequila and Coke from plastic cups, the throb of the tuba and the reign of the accordion blaring banda from the Ford Fiesta her lover bought her. Everyone called him El Vibora—the snake—and along with the car, he gave her a key chain of a coiled serpent. One day I uncoiled it just because, and she called me pinche cabrona and almost kicked my ass because it was her luck charm and because for four years she wanted to uncoil it herself. Sometimes we'd dance right there in the street taking turns spinning one another, but mostly we just talked. About our moms with whom we both lived, about her daughter's first communion and whether to make posole or tamales for the fiesta, about the soccer rivalry in our pueblo and whether our team, Las Diablas, would beat the Fresonas, a team who thought they were the best because they had money for new uniforms every year. Her brother, El Diablo, was our coach, and every Wednesday the team practiced on the field in front of the lake, the smell of wet dirt and cucumbers, and the sweetness of sweat mingling in the early evening air as we did cartwheels and somersaults in inventive drills before dizzily driving the ball towards the goal. We'd play until it got dark and then pull our cars onto the field and play under the light of the headlights, heat radiating from our bodies, the grass slick with the night's dew.

I wasn't from the pueblo, but my tíos were, and when my father died and my mom became sick with sadness, we put the dogs and everything that would fit into the back of the green pickup truck, left Iowa, and drove south for two thousand miles because maybe Mexico would fix my mom's loneliness. I wasn't from the pueblo, but I played soccer like I was. The games were every Sunday in el empastado, our home field, and depending on the team we were playing, the stands could become a flood of movement and sound and broken bottles. Pride in the team was measured by how much it hurt to lose. We had blue Bayern Munich jerseys and matching shorts, and my number was fourteen, the same as Mexico's national soccer star and former Chiva, Javier "Chicharito" Hernández. There was an electricity stepping onto the finely trimmed grass of that field, a welling of adrenaline that you felt behind the thighs, between your legs, in your throat and chest. As a team we shared a fierce sense of solidarity that El Diablo and Lupe cultivated through potlucks and parties and gatherings where we

celebrated baptisms and births and graduations and long-ass hikes through the cerros of the pueblo to waterfalls and shrines where we knelt and bathed and skipped stones and talked shit about the Fresas. To be a Diabla was to be una Diabla por simepre.

Lupe played sweeper. She was the last line of defense on the field, and unlike the position of striker or wing whose very names resonate a kind of glamour, sweeper is the grittiest, dirtiest, position—it is the linebacker of soccer. What was impressive about Lupe was her uncanny ability to read the opposition and this, combined with her speed and fearlessness, was an intimidating combination. Her slide tackles were hard, and she had no qualms about taking another player out even if it meant grabbing their jersey or their ponytail, so long as they didn't score. There are some players with whom you have chemistry on the field, and Lupe shared this don with the goalie on our team. She was a massive, masculine, squat woman with slicked-back obsidian hair, whose real force was to bellow at the team, and in particular at Lupe, to shut the pinche play down and clear the fucking ball up the field. And if, by chance, Lupe failed, she would rush the ball like a steam engine, her arms extended as though preparing for flight. Her name was Erika, but Lupe affectionately called her Puerca. Every Saturday night if it was a home game the two entered el empastado with a bottle of Herradura Antigua to watch Viernes Social play. It was El Diablo and El Vibora's team—"el equipo de los veteranos"—and if the Diablas owned that turf those late Sunday afternoons when the hangover was as its apex or when the drunkeness was just being reignited with una chela, nada más una, the real pedo started at dusk the night before when the stands reached that extreme of capacity where you feel the heat of the person standing next to you, behind, and in front of you through your shirt.

El pri pedo began on Thursday mornings in the tianguis at Doña Carmen's taco stand where last week's game was rehashed: El Diablo, who played center-mid, scored two goals and had an assist to El Burro, the Argentine and the team's ringer, whose nomenclature came from his stubbornness, but also, and according to some women in the pueblo, from his size and his ability to penetrate their defense. Over cold glass bottles of coke and hot tacos de lengua o barbacoa amidst the market rhythm and cry of fruit vendors, candy vendors, underwear, cigarette, and anything-you-can-imagine vendors, bets for Saturday's game were cast. The team might go on to win it this year. What a party we're going to have! Do you think Viernes Social is going to win the championship? I bet you una botella they will. A huevo they're gonna win. Viernes didn't have the bankroll of Oro who paid guys from Guadalajara and Chapala to ring games, but there were a couple of stars outside of the pueblo, guys who were financed in part by El

Vibora, guys who at one time played on the Chivas or Atlas and who now earned their pesos on the field in this semiremote pueblo.

At kickoff Lupe and La Puerca would strut through the stands like a power couple high-fiving and fist-bumping the gente como reinas. Because it was too ungraceful to carry all of the goods required for la borrachera, one of them would have delivered to the stands a bucket of ice, plastic cups, and a liter bottle of Coca-Cola to mix with their fancy tequila. It cost five hundred pesos a bottle, what Lupe earned in two days cleaning house and making cheese, what La Puerca earned in one day at the marble factory where she was a foreman who labored a thirteen, sometimes fifteen-hour shift. The first time they invited me to a game I arrived with a bottle of Destilador, the cheap brand of tequila my uncles drank. "Destripador"—rip-out-your-guts tequila. "Pinche pendeja, no sabes que es un buen tequila." Shitty tequila was a sign of low class. Middle-of-the-road tequila was a sign that you were cheap. What Lupe and La Puerca drank signified status, and it differentiated them from every other person in the stands, probably not one of whom had the money to buy a bottle that came in a decorative box. "What you brag about is what you don't actually have," goes that dicho, but the thing about Lupe was she never pretended to be anyone she wasn't, or to have something she didn't. How could you, anyway, in such a small pueblo where almost everyone bathes in that slow trickle of cold water that you save in buckets to flush your toilet.

My first time playing soccer apart from schoolyard games at recess was when my mom sent me to live in Mexico. I was eight years old. The objective of the three-month summer sojourn to live with family who didn't speak any English was for me to learn Spanish. Apart from mastering how to roll my Rs so that I could repeat that tongue twister my mom rhymed to me about los carros del ferrocarril, imbued within me that summer was a deep, deep love of soccer. I played with my cousins in the side streets of the barrio where we created makeshift goals with our sweatshirts and our hats. We had a ball that was lopsided and flapping at the seams, and on those afternoons that leaned into evening, we played with levity and love, pausing to pool our pesos together to buy icy sodas from the tienda. We'd sit with our backs against the cool cement walls of the store drinking out of straws from those thick, glass bottles. We played on dirt fields where the dust sticks to your sweat, your eyelashes, and to your upper lip. Días del campo, we played in alfalfa fields, the sweet smell of cebolla and carne asada and calientitas permeating the afternoon air until hunger got the best of us. We'd halt the game to assemble tacos lathered in salsa del molcajete, which we ate standing, our hearts still pounding from the game. When we left Guadalajara for the coast of Barra de Navidad, all of us cousins piled into the cab of an old pickup truck, and

when we finally got to the beach we played sand soccer, and if we could have played it in the ocean, we would have.

My mom sent me to Mexico to learn how to speak Spanish as well as something, I know now, of privilege. And while I ached for her, longed for my bedtime songs and stories, and while I missed the creature comforts of home, things like Saturday morning cartoon sessions, hot water, and not having to sleep in a bed with three other cousins, what I learned that summer in Mexico was soccer. It was an entrance, a point of contact with freedom in the strange suspension of time. Even my ancient tíos set down their beers to join us kids, becoming themselves momentarily transformed as they swept the ball in almost languid movements between our legs with such grace, with that combination of whim and precision that made our bodies twist to keep up with, challenge, and chase the dance. Soccer is a language in itself—it is a point of connection, a visceral form of translation. It creates a space where no matter how far you are from home, within that span of time you give yourself to the game you are always in some way, home.

In the colonia where I lived with my mom a few cuadras de mis tíos, I played with los albañiles and jardineros every Saturday y de apuesta, cubetas de chelas o botellas de tequila con refresco which we shared in the shade, the smell of sweat and aftershave thick in the afternoon air. Never mind if the neighbors were scandalized by a grown woman playing soccer with men in her yard and never mind the scathing commentary of my fat, uncomfortable tía, who had to smoke a cigarette every morning to take a shit. It was a cousin of El Diablo, a gardener named José, who told me that the women's league was starting up again and to show up at the field that Sunday, ready to get my ass kicked. The women in the pueblo, he told me, took their soccer seriously. My first time playing with the Diablas, the sky was heavy with clouds that seemed to narrow the distance between Jocotepec and the heavens. All Sunday it stormed a fast, warm rain that flashed floods through el callejón, producing puddles the size of small ponds in the pueblo streets.

I didn't know who El Diablo was, and I had never, despite the team's fame, heard of the Diablas. I had never entered the empastado, but when I walked through the gate that Sunday with my cleats slung over my shoulder and saw the tightly groomed field resplendently green in the last of the rain, I felt like I was being let in on a great secret. And truth be told, I was. I don't remember meeting Lupe, but I remember being impressed by the range of different ages on the team—from high school girls to women in their twenties and thirties, all of whom brought their family. Mothers, daughters, husbands, sons, lovers, week-old babies cradled by aunts in soft cloths. Despite the rain the stands slowly filled, and I watched the referee,

a small, stocky man whom everyone called Oso—the bear—drink from a tallboy of Corona while he waited for the game to begin.

I invited my mom, but she wanted to stay in bed curled up with the dogs, watching cooking shows. And I invited my tíos, but they were clasped to their cans of beers and their Pall Malls, and their endless game of dominos. And while I remember the sun breaking through the clouds in streams of yellow light, I don't remember getting my jersey, being introduced to the team, or whether Lupe pulled me aside to welcome me. She must have. I don't remember whether La Puerca sized me up, could she take me down, could she fuck me, could this pinche gringa-mexicana actually play soccer, but I can't imagine she didn't. I remember El Diablo, a tall, lanky man with a thick moustache, the perfect counterpoint to his receding hairline, pulling me aside to ask my preferred position on the field, clapping me on the back, and telling me to play my game. I remember watching our captain, a woman with a shock of black curly hair streaked with crimson highlights, gracefully juggle the ball as she waited for the coin toss, which she won. And I remember that the third touch on the ball was mine.

Guadalupe María Saldaña was the fifth of sixth children. She was born on the twenty-eighth of May in Jocotepec at the threshold of heat and rain. She was closest in age to Juan and when their father, a tall, formidable man, died of a heart attack, there was no way for her to assimilate the loss. She was eleven. She had just celebrated her first communion. And she was angry. What God our Father takes another's father? *Sacred heart I give you my heart, sacred heart you destroyed my father's heat, sacred heart, his name like yours was Jesus.*

"No seas corajuda," her mother would tell her.

But did that mean angry? Courageous? The two emotions wedded to one another because maybe you can't have courage without anger, or was it that you can't have anger without courage? The year Papá Jesus died, the year her mother became quiet and her older sister got pregnant, Lupe began playing soccer. On the pebbled dusty path behind el rastro, on the concrete playground of the schoolyard, on the sidelines of the pueblo fields where her brother played with his friends, she inserted herself into the game. She had the rhythm and the timing of Juan, or maybe it was he who had the rhythm and timing of his sister. Together they read the field, anticipated and collapsed the defense and the opposition. Lupe outmaneuvered the boys whom she decked when they let fly about girls needing to be at home, or how she was mighty fine and did she need a hug because how nice it would be to feel those chichis. Sometimes it was Juan who stepped in to crack his forehead against the offending suitor's face, his trademark move that he could punctuate with a fist if need be. "Pinche Diablo," they would say, averting their eyes from Lupe, who stood at his side with her chin up

and her head held high with an electric kind of pride. Beyond las fiestas y bailes y cenas con la familia, soccer was their bond. Unspoken, visceral, it was in the aftermath of their father's death where they located the release of relief, and for the span of that game, felt whole again.

On Saturday afternoons, Lupe, her daughter, and I would meet in el malecón and eat popsicles. Sitting in front of the lake we watched Fernanda play exuberant games of marbles with her cousins while we talked about everything and nothing at all. Who could eat more chiles serranos? It was a game we ended up actualizing with La Puerca one evening, weeping and laughing and punching one another in the shoulders and the thighs as we tried to chew one entire pepper after another without vomiting. What was California like? If I had to choose between Mexico and the United States, which would I pick, and why? Do you also play marbles? I'll also kick your ass. If we won the lottery, would we invite La Puerca on that cruise ship we were going to take to Brazil to meet us some actual men? What's your biggest fear? Not being there for my daughter. Y tú pinche güera? Losing my mother. Until Fernanda lost or won all the marbles we'd sit there talking or thumb wrestling, and sometimes we'd throw our arms around the other's shoulders like childhood friends or lovers until one of us called the other jotita or pinche puta, breaking the intimacy of the embrace.

Who you allied with, as with the rivalry between Las Diablas y Las Fresas, said something about your socioeconomic status. Viernes was a team made up almost entirely of workers, albañiles, taco vendors, fontaneras, lo que sea. With the exception of El Vibora, who supposedly had a refrigeration business in L.A., who owned a pool hall and a bar in the pueblo, and who drove expensive classic cars, there was only one other rico on the team. His name was Gustavo, but everyone called him El Hippy. His family owned a string of different grocery stores in the pueblo, and they were so monetarily successful as to become a target of thugs. El Hippy's father, who happened to rent a home to my tío Heladio and my tía Lupe, was kidnapped one afternoon outside of his store by men with guns and masks.

Everyone saw it. But nobody said anything. After over a week of ransom negotiations, the thugs made their final demand—a quarter of a million, and now, and if not, fingers and ears and teeth would start arriving on the doorsteps and porches of the brothers until there was nothing left of their father. My tío Heladio told me that when El Hippy and his brother tried to assail the assailants whom they trailed along the highway bordering Lake Chapala the Sunday after el secuestro, that they had no idea what they were doing. Someone had given them an anonymous tip that their dad was in the back of a black SUV with chrome rims heading west towards the gringo town called Ajijic. And when the brothers heard that,

they took off in their Ford Lobo. "Shit," my tío Heladio told me, "They didn't have a bag of cash to negotiate. They didn't have other guys. They didn't even have guns." Whether for vengeance or capricho, o quién sabe por qué, their father was thrown out of the back of the SUV at an insane speed that destroyed his body not just once, but twice when El Hippy ran over half of their father's torso. At the funeral there was no open casket. While violence was the backdrop of Mexico, it wasn't necessarily of Joco, and this incident startled the pueblo.

It was Hippy and El Vibora who bankrolled the team. While they had a couple of professional ringers they also paid guys like El Diablo who earned in a ninety-minute game what he made in a twelve-hour day laying brick. When El Vibora was in town cubetas de cerveza and bottles of tequila were delivered to the stadium at halftime. Riled from drink, the fans kicked the metal stands when they disagreed with the ref, when Viernes scored, or when the opposition botched a play. It created a thunderous sound you could hear from the streets. We always sat towards the defensive end, where Lupe could watch her man. They both played the same position. Sweeper. The same age as Lupe's father when he died, El Vibora was sixty. He was married with four grown children. And he wrung Lupe's heart like a washcloth. Even though there was no pretense of a life together, he had her at his beck and call and worked her like a slide whistle with the up and down of swings and sighs, with his kisses and gifts, his presence and his absence. Lupe loved him in a deep aching way that not even she could explain.

Maybe, she told me during one of those afternoons in the malecón, it was because she married so young and had never really known love. Or maybe, she told me, breaking into a grin, it was because he could dance the cumbia with a glass of water on his head without spilling it. When he was seventeen, El Diablo married a girl who was also bold enough to play soccer with the neighborhood boys, and shortly thereafter, Lupe married one of those neighborhood boys. She was fifteen. And she stayed with him for as many years. She stopped playing soccer. She stopped going to school. She worked cleaning houses until berry season started, and then she would go to work for Dole, or Driscoll, U.S. businesses that rented the arid land and exploited a workforce of women for their small, dexterous hands and gendered subservience. In the berry fields you could earn five hundred pesos a day, around twenty dollars, which was more than you could earn anywhere else, except maybe in los burdeles. Never mind the thirteen-hour shift or the chemicals, or the soreness through your neck and spine. Never mind the thirst that comes working in the trapped heat of those white hoop huts that balloon across the land. Lupe didn't have a car, she didn't even have a bicycle, and at sunset every day she walked the three miles home from the fields to straighten the house and to

prepare la cena and to be beaten and belittled by her husband until she became unrecognizable even to herself. During those Saturday afternoons watching her daughter play marbles, watching the herons in their still pose navigating a combination of land, air, and water as we licked the stickiness from the popsicles from our fingers and wiped our hands on our jeans, it didn't occur to me to ask what happened, or why she didn't leave the relationship earlier. It was unfathomable to me that someone who was so alive, that radiated a contagious joy, and who embodied such strength, was once anyone other than herself.

Weekends are sacred, but those Saturdays where we moved from the malecón to el empastado were especially so. Lupe would sit in between me and La Puerca, who wore elegant button-down shirts. She was married to Lupe's youngest aunt who never came to any of the games, and despite the semiclandestine affair with El Vibora, the pueblo chisme was that La Puerca estaba trincando a Lupe. Renowned for making even the straightest girls in the soccer community switch teams, she was also known for stealing men's wives. A real mujeriego, not even the men in the pueblo fucked with her. To the contrary, there was this tacit respect. Aggressively macha, she rode an orange crotch rocket, marca Italika, and she had no qualms about asking women to dance during fiestas in la plaza or telling them exactly how she would kiss them. She also had no qualms about fighting and one Saturday in el empastado she leveled a man with a right hook because he touched my ass. She was chivalrous and obnoxious. She was self-centered. Always on the chase. I hated how she winked at my mom whenever she came over to the house, and when La Puerca drank too much tequila she would either flirt with or try to fight me. And while I was alternately entertained and off-put by her, in the end I was also endeared. Those Saturday nights sitting shoulder to shoulder with those two women in the stands, I felt empowered. Fiercely beautiful. And happy.

Having to play the following day did not curtail our bedtime. When the game ended, Viernes would congregate in the stands. Radiating heat, still high on adrenaline, the game reverberated off the men's bodies as they recounted in gestures the highlights of the game over beers and tequila. The stakes were high this season. The winning team would take home una pachanga de alrededor de diez mil pesos. Compa, ¡qué fiesta! But more than the party, and way beyond the coveted five-foot plastic, fake gold trophy that would become the centerpiece in the sala of the MVP, the game was about class. It was about power, the unspoken friction between los ricos y los jodidos, and because la mayoría del pueblo son jodidos, la mayoría del pueblo estaba con Viernes. ¡Qué viva Viernes! At the end of the season regardless of how many games you won, it was the number of goals you scored that determined your place in the league. And just like the men's

league, the prize in the women's league was la fiesta de las fiestas, but more importantly, it was a form of empowerment that manifested itself in bragging rights for the pueblo's most disenfranchised.

Las Fresonas were from the wealthiest families in Joco. They were the daughters of businessmen, of politicians, and the strongmen of Pemex. Their fathers owned the pueblo. They owned the municipal police, las pinches gallinas who could ticket and tow your car, even if you were parked legally. And then you would be charged for la grua and for the time your car was held in the lot, and when you finally had enough pesos to get your car out of hock its battery or that one new tire you bought would be gone. They owned the right to the streets in different ways. They rented parking spaces to vendors for the candies and calandracas and puestos for comida, and they also owned the carnival rides that were rolled out multiple times a year for different celebrations. They charged a fourth of an average day's wages or the equivalent of four kilos of tortillas—what one entire household consumes in a week—for one ticket on the Bumper Cars or on the Super Loop, rides that were the fascination of every kid in the pueblo. Las Fresonas lived on the periphery of the plaza in giant casas antiguas, or they in lived in modern homes in gated colonias right outside the pueblo where the mother and sisters and tías and cousins of Las Diablas cleaned house for them and for expat gringos. Las Fresonas didn't go to school in the pueblo but were ferried to their English and French immersion schools in Guanatos by a personal driver. They wore clothes from the GAP and Calvin Klein, and their soccer cleats weren't the thick plastic kind that everyone bought in the tianguis. Las Fresonas wore top-of-the-line soccer slippers, real—not knockoff—Nikes, but cleats created with Nikeskin technology by professional soccer players and which cost hundreds of dollars. Game days they arrived in unison on their cuatrimotos in their fancy matching warm-ups and they would strut into the same stadium where, if their father hadn't played the night before, they had sponsored the ringers who did.

The first time I played with Las Diablas I remember the field was still wet with rain and how it seeped into my cleats, soggying my socks. When the whistle blew, mine was the third touch on the ball, which I sang up the field and laced into the goal. I scored four times that game, becoming the target of Las Fresonas, who shoulder checked me or went at my shins so hard that the next day I was covered with bruises. More memorable than my goals, which wouldn't end up counting for anything because both teams were disqualified from the game, was that the captain of our team started a brawl. The only other fight I had been privy to was when I played soccer in a women's league one summer in Nayarit. I didn't join the fight, but instead retreated to the periphery of the field where I sat with my arms wrapped around my legs and my stomach curdling as the women

came at one another with a vitriol sicker than bile. When the fight ended, and the team regrouped, the unspoken rules were articulated to me. To be on the team was to fight with the team. In el empastado in Jocotepec where Lupe was locked in a long stare down, forehead to forehead with the striker of Las Fresonas, I remembered the missive from my coastal team. And I remember feeling an incredible surge of adrenaline that alternately registered within my body as electricity and ice, a short-circuiting of emotion that made me want to stand still at the same time as it propelled me closer to the ensuing fight. In the moments that it took La Puerca to strut out of the goal, El Diablo to leave the sidelines, and the entirety of the two teams along with spectators to collapse onto the field, Lupe clapped her forehead against the face of the Fresa. I had no idea about the contentious history between the teams, or what it meant in the pueblo to be a Fresa or a Diabla, or how it was to have to work in one capacity or another for that wealthy cadre of families, and how that tension translated on the soccer field—the only place, perhaps, where such residual anger in the face of daily dehumanization could find outlet. Never having been in a physical altercation, that day I found myself in the thick of a fight that wasn't mine. My instinct, like during that coastal soccer game, was to retreat, but not wanting to be the weirdo güera, the disloyal defector, I put myself into the malstrom of fists and teeth, sharp fingernails and the grating of cleats against shins. Still, I didn't fight. Instead I used my body to pull players off one another. Bear hugging their torsos to my own, I held their backs against my stomach or I held them stomach to stomach in a lock where I could feel the heat and force of their chests as they heaved and tried to push me over and away, yelling, ¡suéltame! But I didn't let go. Not of Lupe, who had such fire inside of her that she could have leveled me if she wanted to. I hung onto her like I was hanging onto a wave.

Whether we would have become such good friends had that fight not happened I cannot say, but I suspect we would have found our way to one another. The season spanned almost a year. There's no way that we wouldn't have one day ridden together in that Ford Fiesta with the windows rolled down and the Banda blaring on the way to those away games where we filed onto the field with power. There's no way we wouldn't have one day crossed paths at La Cuba, the only bar in town where we would hang out with La Puerca well past closing time talking soccer and sex, and if you had to give up one or the other forever, which would it be? There's no way that I wouldn't have invited the two—the only women on the team who were my age—to my mom's home. While I cannot say whether Lupe and I would have become such fast friends without the brawl the first day I played with the Diablas, what I can tell you is that in the aftermath of the rumble when we re-collected as a team, I watched as she held an icy bottle of Corona to

her eye. When she saw me she grinned, and then opening the bottle with her teeth, gave it to me.

"Eres una cabrona," she said.

That New Year's Eve, Lupe insisted that my mom and I come to her house. She was making posole and there would be tequila and karaoke and cake and sparklers. Her whole family, including La Puerca, would be there. I didn't have to bring anything, we just had to show up… but if I did want to bring a bottle of Herradura, not that cheap shit your tíos drink, she wouldn't say no. That night I remember sitting on the folding plastic chairs next to my mother who was enamored with all five of Fernanda's dogs who scouted the area in search of tortillas, and I remember how good the posole tasted, and how at one point in the night everyone, including my mom and Mamá Chuy, were dancing. The kids had three-foot sparklers that they used like sabers, and just before midnight we lit giant paper luminaries that we made wishes on as they rose into the night sky. I don't remember what I wished, but I remember how the entire skyscape of the pueblo, not just right above the rastro, but all the way to the lake, was aflame with deseos.

The following week Las Diablas would travel to Zapotitlán, a pueblo twenty minutes north of Joco. On the way to the game I would bet Lupe and La Puerca a six-pack and a Chicharito soccer jersey that I would score three goals. This year, the championship was ours and Las Fresas could chingar a sus madres. We had the momentum to win, and if we did, we would travel to the pueblo called Jamay where there was a waterslide park, and that's where we would celebrate. The campo air flooded through the open windows of Lupe's car—that mix of sweet grass and the swampy sultriness of the lake. Despite having been up with El Vibora until five a.m. drinking and loving, and despite a pain that had been plaguing her lower back and hips, maybe she needed to lay off the loving we joked, Lupe made the play of the season that afternoon. Picking off the ball from Zapotitlán's striker at the Diabla's eighteen with a leveling slide tackle, she dribbled in a sprint past midfield where she actually stopped in mid play and grinned before breaking out in giggles. It was her glee, not so much how she manipulated her way—sola—through what remained of the midfield and defense with the offense now giving chase as she launched a gentle but calculated shot that arched over the goalie's head, that made the play so memorable. That singular play, Lupe told me two months later when we sat together under blankets on the bottom bunk of the bed she shared with Fernanda in their tiny, windowless, bedroom, was the play that would save her.

Our second away game that year was in San Pedro, a tiny pueblo tucked right against Lake Chapala. It had rained, and the field was thick with mud that weighed on our cleats like sadness, making us slide sideways and fall as we scrambled towards the ball. It was the first game Lupe didn't suit up.

Every day she had been laying brick after work to build an addition on her home so that Fernanda could have her own bedroom, and Lupe something larger. It was a mini apartment that El Vibora was financing the materials for, and that El Diablo was also helping her build. But the physical labor of pulling brick up to a second story was taking its toll, and her back felt wounded. She complained about it during the previous practice, walking off the field midway to join her brother to coach us from the sidelines. All the rest of that week when I asked, she was too busy or too tired to get popsicles in the plaza, grab tacos, or to drink beer in the malecón. She was going to go to las sobadoras in San Cristobal, Fernanda had assignments due, we would see one another on the field. In San Pedro, Lupe sat on the sidelines in her jeans and jersey and every now and again she shadowed El Diablo to encourage us to open the field, to push harder. We barely won the game and after, I drove home alone in my socks which were damp with mud, shivering, even though it wasn't cold.

If Lupe began bleeding during that San Pedro game, she didn't let on. If she had been bleeding slowly from the day of the practice when she walked off the field, she didn't say. She tried to still the blood with maxipads and bunches of toilet paper, which became saturated, leaking into her underwear and her jeans, and when she buckled in the kitchen that Sunday she told Fernanda to go play outside and asked Mama Chuy to call El Vibora. If he hadn't rushed her to the clinic, Lupe told me when I heard the news, she would be dead. That's what the doctors said. An hour more, and she would have been a ghost. Right then and there they removed her uterus, which was corroded with tumors that they were testing for cancer. Sea lo que sea, she told me, tengo fe que voy a salir de esta enfermedad. The season ended unceremoniously. We were champions, but not because we beat Las Fresas in the last game. We won by having more overall points than any team in the league. Nobody went to the waterslides to celebrate and we didn't have a party. The purse Las Diablas won was given to Lupe, who could no longer work. When she wasn't at the hospital in Guadalajara she was in bed recovering from the radiation treatments, which she said made her body burn. Mama Chuy moved into her room where she slept on the floor. Having her mom there was the assurance she needed that she would wake up. Fernanda insisted on being in the bottom bunk with Lupe, for whom sleep was ever elusive. Late at night and into the early morning she listened to the house breathing, replaying that singular soccer play and the night before that game that she spent with El Vibora until she was overcome by exhaustion, at which point she would wake Mama Chuy who she asked to watch her because she was afraid she wouldn't wake up.

At first La Puerca came to visit Lupe, but then she stopped coming around. Sometimes I ran into her outside la licorería where she would

be on her second or third caguama, and I'd tell her that it was fucked up that she no longer visited Lupe, and she would tell me that it was all too unbearable. Even El Diablo stopped seeing his sister. He only came by when she was having an attack or being carted off to the hospital because he calmed her in a way that nobody else could. When El Vibora came around he was almost always drunk. He would crawl into bed with her and the smell of his breath and his sweat made Lupe recoil, but she was still glad to feel him next to her. I had known her for only a year, and maybe that was what allowed me to drive every other afternoon to the rastro. The day she told me she wanted to throw in the towel, that she could feel the cancer spreading through her body, that the treatments weren't working, that she was tired, I got up from the bunk bed and made my way towards the door. I could feel the burn of my heart in the back of my knees, through my throat, behind my eyes. It was then that I realized that I was so sorrowfully grateful not to have known her for a lifetime because it would have ached that much more. No manches, cabrona, I told her. No hables así. She was holding the Chihuahua called Asia, and the small television that was always on flickered its cold blue light in the darkness of her room. My body, she told me, it feels like it's melting.

When someone dies in Jocotepec the church bells ring, and that person's name is announced over the loudspeaker attached to the steeple. The streets in front of that person's home are closed down, and chairs are set up for friends and family to come and pray, and sometimes you can hear the incantation of Padre Nuestro from blocks away like a vibration as they weep through the words. Lupe had been in the hospital for two weeks before she returned to the rastro.

They had realeased her from the hospital, and when her brother carried her inside Lupe called out, "Mama, I told you I would come home!"

Climbing into bed with Fernanda, she kissed her eyelashes. The Chihuahua curled into the crook of Lupe's arm and then she asked Mama Chuy to sit vigil, so she could sleep. The following morning all the way to the lake where I lived I could hear the low din of the church bells. That afternoon the road to the rastro would fill with hundreds of people. Without planning it, every Diabla arrived in uniform. The tiny living room of Mama Chuy's home was alight with sweet smelling flowers and wreaths and candles that surrounded the oak coffin. Lupe's body was still warm when Fernanda did her makeup. She put blush on her mother's hollow cheeks and carefully lined her lips with an orange lipstick, her grief momentarily betrayed by the tiniest smudge of color on the corner of Lupe's mouth. She painted her mother's fingernails, which had grown long, and she tried to pull her mother's sleeves over the parts of her hands that were bruised a painful color of purple from the IV's. Deep into the night when

canelita and pan dulce was served, all the way through that sharp cold that comes on at three a.m., people sat and stood, whispered and wept. They drew closer to one another until they were standing shoulder to shoulder, sleeping cheek against shoulder generating heat in between one another as their prayers expanded outward, reverberating in the night until the stars retreated. The whole pueblo, or so it seemed, had gathered to sit vigil for Lupe so she could sleep.