

## THE MASKS OF ANGELS

*Melita Schaum*

1.

The waiter at La Luna Mextli is a dreamy boy, not much older than fourteen, with an apron that hangs down to the tops of his shoes. He brings her *limonada* and a basket of bread. He smiles and squints up toward the ridge of Monte del Diablo.

*“Si, senora, hace mucho calor.”*

She sips the cold, sweet drink with its risky ice cubes and reads a chapter in the book she’s brought before he returns, bringing mismatched silverware and a faded menu.

She is glad that things move so slowly here in Mexico. She has a few more hours of this afternoon to kill, and the restaurant courtyard is a cool, tranquil place. She orders *enchiladas con pollo*, and the boy nods, writing nothing down, and shuffles off.

2.

Her hotel was a beautiful old villa, perched on a rise overlooking Tepoztlan. On her first morning there, a week ago, only the gatekeeper had been up, snoozing on a folding chair by the posada’s huge iron gate, gallant and sleepy as he rose to unchain it for her so she could pass from the villa into the cobbled streets of the *barrio*. The descent was steep down Calle Buenavista, past small adobe houses nestled into the hill, festooned with paper flags to mark the feast day and empty soda pop bottles suspended on wires, the colored glass shimmering in the sunlight.

It was her first time south of the border, and she felt entirely at sea. Nothing had prepared her for this culture. As she emerged onto the town’s main street and strolled, she peered into shops the size of phone booths stuffed with magazines, cigars and gum. Men lounged in doorways. Women carried bags and bolts of cloth. Everywhere the brilliant eyes of children, staring.

She saw a shy boy in a *taqueria* unfolding a disc of dough. A few doors down, a dark shop in which a row of coffins gleamed. Smoke from wood fires flattened across the valley. Cocks began to crow, and dogs launched into relays of barking; big-bellied churchbells vied with the mariachi music that piped out, loud and crackly, from a bandstand in the public park.

There were other Americans at breakfast back at the hotel, in small groups on the patio, ordering cappuccinos and scrambled eggs. She pointed

to items on the menu, and a dark girl brought her a plate of gold melon and coffee.

“*Que es?*” she asked pleasantly and then realized that was the wrong phrase. “*Como le llama?*”

The girl appeared puzzled. “*Melon,*” she replied and looked at her, a woman not too young, at a table alone. “*Estadounidense?*”

If anyone had asked her, though no one did, she might have said she was here to learn to speak again.

Because her life grew more conflicted every day.

Because she did not know the language of this country, and to her just now that seemed a perfect metaphor for a heart that felt as if it too had been lost in translation.

## 3.

She opens a notebook, writes. *I am in Tepotzlan, Mexico. The sun is about to rise over the Morelos valley on the Feast of the Virgin of Guadeloupe, and the sky is still no more than a red smudge against the black crags of volcanic cliffs. The town below me is a sprinkle of lights, and suddenly the dawn explodes—literally—with a volley of fireworks left over from last night’s fiesta.*

She pauses.

I am 46 years old and I don’t know yet that I am pregnant. But a small cluster of cells has begun to grow and divide in my body, nourished by my blood. It’s so soon I’m only vaguely aware that my period is late. When I think about it at all—a fleeting thought, a small shrug—I think it must just be the stress of travel.

## 4.

“I am not responsible for your happiness.” He’d said that a few weeks earlier, the morning after they’d had another fight—about space, about her need to work. She was lying in his arms, just awake, and the remark seemed cold, incongruous. Why did they always seem to land at limits in each other?

They had talked about a child before. Both of them too ambivalent to decide. He wanted to leave it to Fate; she wanted absolute certainty to arrive one day like a parcel.

Some days she woke thinking a child this late in life would fill her days with song.

Some days she woke fearing a child might silence her forever.

## 5.

As she waits for the boy to return, she looks around at the other customers. Across the courtyard, a table of young jetsetters from Mexico City is on their third round of Cuba Libres; a tourist couple in the corner appear uncomfortable, outfitted in catalogue clothing, the man's safari vest adorned with so many useless pockets he looks like a jewel thief or an ornithologist. Near the exit a bald businessman, most likely a silver dealer from Taxco, wipes the top of his head over and over with his napkin, as if he were polishing a pot. There are few locals here; it's a tourist restaurant, self-consciously atmospheric. But the sun beyond the adobe is brilliant, and the mountains are etched against a heartbreakingly blue sky, and there's a lean black cat stretched out languorously beneath a rusting iron table.

She had found this place, just off the avenida de la Revolución, on her second afternoon. On her way down the hill from the hotel, she'd ducked into an Internet café to check for news from home. It was a shell of a room with chipped blue walls and a few old Macintoshes set up on plywood shelving. A couple of teenagers played video games in the corner. An old woman wandered in, selling tubers that floated in a bucket of gritty water. Stray dogs drifted across the entrance that was open to the street's traffic and bustle. There was no message from him. Just silence.

Outside, already the heat had set in. She walked, crushed dizzily against displays of tie-dyed clothing in the narrow avenue, rattling trays of coconut pieces and racks of postcards that had been pushed out into the sidewalk for sale. She passed a store filled with stuffed armadillos and cowboy hats, an empty barber shop in which an old man sat watching soaps. Nearby, the bells of Santo Domingo, the barrio church, began to ring like someone striking tin. The church was corroded, its bell towers chewed away by time and weather—or perhaps, she thought, by all the unanswered prayers, blind pleas, discarded and insubstantial, that flitted through the church's hollow heart like bats. What is it we ask for? To be whole. To be heard. To move through this world and for it somehow to part for us like water or air.

She came out onto the main street, into its blare of daylight and construction work, tourists and taxis. Disoriented and thirsty, she turned into a doorway that looked as if it belonged to a café of some sort. It took her eyes a while to adjust to the gloom, but she could hear the burble of a fountain and the clink of silverware through a shaded loggia. It felt cool and sudden, as if she'd stepped through a membrane into another world. A waiter ambled by carrying two green bottles on a tray.

"What is this place? *Donde...estoy?*"

"La Luna," the boy pointed to a clay mask of a sad-faced moon over the

doorway.

“And *sol*,” she gestured to a jolly orange sun beside it, blowing on a small blue trumpet.

“*Si, senora*,” he smiled, “*un lugar de luz y oscuridad*.”

6.

He and I. Two bodies. Two voices. One silence. Times when my demands make his wounds gape. Times when his dismissal makes me feel again that I’ve been stripped of voice.

We join. We part. We speak. We dive into muteness, the ground giving way under us. We orbit each other, a tense, opposing dance.

*Sometimes in the silence there are kisses. Sometimes tears.*

7.

The scorpion was patient and deadly, the perfect sharp grammar of its tail curled into a question mark, a pause, an end-stop. It slipped through the grooves of the cobbles, beneath the feet of a hundred shoppers. She saw a brown boot land beside it and move on. She watched a girl’s foot—open-toed, with glitter-pink-painted toenails—tread so close her instep nearly touched. Death is beneath us, everywhere, under our next footfall, unnoticed.

She drifted past vibrant stalls of vegetables and embroidery, men hunched over rickety picnic tables drinking *cervezas* and old women swatting flies from slabs of withered meat that no one seemed to buy. They hid their faces from her when they saw her raise her camera. Children scattered out of her way in the park near the church. The stones were blackened, smeared like dirty, weeping martyrs. Nearby, four men repairing a wall held their tools up in front of their faces when she tried to snap their picture.

This country didn’t want to be recorded. It felt like a world she wasn’t permitted to enter, a speech not made for her, a door closing to shut her out.

It was her third day, and she decided to hike to the pyramid on the summit of Cerro del Tepozteco. The houses thinned out at the edge of town, where the woods began and the road narrowed into the rocky trail that led up the mountain. It was still morning, and she traversed the last yards of avenue lined with a few desultory booths, hawking postcards and trinkets—mass produced clay shotglasses, bead bracelets, holy cards—to the tourists who make this trek.

She had to walk slowly. She wondered whether it was the heat or the altitude that made her so tired. The trail rose before her, a Golgotha of rocks.

But there was birdsong, and a tonsure of ferns beside the path, verdant and bright. She climbed for an hour, seeing no one. The ground was volcanic, and she imagined the land once bleeding lava, hardening into black, then eroding into this friable ground that now exploded with green. As she gained altitude, the vegetation thickened into jungle—vines trailing from rock walls, ferns clutching the moist fissures, green life tangled in fingers of morning haze, as if the mountain itself were breathing its condensed breath out over the canyon.

Around a bend, she came up against a gate. Beyond its padlocked iron she could see nothing but more trail leading up to a ridge, somewhere beyond which must be the temple. She sat down heavily, aching. She judged she was about halfway up the mountain. She couldn't fathom why the city would have put this barrier here.

Graffiti was scrawled on the rocks nearby; words of vandalism and anger. Others had stopped here, too. But there were also offerings. At first she thought they were trash, but when she looked again she saw they were too carefully composed: beans laid in a pattern on the ground, a Barbie doll, small bottles of liquor, unopened packs of cigarettes, strings of glass beads.

Baffled, she turned away from these privacies, these relinquished things. The strange, willed hopefulness of gifts laid before locked gates.

## 8.

She writes.

*In the fetus the heart develops before the brain. As early as three weeks, a clot of cells gels, anchors, ignites a pulse. Tiny drummer, it tattoos its message, which is the message of every heart:*

Hear me.

I am here.

Hear me.

I am here.

## 9.

She woke with the heavy burden of him in her arms; his moist cheek against her chest. Then nothing. Air. The hard embrace of pain.

Remembered that last morning's slow burn. The way he stood at the counter doing nothing, watching her prepare breakfast—two juices, two coffees, two bowls, the pot of porridge, stir, turn, open fridge, rummage for butter, fruit, wash, slice, arrange, turn, stir, open the drawer for silverware—and him just leaning, silent and sullen. Her plane ticket burning in her purse like an ember.

But there was also lying beside him watching the trumpet vines on fire outside their bedroom window, red claxons of bloom like tongues of flame, and the hummingbirds' iridescence, which she'd read once was all illusion, a spectrum of light, feather on transparent feather overlaid like a prism. Catching, plagiarizing light.

Brushfires they put out with tears and kisses. Start again. Forgive, love, pour the juice, grind the coffee. Lean against the counter not knowing what to say.

## 10.

She met a group of Americans at the hotel, writers who had stayed on for a few days after a workshop. On Sunday, after dinner and drinks, they descended together from the villa on the hill—a gaggle of foreigners, high-heeled and jacketed, winding down a maze of unlit, treacherous streets to the *barrio* of San Sebastian, where the whole town of Tepoztlan had convened to watch the fiesta's fireworks display. The pitted, volcanic stones that made up the village's walls and alleyways were eerie in the greenish moonlight, tinted by an occasional hellish flare of storefront neon, garish Christmas lights or lit signs for beer.

They waited, packed in with the curiously somber crowd in the plaza outside the church. On one side of a walkway leading up to the flower-covered nave, a mariachi band—fourteen men wearing banana-yellow suits—were line-dancing and doing can-can kicks to yelping Spanish tunes. Across the way, a rock band had been elevated above the crowd on a flimsy stage made of market crates and plywood. Pelvis-grinding, long-haired local boys pressed electric guitars to their hips like lovers, amid smoke machines and psychedelic lights.

Sandwiched between them was the populace—dark and impassive. There wasn't a smile in the crowd despite the festive atmosphere, and barely any movement. The deep-eyed, clay-like faces seemed frozen in a pose of waiting, a people for whom the music and colored lights were trivial, transient diversions. It was the Virgin they had come to see, their dark Madonna. Children squatted on curbs, dogs slept in the pathways, teenaged lovers leaned against the *barrio* walls and held each other vaguely, gazing off. Near them stood the mothers—their square, strong bodies in brightly colored skirts. She read the logo on one woman's T-shirt: *Bebe*. On her it looked like a war cry, a proclamation.

Two hours late, the fireworks began. One of the writers worried that they were standing too close to the *Castillo*. He herded them into a bodega half a block away—just a ramshackle construction site, but something that

afforded protection from falling sparks. Inside, the building's one gutted room was painted a grimy aqua and scrawled with crude slogans. A doorless opening at the far end led into a pitch-dark courtyard where some construction work seemed to have taken place that day. Dimly, they could make out a few shovels lying on a pile of dirt, a snarl of yellow cordon tape, a few aluminum tubs of molten ice and beer.

From somewhere in the gloom, a very drunk proprietor emerged—really just the man who'd been squatting here, who'd set up shop for the fiesta and seemed to have been pickling himself since Thursday. He leered at the Americans, brought out tequila and Beefeaters, which he served them with great, intoxicated flourishes. Young boys snuck in from the street and slipped out again with filched cold beers up their shirtsleeves.

She drank some tequila out of a not very clean cup and went with the others to stand in the doorway, a few feet above the crowd. Somebody pointed out where rockets had been strapped to the tall metal tower made of brackets and revolving wheels. When the fireworks were lit, figures would be etched in pyrotechnics against the night sky.

The show began with geometric sparklers in red and green and gold, followed by a giant Roman candle. But the writer had been smart to move them. Someone had miscalculated, and billows of gray smoke began to choke the onlookers, who were trapped in the street by their numbers. For a few minutes, the avenue became a funnel of acrid fumes, and a cloud of orange sparks and flaming debris rained on the crowd.

The scene was surreal, and yet the audience remained curiously undisturbed. A scrap of burning paper landed in a woman's hair. She reached up calmly with one hand, snuffed it out. Another man's jacket caught fire. His neighbor casually clapped him on the shoulder, extinguishing him. She could see the burn mark on his jacket arm, a big black "O" like a brand, still smoking.

The char drifted off and the fireworks resumed. They were outlandish, arbitrary, bizarre. One rocket changed from a wolf to a swan; another depicted a ringing bell which then, surreally, began to spin. A peacock fanned gold and electric blue, then sprayed the crowd with blazing guano. The fireworks moved up the tower, a crazy evolution. Near the top, the figure of the Virgin of Guadeloupe lit up and sizzled, then she too whirled on her axis, limber as a circus act. Soon after, her son ignited—the crucified Christ, complete with a halo that resembled a chef's toque, dripping embers.

At last the summit of the tower detonated into a whirling ring of silver that fried the numbers 2-0-0-3 against the night sky. One of the writers remarked that it must have been left over from some New Year's celebration,

when suddenly the whole top spun off and flew into space like a burning Frisbee, arcing in a trajectory high over houses and far into some adjacent *barrio*. She was shielding her eyes to watch this wheel of fire whiz past the face of an astonished moon, when somebody jerked her elbow hard. She heard screaming, “He’s fallen! He’s fallen *in!*”

They rushed into the darkened courtyard where, somehow, a crowd of locals has already gathered. She and the Americans shouldered their way between them. Everyone was looking down a deep pit. One of the writers from New York was at the bottom. In the arc of a couple of flashlights they could see him, ten feet down, sitting on a mound of dirt and rubbing his shoulder. He looked stunned. Somebody shouted for water, but no one moved. One of the flashlight beams landed mischievously, a little unkindly, on the bald spot on the top of the writer’s head. He looked so fragile sitting there. Whether out of pain or embarrassment, he wouldn’t look up.

A ladder was brought, and two men climbed down. One was the proprietor’s assistant, a reelingly intoxicated *borracho* who, once down there, did nothing more than stand and smoke a foul cigar. The other man was a member of the writer’s group. He clambered down next to his fallen colleague, and patted the injured shoulder inexpertly, testing for broken bones in a way he probably saw once on TV. The joker with the flashlight played the beam across the logo of his Eddie Bauer polo shirt. Someone announced that a doctor had been called, and nothing should happen until he arrived.

Around the rim of the pit, a double ring of drunken Mexicans and the small group of Americans squinted down through the darkness at the figures below. Looking around, she realized that for the first time these fiesta-goers’ faces looked content. As if *this* was what they’d come to see—mortality and disaster, catastrophe, a fitting tribute to their dark goddess. It seemed as if they’d known that if they waited long enough, drank long enough, endured for long enough the smoke and the awful music and the silly lights, eventually something real was bound to happen.

Suddenly she felt very ill. She thought it must just be the liquor and the press of unwashed bodies and the vertigo of looking down. Somebody saw her stagger and brought a chair. She sat until the feeling passed.

## 11.

That night she had a dream: the constellation Scorpio seared into a moonless sky. A comet’s scrawl in blazing ink. Flying and falling.

The next morning she began to bleed. Strange, dark blood. She found it odd that her period had come so late. And now so heavy. Sheepishly, she

asked the housekeeper at the villa the Spanish word for *tampon*.

12.

The next day at lunchtime the restaurant was full; a German tour bus had arrived at noon, and she was told there would be a wait of at least half an hour before a table opened up. The hostess pointed her to a doorway, told her if she liked she could have a drink in the bar.

There was no one behind the counter, but she sat down anyway, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. The shutters were closed, and the room was dim and cool as a cave. Her body had been aching all morning, and what she really wanted was a tequila and a cigarette to dull the pain. She leaned back on the barstool and stretched her shoulder blades. It was then that she saw them.

Lurid and inscrutable, they shimmered from the gloom, a shadowy multitude—dozens of them hanging from the rafters in riotous colors—wood, cloth, horsehair, the horns of animals, felt and bead and bone—lining the walls above the bar, spilling over onto the jambs and casements of the shuttered windows that opened to the street. In the grey, still, mote-filled air of the bar the masks looked half dead, half vivid and alive—composite figures of horror and whimsy, devils and angels and a host of creatures from some outlandish bestiary. Scenery of dream.

A green demon with cat's ears and huge incisors slavered down at her. Another beside it had pythons coiling from its mouth, grinning, vulva-red. *Viajo*, this culture's impudent, many-sided god. She stared for a long time at a small dark mask—rectangular fangs, striated eyes, wooden whiskers. *Negrito colmulludo*, was inscribed beneath it, "*Tusked little black one.*" *Zapotec*. What could it possibly mean?

A syntax of half-filled forms, it seemed a language just beyond her understanding. A Spanish-featured face, pale-skinned, blue-eyed, sprouted a vulture from its forehead. A scorpion with teeth in its pincers and a fishtail on its head. A gazelle fused to a woman's face. A toad whose back erupted into a human skull. Beside these, the masks of cherubs, *putti*, the floating heads of infants with their splendid wings—some gold, some green and red, unfurling with exquisite Aztec geometry, others detailed and perfect as the feathers of small birds. Angels or puppets? Their faces were placid and expressionless, their lips open, mouthing silence, their glass eyes opaque and still.

She sat, surrounded by the empty skins of leather and wax and mud, lacquer, shell and horn, wood cut during a waning moon. She'd read about the grotesque—boundaries breaking, the jerks and twitches of an absurd

universe. But this silent ancestry seemed to come from somewhere else. A spirit world: not the liminal imagination, but the deeply, strangely real. Fused, metaphoric, powerful—forms that were just matter and pigment, meant to be donned and brought to life. Or was it the mask that animated the wearer? Was it the disguise that protected and inspired, that freed narrow being into spirit, dance and song?

## 13.

Fill me, she'd whisper sometimes after he'd gone to sleep, thinking how plaintive the phrase sounded in the dark, without a listener. Blue shadow on skin, arc of entry like white light, a star exploding. Climax was that cry, that utterance, climbing out of one's own soul on a rope of sound.

What she missed most was not even the act but the wanting—that wordless current, feeling the heat of skin near skin, speech of lips and hands. She had longed for him that way, but these days his body was a tired animal, needing only food, sleep.

She'd lie beside him after he'd turned away, still holding everything of her day inside her—buzzing, thrumming, unheard. A phrase she'd read, the flash of a new idea, a phone call from a friend—and now, the way her body was growing mute, how she felt in the deepest parts of herself unclaimed.

## 14.

She learned from the Americans a couple of days later that the writer from New York was fine. A sprained arm, some bruised pride. He was very lucky, everyone agreed. They joked a little among themselves about immersion experiences, then chided themselves for laughing.

She drank a coffee, resting on her elbows. One of the writers told her she looked pale, wondered if she'd picked up a dose of Montezuma's Revenge. The women of the group urged her to join them on a trip to a Nauahtl Indian sweat lodge a few miles outside of town run by a farmer and his wife.

It was a warm day, a dry wind coming up from the valley like a sirocco. They hired a taxi and bumped down the long dirt road, the driver's rosaries dangling from the rear view mirror like Mardi Gras beads. Their colorful swaying made her ill, unsettled her. She listened to the women chat about screen contracts and options.

The farmer's wife, a small, compact woman with a thick silver braid down her back, had been notified of their coming. Standing with her husband by the ranch's ramshackle bamboo gate, she welcomed the Americans by singing a song. Someone translated the lyrics—it was a sad song, she

said, about a husband who leaves and never returns. Maybe not so sad, the old *campesino* quipped and squeezed his wife's waist. She told him to get lost, and led them to the lodge.

They followed her down a pathway to a shack with animal skulls nailed over a rusted metal door that looked like it might once have been the lid of a dumpster. Flanking the doorway were grain sacks to sit on, an old saddle resting under a sheet of burlap, a rick filled to the ceiling with dried ears of corn. In a side yard, one dusty horse was tethered to a tree, its eyes crawling with flies. All around were a jumble of overturned buckets, old iron tools, Pepsi cans inverted on fence posts for decoration. A dog whose ribs look like two washboards ambled by.

The *temescal* was a stone cave made of black volcanic rock, sooty from the wood fires beneath it that had been burning for two days and nights to heat the stone. A small opening, no bigger than a shoulder-span, led into the darkness. "*Quitarse todo salvo la ropa interior.*" They stripped down to their underpants and climbed one by one through the opening and into the small space, shaped like a bread oven.

She was the last to go in, and when she dropped the burlap curtain behind her the darkness was so deep she could feel it in her bones. The heat was intense; it closed around her like two huge fists. Her eyes stung and she felt soot falling on her like soft sand. She crawled around and stretched out onto a surface of gritty rock and damp reed matting.

They lay in silence under the ton of blackness, the heavy heat. So dense she couldn't even hear the woman beside her breathe. It was womb-dark, tomb-dark. Her body felt slick and her heart was hammering. She had to force herself to inhale. Her arm brushed against someone's skin, and it felt clammy, as if she'd just made contact with a corpse. She was drowning in this smell of ash and hair conditioner and human sweat. Suddenly she couldn't stand it—the silence, the terrifying dark.

She struggled out, soot-streaked and gasping, as if emerging from a pit. The daylight blinded her. The old woman, startled, wrapped a towel around her, scolding her that this was no good, this shock of cold air. She clambered into her clothes and went outside.

15.

Her eyes blur with tears as she wanders down the dirt path past a rusted shed where two gaunt dogs lie panting in the shade. Down beyond a grove of bamboo, out to the wire fence that marks the property's edge. There, she looks out over the plain to the mountains and lets herself cry. She doesn't know why she's sobbing, but it's as if her body is a vessel filled with tears

and they are simply spilling over. What comes up with them is a deep bone-knowledge.

This blood is wrong.

Something has happened.

She has an absolute awareness that something has passed through her—like a lost idea or memory or dream whose bright threads she could only hold for an instant.

My body knows.

Something was in me, and now it's gone away.

16.

She cried for as long as she could. Then she stood for a while looking at the golden afternoon light on a few stubby trees, at a *zopilote* circling in the sky, then at some movement in the distance that turned out to be a pack of feral dogs dragging something across the plain.

She felt as if she had been entered and emptied. Her body a casing or sheath, a momentary incarnation for something. Possessed, animated briefly, then left. Something flashing across the sky and gone. She felt like a shell, hollowed out and resonant, as if she would never be quite full again.

What could she tell him? What was there to say? That the life in her had felt unwelcomed, a call unanswered, like a lost prayer? There weren't even words for this, just fragments—surreal, disjointed. Things she'd abandoned at a threshold before being turned away.

Her body would grow hard again. Her heart, too. Already she could feel it closing, all muscle, could hear its singular, unaccompanied beat echo inside her chest.

Eventually, she turned to retrace the path up to the shack. In the distance, she could hear the group of women emerging into the fresh air, laughing. Somebody was telling a story about Nepal. It seemed incongruous how life went on, trailing its griefs, itself an empty thing, holy and hollow, unfeeling.

17.

What names do we give the children we will never have? The boy with hair like January sunlight, the girl with eyes the color of a troubled sky. When they wander off—loveless, unnamed—how do we call them home?

18.

There was a wedding at the hotel on the last morning of her stay—the mother of the groom stuffed into a pink flamenco sheath, the bridal party

smoking joints out behind the fountain, children roughhousing around the pool, crushing the fallen petals of bougainvillea until they looked like lipstick marks along the walkways. Her bags were heavy, and she had bought a Day of the Dead doll at the marketplace that the taxi driver, superstitiously, wouldn't touch. He eyed it in the rearview mirror, his own dashboard a cabinet of wonders from which five suction-cup heads of Christ regarded her with twisted, bleeding faces.

“*Donde va, senora?*”

“To the sun and the moon.”

They drove through town, the press of people all around them, stepping into the street, ambling beside the taxicab's open windows, so close she could touch them, smell the sweat and cigarettes and hibiscus tea on their skins. She saw the face of a man who looked like a Conquistador, the blue shadows of his hat playing around his features like the wings of an eagle. She saw a boy with one eye, an old woman with a gold tooth whose hair spiked like the horns of a gazelle. A man whose skin was so red it seemed he'd been dipped in dye. From behind a curtain, she saw a woman in a circle of lamplight, kissing a holy card. For an instant it looked as though she had grown a bleeding heart in place of her mouth.

At La Luna, she paid the driver and passed through the cool dim doorway one last time. She ordered tequila at the bar, and looked around. Dusky forms under a haze of dust and shadow. The angels regarded her with empty eyes. Just wood and paint, sterile invocations. The masks held everything, they gave nothing away.

19.

I close my notebook, push aside my empty plate. The afternoon has dwindled; my bus departs for the airport in an hour. The waiter has disappeared, and the only movement across the courtyard, except for the slide of late afternoon sun, has been a young brown-skinned waitress bringing more Cuba Libres and coffees to the jetsetters' table, then flirting with the dishwasher who stands in the shadows of a far corner, spritzing a washtub with a hose.

I look down at these scribbled evasions. This last day wasted writing, inventing a speech for a thing that has no words. “She” or “I”—just masks. The heart, split from itself, growing silent. In a few hours I will step off a plane, off a page, into my life again. What is there to say?

I catch the waitress' eye to ask for *la cuenta*, the account, but when she arrives at the table my clumsy tongue mispronounces the Spanish word as *cuento*, “story.” *Traer el cuento por favor*, I say with dumb hopefulness, bring

me the story. As if this strange, inscrutable country could lend me its voice. As if the brown-skinned girl could bring me a narrative, summed up, the words in order, their cost and balance clear: this day, this moment, my life carried to me neatly on a tray across the stippled courtyard, beneath the gaze of speechless angels.