

*El Camino Revienta, or
The Way Will Break You*

On days like today, when the sky is torn in two (the east-side brooding, churning up charcoal— the west a brilliant, even-handed blue, with trails of cumulus clouds like breadclumps leading over the horizon) the rain falls and stops over sun and dark, the townsmen look up, they say: that that's the devil beating his wife.

On days like today, drivers pull over, blind— the rain like clay on the windshield. But I drive: and the road is inexhaustible: rolling hills come and go, the car's momentum in my gut, cities pass by, highways merge and split up: I will drive all day, with music as my food, and my cigarette air.

No one, I believe no one, could have been with her on that day, when she up and left town.

It was late June— magnolia air— hornets crawled into bloom beds, the stalks of sunflowers would break, their heavy heads would hide from the sun weeping. In those days, the town would hush up when she was around. I never knew whether it was out of sympathy for her, or in fear of her. No one blamed her, I suppose, when she left, saying nothing. The

storms of the years after beat down on her old shack, until the ceiling began to cave like a cheap chair, from the center; until the whole thing gave like wet paper; the walls leaning like cards, plants coming through the floor, trees in the windows, or windows broken by boys in fits of boredom; until the neighbors pooled some money, and tore down the

eyesore. And so, the story of Tuli, and the spring that took her away, began to be forgotten.

Altamar was a winding town, with cobble roads that crossed and circled and often narrowed against the buildings to walkways, such that driving suddenly became futile, and the cars that remained dated better years, or were only to leave

town, and the motos buzzed wildly to and fro, one foot or the other hanging off the side, skirting past those on bike and foot.

Balconies hung off every building, with their shallow wrought-iron frames— the old women watering their hanging plants, the smokers of the pipe, the children after dinner in the last light, the day's laundry revealed in the wind— the streets always had a witness.

But morning was very different from night.

In the morning you could walk the low uneven tile of sidewalks and chance upon the fruterias, arranging their color, the smells of pastries

alive in the bakeries, stacks of unread newspapers, rare peace in the plaza, just the fountain, cent-rust at the bottom, just the benched sleepers, the warble of pigeons in conduction.

The very old: first batches of talk and coffee. The very young, the delivery trucks: first noise of day.

At night, the poor, the sick, the pregnant, the hungry, would roam the alleys and stop at bars with flowers or hats but the drunks ignored them, would hug each other and then fight, or

drink until their face sunk to their bones.

Singers would sing, but only late, with time against the dark, when the streets were all murmurs, of lovers, or rats, broken glass, broken colors in the yellow of lamps.

It was not uncommon at that time to find flowers strewn along the streets or stacked at the double- door of a home. It was a time of rain and heat and death. I was sleeping very little, and would go on long walks, noting the rose guided up the palm tree, the aisles of golden hibiscus in the garden. Sunrise, sunset, merciful touch of cold from the sea in the air.

You'd wake, having slept in the dark of low tide, with the restaurant that fried fish the night before signed: "closed due to a death."

In the short hours in which the drunks would dwindle and the shore turned towards the sun, then the town fell to a quiet, with the sea like a machine at rest, only that, whirr of wind like a

low viola.

Then, with sunrise: smell of coffee and toasted bread.

It was true: people were desperate. Men, women, and children—everyone seemed to be selling something: strange things, underwear at the beach, household sacrifices, private skills, weaving the hair of tourist children on the street. Heat and tension filled the sky: and it would build, it certainly escalated, until Tuli broke, and left, with the light of the town.

Over months, others left. The families with means. Poor young men with nothing to lose, waiting for rides in the shade of trees on the median of the highway. Old people, extricated by extended families who had a place for them. I'm telling you it was never the same.

At the time I myself was a street-sweeper, a plaza- keeper. Certainly not my first job, I have done other things: I have worked in restaurants, but in the end I could eat out of cans; I have fixed bicycles, painted houses, but my hands barely work now, I am barely able to squeeze anything for long, but let's not say it, I have not suffered so bad— in the end, sweeping has kept me in the world, with my eyes open, that is a success in itself, even with the broom taped to my hands.

Tuli appeared in Altamar on a blistery day, the kind that made children and old people ill in the shining streets, or women working the olive fields faint. Her face was sunburnt from days of travel. I remember her red dress: it was like she could talk through her way of dressing a different language than the others, it implied a completely different kind of life. Some people were embarrassed. Others: fascinated.

The tree trunks were painted blue, purple, and green on the highway that year.

When she arrived, the town was already in decline. In the time it took rumours of opportunity to reach the countryside the enterprises that had found their tender beginnings in Altamar had also found their abrupt end. Some blamed the investors, others the drying river. There was something in the clay that made the pottery break. It was one in the same. Graffiti had begun to appear on the cigarette factory. The pools of

the rich yellowed, and the hills upon which the few mansions had been mounted, walled in like fortresses, were like an insult over the town.

In her first months there, she had arranged to sleep above the bakery. The old baker had emptied out the attic to make some extra money. His boxfuls of books, his trombone, his Peugeot, which he used to ride from the market full of fruit, were loaded into his truck in the days before her arrival. She was to wake at sunrise with the rising pastries and the sweetened breads. I remember that day, when the window above the baker's opened, and an unusual string music began to be heard on certain nights.

Tones:

dry beige.

white stucco against dull pine. brick scalloped roofs.

marl yellow of wet sand. azulejo of the castle.

rust & opal.

horse of smoke and white.

Sights:

orange trees in every street.

the gnarled arms of olive in the field.

the arches of moorish balconies [⏏⏏⏏⏏].

tamarind eyes.
the dark under the cedars.
the circles of heat and light inside the church.

a sailboat like an ivory spike in the distant water. horses in the side-
swept grasses.
oil rigs like elephants of the sea.
abandoned dogs, gardens, children, the water- park, anything that
needed.

The cliffsides, aloe drooping on the cliffsides, a lone white horse tied to
the cliffsides, rows of windmills turning as though giant paper stars were
cart-wheeling along fields of sunflower and grass, the tethered terraced
gardens of communities with no name, the buried heads of goats and
cattle in the cliffsides, the grass burnt a color auburn, rows of cactus
around the crops, a cactus with leaves like huge lima beans, a pile of
sheep in the shade of a tree, the scraggly lines of plowed fields...

There's the mountain, with its lifeless rocky peak, there's the ocean, tiers
of blue, tan-teal-marine...

Absolutely no one can imagine this is me, tracing the lips of the
coastline.

At some point, Tuli left the baker's. She had done well for herself, she had found a job. You see she could read, and at that time not many could, still not many can, on the cliffsides. She was given a post, a territory. I can remember the year when

you could chance upon sight of her, her moto with two large bags mounted on either side, her yellow dress for a second between two trees, her sparkly blue helmet. When the territory was rocky, then she would park, and climb the rest on foot. No letter went missing.

Often, she was asked to open the mail, right there and then, and read its contents to the family. Sometimes they would convince her to come inside and sit and drink a juice or a tea, while reading. Other times people stood at their door, faces crowding within the frame, to watch her read what had come.

Often, the news was bad. Debts, deaths. Everything awaiting a response seemed to loom over the townspeople. After she read they would look at her as though she too held an envelope with their answers. She would leave homes exhausted, she would cry on the moto, navigating the town and its outskirts.

But with the bad, there too chanced the good. Checks for a sum, pictures of babies, the trinkets of love letters would drop from envelopes before even words began, and then Tuli would see a face suddenly change, the eyes brighten, you could feel the light when the townspeople were made alive again. Before even words began, she would be told many stories, stories of love, of distant lands, of miracles, of the way the weather was when these things happened, when the world actually lit upon a soul.

The little shack where Tuli lived. Work of cinder and clay. The whole town went inside, when she left. I could only stand it once. They went to see what she had lived like, what she'd left. But I could feel her still there. No one touched a thing for days. Then they stole everything. The little round table, its green velvet cloth. The record player and her two records, strings on the covers. The porcelain kettle and the single cast iron pan hanging above the camping stove on the table. Her flowers, still-living blooms, carefully arranged in glass coca-cola bottles; her straw hat and her horse shoes. I tried to imagine for weeks what she'd held onto. What picture, what object would be her anchor, her target in the difficulty to

come. I would work myself up until I cried, walking while everything went blurry.

I remember that night in Altamar: the sky was moonless for many hours. I was like many on the boardwalk, looking along the water for a moon and seeing nothing, and then, alarmed, behind my back, as though some betrayal had occurred, but also there no moon could be found. I sat in between the lightposts, where it was darkest, near an old fisherman on the shore, with my beers sweating in a plastic bag. The water was black as oil in the dark.

The smell of firewood and fish trailed from the restaurants, and saline stuck to my skin. The only men that walked off alone were the oldest of men. But I was not a man then I don't think. Even now, I don't think. The old fisherman had a grandson, who had been running about at a distance

with a soccer ball, and then had run back, in sporty stupor, to take the old man home. So— I was truly alone then, no allegiances, when this very strange thing happened:

From the oil rigs, for I first saw them there, over the long pipes of the oil rigs, there emerged a flurry of fire— fiery shreds flew like swifts in the plaza, a circle together, trying to stay up, in an up & down motion, sometimes separating, a violent veer off-course, and then somehow reconvening,

with no apparent signal becoming one huge mass again. The fiery shreds floating that night my god I thought I was going crazy— they appeared to have volition— they flew away, died out, and the sky went dark again over the oil rigs.
