

Originally published in *Asimov's Magazine* May, 2002

## Madonna of the Maquiladora

by

Gregory Frost

You first hear of Gabriel Perea and the Virgin while covering the latest fire at the Chevron refinery in El Paso. The blaze is under control, the water cannon hoses still shooting white arches into the scorched sky.

You've collected some decent shots, but you would still like to capture something unique even though you know most of it won't get used. The *Herald* needs only one all-inclusive shot of this fire, and you got that hours ago. The rest is out of love. You like to think there's a piece of W. Eugene Smith in you, an aperture in your soul always seeking the perfect image.

The two firemen leaning against one of the trucks is a good natural composition. Their plastic clothes are grease-smearred; their faces, with the hoods off, are pristine. Both the men are Hispanic, but the soot all around them makes them seem pallid and angelic and strange. And both of them are smoking. It's really too good to ignore. You set up the shot without them knowing, without seeming to pay them much attention, and that's when you catch the snippet of their conversation.

"I'm telling you, *cholo*, the Virgin told Perea this explosion would happen. Mrs. Delgado knew all about it."

"She tells him everything. She's telling us all. The time is coming, I think."

*Click.* "What time is that?" you ask, capping the camera.

The two men stare at you a moment. You spoke in Spanish — part of the reason the paper hired you. Just by your inflection, though, they know you're not a native. You may understand all right, but you are an outsider.

The closest fireman smiles. His teeth are perfect, whiter than the white bar of the Chevron insignia beside him. Mexicans have good tooth genes, you think. His smile is his answer: He's not going to say more.

"All right, then. Who's Gabriel Perea?"

"Oh, he's a prophet. *The prophet, man.*"

"A seer."

"He knows things. The Virgin tells him."

"The Virgin Mary?" Your disbelief is all too plain.

The first fireman nods and flicks away his cigarette butt, the gesture transforming into a cross — "Bless me, father ..."

"Does he work for Chevron?"

The firemen look at each other and laugh. "You kidding, man? They'd never hire him, even if he made it across the Rio Bravo with a green card between his teeth."

Rio Bravo is what they call the Rio Grande. You turn and look, out past the refinery towers, past the scrub and sand and the Whataburger stand, out across the river banks to the brown speckled bluffs, the shapes that glitter and ripple like a mirage in the distance.

*Juarez.*

"He's over there?"

"*Un esclavo de la maquiladora.*"

A factory slave. Already you're imagining the photo essay. "The Man Who Speaks to the Virgin," imagining it in *The Smithsonian*, *The National Geographic*. An essay on Juarez, hell on earth, and smack in the middle of hell, the Virgin Mary and her disciple. It assembles as if it's been waiting for you to find it.

"How about," you say, "I buy you guys a few beers when you're finished and you tell me more about

him.”

The second guy stands up, grinning. “Hey, we’re finished now, amigo.”

“Yeah, that fire’s drowning. Nothing gonna blow today. The Virgin said so.”

You follow them, then, with a sky black and roiling on all sides like a Biblical plague settling in for a prolonged stay.

#

You don’t believe in her. You haven’t since long ago, decades, childhood. Lapsed Catholics adopt the faith of opposition. The Church lied to you all the time you were growing up. Manipulated your fears and guilts. You don’t plan to forgive them for this. The ones who stay believers are the ones who didn’t ask questions, who accepted the rules, the restrictions, on faith. Faith, you contend, is all about not asking the most important questions. Most people don’t think; most people follow in their hymnals. It takes no more than a fingernail to scrape the gilt from the statues and see the rot below. Virgin Mary didn’t exist for hundreds of years after the death of Jesus. She was fashioned by an edict, by a not very bright emperor. She had a cult following and they gained influence and the ear of Constantine. It was all politics. *Quid pro quo*. Bullshit. This is not what you tell the firemen, but it does make the Virgin the perfect queen for Juarez: that place is all politics and bullshit, too. Reality wrapped in a shroud of the fantastic and the grotesque. Just like the Church itself.

You went across the first time two years ago, right after arriving. The managing editor, a burly, bearded radical in a sportcoat and tie named Joe Baum took you in. He knew how you felt about the power of photography, and after all you’re the deputy art director. One afternoon he just walked over to your desk and said, “Come on, we’re gonna take the afternoon, go visit some people you need to see.” You didn’t understand until later that he was talking about the ones on film. Most of them were dead.

Baum covered El Paso cultural events, which meant he mingled with managers and owners of the *maquiladoras*. “We’ll have to get you into the loop. Always need pictures of the overlords in their tuxes to biff up the society pages.” He didn’t like them too much.

In his green Ford you crossed over on the Puente Libre, all concrete and barbed wire. He talked the

whole time he drove. “What you’re gonna see here is George Bush’s New World Order, and don’t kid yourself that it isn’t. Probably you won’t want to see it. Hell, I don’t want to see it, and America doesn’t want to see it with a *vengeance*.”

He took you to the apartment of a man named Jaime Pollamano. Baum calls him the Chicken Man. Mustache, dark hair, tattoos. A face like a young Charles Bronson. Chicken Man is a street photographer. “We buy some of his photos, and we buy some from the others.” There were six or seven in the little apartment that day, one of them, unexpectedly, a woman. The windows were covered, and an old sheet had been stuck up on the wall. They’d been expecting you. Baum had arranged in advance for your edification. “What you’re gonna see today,” he promised, “is the photos we *don’t* buy.”

The slide show began. Pictures splashed across the sheet on the wall.

First there were the female corpses, all in various states of decay and decomposition. Most were nude, but they weren’t really bodies as much as sculptures now in leather and wood. The photographers had made them strange and haunting and terrifying, all at the same time. In the projector light you can see their eyes — squinting, hard, glancing down, here and there a look of pride, something almost feral. The woman is different. She stares straight at death.

“Teenage girls,” Baum told you while the images kept coming. “They get up at like 4 a.m. to walk for miles to catch a bus to take them to a factory by six. They live in *colonias*, little squatter villages made of pallet wood and trash. Most of these girls here were kidnapped on the way to work. Tortured, raped, murdered. Nobody goes looking for them much. Employee turnover in the maquiladoras is between fifty and a hundred and fifty percent annually, so they’re viewed as just another runaway *chica* who has to be replaced. The *pandillas*, the local gangs, get them, or *federales* on patrol, or even the occasional serial murderer. Who knows who? No one’s looking for her anyway, save maybe her family.”

All you could think to say was, “They’ve lost their breadwinner.”

Baum snorted. “That’s right. She worked a forty-eight hour week, six days, for about twenty-five dollars.”

“A day?”

“A *week*. Per day they make about four dollars and fifty cents. Not just these girls, you understand. All of ‘em. All the workers.”

You tried to work that out, how they live on so little money. Finally you suggested, “The cost of living here is cheaper?” The handsome woman photographer’s eyes shifted to you, cold with disgust.

The pictures never stopped coming. You finally passed the gauntlet of dead women. Now it was a man dangling like a *piñata* from a power line. He’d been electrocuted while trying to run a line from a transformer to his home. Then other dead men. Some dying in the street with people all around them. Others dead like the women, executed, tortured, burned alive. You tried to look elsewhere as the images just kept slamming the wall. How many deaths could there be? Baum suddenly said, “Let me put the cost of living thing in perspective for you. You’re seventeen, you live in El Paso, you work six days a week all day and you buy your groceries and pay your bills on your thirty-five dollar paycheck. That’s adjusted gross to compensate for the differences in cost on our side of the river.

“On this side along the river there are over three hundred factories. Big names you know: RCA, Motorola, Westinghouse, GE. We use their products, we all do. They employ almost 200,000 workers, mostly female, living crammed into the *colonias*, altogether about two million people. That’s eighty percent unemployment, by the way.”

Between the images and the facts, you’re lost and grasping for some sort of reality. This is what a series of smiling presidents promised the world? Even as you flounder, the photos change course. A severed arm dangles from the big face of Mickey Mouse, both nailed to a wall; a clown head tops a barbed wire fence post, with laundry drying on the wire; a six-year-old holds a Coca-Cola can, only the straw’s going up his nose, and you can tell by his slack face that whatever’s in that can is fucking him up severely. The power of these images is in their simplicity: This isn’t art, it just is. All you could do was repeat the mantra that this is what art is *supposed* to do — shake you up, make you think differently. Make you sweat. Doing its job. God, yes.

Afterwards Baum introduced you to the photographers but the room stayed dark. You walked through the line, shaking hands, nodding, dazed. One man was drunk. Another, the feral one, had the

jittery sheen of an addict. The woman hung back. Reality after that onslaught barely touched you.

Baum bought some of the pictures in spite of what he'd told you, paying far too much for them. Maybe he collected them — you were sure they weren't going to get into the paper. You know what the paper will print. He walked you out, across the street, past his car and through the Plaza de Armas, the main square. It was a Friday night and there must have been a thousand people milling about. The ghosts of all those photos tagged along, bleeding into the world. The cathedral across the plaza was lit in neon reds, greens and golds, looking more like a casino than a church. Everywhere, people were selling something. Most of it was trash collected and reassembled into trinkets, earrings, belts, whatever their skill allowed. There were clowns on stilts wandering around. A man selling flavored ice chips. Baum bought two. Others sold tortillas, drugs, themselves. All of it smelled desperate. A lot of the crowd, Baum told you as you drove home after, were actually Americans. "They come across the border on Friday nights for a little action. The factory girls sell themselves for whatever extra dollars they can get from the party boys."

You remember at some point in the drive asking him why the workers don't unionize, and provoking the biggest laugh of all. "No union organizer would have a job by day's end, is why. Some of them don't make it home alive, either, although you can't tie anything to the corporations that fire them. Just as likely they pissed off their co-workers by threatening the status quo. It's happened before — whole shifts have been fired, everyone blamed for the actions of one or two. When you're an ant, it doesn't take a very big rock to squash you. My, what a glorious testament to American greed — and we've even kept it from crossing the border, too. So far."

#

That conversation comes back to you now, driving away from your drinks with the firemen. Gabriel Perea was an activist. In Baum's terms, he was a dangerous man to himself and anyone who knew him. The Virgin turned him, saved him. She's protecting him for something important. The firemen expect something between Armageddon and Rapture. Transcendence. All you know is that you want to get there before the Kingdom of Heaven opens for business.

#

"*Pura guasa*," Baum says when you tell him what you want to do. "Just a lot of superstitious chatter. Nonsense. I've heard about this guy before. He's like an urban legend over there. They need for him to exist, just like her."

Nevertheless, you say, it's a great story — the kind of thing that could garner attention. Awards. The human spirit finding the means to survive in the maquiladora even if that means is a fantasy. Baum concedes it could be terrific.

"If there's anything to it."

There's only one way to find that out. In *c. de Juarez*, all roads lead to the Chicken Man.

#

On the outside of his apartment someone has sprayed the words "Dios Está Aquí." Chicken Man has moved three times since you first met him. Most of the street photographers move routinely, just to stay alive, to stay ahead of the *narcotraficante*, or the cops or anyone else they've pissed off with their pictures. Of the six you met that first day, only five are still living. Now Pollamano's holed up just off the Pasea Triunfa de la Republica. And holed up is the right term. The cinder block building has chicken wire over the windows and black plastic trash bags on the inside of them. You knock once and slide your business card under the door.

After awhile the door opens slightly and you go in. It's hot inside, and the air smells like chemicals, like fixer and developer. The only light on is a single red bulb. Chicken Man wears a Los Lobos tank top, shorts and sandals. He's been breathing this air forever. He should have mutated by now. "¿*Quiubo*, Deputy?" *Deputy* is the street photographers' their name for you. Titles are better than names here anyway. They call Joe Baum "La Bamba."

He invites you to sit. You tell him what the firemen told you. What you want to do with it.

"*El Hombre de la Madona*. I know the stories. A lot of 'em circulating round."

"So, what's the truth? He isn't real? Doesn't see her?"

"Oh, he's real. And he maybe sees her." He crosses to the shelves made of cinder blocks and boards, rummages around in one of thirty or so cardboard boxes, returns with a 4x5 print. In the red light, it's difficult to see. Chicken Man turns on a maglight and hands it to you.

You're looking at a man in dark coveralls. He's standing at a crazy, Elvis Presley kind of angle, feet splayed and legs twisted. His hands are up in front of him, the fingers curled. There are big protective goggles over his eyes. He has a long square jaw and a mustache. Behind him other figures in goggles and coveralls stand, out of focus. They're co-workers and this is inside a factory someplace. Fluorescent lights overhead are just greenish smears. The expression on his face is fierce — wide-eyed, damn near cross-eyed.

"He was seein' her right then," says the Chicken Man.

"You took this?"

"Me? I don't set foot in the maquilas. Factory owners don't like us, don't want us taking pictures in there. Some of the young ones get in for a day, shoot and get out. I'm too old to try that kind of crap."

"Who, then?"

"*Doncella loca.*"

He holds out his hand, takes the photo back. When he hands it back, there's writing on it in grease pencil. A name, Margarita Espinada, and the words "*Colonia Universidad.*" He describes how to drive there. "You met her," he says, "the very first time La Bamba brought you over. She lives in her car mostly. *Auto loco.* I let her use my chemicals when she needs to. And the sink. She's shooting the Tarahumara kids now. Indians. They don't trust nobody, but they trust her. Same with the maquilas. Most of the workers are women. She gets in where I can't. She's kinda like you, Deputy. Only smart." He grins.

You grin back and hand him a twenty and three rolls of film. He slides the money into his pocket but kisses the plastic canisters. "Gracias, amigo."

#

*Colonia Universidad* is easy to find because half of it has just burned to the ground and the remains are still smoking. Blackened oil drums, charcoal that had defined shacks the day before, naked bed springs and a few bicycle frames twisted into Salvador Dali forms. Margarita Espinada is easy to find, too. She wears a camera around her neck, and black jeans, boots, and a blue work shirt. The jeans are dirty, the shirt stained dark under the arms and down the back. Her black hair is short. The other

women around her are wearing dresses and have long hair, and scarves on their heads. At a quick glance you might mistake her for a man.

They're all watching you before the car even stops. When you stride toward them, the women all back up, spread apart, move away. Margarita stands her ground. She raises her camera and takes your picture, as though in an act of defiance. From a distance she looks to be about twenty, but up close you can see the lines around the eyes and mouth. More like early thirties. Lean. There's a thin scar across the bridge of her nose and one cheek.

If she remembers you from the Chicken Man's, there's no sign of it in her eyes. You hand her the photo. She looks at it, at her name on the back, then wipes it down her thigh. "You want a drink, Deputy?" There's the tiniest suggestion of amusement in the question.

"I'm not really a deputy, you know. It's just a nickname."

"Hey, at least they don't call you *pendejo*."

"I don't know that they don't."

She laughs, and for a moment that resolute, defiant face becomes just beautiful.

The shack she takes you to is barely outside the fire line. The frame is held together by nails driven through bottle caps. The walls are cut up shipping cartons for Three Musketeers candy bars. No floor, only dirt. There's an old, rust-stained mattress and a couple of beat-up suitcases. She comes up with a bottle of tequila from God knows where, apologizes for the lack of ice and glasses. Then she takes a long swig from the mouth of the bottle. Her eyes are watering as she passes it to you. You smell her then, the odor of a woman mixed in with the smoke smell, sweat and flesh and dirt. You almost want to ask her why she does this, lives this way, but you haven't any right. Instead you say his name as a question.

She lays down the photo. "Gabriel Perea is real, he exists. He's what they call an assembler, on a production line. The *maquila* is about twenty miles from here. The story of him grows as it travels. All around."

You recite the firemen's version: great prophet, seer who will lead them into the kingdom of Heaven.

"*Pura guasa*," is her answer. Pure foolishness — exactly what Baum said.

"But the picture. He *is* seeing the Virgin?"

She shrugs. "Yes, I know. From your eyes — how could I take the picture and not say it's true?"

She pushes her thumb against the image, covering the face. "This says it's real. Not true. I know that he tells everyone what the Virgin wants them to know."

"And what's that?"

"To be patient. To wait. To endure their hardships. To remember that they will all find Grace in Heaven more beautiful than anything they can imagine."

"That wouldn't take much of a heaven. Has anyone else seen her?"

"No one in the factory now."

"But someone else?"

Again, she shrugs. "Maybe. There are stories. Someone saw her in a bathroom. In a mirror. There are always stories once it starts. People who don't want to be left out, who need to hear from her. That can be a lot of people.

"In *Colonia El Mirador*, a Sacred Heart shrine begins to bleed. It's a cheap little cardboard picture, and they say it bleeds, so I go and take its picture."

"Does it? Does it bleed?"

"I look in the picture I take, at how this piece of cardboard is nailed up, and I think, ah, the nailhead has rusted, the rust has run down the picture. That's all. But I don't say so."

"So, you lied to them, the people who made the claims about it?"

She snatches back the bottle. Her nostrils are flared in defiance, anger; but she laughs at your judgment, dismissing it. "I take the picture and it says what is what. If you don't see, then what good is there in telling you *how* to see?"

The anger, contained, burns off her like radiation. You flip open your Minox and take her picture. She stares at you in the aftermath of the flash, as if in disbelief.

Breaking the tension, you ask, "Is he crazy?"

She squats down in the dirt, her back pressed against the far wall, takes off the camera and sets it

on the mattress. "Listen, I got a job in a factory because I heard there was a dangerous man there. A Zapatista brother, someone of the Reality. He had workers stirred up.

"And I thought, I want to be there when they have him killed. I want to document it. The bosses there will pay workers to turn in their co-workers. Pay them more money than they can earn in a month, so it's for sure someone will turn him in. But this Perea, he sought out those people and he convinced them not to do this. He offered hope. 'The Dream we can all dream, so that when we awaken it will remain with us.' That's what he promised. When I learned that, then I knew I had to photograph him. And his murder."

"Except the Virgin showed up."

She grins. "I hadn't even gotten my first exciting twenty dollar paycheck. The rumor circulated that he was going to confront the managers. Everyone was breathing this air of excitement. And I have my camera, I'm ready. Only all of a sudden, right on the factory floor, Gabriel Perea has a vision. He points and he cries, 'Oh, Mother of God! See her? Can you see her? Can you hear her, good people?' Of course we can't. No one can. They try, they look all around, but you know they don't see. He has to tell it. She says, 'Wait.' She says, 'There will be a sign.' She'll come again and talk to us."

"Did she? Did she come back?"

"About once every week. She came in and spoke to him when he was working. People started crowding around him, waiting for the moment. It's always when he doesn't expect. Pretty soon there are people clustering outside the factory and following Gabriel Perea home. The managers in their glass booths just watch and watch."

"They didn't try to stop it?"

"No. And no one got into trouble for leaving their position, or for trespassing. Trying to see him. To hear his message. And I begin to think, these men are at least afraid of God. There is something greater and more powerful than these Norte Americanos."

"Yet you don't believe it?"

In answer, she gets up and takes the larger suitcase and throws it open on the mattress. Inside are photos, some in sleeves, some loose, some in folders. You see a color shot of a mural of a Mayan head

surrounded by temples, photos of women like those you scared off outside, one of a man lying peacefully sleeping on a mattress in a shack like this one. She glances at it and says, "He's dead. His heater malfunctioned and carbon monoxide killed him. Or maybe he did it on purpose."

She pulls out a manila folder and opens it. There's a picture of an assembly line — a dozen women in hairnets and surgical gowns and rubber gloves, seated along an assembly line.

"What's this place make?"

"Motion controller systems." You stare at a photo sticking out from the pack, of Gabriel Perea head-on, preaching, in that twisted martial arts pose of his. This time she has crouched behind equipment to get this shot, but in the background you can see the managers all gathered. Most of them are grainy shadows, but the three faces that are visible are clearly not frightened of what's happening here.

"They look almost bored."

She nods.

"You think he's a fake. Comes in as an agitator to catch workers who'd be inclined to organize, and then he catches them in a big net, a phony appearance by the Virgin Mary, promising them a wonderful afterlife if they just grind themselves down like good little girls and boys in this one."

She glances at you oddly, then says, "Maybe they *don't* call you names, Deputy."

You meet her eyes, smile, thinking that you'd be willing to fall in love with this other photographer; but the idea fades almost as fast as it arrives. She lives with nothing and takes all the risks while you have everything and take no risks at all. Her dreams are all of her people. Yours are of awards and recognition.

She offers you the bottle again and you drink and wheeze and wonder why it is you can't have both dreams. Why yours seems petty and cheap. You don't believe in the Virgin, either. The two of you should be able to support each other. Ignoring the delusions of a few people over their rusting shrine is a far cry from ignoring this kind of scam.

She agrees to get you an interview with Gabriel Perea. It will take some days. He is a very reluctant holy man, more shy than the Tarahumara.

“Come back in three days.” To this *colonia*, to this shack, to wait for her. All right, you think, that’s good. It gives you time to get information.

You give her five film canisters and she kisses you on the cheek for it. You can feel her lips all the way home.

#

When you tell Baum what you’ve found, he sends you down to see Andy Jardin. Andy’s a walking encyclopedia of corporate factology — if it’s listed on the DJI, Nasdaq or the S&P 500, he’s got a profile in his computer if not in his head.

He barely acknowledges you when you show up. The two of you had one conversation on the day you were hired — Baum introduced you. Andy said, “Hey.” You take pictures, he babbles in stocks — two languages that don’t recognize each other without a translator. He has carrot-colored hair that might have been in dreadlocks the last time it was mowed, and wears black plastic frame glasses through which he peers myopically at his computer screen.

You clear your throat, ask him if he knows of the company. Immediately you get his undivided attention. He reels off everything — no one has ever accused this kid of trying to hold back.

They manufacture control systems, have government contracts, probably fall into someone’s black budget, like most of the military manufacturers. Their stock is hot, a good investment, sound and steady. They don’t actually manufacture anything in the maquiladora, which is a common story. They just assemble parts, which are shipped up to Iowa, where the company’s based. That’s where the controllers are made. He says they’re developing what are called genetic algorithms. When you look blank, he happily sketches in the details: genetic algorithms are the basis for lots of artificial intelligence research. Of course, he adds, there is no such thing currently as AI — not in the evil, computer mind bent on world domination sense. It’s all about learning circuits, routines that adjust when conditions change, that can refine themselves based on past experience. Not brains, not thinking — a kind of mathematical awareness.

Before you leave, he invites you to buy some of their stock. This is a really good time for them, he says.

Later on, Baum tells you that Andy's never invested a cent in his life, he just loves to watch, the ultimate investment voyeur. "And you can expect to get every article that even mentions your company from now on. He'll probably forward you their S&P daily, too.

"You're into something here?" he asks, as if that's the last thing that concerned him. The real question he's asking is "How long is this going to take?"

All you can do is shrug and say, "I really don't know. This woman — this photographer — she has a notion he's a ringer, someone the company threw in to manipulate the workers, keep them docile. I want to interview him, take his picture, get inside the factory and get some pictures there, too. You know, get what I can before they know that I'm looking at him specifically."

"Is it a Catholic thing — I mean, your interest?"

"It's not about me."

Whether or not he believes you, he doesn't say.

As you're leaving he adds, "You've seen enough to know that weird and bizarre are the norms over there, right?" Again, he's not saying it outright. Beneath his camaraderie lies the real edginess: He's worried about you and this story — how you fit together.

"I won't forget. Hecho in Mexico is Hecho in Hell."

Baum laughs. It's his saying, after all.

#

Perea speaks so quietly and so fast that you can't catch half of it. He sits in the corner away from the lantern, on the ground. He bows his head when he speaks as if he's ashamed to admit what's happening to him. This is not, to your thinking, the behavior of a man who is playing a role. Still, how could anyone be certain? You take pictures of him bathed in lantern light, looking like a medieval pilgrim who has made his journey, found his God.

Margarita kneels beside you, leaning forward to hear clearly, translating his murmured Spanish. "I don't know why the Virgin picked me. I'm just a *Chamula*.' That's an Indian from Chiapas, Deputy," she explains. "I believe that things need to change. People need their dignity as much as their income. I thought I could do this on my own — change things in this factory, I mean. The other workers would

trust me and together we would break the cycle in which the neoliberals keep us.”

“What does she look like?”

“She has blue robes, a cloth over her head. I can sort of see through her, too. And her voice, it fills my head like a bell ringing. But it’s soft, like she’s whispering to me. No one else sees her. No one else hears her.” He looks up at you, his eyes pleading for understanding. “She stopped me from doing a terrible thing. If we had protested as I planned, many people would have been killed. They would bring in the federales and the federales would beat us. There would be people waiting for us when we got home — people the federales won’t see. Some of us would have been tortured and killed. It might have been me. But I was willing to take that risk, to make this change.”

“She stopped you.”

He nods. “Someone said my very first day that the factory is built on a sacred place. In the San Cristóbal we have these places. Maybe she heard our fear. There is a shrine nearby there where a picture of Jesus weeps. And another with tears of blood.” Margarita glances sharply at you as she repeats this. You nod.

“She tells us to live. To endure what life gives us, no matter how hard. She knew what was in my heart. She said that the greatest dignity could be found in the grace of god. To us finally the kingdom will be opened for all we suffer. It will be closed to those who oppress us.” He is seeing her again as he speaks, his eyes looking at a memory instead of at you.

Afterwards, you ride in your car alone — Margarita insists on driving her own, an old Chevy Impala that rumbles without a muffler. She won’t ride with anyone; it’s one of those things about her that makes it clear she’s crazy. Your tape recorder plays, Margarita’s translation fills the night.

Perea’s telling the truth so far as he knows it. In a moment of extreme danger, the Virgin appeared. That’s happened before — in fact, she usually manifests where the climate’s explosive, people are strained, fragmented, minds desperate for escape. It’s religion to some, mental meltdown to you. So why do you resist even that explanation now? “A Catholic thing?” Baum asked. That’s not it, though. You recollect something you once heard Carl Sagan say in an interview: Extraordinary events require extraordinary proof. “So, Carl,” you ask the dark interior, “how do you pull proof out of a funhouse

mirror?"

#

By the time Margarita returns, you know what you're going to do. You tell her to see what she thinks. She sits back on the mattress. You can hear her pulling off her boots. "You might get away with it," she answers, and there's anger in her voice. "If they don't pay too much attention to your very Castilian Español. You still talk like a *gringo*. And you still think like one, too. You listen to what he says, and you see it all in black and white, Norte Americano versus us. La Bamba's the same way. You guys see what most of your people won't, but you see it with old eyes."

"How are we — I don't understand. The Zapatistas you mean? What— ?"

She makes a noise to dismiss you, and there's the sound of the bottle being opened. Not sharing. Then suddenly she's talking, close enough now you can almost feel the heat of her breath.

"It's not north against south anymore, rich whites against poor Mexicans. That's only a thing, a speck. It's the whole world, Deputy. The maquiladora is the whole world now. Japan is here, Korea is here, anyone who wants to make things without being watched, without having to answer to anyone, without having to pay fairly. They're here and everywhere else, too. *Ya, basta!* You understand? Enough! It's not about NAFTA, about whose treaty promises what. Whoever's treaty, it will be just the same. Here right now in Mexico the drug dealers invest, buy factories, take their money and grind their own people to make more money, *clean* money. Clean! And it's no different here than anywhere else, it's even, *dios mio*, *better* here than some places. It's a new century and the countries bleed together, and the only borders, the only fences, are all made of bodies. All the pictures you've seen, but if you don't see this in all of them, then you're seeing nothing!"

Clearly it's time to leave. "I'm sorry," is all you can think to say, and you turn to go. And suddenly she's blocking your way. Her hands close on your arms. For all your fantasies you didn't see this coming. Here in a shack with a cardboard door is not where you'd have chosen. Only this isn't your choice, it's entirely hers. Anybody could come by, but no one does. She works your clothes off, at the same time tugging at her own in hasty, angry, near-violent action. Sex out of anger. You keep thinking, she's as crazy as they said she was, she's furious with you for your stupidity, how can she possibly want

to fuck you, too? For all of which, you don't fight, of course you don't, it's your fantasy however unexpected and inexplicable

You fall asleep with your arms around her, her breasts warm against you, almost unsure that any of it happened.

#

The Virgin only visits Perea in the factory. That's where you get a job. Driving a fork lift. It's something you used to do, so at least you don't look like an idiot even if they're suspicious of your accent. If they are, they say nothing. They're hiring — from what Baum said, they're always hiring.

You get assigned a small locker. In it are your work things — coveralls and safety glasses. There are signs up in every room in bright red Spanish: "Protective Gear Must Be Worn At All Times!" and "Wear Your Goggle. Protect Your Eyes." Your guide points to one of these and says, "Don't think they're kidding. They'll fire you on the spot if they catch you not wearing the correct apparel."

The lift is articulated. It can take you almost to the ceiling with a full pallet. It has control buttons for your left hand like those found on computer game devices. Working it is actually a pleasure at first.

The day is long and dull. Breaks are almost non-existent. One in the morning, one in the afternoon, both about as long as it takes to smoke a cigarette. The other workers ask where you're from, how you got here. Margarita helped you work out a semi-plausible story about being fired from dock work in Veracruz when you got caught drunk. At least you've been to Veracruz. A few people laugh at the story and commiserate. Drunk, yeah. Nobody pries — there's hardly time for questions, even over lunch, which is the only place you get to take off the safety glasses and relax — but you see suspicion in a few eyes. You can tell any story you want, but you can't hide the way you tell it. Your *voice* isn't from Veracruz. Nevertheless, no one challenges you. Maybe they think you're a company ringer, a spy. That would give them good reason to steer clear of you. Whatever you are, they don't want trouble — that's what Baum said. This job is all they've got. And at week's end, just like them, you'll collect your \$22.50, too.

#

The second day you're there, the Virgin appears to Gabriel Perea.

You're unloading a shipment of circuit boards and components off the back of a semi, when suddenly you find yourself all alone. It's too strange. You climb down and wander out of the loading bay and into the warehouse itself. Everyone's gathered there. A circle of hundreds. Right in the middle Perea stands at that crazy angle like a man with displaced hips. His hands are out, palms wide, and he's repeating her words for everyone: "She loves us all. We are all her children. We are all of us saved and our children are saved. Our blood is *His* blood!" The atmosphere practically crackles. Every eye is riveted to him. You move around the outside perimeter, looking for the masters. There are two up on a catwalk. One looks at you as if you're a bigger spectacle than Perea. You turn away quickly and stare like the others are doing, trying to make like you were looking for a better view of the event. From somewhere in the crowd comes the clicking of a shutter. Someone is taking shots. You could take out your tiny Minox now and shoot a couple yourself, but there's nothing to see that Margarita didn't capture already. Nothing worth drawing any more attention to yourself. *Nada que ver*, the words echo in your head.

For a long time you stare at him. "The *niño* loves us all. His is the pure love of a child. Care for Him, for it's all He asks of you." People murmur, "Amen," and "Yes."

Eventually you chance another look at the two on the catwalk. One of them seems to be talking, but not to the other. You think: *He's either schizophrenic or he's got a microphone.*

#

In a matter of minutes the spectacle is over. She had nothing remarkable to say; she was just dropping in to remind everyone of her love for them and theirs for her. Now she won't come again for days, another week.

Except for the first two nights you eat alone in the shack. Margarita is somewhere else, living out of her car, photographing things, capturing moments. How does she do this? How does she live forever on the edge, capturing death, surrounded, drenched in it? How can anybody live this way? It's hopeless. The end of the world.

You lay alone in the shack, as cold at night as you are scalding in the afternoon when you walk down the dirt path from the bus drop. You'd like to fall into a swimming pool and just float. The

closest you can come is communal rain barrels outside — which were once chemical barrels and God knows whether there's benzene or something worse floating in them, death in the water. Little kids are splashing it over themselves, drinking from it. Watching makes you yearn for a cold drink but you wouldn't dare. Margarita's friends there cook you dinner on their makeshift stoves, for which you gladly pay. By week's end, they've made more from the dinners than you'll take home from the factory.

Friday you drive home for the weekend, exhausted.

You flop down on your bed, so tired that your eyes ache. All you can think about is Margarita. Gabriel Perea's Virgin has melted into a mad photographer who is using you for sex. That's how it feels, that's how it is, too. A part of her clings to you, drowns with you in that dark and dirty shack, at the same time as she dismisses your simplistic comprehension of the complexities of life where she lives. A week now and you've begun maybe to understand it better — at least, you've begun taking pictures around the *colonia* — it's as though she's given you permission to participate. It would be hard not to find strange images: the dead ground outside a shack where someone has stuck one little, pathetic plant in a coffee can; another plywood shack with a sign dangling beside the door proclaiming "Siempre Coke!" The factory, too. A couple of rolls of film so far, as surreptitiously as possible. The machinery is too interesting not to photograph, even though you feel somehow complicitous in making it seem beautiful and exotic. Even in ugliness and cruelty, there is beauty. Even in the words of an apparition there are lies and deceit. You finally drift off on the thought that the reason you despise the Virgin is that she sells accommodation. It's always been her message and it's the message of the elite, the rich, a recommendation that no one who actually endures the misery would make.

The phone wakes you at noon. Baum has an invitation to a reception for a Republican Senator on the stump. "All our best people will be there. I could use a good photographer and you can use the contacts."

"Sure," you say.

"You'll need a tux."

"Got one."

"You'll need a shower, too."

How he figured that out over the phone, you can't imagine; but he's right, you do smell bad, and it's only been a week. When you get up, your whole body seems to be knitted of broken joints. It's a test of will to stand up to the spray. Being pummeled by water feels like the Rapture, pleasure meeting pain.

#

It's an outdoor patio party with three Weber Platinum grills big enough to feed the Dallas Cowboys, half a dozen chefs and one waiter for every three people. Everybody wants to have their picture taken with the Senator, who is wearing tan makeup to cover the fact that he looks like he's been stumping for two weeks without sleep, much less sunlight, and you're glad it's not your job to make him look good.

As it is, you end up taking dozens of pictures anyway. Baum calls most of the shots, who he wants with the Senator, whose faces will grace the paper in the morning. He introduces you to too many people for you to keep track of them—all the corporate executives and spouses have turned out for this gala event. When he introduces you to the head of the Texas Republican Party, just the way he says it makes it sound as if you are beholding a specifically Texan variety of Republican. For a week you've been living in a shack with dirt floors among people who cook their food on stoves made from bricks and flat hunks of iron, and here you are in a bow tie and cummerbund, hobnobbing with the richest stratum of society in El Paso and munching on shrimp bigger than your thumb, a spread that would feed an entire *colonia* for days. It's not just the disparity, it's the displacement, the fragmentation of reality into razor-edged jigsaw puzzle pieces.

And then Baum hauls you before a thin, balding man wearing glasses too small for his face, the kind that have no frames, just pins to hold the earpieces on. "This is Stuart Coopersmith." He beams at you — a knowing smile if ever there was one. To Coopersmith, he says, "He's the guy I told you about who's into image manipulation." He withdraws before he has to explain anything to either of you.

"So, you're Joe's new photo essayist," he says.

A smile to hide your panic. "I like that title better than the one they gave me at the paper. Mind if I use it?"

“Be my guest.” If he recognizes you, he shows no indication.

“So, what do you do that I should consider taking *your* picture, Mr. Coopersmith?”

He touches his tie as he names his company. It seems to be a habit. “Across the river?”

“La *maquiladora*. You guys make what —”

“Control devices. We’re all about control.” There’s a nice, harmless word for someone in the big black budget of government bureaucracy, flying under the public radar.

“It’s more than that, though, right? Someone told me, your devices actually learn.”

“Pattern recognition is not quite learning, not like most people think of it. Something occurs, our circuit notices, and predicts the likelihood of it recurring, and then if it does as predicted, the circuit loops, and the more often the event occurs when it’s supposed to, the more certain the circuit becomes, the more reliable the information and, ah, the more it seems like there’s an intelligence at work. What we know to be feedback *looks* like behavior, which is where people start saying that the things are alive and thinking.”

“I’m not sure I — “

“Well, it’s no matter, is it? You can still take pictures without understanding something this complex.” Coopersmith says this so offhandedly, you can’t be certain whether you’ve been put down. He flutters his hand through the air as if brushing the subject away. “We just manufacture parts down here. We do employ lots of people — we’re very popular in the *maquiladora*. Like to help out the folks over there.”

You nod. “So, what’s on deck now?”

He looks at his champagne glass, then glances sidelong, like Cassius conspiring to kill Caesar. “Oh, some work for NASA. For a Mars flight they’re talking about. Using GAs to predict stress, breakdown — things they can’t afford in the middle of the solar system. The software will actually measure the individual’s stress from moment to moment, and weigh in with a protective environment if that stress jumps at all. It’s still pattern recognition, you know, but not the same as on an assembly line. I suppose it’s really very exciting.”

“Amazing.” It’s probably even important work.

“In fact you all should do a story on it — I mean, not right this second, but in a few months, maybe, when the program’s a little further along and NASA’s happy, you and Joe should come over to the factory, shoot some pictures. Write this thing up. I’d give you the exclusive. You guys beat out all the other papers, get a little glory. We’d sure love the PR. That never hurts. You come and I’ll give you the guided tour of the place, how’s that?”

He adjusts his tie again on the way to reaching into his coat and coming up with a business card. The card has a spinning globe on it, with tiny lights flashing here and there as the world spins. Coopersmith smiles. “Cool, isn’t it? The engine’s embedded in the card. Doesn’t take much to drive a little animation. You be sure and have Joe give me a call real soon.”

He turns his back, striking up another conversation almost immediately. You’ve been dismissed. Heading over to where Joe stands balancing a plate of ribs, you glance back.

Coopersmith with eyes downcast listens to another man talk, his hand fiddling with the knot on his tie again.

You might not have been sure at first, but you are now: He was the one on the catwalk, watching as you edged around the factory floor while the Virgin paid her visit.

Joe says, “So?”

“He offered us the exclusive on their new program for NASA.”

“You have been blessed, my son. An overlord has smiled upon you.” He tips his glass.

#

When you tell Margarita what you suspected, she isn’t surprised so much as hurt. Even though she’d been certain of the fraud, the fact of it stings her. By association, you’re part of her pain. Although she welcomed you back with a kiss, after the news she doesn’t want to touch at all. She withdraws into smoke and drink, and finally wanders off with her cold black camera into the *colonia*, disgusted, she says, with the human race and God himself. You begin to realize that despite her tough cynical skin, there’s at least a kernel of Margarita that wanted the miracle in all its glory. Beneath your rejection, does some part of you want it, too? Once in awhile in seeking for truth it would be nice to find something better than truth.

Later, in the dark, she comes back, slides down beside you on the mattress and starts to cry. From her that's an impossible sound, so terrifying that it paralyzes you. It's the sound of betrayal, the very last crumb of purity floating away.

You reach over to hold her, and she pushes your hand away. So you lie there, unable to take back the knowledge, the doubt, the truth, and knowing that the betrayal will always be tied to you. There's nothing you can do.

#

The first opportunity you have, you swap your goggles with Gabriel Perea. The only place you can do this is at lunch. You have to wait for a day when he carries the goggles off the assembly line straight to the lunch area. You sit with him, listening to other workers ask him things about the Virgin. He looks at you edgily. He knows he's supposed to pretend that you've never met, but you're making this impossible by sitting there beside him. Making the switch is child's play. Everyone's staring at him, hanging on his every word. You set your goggles beside his, and then pick up the wrong pair a minute later and walk away.

Close up, you can see that his goggles have a slight refractive coating. He's going to know immediately what's happened, but with luck he won't be able to do anything about it. He won't want to be seen talking to you in the middle of the factory.

If Perea remotely shares your suspicions, he hasn't admitted it even to himself. This makes you think of Margarita, and your face burns with still more betrayal. It's too late, you tell yourself. This is what you came here to do.

Two days later, ten feet up in the forklift, you get what you wanted: The Virgin Mary appears to you.

It's a bare wall, concrete brick and metal conduits, and suddenly there she is. She floats in the air and when you look through the cage front of the forklift she is floating beyond it. The cage actually cuts her off. It's incredible. Wherever you look, she has a fixed location, an anchored spot in space. If you look up, her image remains fixed, sliding down the glasses. Somehow the circuit monitors your vision, tracks the turn of your head. "Feedback loops" — wasn't that what Coopersmith said? It must

be automatic, though. She may recognize the geometry, but not the receiver, because the first thing out of her mouth is: "*Te amo, Gabriel, mi profeta.*" So much for divinity. She doesn't know you've swapped goggles even if the goggles themselves do.

She is beautiful. Her hair, peeking out beneath a white wimple, is black. The blue of her robes is almost painful to see. No sky could match it. Her oval face is serene, a distillation of a million tender mothers. Oh, they're good, whoever created her. Who *wouldn't* want to believe in this Mary? Gabriel couldn't help but succumb.

The camera in your pocket is useless.

She reminds you of your duty to your flock. She promises that you will all live in glory and comfort in Heaven after this life of misery and toil, and not to blame —

In the middle of her speech, she vanishes.

It's so quick that you almost keel forward out of your seat, thank God for the harness.

You can guess what happened. Management came out for their afternoon show, and things were wrong. Gabriel Perea, the poor bastard, didn't respond. He's still somewhere, attaching diodes to little green boards, unaware that divinity has dropped by to see him again.

You lower the forklift, and get out, unable to help one last glance up into the air, looking for her. A mere scintilla, a Tinkerbell of light would do, but there is nothing. Nothing.

The last hour and a half you go about your business as usual. Nothing has changed, nothing can have changed. Your hope is they think their circuits or the goggles malfunctioned, something failed to project. Who knows what sort of feedback system was at work there — it has to be sophisticated to have dodged every solid shape in front of you. They'll want to see his goggles at the end of his shift. No one seems to be watching you yet. No one calls you in off the floor. So at the end of the day you drop the goggles in the trash and leave with the others in your shift. Everyone's talking about going home, how hot it is, how much they'd like a bath or a beer. Everything's so normal it sets your teeth on edge. You ride the bus down the highway and get off with a dozen others at your *colonia* and head for home.

It's on the dusty cowpath of a road, on foot, that they grab you. Three of them. They know who

they're looking for, and everyone else knows to stay out of it. These guys are *las pandillas*, the kind who'd kill someone for standing too close. A dozen people are all moving away, down the road, and the looks they give you are looks of farewell. *Adios, amigo*. Won't be seeing you again. They know it and so do you. You've seen the photos. The thousand merciless ways people don't come home, and you're about to become one.

The first guy walks straight up as if he's going to walk by, but suddenly his elbow swings right up into your nose, and the sky goes black and shiny at the same time, and time must have jumped because you're on your knees, blood flowing out between your fingers, but you don't remember getting there. And then you're on your back, looking at the sky, and still it seems no one's said a word to you, but your head is ringing, blood roaring like a waterfall. Someone laid you out. Each pose is a snapshot of pain. Each time there's less of you to shoot. They'll compress you, maybe for hours, maybe for days — that's how it works, isn't it? How long before gasoline and a match? Will you feel anything by then?

You stare up at the sky, at the first few stars, and wait for the inevitable continuation. The bodies get buried in the Lote Bravo. At least you know where you're going. In a couple of months someone might find you. Will Joe come looking?

Someone yells, "*¡Aguila!*" and a door slams. Or is that in your head, too?

Footsteps approach. Here it comes, you think. Is there anything you can do to prepare for the pain? Probably not, no.

The face that peers down at you doesn't help. Hispanic, handsome, well-groomed. This could be any business man in Mexico, but you know it isn't, and you remember someone telling you about the *narcotraficantes* investing in the maquiladora, taking their drug money and buying into international trade. Silent partners.

"Not going to hurt you, *keemo sabe*," he's saying with a sly grin, as though your broken nose and battered skull don't exist. "Couldn't do that. No, no. Questions would be asked about you — you're not just some factory cunt, are you?" His grin becomes a sneer — you've never actually seen anyone sneer before. This guy hates women for a hobby. "No, no," he says again, "you're a second rate wedding photographer who thought he was Dick fucking Tracy. What did you do, hang out with the

Juarez photo-locos and get all righteous? Sure, of course you did.” He kneels, clucking his tongue. You notice that he’s holding your Minox. “Listen, *cholo*, you print what you’ve uncovered, and Señor Perea will die. You think that’s a threat, hey? But it’s not. You’ll make him out a fool to his own people. They trust him, you know? It’s all they got, so you go ahead and take it from them and see what you get. *We* care so much, we’re lettin’ you go home. Here.” He tosses the camera into the dirt. “You’re only a threat to the people who think like you do, man.” Now he grabs your arm and pulls you upright. The world threatens to flip on you, and your stomach promises to go with it if it does. Close up, he smells of citrus cologne. He whispers to you, “Go home, *cholo*, go take pictures of little kids in swimming pools and cats caught in trees and armadillos squashed on the highway. Amateurs don’t survive. And neither do the professionals, here. Next time, you gonna meet some of them.” Then he just walks away. You’re left wobbling on the road. The gang of three are gone, too. Nobody’s around. Behind you, you hear a car door and the rev of an engine. A silver SUV shoots off down the dirt road, back to the pavement and away.

You stumble along the path to the *colonia*. Your head feels as tender as the skin of a plum. Your sinuses are clogged with blood and your nose creaks when you inhale. People watch in awe as you approach your shack. In that moment you’re as much a miracle to them as Gabriel Perea. They probably think they’re seeing a ghost. And they’re right, aren’t they? You aren’t here any longer.

Margarita’s not inside. Her camera’s gone. There’s no one to comfort you, no one to hear how you were written off. The heat inside is like the core of the sun. Back outside you walk to the water barrel, no longer concerned with what contaminants float in the water. You splash it on your face, over your head. Benzene? Who cares? You’re dead anyway. You touch your nose and it’s swollen up the size of a saguaro. Embarrassing how easily you’ve been persuaded to leave. It didn’t take anything at all, did it? One whack and a simple “Go away, Señor, you’re a fool.” What, did you think you could change the world? Make a difference? Not a second rate wedding photographer like you. Not someone with an apartment and a bed and an office and a car. Compromised by the good life. Nobody who leads your life is going to make the difference over here. It takes a breed of insanity you can’t even approach.

Baum was dead wrong about everything. He simplified the problems to fit, but they aren’t simple.

Answers aren't simple. You, you're simple.

Two little girls kneel not far from the barrel, cooking their meal in tin pans on top of an iron plate mounted over an open flame. There's a rusted electrical box beside them, with outlet holes like eyes and a wide slit for a switch. It's a robot face silently screaming. The girls watch you even when they're not looking.

Long after it gets dark you're still alone inside. Margarita must be off on some adventure, doing what she does best, what you can't do. You've had hours to build upon your inadequacy. Run your story and they'll tear Perea apart. He was doomed the moment he believed in the possibility of her. Just like the Church and the little Catholic boy you were once. When you see that, you don't want to see Margarita. You don't want to have to explain why you aren't going any further. All you can do is hurt her. Only a threat.

You pack up your few things, leaving the dozen film canisters you didn't use. Let the real photojournalist have them. "*Nada que ver,*" you tell the empty room.

Back across the border before midnight, before your life turns back into a pumpkin — better she *should* think you're lying under three feet of dirt.

#

A month rolls by in a sort of fog. Booze, pain killers and the hell-bent desire to forget your own name. Your nose is healing. It's a little crooked, has a bluish bump in the middle. Baum keeps his distance and doesn't ask you anything about your story, though at first you're too busy to notice. Then one day you find out from the sports editor that Joe got a package while you were gone, and although nobody knows what was in it, when he opened it, he turned white as a ghost and just packed up his office and went home. Called in sick the next three days.

When you do try and talk to him about what happened, he interrupts with an angry "Don't think you're the first person who's been smashed on the rocks of old Juarez." Then he walks away. They got to him somehow. If they wanted to, they could get to both of you. Like the wind, this can blow across the river. That message was for you.

Then one day while you're placing ad graphics, Joe Baum comes over and sits beside you. He won't

look you in the eye. Very softly he says, “Got a call from Chicken Man. Margarita Espinada’s dead.”

You stare at the page on the monitor so hard you’re seeing the pixels. Finally, you ask him, “What happened?”

“Don’t know. Don’t know who did it. She’s been gone for weeks and weeks, but he said that wasn’t unusual. She lived mostly in her car.”

“Auto loco.”

“Yeah.” He starts to get up, but as if his weight is too much for him, he drops back onto the chair. “Um, he says she left a package for you. Addressed to him, so maybe whatever happened, she had some warning.” With every word he puts more distance between himself and her death. “There’s gonna be a funeral tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

Baum makes a face, lips pressed tight. Defiantly he meets your gaze. “She was dumped in the Lote Bravo awhile ago.”

#

Pollamano nods sadly as he lets you in. “¿*Quiubo*, Deputy?” he asks, but not with any interest. His eyes are bloodshot, drunk or crying, maybe both. Some others are there inside. A few nod — some you remember. Most of them pretend you aren’t there. Her body lies in la Catedral, three blocks from Chicken Man’s current abode. You shouldn’t see it. Their newest member took pictures. Ernesto. He was there, following the cops with his police band radio the way he always does, always trying to get to the scene before they do. He’d taken half a dozen shots before he saw the black boots and realized whose body he was photographing. They’d torn off most of her clothes but left the boots. You remember the one who warned you off. The boots were left on so everyone would know who she was.

Everyone drinks, toasting her memory. One of them begins weeping and someone else throws an arm around him and mutters. One of the others spits. None of them seems to suspect that you and she spent time together. In any case, you’re an interloper on their private grief. Not one of them.

Margarita must have known you weren’t dead — otherwise, why send a package for you?

Late in the afternoon, everyone has shown up, almost two dozen photographers, and some unseen

sign passes among you all, and everyone rises up and goes out together. You move in a line through the crowds, between white buses in a traffic snarl and across the square to the neon cathedral. Orange lights bathe you all. Ernesto with his nothing mustache runs up to the door and snaps a picture. Even in this solemn moment, his instinct is for the image. A few glare at him, but no one chastises him. You gather in the front pews, kneel, pray, go up one by one and light your candles for her soul. Your hand is shaking so hard you can hardly ignite the wick.

#

After everyone else has left he gives you the package. It's nearly the size of a suitcase. He says, "She left it for you, and I don't violate her wishes. She was here a couple times when I wasn't around. Using the darkroom."

You pull out a folder of photos. On top is the picture of you she took the first day you arrived in *Colonia Universidad*. You look like you could take on anything. Just looking at it is humiliating.

Underneath is her collection of shots inside the factory. The top photo is Gabriel Perea standing all twisted and pointing. Foam on his mouth, eyes bugging out. The image is spoiled because of some fogging on the left side of it as if there was a light leak. Whatever caused it lit up Perea, too.

You almost miss the thing that's different: He's not wearing his goggles.

You go on to the next shot, but it's a picture of the crowd behind him, all staring, wide-eyed. She's not using a flash, but there's some kind of light source. In the third, fourth and fifth shots you see it. It shines straight at Perea. There are lens flares in each image. The light is peculiar, diffuse, as if a collection of small bulbs are firing off, making a sort of ring. The middle is hard to make out until the sixth picture. She must have slid on her knees between all the onlookers to get it. Perea's feet are close by and out of focus. The light is the center of the image, the light which is different in each shot.

"Jaime," you say, "do you have a loupe?"

"Of course." He gives it to you. You hold it over the image, over the light. Back in the lab at the *Herald*, you'll blow the image up poster size to see the detail without the lens — the outline, and at the top of it a bunch of smudges, a hint of eye sockets and mouth, a trace of nose and cheek. Can an AI break loose from its handlers? you wonder. Does it have a will? Or is this the next step in their plan?

You give the loupe back.

He says, "That Perea is gone. Disappeared. People are looking all over for him. They say he was called up to heaven."

One way or another, that's probably true. If the Virgin can float on the air now, then they don't need an interpreter. Belief itself will do the work hereafter, hope used as a halter.

"That crazy girl, she went right back into that factory even after he was gone."

You wipe at your eyes, and a half-laugh escapes you. *That crazy girl.*

You close the folder. You can't let anyone have these. That's the ultimate, wrenching realization. Margarita died because of this and no one can see it. The story can't be told, because it's a lie. She knew it, too, but she went ahead.

This is your Sacred Heart. Your rusting nail. Gabriel Perea was called up to heaven or killed — for you it doesn't matter which. By revealing nothing you let him go on living.

Under the top folder there are others full of negatives, hundreds of inverted images of the world — black teeth and faces, black suns and black clouds. The world made new. Made hers. There is a way you can keep her alive.

Jaime pats you on the shoulder as you leave with your burden. "You go home, deputy," he tells you. "Even the devil won't live here."

— for Sycamore Hill 1999