

There is a species of cicada that hibernates underground for seven years. When the years have passed it moves its body through dirt and pale roots. In the sunlight, something so foreign and unimaginable, it mates and soon begins to die. Its death is filled with sound-a rhythmic hissing, almost mechanical. I am told that it dies in pain, waiting, with nothing more than its own voice, while its body dries up from evaporation of the internal fluids- a reverse kind of drowning.

As I walk I am surrounded by cicadas pleading to me their life stories, throbbing their song of self-mourning. I go to the fields and the rivers, where I work with a compass and a measuring tape for a man who is the same size as I am. We are mapping the curvatures and inclinations of a portion of land, one of rainforest and also of cut-down trees. He takes the measurements and I write down the numbers, holding between us the measuring tape that breaks and must be tied again so many times I have to keep subtracting numbers from the ones he shouts. He carries the machete and I paint clay from the river on my face. I put flowers in my hair, tucking their stems behind my ears. I lose my breath when we fall down a hill, twisting in the loose dirt, wet dirt, pulling out tree roots that I think should stop me. He asks why are you not crying and I ask why should I be and he says because you're a girl. He says do all girls from the States not cry after things like this and I say no, just me, I'm tough.

In the dirt brought down by our fall are the minute exoskeletons of cicadas, diluted and hollow. He says, looking at their shells, sometimes the noise makes me insane, and I am thinking, as they cry all around us, imagine how they feel.

This man is named Ronald which is quite unsuitable for a native born Costa Rican. I do not like it because it is a name that does not sound nice in either language. There are ugly names in English, ones that would be either greenish-brown or murky orange if they were a color. Yet in Spanish there are no ugly names, not many. There is a power in the translation that renders English names into something beautiful. I understood this when I met a girl named Mar◆a del Mar. In English it would be Margaret of the Sea. Instead Mar◆a del Mar: I want to say it over and over like a verse, like a prayer. And then there is Alexandra. I see the X as forceful, a pounding, a requirement for the creations of Alex and Al which are so ugly, so hard. With Spanish tongues here is the creation of Alejandra, A-lay-han-dra. But his name in both languages is homely. I do not like it and so I do not say it. I find ways of avoiding calling out his name.

In the field it is not so difficult to do this since there are only the two of us with an umbilical cord of flexible, rainproof plastic between our bellies. We create a game so that I must guess the distance between us. Straightway I realize I am no good at judging distances so I start with fifteen every time. He'll make a little thumbs up motion, bobbing his hand toward the canopy of trees, and this is how I know to guess higher. Usually I never get it until I start going number by number. Twenty. Thumb up. Twenty-one. Thumb up. Twenty-two. For a while it stays around twenty-six so I guess this a few times and he shakes his hand sideways, fingers flat, smiling like to say You're on fire! He shakes his hand horizontally, wrinkles the space between his eyebrows, exhaling from his lips as if to say Watch out for this one, she gets it every time!

He is the first person whose eyes I have ever know to really twinkle. They rest in permanent horizontals for he is in a continual state of squinting, and has been, I believe, all his life. If it is not the sun, it is the reflection of sun from the thunderclouds. He is also the first person I have known whose skin is like leather. It is as if his entire body is callused; he touches rough. Sometimes I think of the skin of a marshmallow blown out after having caught fire.

When he has to go to the bathroom he says I'm going to look at the flowers. I do not understand, for, of course, I translate the idiom literally and he gets frustrated, not wanting to explain this to me.

We are walking along the Rio Java when it begins to rain and today the rain brings coldness. If the rains start early it will rain all day, and it does. The river swells and overflows my boots. It rains so I must run my hand across my eyes to be able to see. I cannot hear his numbers, still we keep tracking the land. I write down what I think I hear, sometimes he holds up fingers but I lose count of how many he flashes at a time. When we get back to the station, we take our boots and socks off, walking barefoot across the kitchen floor to drain hot water into tea bags. He tells me he is the seventh of eight children. His grandmother was one of eighteen. We sit on the terrace where we can see over the lower hills and down in the blue valley that cradles the town.

It is the original settlers of the town from whom we are stealing back the land, measuring and mapping to replant the trees they brought down so long ago. The town was founded by Italians. They carried with them dreams and indulgent memories of their countryside, planting olive groves into the sides of Central American hills. The Italians tore down trees that were so old they were not physically one tree but many grown together, for in the jungle everything is a wall for the house of another and even a fungus has learned to release its spores to grow within ants. When the seedling bursts it shoots it tendrils from the body of the ant, grabbing hold to the earth beneath the small black legs. The Italians tore down these trees with flowering insects, the bloated pulsing vines, fungi so orange that their poison came from sight alone. The foreigners, whose language also beautifies names, made neat and dignified rows of olive seeds into the fertile soil. And when they traveled away, home to Italy or perhaps to the prospects of coffee, the slopes they left behind were blistered. We claim them now and they are blistered still, small creepers and translucent branches timidly traversing the open ground.

I have seen in town the greenish statue of the Italian man who was the founder. Sodden fungi dwell upon his metallic skin as their sister species claim the skin of all that live here. I have seen the statue twice; I do not remember the name and I do not go into town much even though the bus stops right at the gates of the station. Ronald lives somewhere in

town and leaves each day at five to catch the bus. When we finish drinking tea he goes to the computer to enter the day's penciled numbers into ordered columns, perfect typed numbers. Pepe is there too. Pepe is a house wren that has learned that bugs are better caught indoors and, since the doors here are always left open, he adapts to fly low against the ceiling beams, to scuttle between chair and table legs. Ronald is at the computer and I am watching Pepe. The panes of the windows are laid horizontal and open sideways so that each one is a tiny ledge, a step where Pepe scans for mayflies with broken wings, before he hops to the next level. He is not tamed. I can call but he will not come. I think how clever you are. The little king.

One day a hummingbird gets stuck inside. It has a throat so green the blood in its body can only course the color ruby. Pepe is there but he finds this luminous creature an irritation. The hummingbird is smaller than many insects of this place, about the size of the cicadas. Its feathers throw back the light like the scales of fish beneath water. It hears noises it should not, does not see its familiar expanse of sky, and does not see the door wide open. I am looking for a broom to shoo it out but it darts into one of the metal pipes that runs across the ceiling and goes somewhere unknown but not outside. From the computer he says It's as good as dead and I hear its wings beating against the metal. I think how does it tell the sound of its wings from the sound of its heart? He leaves for the bus and I am left with the hummingbird; stupid I scream at it. I can do nothing. Pepe clicks at me. Pepe says this is how life is and flies through the opened doors.