



Down in the Dust They Were Born In

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*Weariness is the lot of the women who have work;
tragedy is the fate of the men who have none.¹*

—Earl Shorris

Please note: Rosa Amarilla has five syllables spoken aloud, not six. Though it is almost a woman's name, it isn't. Rosa Amarilla is a place.

Rafael would never be sure at which point he decided to become a *microhistoriador*, a microhistorian, but sometime before the end, he had come to feel that the story of Rosa Amarilla, properly told, was the story of Jalisco.

Maybe Mexico too.

The question was which was the microhistorical event, or nonevent. The irrefutable and not-to-be-repeated date, overtime, came to a pueblo (Rosa Amarilla) that usually had *no* work to offer... or the difficult to pinpoint (possibly recurring) moment at which two people made for each other missed each other?

At times he thought that if he could just tell the tale of the star-crossed lovers, Rafael the workingman and Xochitl the lovely, Xochitl with the heart that held more than words could ever unveil, he would have, in a way, laid bare the story of Rosa Amarilla, maybe of Jalisco...

And Mexico too.

The trouble was, each time he began his love story with the repaving of the one paved street in town, Benito Juárez... himself, Rafael, at the controls of the lumbering *la motoconformadora* came to mind as if it, the common effort, might stand for the telling of any story, especially one in which, as any *arqueólogo* could tell you, there were sure to be stories beneath stories. Though history, unlike bits of bone or broken pottery, is fluid, it changes to the point at which you really can't be sure what happened, what didn't, what only might have.

But, to begin...

Rosa Amarilla had mass. Substance. It took up space. There were sounds, sights, a scent. If not of roses, maybe even yellow ones. Rosa Amarilla had light. Light intense, muted at the same time. A *pueblo* aglow, yet shaded...

¹ Shorris, E. (2006). *The Life and Times of Mexico*. W.W. Norton & Company.

To some it was the only existence they had ever known; to others, the only one they ever would. And Rosa Amarilla, with time, knew improvement. Day to day, hourly, people moved, changed places and, if they had work, worked.

Hard work. Overtime.

This was the picture Rafael could not get out of his mind...

Five men.

Two—one not so young, one not so old—matching shovelful for shovelful as *la mezcladora* mixed gravel, sand, cement, and water. Two others—sometimes on their knees, more often bent double—troweling concrete between guide rails and pressing new stones in, four to a meter and a half width of pavement and tapping them level with the edge of a board. The last of the five men wheeling *la mezcla* between *la mezcladora* and the wet lip of the advancing street. The sun not yet at the zenith, already heavy on backs and shoulders. The grinding of the simplest of mechanisms. The scraping of shovels. Five men integral to the activity, the components, the parts of it all.

And one man, one young man. At the other end. Apart.

One man operating *la motoconformadora*—the earthmover as he called it from his days on *el otro lado*—smoothing the remaining unpaved section, readying it for when the five finished one end and advanced to the other. One man able to stand back from his work, improve it, as the machine moved with him or he with the machine.

One man. Rafael. The project well in mind. His.

A street to be finished for the fiestas. The venture begun two months in advance. *Una excavadora* ripping the trench to pipe *las aguas negras*. Filling in. Ripping another trench parallel, not a meter away, to pipe *la agua potable*. Rafael had driven *la excavadora* too. He'd called it "the backhoe" up north, though he didn't care for the word. Or the machine either.

The paving of a street, the simplest of procedures, a little drawn-out maybe but, to one man, unforgettable. Etched with an earthmover, it seemed, in the flesh and bone of human memory.

In the years to follow, Rafael, unable to forget a couple of months manning machines in his native *pueblo*, would wonder if, somehow, it had not been some proof of shared existence he had excavated, smoothed, practically polished. If any attempt to make sense of the events and nonevents of all the years to come might already have been supplanted (if not surpassed) by the attempt of one young man to pave, the three blocks of Benito Juárez, as well as possible.

As well as possible.

What were its origins, this *punto de referencia*? Did it make sense? Did it have a place in the telling—or retelling—of incidents so minor they would never merit much interest?

Uncertainties that did not seem to prevent him from going over it once more, from the vantage of his lopsided doorstep, and then again, to the point of noting detail in an old school notebook, referring, if necessary, to himself, by name. One more life in the life of Rosa Amarilla if, at its end, he might well be the only *microhistoriador* in town.

A year or two ago, he wrote, Rafael had left. A month or two ago, he wrote, Rafael came home.

Rafael had a license to operate heavy machinery, a genuine *documento*, not the kind that could be arranged this side of the border. He got it on the other side, in the city by the lake, got it correctly and officially. Legally.

And Rafael wondered.

Would there ever be anything he could shape and form as well as he could sculpt the street? Something made to stand by itself. That was, itself, its own justification. Something that might

require human breath at the beginning but, finally, floated free above all that which was forever unfinished, forever undone?

But wonder wouldn't keep him from his work. It didn't then.

Curb to curb, forward and backward, beeper beeping, he maneuvered his colossus up and down a street where others couldn't. Men twice his age, older, able only to lean on hand-tools, return to using them when the dust settled, looked on. There are a finite number of ways a body can move, Rafael noted, with pick or shovel or spade. Men with hand-tools serve them repeatedly. Routinely. Perpetually.

Men without the license that set a man free.

The card wasn't a union card or a work permit. It wasn't what they called "papers." North, it had meant work, the same work others had. It didn't mean the same salary. It was only ten times what he could earn in Rosa Amarilla, when he could earn anything at all.

A little macrohistory here.

Rafael was in Chicago when the delayed-action mortgages went off. Those sold to families who could never have paid for long (even at the "introductory" rate) proved worthless. Defaults multiplied, hit the megabanks that bought them and the regionals that bundled and sold them. Defaults traveled back though households stood in the street with tables and chairs and back to the unfinished skeletons, staples stuck in two-by-fours, tar paper flapping in the wind.

Crews no longer swarmed over platform and framework. Equipment that would have flattened another site or trucked pre-mixed concrete stood silent. Unused. Untouched. Even by those with a perfectly legal license to operate in the boss's back pocket.

You might think, in a time of fewer and harder-fought contracts, contractors would let the higher-priced union men go. It didn't happen like that. The ununionized went, then the unionized. *El desempleo* spread. Spread to mom-and-pop stores, to Poles who rented rooms, anyone who sold anything to the men from Mexico, the workingmen, the men in *construcción*. It spread the other way too, up and back through trucks and truck drivers. Through distributors and producers. To their co-workers on assembly lines.

Men who found their way south once a year at fiesta time to cheer riders or even bulls they knew in the non-fatal fights of *las comunidades* and to sway to the familiar tunes of *la banda* behind them didn't this year. If they had papers, they couldn't afford it; if they didn't, they couldn't risk it.

Some came anyway. Chose to undertake the last trip of their lives. No more wading across rivers. No more trudging through deserts. No more hanging out at Taco Bell with those who never made as much as the unionized.

Homeward to no earthly paradise, just home to home. To wives, children who had or had not seen them, who remembered them or didn't. To family who mattered more than fortune. To work that didn't pay much and wouldn't pay long.

Rafael came home for the same reason the others did. No work in Chicago. No way to survive without it.

In Rosa Amarilla, he had work (for a while) with *el municipio*. *La comunidad* was repairing its worst streets with state *pesos* to replace cobblestones curb to curb. Not sidewalks. The streets, done, would be lined with ruined sidewalks. The streets done, Rafael would be out of work. That's the way it was—it *is*. Unemployment behind you. In front of you. Waiting.

You... bonier than before, more tired without work than with it... you wait for something else.

One street, Benito Juárez, not done in time for the fiestas. An early rain turned it to mud. It wouldn't have been finished anyway. A sunstruck tunnel of dust long before the designated week and long after. A tunnel in which life went on—or didn't.

The heat killed some, brought others to life. On Juárez, several in their seventies left the scene, Don Miguel and Doña Lupe, carried out behind tinted veils of Rosa Amarilla dust, of drifting sand and cement, loaded onto pickups where Juárez ended, and cobblestones shook their bones as before. An equal number of babies, Alexandra and Esmeralda, entered the scene. Mothers helped out through shades of cinnamon and pearl, returned with newborns through hints of lilac and rose, all through growl of mixer and snarl of spade, the grunting of five men on their knees or bent double, their coughing...

Some of Rafael's brothers had stayed north, some had never left Rosa Amarilla, one was in high school. Rafael accompanied his mother to the market on Wednesdays. Plastic bags stretched with carrots and potatoes cut into their fingers. Overhead floated a kind of fresco or mosaic, that needed neither wall nor ceiling, but stood, if anywhere.

But, lest we forget, the other microhistorical event (or nonevent) the love story...

* * *

It was Rafael's girl's last year in school. She had waited while he was in Chicago. She rode in his new used car when he was driving machinery that had never been seen in Rosa Amarilla, leveling streets that had never been level. When state money ran out, the machines would go back where they came from, the new used car would be repossessed like houses in the north, and Xochitl would say goodbye to *la preparatoria* and go to Guadalajara to become a *veterinaria*.

Xochitl was a fine girl, hair like darkness in daylight; eyes that refracted, luminous; breasts you wouldn't expect on the thin young woman who carried the flag on Flag Day and stood at attention behind *la bandera*, behind her breasts, and looked at Rafael with eyes that stayed in his when hers were gone and the *pueblo* sang *el canción nacional*.

Xochitl. A person with purpose in her hands, hands that would feed the hungry if they could.

Rafael wondered what would become of her, of him, of his and her *pueblo*. Even if it had outlived so much and so many, even if the newborn equaled the dead, the young were always leaving and, one day—he felt it in his bones—Xochitl would leave too.

Leave a likeness settling in the street, a trace of Rosa Amarilla waiting to be traced. An afterimage looking at yours. Beyond representation, beyond language. Rafael had found what he hadn't known he'd been looking for (yet never could hold onto) even if he scraped and sculpted from one end of life to the other.

Even if you could know another as well as you would like to know yourself and personality was key to place and place key to all that mattered and the telling of one story is the telling of all.

Within skin a little lighter than that of the man who bore the presidency of *los Estados Unidos Mexicanos* (1858-1872) and after whom the one paved street in Rosa Amarilla was named, Xochitl contained more lives than one could possibly live. In those eyes, if you looked hard, you'd see *the* spectrum of... You'd see the spectrum. All any daughter of the dust could do with one life (more), especially if she started out in Rosa Amarilla.

There was an invariable, one to which anyone who knew her knew she would be true. Xochitl had a way with living things.

When she stopped to look at one, it stopped to look at her. It knew, if it could make the source of its oppression clear, it would be understood. Something would be done. Because something *could* be done. And if Xochitl couldn't do it now, she would soon be able to. For her there was—and always would be—time to come.

She didn't perceive her future as circumscribed as that of a young man with a license to operate heavy machinery in a landscape that hadn't changed in a hundred years.

There were two veterinarians in Rosa Amarilla, both old and unlicensed. Not *incompetente*, but Xochitl knew she could do better. It made sense. It made sense to several of her friends, too, who made the same decision and pursued the same degree. The possibility of education had come to Rosa Amarilla. No one had had time to realize that nothing else had.

The land would never change. *El terreno*, the field—part depression and part hillside that family could work—no larger, no smaller, than ever. In the high country of Jalisco, it had never meant more than *la subsistencia*. It wasn't that anymore. It wasn't a living for half a family. Xochitl could become a veterinarian, but in the *pueblo* she wanted to come home to, where she wanted to live her life, with Rafael or proceeding into old age and death without him, no one could ever pay her what she was worth. Most couldn't pay her at all.

But it wasn't then yet. It was now. Rafael had work. An unfinished street that (it seemed) would never be finished.

Five men with wheelbarrow and spade and trowel working to a standard good enough for *una comunidad* hanging on in the heart of nowhere, a definite improvement over unimproved. And one man manning a machine made for pushing new roads through open space, the backed-up traffic of Guadalajara crowding behind it, in a street barely wider than the thing itself and practically without exit, attempting a measure he had himself imposed.

Done.

When is a thing done?

Rafael's sister did the hair, made up the contestants for *la reina de Rosa Amarilla*. She had an eye for proportion, shape, color and made each of her highlighted sovereign, her made-up masterpiece. Standing back, viewing subject and object in a mirror crowded with cutouts of beauties from afar, and the reflections of Rosa Amarilla *chicas* waiting their turn behind that, Rafael's sister knew what to do, how to do it, and knew when it was done.

Rafael's eye was not unsimilar. In a landscape which seemed, at times, on the point of blowing away, he had spotted Xochitl. He had blinked. He had opened his eyes. He knew he had something to do. If he wasn't quite sure how to do it, he knew he would know when it was done.

When it was done as well as possible.

* * *

"I've been thinking..."

"Good."

"Rafael... Be serious."

Xochitl had said be serious, yet still, as so often when together, they were grinning like kids.

"What is it this time?" Rafael continued. "The roofdog, his mats unmatted when the primeval sea returns to cover Mexico... or the hungry horse fed when the seven-year drought ends?"

"No, Rafael. About you and me..."

Rafael and Xochitl, if not kids, still pretty young, sat in Rafael's unrepossessed new used car at one end of the unfinished Benito Juárez, and Xochitl, feeling she had Rafael's attention, continued.

"For me, Rafael, coming back from Guadalajara might be harder than coming back from Chicago was for you."

But Rafael, fingers still pleased with piloting the *la motoconformadora*, wasn't ready to be serious.

"I know. There's proud Minerva looking out over a city of arts and wisdom, not to mention the sun on the new Wal-Mart, and the air..." he added, somewhat changing his tone. "The air no one can breathe, not even you... and certainly not me."

"Rafael... I just said I have a feeling it will be hard. How will I live? Who can pay me? Don Miguel's widow? Doña Lupe's widower? They are tired. They are hungry. *El municipio* has nothing of its own."

"What kind of patients will you have in Guadalajara? Guard dogs you don't dare to touch?"

"Maybe you can hold them down for me."

Xochitl looked into eyes she'd looked into all her life, always knowing what he knew, what he was going to say next. This time she didn't even know if Rafael knew he'd been invited to join her in Guadalajara.

"Xochi... it would be easier for me to find work in Chicago than in Guadalajara."

"Have you tried?"

"In Chicago? Or in Guadalajara?"

Two took a moment to contemplate a Chicago in which buildings were being built, if not at the same rate as before and a Guadalajara crowded with the qualified unemployed. But, at the moment, Xochitl thought Rafael must have considered her invitation, he rejected it.

Xochitl had an inspiration. She seized his hands.

"What about Tamazula, Rafael? They always need drivers at *el Ingenio*."

"Anyone can drive a sugar truck. You're not carving the earth..." Rafael stopped, thinking some things spoken of might be diminished. "Anyway," he continued. "Tamazula is the other way. Away from you."

"Take a bus to Guzmán and a bus to Guadalajara where you'll find me..." Xochitl said, almost adding, "Waiting for you..."

"Tamazula smells worse than Guadalajara," said Rafael, who'd never been able to read Xochitl's thoughts. "I don't know what Guzmán smells like."

"Maybe you'll find out..." Xochitl said, almost adding "...and find out what I smell like too..."

A hint of cloud clouded the day, soft eyes softened the scene, even for a young man still young enough to think he could tool his way through space. But there he was, Rafael, in each of her eyes, in both.

Just long enough for him to wonder if she saw him better than he saw her, to wonder how, if the story went on from here, it might go on.

* * *

In time, Rafael went to Tamazula; slept in a workers' *dormitorio*; and drove a leaning, lumbering truck from cane field to corporate refinery. Constant dust joined constant smoldering, hazed the air of valley and town, filled the overheated cab. It was not the skilled work of

maneuvering *excavadora* and *motoconformadora*. It was work. For a while. Subsidized U.S. producers were undercutting *el Ingenio* in the U.S. market. In time, there were more drivers than there were trucks.

Returned late from the Guadalajara ride, the Guzmán ride, from the Xochitl of the white jacket and the red hands, of formaldehyde and textbook, Rafael found himself jobless.

He left Tamazula and went north to Guadalajara. He went west. To the mines. He'd heard open-pit mines weren't as bad as underground. You kept your head down, kept your distance from blasting though something might give. A rock face crumbling. A boulder jarred loose. You worked with pick, hammer, spike. It was better than roadwork. Sometimes a split rock yielded a raw, shimmering, fleck of light.

See past the bruised foot, the smashed thumb. One day you'll pocket something for Xochitl, something that mirrors a time to come more multicolored than the dust of Rosa Amarilla which mimics the mystery of her eyes now pressed to the microscope. Something iridescent. You'll hurry it past the guard in your ear.

Besides that improbability, Rafael tried to think. Returning to the pit in the wreck of a bus, he looked at the backs of heads in front of him and wondered if the back of his head was different. No, he decided. It could be crushed like any other.

Had his attention wavered? Had he been dreaming?

The unimaginable had come to pass. Rafael neither saw nor heard the rock that smashed his leg and pinned him like something living too close to the earth, too close to ever look up. He had time to contemplate it before they brought the machine that could lift it off. Yes, there were flecks in it. Luminous. Opalescent. In front of his nose: that which he would have been carrying to Xochitl if they hadn't been carrying him.

She visited him in the hospital on Lázaro Cárdenas and Ocho de Julio. Alone, he remembered the vainglorious general, eleven times president, Santa Ana, who'd had his battle-severed leg preserved behind glass. But that was history.

The question was no longer where Rafael would go to find work, but what, if anything, would find him now that the tumbling boulder had. He went home to Rosa Amarilla to answer that question. Adjusting to state-issued crutches, hard on pavement, harder on cobblestones. Only on Benito Juárez, the street he'd had a hand in building, could Rafael swing along, hold his head high, look at something besides the ground.

By day he managed considerable speed, barreling on one leg of flesh and two of aluminum. Santa Muerte had yet to reign over her country kingdom. Rafael was a free man, free to take the open road. As long as he didn't attempt too much, such as the border.

Nighttime and rain nurtured the mind's eye. Rafael would pilot an *excavadora* ten times as large as the one that ditched Benito Juárez, or he was a child at the controls of a *motoconformadora* Atlas would have envied. Semblances so picture perfect, so precise they might have been used to whittle a new world.

But where, he wondered, half asleep. Here? He looked and darkness looked back at him.

Night eyes opened to one night in particular. One, some weeks after an unseasonable early rain. Real rains were imminent. *El municipio* had insisted. Benito Juárez must be finished. ¡*Horas extras!* ¡*Sobretiempo!* The first—and only—time in history overtime would be paid in Rosa Amarilla. Coarse human whistles cracked a raven sky, kept the mixer mixing, the men with hand-tools tooling their own uncertain certainties.

Rafael had helped with his skater, his scalpel of a *motoconformadora*, slicing here, cutting there, leveling, his lights lighting the way for men who worked with hands, arms, shoulders and backs.

Now, on his back, sweating from no particular effort, he understood how others labored. Men older than he. Now, perhaps, on this same night also dreaming of the day overtime came to Rosa Amarilla, also waking to the memory of how it had left. The abyss beneath the ribs. The knowledge that tomorrow they'd rise to twelve, eighteen, twenty-four hours, of *desempleo*. Of counting themselves among...

Los desempleados.

Rafael, wakeful as any in the dark that descended on Rosa Amarilla, decided this day, at daybreak, he'd find every man who'd sweated through that night, who hadn't left in pursuit of one dream kingdom or another. Of work, overwork, backbreaking labor... of piecework, odd jobs, errands. He had something to say.

“¡Hombre! I never knew how hard it was. Come! Let's raise a *copa* to—”

Rafael never took *una copa de más*, never ended a day of liquid, if any, nourishment, slumped against a wall. He'd never been in better shape. If there were a team for one-legged men, he'd play. Outscore them all. Ha! he thought. Here? If you filled an hourglass with the dust of Rosa Amarilla, with silence itself, you'd learn what...

What time is. Or isn't.

At times Xochitl visited to visit family. At times she found herself at Rafael's door.

* * *

They sat, not on his doorstep, but on the curb on the last ruined sidewalk at the edge of Rosa Amarilla. They could almost see, in the slow-burning dust which had not risen much above their ankles, the likenesses of all who had gone, all who had come home. They wondered if there was a kind of balance after all.

“Rafael.”

“What?”

Xochitl looked at the ground. She told him she was getting married.

Rafael had always known it would never be to him. What would he have done as her husband? Followed her to work, hobbled around *la clínica*, held the dog, the horse, led in the sick, wheeled out the dead? Held up the broom that held *him* up? He wondered if the lucky man knew how lucky he was, if he was also a *veterinario*. Why not ask if he had a head, two arms and... Well...

“I wanted you to be the first to know.”

If he should be the first to know, why shouldn't he be the man himself? If he could make it up the steps to *el municipio* for the civil ceremony, in the religious ceremony to follow he could certainly make it down the aisle.

Rafael looked again. Cheekbones, collar bone, wrists, hands, thighs he'd assumed he'd be the first—the only man—to touch. And now? Perhaps the only man who never would.

“Congratulations.”

Xochitl was crying into his neck. Without an extra leg for counterweight, they nearly went down, down in the last gutter of the last sidewalk of Rosa Amarilla. Standing, they would have. Lovers who might have been. Down in a bone-dry dribble of infinity. Down in the dust they were born in.

Laughter spanned the sky. A rainless rainbow of love and tears. As the portraits of children they would never have, correctly dressed as diminutive adults, looked down.

For two who might have been rolled into one right there, mixed in a fine mix of never and forever, were seated solidly on a curb Rafael himself had crafted. Years after he leveled the streets. Tears were silent and so was love. The hourglass of Rosa Amarilla, reticent as roses, had nothing to add.

Rather than listen to a stomach whose timekeeping was more meticulous than his, Rafael raised his eyes to the high ground by the high road.

“I always thought, one day, we’d lie together.”

Xochitl didn’t have to look where Rafael was looking. They’d walked behind enough aunts and uncles, behind their own fathers and each other’s, to know where people went when they went.

“Maybe we will. Things change.”

“Not in Rosa Amarilla.”

“But in Guadalajara.”

Xochitl, with dampened cheeks, with rainbow eyes on his, was not a vision to turn from. For years she had looked at her feet; there was always something she could not bring herself to say. Now more was scrawled on her face than marriage. Rafael added details. He began with the best.

“This is the year of your *graduación*. You’ve made it. You’re out. Free to visit, return. A parade of happy animals at your back. I’m happy for you.”

“I know you are.”

Xochitl raised her eyes as far as possible above the powdered air of Rosa Amarilla.

“I’m probably making a mistake.”

“Probably.”

* * *

The stuff of history, if not a residue of roses, ebbed and flowed. The population of Rosa Amarilla rose and fell.

Rafael kept eyes and ears open. There was what he knew, what he almost knew, and what he didn’t know at all—and never would. He knew he didn’t go to the dogs. He learned a trade. Several. He was well up to Rosa Amarilla standards where plumbing or wiring were concerned. He might be a little slow, but what he did he did well.

Xochitl’s story was different. There were children. Problems with the children. A problem with the husband. Rafael didn’t have to ask. In Rosa Amarilla, everyone knew everyone else’s business or, when she didn’t, thought she did. For Rosa Amarilla invented much of its knowledge of the outside world. But if even half of what he heard was true...

But what if not half, but none...

Zero.

What if half, either half, of history, even microhistory, were falsehood and fabrication?

* * *

Wasn’t it plausible that the year the number of earthly inhabitants finally caught up with (and surpassed) the number of *hectares* required to feed them was also the year the price of rice and other grains rose in multiples? Never mind the merely miserable, the children who didn’t work out, in more and more places young and old were leaving this world together. Then things, it was said in

Rosa Amarilla, changed again. But even as economies recovered and buildings were once again planted on arable land, the climate continued to shift, basin crops drowned, dry lands dried out.

And wasn't that the year the graduates of the veterinary college had no place to go? The year Xochitl, or so Rafael heard, waded the river at Nuevo Laredo, got put back, waded again, waded and swam, found her English not good enough and opportunities, even in agribusiness, sown upon the wind?

The year, also, unique individual corns, peculiar to microclimates all over Mexico, began to disappear, replaced by the uniform, the universally vulnerable? The year that famine spread and individuals from the countryside who carried in their heads not only leftovers of forgotten language but different brains, different eyes, began to die off?

Xochitl, it was said, had got involved with a crowd in Coahuila, *una veterinaria* serving where, really, *una doctora* was required, staunching the flow from a body riddled by automatic weapons, and finally, beyond that, on a secret, dried-up *rancho*, with a rough landing strip and a militia of trained deserters, Xochitl, he heard, was working, overworking...

Washing clothes, whoring.

And the years, limp and relaxed as roses, sifted the landscape that settled, felt and unfelt, between them.

Wasn't the year the crops failed, the livestock starved, the veterinarians had nowhere to go and Xochitl disappeared, the year a plague of *evangelistas* descended on Rosa Amarilla and one local convert—Doctrina, Rafael called her—her dress down to her ankles and her eyes on the ground, glanced sideways to see in a one-legged man on the doorstep of his own drooping house, a house that had once shone with a father's love and a mother's hard work, the opportunity to snatch a soul burdened with far too many questions in a year, if not a millennia, when answers were the craze?

The year Doctrina hovered above the risen earth, dry and dustless, before Rafael, pamphlet in one hand, the other on something heavy and black, the one good book ever written? Hovered until it seemed to many in Rosa Amarilla that she had achieved a kind of levitation which had to be proof of something after all?

* * *

But that isn't what happened. How could it have been? Xochitl giving up on her training? Turning her back on creatures who would never turn their backs on her? Come now! Xochitl washing underwear in *el desierto*, putting out for some kingpin who could reap a pale harvest, even in Coahuila; a man who'd learned you didn't have to be a multinational to win at import-export? Unimaginable. A malicious rumor started by a jealous *evangelista* who never lay beneath a man or rose a centimeter in the fiery air of Rosa Amarilla.

The truth is Xochitl worked with livestock by the thousands on a cattlemen's co-op in Chihuahua. When bad times passed, she found opportunity in the highlands of Jalapa where some raised coffee, and some, purebred horses. Xochitl had a way with anxious animals, such a way *el patrón* worked her into training in her spare time. Mares bred for her. Stallions performed. Geldings competed internationally, traveling by air whenever possible.

Still in her twenties, Xochitl married the son of *el Patrón*, gave birth to *potrillos* of her own, colts who grew into men and who ought to have worked out, but they'd had it too good. They drove fast cars, topped fast women, and kept questionable stables of their own.

Xochitl, on her own flowered verandah, margarita on the rocks in hand, was not surprised when Rafael came to mind. Perhaps she was surprised to find herself wondering if she ought to drive down to Jalisco, if her silver sedan would make it out to Rosa Amarilla in the dirt, see if her young man were still handling heavy machinery as if it were a collection of precision instruments, knives to carve an earth that certainly needed carving.

For Rafael had tired, she had heard, of trucking sugar for *el Ingenio*. He'd never gone to open-pit mines to pick semi-precious stones. That was a resourceful rumor started by a young medical examiner who would have liked to examine her. Rafael, wherever he was, whatever he was doing, was in one piece and had not, she was sure, forgotten her.

Xochitl may have rattled the keys in her pocket, but her silver sedan stayed where it was. She never drove through the night to Jalisco, attempted the dirt at dawn. Xochitl sat on her verandah and watched her sons come to no good, one after the other. She discovered something new in her own chest one day, tried radiation, a range of chemical solutions, and began to age before her time.

Word, somehow, reached Rosa Amarilla. It always did. Relatives of relatives informed relatives of relatives. Rafael heard. Heard her hair had fallen out, hair he would never describe, not now. Near the end, Rafael walked the eight kilometers to *la carretera*, waited for a bus to Tuxcueca, a bus to Morelia and... just in time walked into a white room on two good legs and took a wasted hand in...

* * *

But that isn't the way it went. Not at all. Fantastic fears of a man who'd found what he hadn't known he had and let it drift through his fingers.

This is how it happened.

The work did run out for someone with Rafael's qualifications in Rosa Amarilla. He did try Tamazula, but didn't lose his job to pampered U.S. sugar. He quit. He didn't go west from Guadalajara to *las minas*, never had a leg taken by the gods who live just beneath the surface and never bother anyone until they themselves are bothered.

No.

He moved in with Xochitl in Guadalajara. *Familia* in Rosa Amarilla never did know what was going on. A couple of students at heart, they marched in a *manifestación* to protest *las multinacionales* but weren't among the number roughed up by the rough hand of *el gobernador*, Francisco Ramírez Acuña.

Rafael worked his way in, drove one of the infamous Guadalajara buses (notorious for their yearly toll of pedestrians) went to night school, studied accounting, business, economics. Nothing as useful as a license to operate heavy equipment. He did reach some conclusions. At least, in his mind, there were questions, questions that needed to be asked.

Rafael and Xochitl continued in unmarried bliss. Rafael traced the money trail, asked the questions that needed to be asked, gained a certain visibility.

The rest was history.

As if as an indication of confusions to come, the usual bewilderment, disorder and chaos, the first attempt on his life was substandard, bungled, ridiculously botched, a reminder less of mortality than...

They say you don't appreciate mobility until it's gone.

* * *

That may or may not have been the year that that or something else may or may not have happened.

For it was all in the mind, wasn't it: a truckload of cane, a mine of multihued and ever-changing gemstones, a smashed leg, a well-oiled *excavadora* and a *motoconformadora*, an earthmover that might have been a time machine?

Rafael had reached a point where what happened mattered little more than what didn't happen or what might have happened.

And yet...

If there was not something, someday, to be stuffed in a bottle (or whatever you did when your pages were packed and you lived in the world capital of dust), if the story stood for nothing beside itself—nothing, no one, certainly not the many, if not all, who tried and failed, who persisted or failed to persist—but represented only that which passed, if anywhere, behind the eyes, then he might as well be staring at his own reflection in the dappled dust of Rosa Amarilla, the story of which need never be told.

Luis González y González had written *la microhistoria* of a neighboring *pueblo* better than he ever could. Rafael, it seemed to Rafael, must remain, at best, a failed *historiador* unable to pass some legend of love and loss or a single recurring scene, the efforts of five men and a machine, a chapter in a chronicle in which he himself had had, once upon a time, a hand.

Unable to get a thing done.

That's what sitting on his doorstep had done, the threshold, some said, *los cristeros* and *las federalistas*, and others before them, if not *el emperador* Maximiliano's French troops in hot pursuit of *el presidente* Benito Juárez and his traveling government, had crossed.

The unassuming Benito Juárez, after whom more than one street in Mexico was named.

The trouble, it occurred to Rafael, was that even an inert mass of half-digested tortillas and chicken fat nursed by a dried up (yet long-lived) mother must know, if a man didn't, that the wiry amputee who had once wondered if there weren't opportunity, somewhere in this world, to play one-legged *fútbol*, even if, in its way, a living thing, must have been a creature of the imagination.

Rafael, in one piece or not, face to face with a scene of rural wretchedness or not, was troubled.

If all were fabrication, falsehood or fantasy, was hunger the rumbling of some personal cloudscape atop an arid dreamland?

Were the unemployed not unemployed?

Were the powers that granted money freedom to move wherever it found the figures right—and denied the claim of those who owned only the strength of their backs had the right to cross a single well-lit border—illusory?

Was it a false impression that prices could go where they wanted but wages were supposed to stay where they were?

Had not *las evangelistas* of the marketplace—which meant only that those who had the power had the blessings of the gods of economics to use it as they wished—been heard and seen in Mexico?

Did the quantified data which appeared almost nightly on television—even if the number of children at donkeywork, not school, perpetuating, thereby, the endless cycle of poverty, might be inexact—not represent a reality? Had not the children mass? Volume?

Were they not facts of a kind?

Facts.

Rosa Amarilla had electricity, running water, sanitation. It had a *primaria*, a bus that took the older children out to *la secundaria*. Rafael could not remember when television entered the scene. The people of his pueblo had long known there was a world, the world that would never know there was a Rosa Amarilla.

Unless...

A Rosa Amarilla where a man sat on his doorstep and watched the dust change colors, never forgot that it was dust, and one day realized that if he read (or wrote) the story of this life as... as if it were as changeable as semiprecious opal... as near to fiction as it was possible to get...

Fiction.

...then what could anybody do about anything? Families in the sprayed fields of the United States of America, hunger looming behind them. And the others, all the others? Could no wrong ever be righted? Was justice, as some say injustice, an illusion? Was there nothing to be done?

Unless...

In a Rosa Amarilla where a man had once done a good job, nearly perfect, yet lost the girl...

The girl? What girl?

A girl who could take care of herself.

History, he mused, must be more than meditation. You want to know what happened.

It was words leaning on words, full of themselves, unless...

Unless he refused to spend the rest of his life, his forehead on his fist, the stub of a conceivably illusory pencil in his hand.

Unless this Rosa Amarilla was rendered. The tale told. Unless he did something one tenth as well as Luis González y González.

So, what was the telling fact, the all-revealing event, the microhistorical moment?

Work and no work were the parameters. They forged the forceps, pulled the love right out of you, however deep. What happened, what didn't happen and what might have happened—if in shades of cinnamon and pearl with hints of lilac and rose—settled softly, silently, interred what was left.

Now let's see...

Where was Rafael, in his story of a story buried beneath the others, his tale of a tale?

...the sun not yet at the zenith, the grinding of the simplest of mechanisms, the scrape of shovels...

That's it. You start where the men bend over, where the men get down in the dust, down in the dust they will die in.

Five men.

Two—one not so young, one not so old—matching shovelful for shovelful as *la mezcladora* mixed gravel, sand, cement, and water. Two others—sometimes on their knees, more often bent double—troweling concrete between guide rails and pressing new stones in, four to a meter and a half width of pavement and tapping them level with the edge of a board. The last of the five men wheeling *la mezcla* between *la mezcladora* and the wet lip of the advancing street...

Five men. Integral. Component. And one man, at the other end, the sixth, his hands on the earthmover, the time machine, *la motoconformadora*.

One man who would love and lose. One who would understand. One who would tell the story... if it could be told...

One man, a part of it all.