UNFORGETTING

A MEMOIR OF FAMILY,

MIGRATION, GANGS,

AND REVOLUTION IN THE AMERICAS

ROBERTO LOVATO

PRAISE FOR UNFORGETTING

"What is *Unforgetting*—a coming-of-age story, a thriller, a slice of hemispheric history? All I can say for sure is that it's both gripping and beautiful. With the artistry of a poet and the intensity of a revolutionary, Lovato untangles the tightly knit skein of love and terror that connects El Salvador and the United States. This book is an eye-opener into a world Anglo-Americans have been taught is enemy territory."
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"Salvadorans are 'a people in the constant motion of overcoming,' Roberto Lovato writes in his pivotal debut, *Unforgetting*. In it, he runs a machete through himself and his family's history—the 1932 Matanza, the 1980s civil war, and our present-day struggles with gang violence and migration. With raw honesty, Lovato partakes in a much-needed excavation of
means to be 'Salvadoran'—and 'American'—
world. *Unforgetting* is an opening, a tear in
th, we Salvadorans must speak through."
ER ZAMORA, author of *Unaccompanied*

UNFORGETTING

A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs, and Revolution in the Americas

ROBERTO LOVATO

HARPER
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Some names and locations have been changed to protect sources.

Excerpt from Alisha Holland's interview with Aída Luz Santos de Escobar, Juzgado Primero de Ejecución de Medidas al Menor Infractor, San Salvador, August 9, 2006, used with permission.

"Todos" and excerpts from "Poema de Amor" reprinted by permission of the estate of Roque Dalton.

Excerpts of Ethan Rundell's translation of Ernest Renan's speech "What Is a Nation?" reprinted by permission of Ethan Rundell.

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PARA MI MADRE, MARIA ELENA ALVARENGA LOVATO,
MI VERDADERO "CORAZÓN DE MELÓN" Y MI PADRE,
RAMÓN ALFREDO LOVATO, SR., EL QUE SUPO VIVIR,
A PESAR DE LA OSCURIDAD.
WITH LOVE AND GRATITUDE FOR TEACHING ME TO DIVE
DOWNWARD INTO DARKNESS, ON EXTENDED WINGS.

Forgetting, I would even say historical error, is an essential factor in the creation of a nation. . . . Historical inquiry, in effect, throws light on the violent acts that have taken place at the origin of every political formation, even those that have been the most benevolent in their consequences. Unity is always brutally established.

—Ernest Renan, "What Is A Nation?"

Now everyone is a gang member, or a terrorist, or a narcotrafficker. . . . Maybe next they will go back to just being Communists.

—Aída Luz Santos de Escobar, former Judge of
the First Court of Execution of Measures
of Minor Infraction of San Salvador

los guanacos hijos de la gran puta,
los que apenitas pudieron regresar,
los que tuvieron un poco más de suerte,
los eternos indocumentados,
los hacelotodo, los vendelotodo, los comelotodo,
los primeros en sacar el cuchillo,
los tristes más tristes del mundo,
mis compatriotas,
mis hermanos.

—Roque Dalton, from "Poema de Amor"

los guanacos hijos de la gran puta*,
the ones who could just barely go back,
the ones who had a little bit more luck,
the eternally undocumented ones,
the I-can-do-it-all, the I-can-sell-it-all, the I-can-eat-it-all,
the first ones to take out the knife,
the saddest most saddest of the world,
my compatriots,
my brethren.

—Translated by Roberto Lovato and Javier Zamora

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* "Los guanacos" is a term of unknown origin used affectionately to refer to Salvadorans. "Hijos de la gran puta" means "sons of the baddest bitch," a very common phrase used by Salvadorans.

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INTRODUCTION

The machete of memory can cut swiftly or slowly.

It's August 4, 2019. Pop and I are watching news of the latest shooting rampage. A white supremacist slaughtered twenty people in El Paso yesterday. Most of the victims were people who looked like us, people whose last names end in *z*. This shooting and the one in Dayton days before have the country aghast. The El Paso shooter's declared motive—preventing "the Hispanic invasion of Texas"—has friends talking or posting on social media about the possibility we may have to take up arms to defend ourselves. No stranger to guns, Pop has other concerns.

"Those fucking gangs are ruining El Salvador," he says suddenly, as if out of sync with the more urgent news in the Spanish-speaking United States. A few minutes earlier, the newscast that reported on the El Paso massacre also reported on the relentless killing in the tiny country of titanic sorrows that bore him.

Pop has never met a member of MS-13, the most notorious of these gangs. Over the course of several decades, I've met dozens,

and even befriended members of a gang that the president of the United States compares to Al-Qaeda and calls "animals" who, he says, have "literally taken over towns and cities of the United States." I watch the news and the snake in my stomach twists and tightens my gut before the eternal return of two figures whose outsize contributions to the cataclysmic cycles of Salvadoran violence go back to the early nineties but remain largely forgotten: former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani and two-time US attorney general William Barr.

I nod, as if silently agreeing with Pop's gangs-as-cause-of-every-problem thesis. The snake in my gut lets me know there's no room to deal with the shooting and Giuliani and Barr and Pop all at once.

"Yeah. You're right, Pop."

The news from El Paso and my friends' terrified social media responses tighten my shoulders and neck, my body reminding me of those times someone has tried to hurt or kill me. It brings back a memory of sitting at Pop's dining room table last April. I was helping him pay some overdue bills, while he watched Animal Planet. During a commercial break, Pop stood suddenly and hobbled back to his bedroom. The soft steady *skss-skss-skss* of his fluffy gray orthopedic slipper rubbing against the faded linoleum sounded faster than his usual pace.

A minute later, another, faster-paced *skss-skss-skss* signaled he was navigating his way through the kitchen toward the living room. As he neared the table, he stopped and stood next to me.

I looked up and smiled at him. He had a strangely familiar look on his tense, unshaven face. His eyes like daggers, looking at me with a wrath I hadn't seen since my adolescent years, when our anger was at its mutual worst.

I raised my eyes in disbelief when I saw his hand wrapped tight around the dusty, varnished black handle of a machete. Without

warning Pop swung his machete toward me, screaming, "You drogadicto son of a bitch! Stop trying to steal my money!"

I glanced at the ninety-six-year-old hands clutching the machete's handle. The flags of Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador on the old souvenir were about to come down on my head. I jumped to Pop's side and grabbed the machete before he could finish the act.

Pop stood dazed, and frustrated, and alone. I rushed out of the dining room to hide the machete downstairs in a safe corner of the garage. He rarely went into the garage, since he stopped driving two years ago at age ninety-four. From down below, I heard my cousin Ana's hurried footsteps rushing from her room through the kitchen and into the dining room. I remained downstairs a few minutes to let my cousin chill Pop out.

In the cool silence of the garage, a couple of five-by-three-foot cardboard boxes sit side by side in the shadows beneath the stairs. The boxes bear musty old clothes, cheap new blouses, radios, calculators, TVs and other ancient electronics, and outdated toys, remnants of my family's contraband empire, once a source of income—and serious family conflict and inner conflict of my own.

Minutes later, the mellifluous guitars and layered three-part harmonies of "Golondrina Viajera," a bittersweet bolero by Trio Los Condes followed by the soulful, dreamy sounds of Jose Feliciano singing "La Barca," another nostalgic Pop favorite, signaled Pop's latest storm had subsided. It was safe to come back upstairs.

Music, we were told some years ago, would help calm Pop's dementia. Doctors predict his process of mental fragmentation will only accelerate over time.

The machete cuts slowly.

Now we're watching Alex Trebek start *Jeopardy!* Months after Pop's outburst, we no longer have machetes in the house, a decision that runs contrary to the traditions of Salvadorans in

the US. Many of the two to three million Salvadorans living here since the bloody civil war of the eighties and early nineties have souvenir machetes in their homes. Machetes adorned the waists of countless men back when most Salvadorans lived in the countryside. Revolvers replaced them in the age of the urban majority.

The image of skinny, droopy immigrant kids strutting into Liborio Market in LA's Pico Union–Westlake district to buy the machetes in the nineties lingers. They were among the first mareros I saw. Only later did I realize that the machetes those gang members bought gave local media, Hollywood, and the LAPD—and eventually the Pentagon and US presidents—the exotic ethos they needed to turn the skinny kids into a tattoo-faced scourge, "the most violent gang in the world."

Those of us in the Pico Union area knew why those early mareros carried rocks and baseball bats and bought machetes: the poor immigrant youth needed to defend themselves from larger gangs but couldn't afford the AK-47s and other weapons used by the older, richer, more sophisticated Crips, Bloods, or Mexican Mafia. Those gangs possessed another, more powerful weapon the mareros also lacked: US citizenship.

The story of the maras and their real violence remains hidden, buried in half-truths and myth in a labyrinth of intersecting underworlds—criminal and political, revolutionary and reactionary, psychological and cultural. Many Salvadorans are mired in simplistic explanations. Even before his dementia set in, Pop, for example, agreed with the one of every three Salvadorans who told pollsters they support a Kurtzian solution to the gang problem: "Exterminate all the brutes!"

The machete makes us hack at ourselves.

No matter how much I try, Pop won't ever understand the subterranean connections I've spent my adult life excavating and documenting in the hopes of finding fragments of our heart lost in

the darkness. So I resist his ancient provocations around things we simply won't agree on. The framed photo of Mom on the mantel—the one in which she's wearing her favorite polka dot blue dress and the pearl necklace he gave her—beckons us to overcome the great paradox of Salvadoran life: to speak of the darkness is impossible, but to not speak of the darkness is also impossible. Mom's spirit offers a simpler, more effective solution to the paradox: recordar—literally "to pass through the heart again." The two-by-one-foot color photo rests on the mantel, inciting us daily to remember, despite the fear of the dark.

"Death is and always will be a part of life, mijito." Mom said this often. Mom, our great lover of life, was the same woman who wore a wax Halloween bracelet with skulls on it in order, she said, "to remind myself we're all mortal."

Mom's love resembled that of many a working Salvadoran mother: rebellious with a ferocious passion couched in a preternatural ability to curse; the strength to take on the role of sole disciplinarian during my father's emotional absence; and a warm, bubbly disrespect for personal and other boundaries. Prior to Mom's death in 2013, the spot on the mantel where her portrait rests was reserved for the old souvenir steel machete. Beneath the portrait is the brown mahogany box containing half of her remains. Mom left instructions for us to place her ashes at locations marking the two cardinal points on her spiritual map of the American continent: her hometown of San Vicente and her home in San Francisco's foggy outer Mission neighborhood. For all that he loved his partner of sixty years, Pop made me fight to get him to respect Mom's wish to be cremated, arguing in his great grief that "cremation violates our traditions." Several heated discussions later, my siblings and I eventually won him over.

Mom never let borders—physical, linguistic, cultural, political borders—dismember her family. For most of his life, Pop did.

No mementos, no letters, no pictures of Pop's family and life in Ahuachapán ever graced my parents' home, except for a painting an artist in the Mission District made from a photo of his mother, Mamá Tey. Throughout my life, our family has been divided by the border between memory and forgetting.

The machete chops up our families.

Similar borders exist within the country we live in, the United States, including borders put up by the media Pop and I watched, the media I belong to. The journalist in me watches news of the "Central American child refugee crisis" with deep skepticism, a skepticism that often morphs into utter disbelief. The half-truths and absolute lies in stories about the crisis that even liberal media engages in disturbed me. In the summer of 2018, I decided to take action and convinced the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR) to let a couple of volunteers and me analyze the quality of the media coverage of the refugee child separation crisis of earlier that year. That year the refugee crisis, MS-13, and caravans generated hundreds of stories and dominated the US news cycle for several weeks. Most media outlets reported the child separation issue as if it was separate from both the caravan and gang stories.

The machete simplifies with the speed of the silicon revolution erasing the memory of us from the Mission, the historic neighborhood where we were once the majority.

Our CJR research identified some of the roots of the distortion, including one that surprised even me: all the stories in all the main media outlets of the United States erased Central American experts from the refugee crisis story. All of them. There were no US-born or -based Central American lawyers, no Central American scholars, no Central American NGO leaders, no Central American journalists in any of the coverage on any channel.

The Central American voices that were included in the news stories about the refugee crisis looked more like the stereotypes

we've come to expect: two-dimensional images of refugee mothers' pain and sound bites of refugee child suffering. One major magazine literally cut and pasted a picture of a crying child who was not separated from her mother and placed it next to a picture of the president, beneath a headline of a cover story about child separation.

Video of Carlos Gregorio Hernández Vásquez, a teenage Guatemalan migrant who died in a South Texas immigrant prison, confirms the journalistic and moral crises—and real-life consequences—of erasure. Surveillance footage shows Carlos's last moments. He was diagnosed with a flu that caused his temperature to reach 103 degrees. His weakness caused him to slip from the toilet in his last minutes of life. He fell to the ground, his head surrounded by a pool of blood. After a news organization released the footage without their permission, Carlos's parents released the following statement: "It's been really painful for our family to lose Carlos . . . but having all these people watching him die on the internet is something we couldn't have imagined in a movie or a nightmare."

The machete dismembers our humanity from our stories.

Left out of the English-language versions of the refugee crisis and gang stories are the Salvadoran culture, politics, and history that underlie them—described by the great poet Claribel Alegría and others in sublime and even mystical terms. Also left out is any notion of a Salvadoran political culture in which one out of every three Salvadorans adopted "radicalized" politics against the fascist military dictatorship during the civil war. Though it might prove useful in the post-COVID-19 world, our ability to organize and fight under dire political circumstances doesn't fit the victim narratives that non-Salvadorans ascribe to us. Locking Salvadorans into the violent-or-violated binary is the storytelling tradition that turned an oft-quoted phrase from Joan Didion into

the definitive English-language statement about us. In the almost forty years since Didion wrote her book *Salvador*, most English-language writing about Salvadorans and El Salvador remains a variation on her theme: "Terror is the given of the place."

Where most see the refugee crisis as "new," I see the longue durée of history and memory. Where many see the story beginning at the border, I see the time-space continuum of violence, migration, and forgetting that extends far beyond and below the US-Mexico border. Where others see mine as a Central American story, I see it as a story about the United States.

Just six years after the Vietnam War ended, my family and all other Salvadorans started living with the profound consequences of the Reagan administration's decision to draw a line in the sand, as it spent billions to bolster the universally condemned Salvadoran government and military in their war against the guerrilleros of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The FMLN was the Salvadoran embodiment of what Reagan referred to as the "evil empire" of communism. By the end of the war, seventy-five to eighty thousand people had been killed in a country of just over five million that's the size of Massachusetts. Most of the innocents were slaughtered by their own government, according to the United Nations and international human rights groups. I'm the son of Salvadorans, so the ongoing humanitarian crisis of violence, perpetual war, and mass migration is, before anything else, personal.

The machete severs any understanding that epic history is a stitching together of intimate histories.

This is why I decided, in 2015, to embark on my own life adventure: a journey along the 2,500-mile chain of mass graves, forgotten dead, and devalued life that begins in wartime El Salvador and travels deep into the remote tropical forests, where gangs and governments have killed, dismembered, and buried their victims

for decades. I've interviewed countless refugees who've braved the migrant trail where cartels and security forces have been digging mass graves for their victims since the wars in Central America ended in the 1990s. And I've traversed the southwestern border states to watch as the pox came to my house, the United States, where I visited mass graves dug by local Texas officials to bury migrant children and mothers and fathers whose remains were put in burlap bags and milk crates after they died during the migration wave of 2014. Leaked Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) memos show that the US government builds child and mom refugee prisons in remote South Texas for silent reasons of state: in order to make it difficult for media and immigration advocates to report on and advocate for those fleeing failed policies in the Southern Hemisphere, many of which the United States had a direct hand in creating. The institutional denial of the destruction of Central American child refugee innocence puts up borders to protect and sustain the myth of American innocence shared by conservatives and liberals alike.

Different circumstances in each country yield the same result: the remains of Salvadoran children and adults buried without investigation into their deaths, unstoried, and without remembrance, regardless of who is president in Mexico, the United States, or El Salvador, the country where the first history department at a public university was established just eighteen years ago, in 2001. The migrant journey is nothing if not a testament to the true constitution of countries.

We're all dismembered from above by that ultimate machete of memory: borders.

My own childhood "American" innocence was protected by my family. Pop cordoned off key parts of his own story, leaving me to sort through and try to make sense of the half-truths and outright myths of my family's history. My lack of access to these lost

fragments of memory, my ignorance of this history, almost got me killed.

I myself have been a party to silent dismemberment from above, remaining quiet about painful—and inspiring—secrets I held in the shadows for decades. Separated from my self, my experience, my history, I was dismembered, to the point of wanting to do myself in. I remembered this during visits to children caged in immigrant prisons where their soft voices uttered that hardest of realities, "Quiero morirme." Psychologists treating them told me that one of the primary ways they treat these children involves creating conditions for them to reconstitute the fragments of themselves into stories they can share, to stir the memory and imagination of that part of themselves that's still resilient and powerful, something we will all need to survive and move forward in this fragmented world of perpetual crisis.

What I am about to share is my best effort at reconstituting the layered and discontinuous fragments of my forgotten, macheted self.

Mine is the story of the re-membering that saved my life. Mine is the story of unforgetting.

Prologue

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

May 1992

Staccato pops of rotor blades on the helicopters above us twisted and tangled my innards. LAPD's helicopters didn't seem to bother Leland the way they did me. His surroundings had him too busy to notice either the copters or my gritted teeth. Leland stood silently mesmerized by the panorama of ruin surrounding his lime green Buick LeSabre: blackened cars, burned-out swap meets, fast-food restaurants, and crowded apartment buildings, hollowed out as if Molotoved by revolucionario students back in wartime El Salvador.

We were on the northeast corner of MacArthur Park, the spiritual and criminal center of the Pico Union–Westlake neighborhood of LA, a densely populated immigrant community that, during the week of April 29 to May 4, 1992—just days before—had become one of the sites of the most destructive riots in US history. After a court acquitted four LAPD officers who had been videotaped beating Rodney King, years of rage over racial inequality and police brutality bubbling below the surface burst onto the streets of LA.

Wherever he turned, Leland Chen, representative of a big

corporation visiting our nonprofit, the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN), to consider giving us a major donation, stood transfixed, his eyes darting back and forth across the blackened landscape. The slick, impenetrable wall created by his round designer glasses, pinstripe suit, and expensive feathered haircut had been breached by the scale of the destruction all around us, giving way to a vulnerability that tethered him to me. He stayed physically close to me and asked a lot of questions about our surroundings, as if on a deadly safari. I worried that the shock would distract him from considering giving CARECEN seed funding to start a youth program.

Leland looked westward, toward the tall buildings on Wilshire Boulevard, where the moguls, movie stars, and mighty politicians who had once called the Art Deco neighborhood home had vanished long ago. One block east of us were the CARECEN offices, located on the same palm-lined street where Raymond Chandler turned his Lost Generation disillusionment into noir, hard-boiled detective novels and films about LA's shadow world. Highest among the towers of faded fame and fortune is the historic twelve-story Wilshire Royale apartment building with a gigantic US flag on top, billowing above the mile-and-a-half radius of destruction wrought by the red-orange flames of the riots.

"Jesus Christ!" he exclaimed. The smell of burned wood and plastic filled my nostrils as we walked toward the southeast corner of the park. "I didn't even know there was rioting here. It looks like a war zone."

No. It doesn't, Tito, my adolescent, rebellious, crazy side fired back silently, my stomach hardening and teeth clenching as if I was preparing to get punched or kicked. War looks like war. Nothing else.

Leland's reaction to the riots felt predictable. His response was similar to those I'd heard during post-riot bus tours guided

by CARECEN staff—urban safaris to view the damage that included all manner of visitors, from heads of major philanthropic foundations to Fortune 500 executives, international scholars, national religious leaders, and members of Congress. All parroted the war analogy. CARECEN staff had met many dignitaries, including the young Arkansas governor challenging George H. W. Bush for the presidency, Bill Clinton.

I was jaded. Cansadisimo. I'd had enough of all this Virgil-leading-Dante-through-hell shit. Leland had it within his power to help us create jobs and education programs for at-risk kids in our crowded corner in the City of Angels, some of whom had taken a torch to it. So I dug deep for some patience.

"Who put up those barriers?" he asked, looking back at one of the many thick, brown steel poles stretching across entire streets throughout parts of the neighborhood with big signs that said NARCOTICS ENFORCEMENT ZONE, RESIDENTS ONLY.

"They're the borders LAPD put up to try and isolate the gangs," I said. "LAPD's CRASH anti-gang units use the barriers to play members of one gang off against those of another. They also use false arrests, falsifying evidence, and other stuff."

"Which gangs?"

"Salvadoran gangs," I responded tersely.

"Do the barriers work?"

"They do nothing to reduce crime but are quite successful in helping escalate violence by reinforcing mental barriers between members of rival gangs."

"No!"

"Yes. It's like they made young homies forget they were friends and, in some cases, family, before the riots."

Leland said nothing, but his eyes were wide. We walked half a block farther south, down to the corner of Seventh and Alvarado. Standing on the north side of the corner were the evangelicos.

Today the Gloria-a-Dioses of the Bible-thumping brothers with the bullhorn drowned out the Spanish-speaking tongues of the miqueros, thickset guys wearing dress shirts, jeans, and dress shoes, spewing out promises of the legal identity contained in the shiny, laminated micas. Other, gruffer, tattooed men, wearing thick chains, tank tops, and jeans, waited for passersby before saying in raspier tones, "Roca, roca. Roca-roca-roca."

"What are they selling?" Leland asked.

"Crack cocaine."

I didn't tell him Pico Union was the main hub of the crack trade north of South Central LA. Nor did I let him know that the park's southeastern corner was one of the deadliest in the country.

"OK, let's keep walking, Leland."

In front of us was the fountain at the center of the lake, the beautiful center of the cyclone that had just hit the Pico Union–Westlake district. Leland looked westward again, at the constant movement of people filling the park—immigrant mothers pushing baby carriages, Mayan men and women wearing flowery traditional clothing and selling candy, kids on bikes.

"Ground Zero is over there, near Ninth."

"Ground Zero?"

"Yes," I said. "Ground Zero, the place they say the first mara was born: the 7-Eleven Locos."

"You mean MS-13?"

"Yes. But they didn't call themselves that till later. They started off as a bunch of long-haired stoner kids in tight jeans, smoking pot and hanging in front of a 7-Eleven on Westmoreland."

"Why there?"

"Don't know. These skinny kids came together out of immigrant loneliness and their love of Ronnie James Dio and Metallica," I said. "Their hardcore violence is a relatively recent development. Even today, most gang members aren't killers."

"But weren't the gangs the ones behind all the rioting in Pico Union?" Leland asked, parroting talking points repeated by Bush attorney general William Barr after the riots.

"They were involved—but so were thousands of others, including white folks."

Leland looked perplexed. But then he said, "Wow! That's gorgeous!" as he gazed at the sunny sparkle of the downtown skyline mirrored on and moved by the lake's ripples.

Just a few weeks ago, on Sunday, January 19, 1992, between five and ten thousand* Salvadorans had gathered around the lake to celebrate one of the most important moments of our lives: the end of the Salvadoran Civil War. The end of the Cold War reinforced the efforts of the Salvadoran government to crush the leftist guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), which had been fighting for twelve years to end the extreme endemic poverty in El Salvador and the mass murders committed by the US-backed fascist military dictatorship. One of the bloodiest, most barbaric wars on the continent had ended. More than one of every three Salvadorans who responded to a 1996 survey said a family member had been killed during the war. All of us had friends and family members among them. That day, longtime enemies shook hands and hugged next to children born and bred entirely in times of war. Even gang members who considered themselves rivals temporarily put aside their differences in the spirit of peace.

Leland looked down at the water beneath him, his nonresponse to my comments indicating his apparent disinterest in hearing about the war and our efforts to start overcoming its effects.

I, too, looked at the tiny black dots on the surface of the dark, algae-green lake. Leland and I were still taking in the sights around

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* Rampart station cops told the media only three thousand gathered.

the lake and nonstop activity of the park when somebody walked up behind us, grabbed me, and said, "Hands up. It's La Migra!"

I turned around. There, greeting me with the biggest, brightest smile beneath the ashen skies above MacArthur Park, was José, the first MS-13 member I'd come to know personally. I smiled back at him. Leland didn't. He was too busy looking the kid over, his gaze gliding quickly past the young man's thick, carefully coiffed, semi-pompadour hairstyle, his heavyset build, and gigantic smile. Instead, Leland eyed the sixteen-year-old's T-shirt, khakis, and winos—canvas shoes—before focusing his gaze on his biggest concern: the big, beautiful MS tattooed in calligraphy on José's forearm. Leland looked like he was about to shit his pants. He glanced back at me again for reassurance.

"José and his mom are our clients," I said in an especially comforting tone, the guide letting the safari spectator know the lion won't bite him. "Lots of gang members have family that are our clients. The gangs have declared CARECEN off-limits."

His look—a combination of dumbfoundedness and fear—told me he still didn't get it.

"That means we're safe," I said.

"Q-vo, homes," José quickly greeted him, intuiting the need to chill my tourist guest out. "Nice to meet you."

"Hello, José," Leland responded, before extending his hand with a hesitation that made the young MS member and me look at each other. "Nice to meet you, too." That awkward silence and the tension of José and me fighting to keep straight faces filled the space between us.

"Puta, Lovato!" José said in the playful way that Pop, Mom, Mamá Tey, and most other Salvadorans regularly use the word for prostitute as an exclamation. "When you guys gonna get my mom and me our papeles? We been waitin' for a while."

José and his mom were among the thousands of undocumented

families who came to CARECEN seeking legal help after the Reagan and Bush administrations rejected 97 percent of all Salvadoran political asylum claims, one of the only ways for them to gain legal status. Their kids often found solace and community—and protection from the bigger black and Mexican gangs—in the maras. José's father wasn't in the picture.

When I was first getting to know him, José had told me about his odyssey as an "unaccompanied minor." As a seven-year-old he'd fled his poor, war-torn neighborhood in San Salvador and crossed the border, one of thousands of children forced by the conflict to undertake the great migration journey in hopes of survival and relative "stability," if such a thing even existed.

"He's a good kid," I said, "when he's not being a smartass."

José smiled.

"The cops are getting out of hand, Lovato."

"How's that?"

"The family of a vato I know said he had all these bruises and scars from a beating the chota gave him during the riots. They said they tortured him and then gave him over to the INS"—the Immigration and Naturalization Service. José's words had a familiar ring. CARECEN had documented many similar cases of abuse during the riots. "Fuck the chota, homes. Fuck them."

A distaste for the infamous cops of Rampart station bonded José and me, as did one of the great loves of our lives: lowrider oldies.

"Dang, vato," José said as he scanned the park, his friendly gaze landing on the evangelical preachers who had started singing. "Those religious tunes make me wanna puke. I'd rather be listenin' to some firme rolitas with my jaina"—some cool songs with my girlfriend.

"Órale," the resentful former evangelico in me responded. We were connecting in Caló, a once secret insider lingo first developed by the Roma people, especially those involved in illicit activities in

the ghettos of sixteenth-century Spain, some of whom migrated to the New World. Like the Roma and the great Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, José's generation and my generation of gang and non-gang California Latino youth used Caló for friendship, for secrets, for love, and for war.

"Hey, Lovato," he said to me in an aside, as Leland wandered away in curiosity—or fear. "Shit's getting heavy. I need to talk wit' you, 'ey." His tone conveyed an urgency that caught my attention. Before we could continue, however, José saw some of his homies across the park and left to join them, saying as he did, "Ay te watcho, Lo-Vato."

His abrupt departure left a lot of unanswered questions, but I couldn't do much about it. I had to give Leland the rest of the tour.

"What's wrong, Roberto?" Leland asked me, clearly afraid he was in danger.

"Nothing. It's just that, after years of relative peace between them, the maras are increasing their drive-bys, escalating violence for reasons we're not entirely clear about."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We suspect LAPD's Rampart division has a hand in it. I'm worried for kids like José. That's all."

"Oh. OK."

"So, Leland," I began, hoping that meeting José had left him sympathetic to our cause. "We're hoping your support for our youth program can help us try to do something to help decrease the violence." With the money, CARECEN would work to draw José and other youths away from gang life by providing jobs, job training, community service, and other opportunities to young people in the neighborhood.

"We've already made commitments to groups in South Central LA, and I'm just not sure we can swing it, Roberto," he responded.

Damn it. Here I am doing the urban safari tour, answering all

his fucking questions, everything short of begging, only to have his punk ass reject us. Shit.

I drove back toward the ABC coffee shop, a spot on Bonnie Brae, where I liked to conduct business over Korean food, tacos, and pupusas. I prepared to try one last time to persuade him, before he left the gates of our little hell for the blue skies beyond LAX. We parked Leland's rented LeSabre across from the CARECEN office, a gorgeous, black-and-white Eastlake Victorian at 668 South Bonnie Brae. Leland and I started walking southward, toward ABC. All around us, on streets crossing Wilshire, were more rows of hulking brick SRO residences packed with Mexican and Salvadoran migrants.

Shortly after we ordered, Leland stood and said, "I'll be right back. I have to make a phone call." He rushed out to the public phone stand near the southeast corner of Bonnie Brae and Seventh. Across the street from the phone booth, several young men in tank tops and jeans were hanging out in front of a big wall covered with MS-13 calligraphy and other graffiti.

I was lost in daydreams of visiting sunny beaches in postwar El Salvador when the all-too-familiar staccato sound rang out on Bonnie Brae: *bam-bam-bam!*

Somebody was firing what sounded like one of Pop's .38s. The shots continued, followed by the sound of shattering glass. Screams of mothers rang out across the street. More clips from a pistol of an unknown caliber followed. *Bam, bam, bam-bam-bam!* The sound of car tires skidding followed the dark, heavy rain of more glass shattering.

"Holy shit!" someone beside me screamed as he hid beneath his table. "They're shooting! They're shooting!"

An imaginary bullet whistling into my head or chest kept me on the ground, ducking for cover. Around me, ABC's workers and customers did the same.

Peeking out through the ABC window, I saw people fleeing in all directions. Then I remembered Leland. Fuck.

As the shots continued, I crept to the front of the restaurant, staying low to the ground, to see where Leland had landed. I spotted the young guys in tank tops chasing a car with their revolvers, but couldn't see Leland. At that moment, the Salvadoreño part of me—the part that has been in similar situations during the civil war—took over. My breathing slowed. I inhaled deeply, eyes wide open, as if taking in everything around me. The automatic, safety-seeking pilot of a young adult life of risks acknowledged the fear and took over my body, focused my mind. I breathed in again, as my sense of responsibility moved me to find Leland.

I crawled outside and spotted him ducking behind the phone booth. He looked like he wanted to scream as bullets whistled and burst just across the street from him. I crawled across the sidewalk to the phone booth and ducked next to him. I grabbed Leland's arm and we both crawled back into the restaurant.

A long Pico Union minute later, the shooting stopped. Minutes after that, several cars from the Rampart police station drove up. The drive-by incident had ended with no blood, no casualties.

Unfortunately, a few weeks later, we got word of another drive-by shooting, one that left the blood of two victims on the sidewalk. One of those victims was José.

The end of the war months before had convinced us all that time and history and God all moved forward along the straight line of progress. We'd believed that, depending on our ideological bent, either providence or the proletariat was ushering in an era of peace unknown to generations of Salvadorans. The mara violence that escalated following the LA riots of April 1992 reminded us that time is cyclical, and that violence moves in spirals as the innocent choose between becoming the violent or the violated—or both.