

*Quiero volver a la infancia  
Y de la infancia a la sombra.*

*I want to go back to childhood  
And from childhood to shadow.*

-Gabriel Garcia Lorca

The sun slowing in dust-adorned body panels, the car brakes, dipping towards the gravel at the roadside like the shadow of a bird. The engine hums, then stops, the metal ticking gently in the heat. He thinks of the steel spokes of a bike wheel shining in a resurrected sun, clicking towards inertia in some contextless corner of his gap-spattered past. The dry hills brown in the sun, wrinkled like old hands. A green sign points across the empty road: MADERUELO (EMBALSE).

The shirt sticks to his back as he peels himself out of the driver's seat. The car's roof scorches the palm of his hand. Hissing an oedipal curse, he withdraws it. The blank asphalt wavers in the sun, the road reflected upside-down, two white lines converging in an immediate infinity, the shadow of a flame. Following the arrow on the sign, he crosses the road, heading for the specious shade of the stunted brown-green trees and the promise of water.

"Nice one." Chris reached for his beer as the cold suds slopped down the side of the glass, a tiny pile of bubbles forming at the juncture of pint and table. Warren struggled onto the stool across from his friend.

"So where are you going to go? Just go travelling?"

"Yeah, I think so. Don't really have a plan. I just wanna go somewhere that's not fucking here."

Warren nodded over his drink. They had grown up together; there was no need to explain. The barbed wire, the CCTV cameras, the blue flashing lights reflected in the rain-rotted streets, night after night after night. Empty, bacterial life, the grim struggle for nothing in this gutted town, in this third-world economic shitstorm masquerading as a first-world power. They both knew it; there was nothing for anyone here. Hope; ambition; joy; these were things that collapsed under this low grey sky, transforming in the dim glow of orange streetlights into the ugly shapes of nightmare. They both knew it.

"Might go to Spain" Chris mused as though the idea had just occurred to him. "But not the islands" he hurriedly went on as Warren raised his eyebrows, "I can't be arsed with that Ibiza shit. I wanna see the places English people don't go, the real country. Always wanted to go there: don't know why."

"I went to Spain once" Warren replied.

"Any good?"

"S'alright. Was a resort though. With my family, back when I was a kid." Chris smiled at a shared memory.

"Oh yeah" he replied, "I remember that. I was gutted. I wanted to go with you, but my mum wouldn't let me." Warren's smile was thinner than the watered-down beer he sipped. They had stumbled onto a shore of genuine emotion that might prove fatal if they couldn't extricate themselves quickly.

"I've heard Spanish birds are proper stuck up" Warren said. "But that might just be Ibiza, where all the English people go. They might be different in places where they're not inundated with Brits." Swallowing a mouthful of beer, he went on. "You gotta watch out, though. I heard about this one lad who blagged this Spanish bird, got her back to the hotel room, ripped her knickers off, and she was hairier than him!" Chris snorted, beer bubbling in the glass he held to his mouth.

"Urgh. No need for that, is there?"

“Proper bush on her, like a taxi driver’s armpit.”  
“Fucking hell!” Chris choked on laughter and beer.

The high sun baked the dirt of Linares del Arroyo. The warm wind sent tempests of dust swirling through the narrow streets. Black windows stared out of dull white houses baked solid by endless years of heat and drought, a mirage of coolness and safety in the grimy heat. Two buses stood at one end of the village, diesel engines growling at the end of the world. Several carts pulled by fly-tormented mules sat still in the sun, piled high with old furniture, chests of clothes, tools, the humble treasures of the post-war rural poor. Sad dark eyes gazed out of the windows of the idling buses, lined faces varnished by sun and work taking in the fatal details of the only home they had ever known, forever lost to them now. In spite of the heat, the old women all wore black.

A thin river of sweat trickled down the face of the government official, following the ridge of his glistening nose to bury itself in his moustache. Standing at the front of the bus, he bent over a clipboard, frowning. He called through the open door to his colleague on the other bus, “Sesenta.” The answer came back from the other bus, “cincuenta y siete.” The first official nodded, everything in order and safely packed away, and made a small mark on his clipboard. Turning to the driver, whose neck bulged over the damp collar of his shirt, he spoke curtly. The driver nodded, scratched his stubbly cheek, and with a grinding of gears and a prehistoric shudder, the bus pulled forward, leaving the sun-striped valley behind. A lazy plume of dust rose from under the wheels like accusatory gunsmoke.

The brown distance swallowed the buses, the villagers, the faces pressed to the glass. The wind stirred the settling dust. A hawk passed overhead.

A thread of water choked its way along the dusty street, its blunt eyeless head winding through the village like some predatory worm. The parched soil drank it in, but a pool was forming behind it, humps and hollows of water mounting from the valley, swirling around the foundations of the houses, creeping under the doors, floating the clothes someone had left drying on the line like seaweed caught in a rising tide.

The water rose. Soon the red tile roofs disappeared below the waves. The bell in the tower of the tiny church clanged dully as the current tugged at the bell rope. Once the highest point in a dusty village, the church now loomed over a lake that lapped insolently at its ancient foundations, throwing its shattered reflection back at the brown walls. Within hours, Linares del Arroyo had disappeared.

The car groaned quietly as Chris pulled up outside their old house.

“Alright then mate” he breathed.

“Not coming in for a bit?” asked Warren. Chris shook his head; he could not make himself go through that door again, not now. To see a stranger on the familiar couch, strange furniture in his old room, the reek of the past clinging on in every dingy corner, whispering of risk and loss and the faint echoes of a life that was already starting to limp on without him – not now.

“Nah” he replied. “I best be off.”

“What time’s your flight?”

“Eight in the morning. I’m gonna stay at my mum’s and go from there.”

“She seeing you off, then?” Warren asked redundantly.

Chris nodded.

“Alright then” Warren sighed, a hand on the door handle. “Good luck, mate.”

“Yeah” Chris whispered. “You too.”

The car door shakes the night, and he watches his friend walk towards the silence, a smile on his face, not looking back. Maybe it can stay like this; maybe we can always be sixteen, the awfulness of our inadequacies crushed by the vastness of our uncharted future. Maybe it can always be night, rats in alleys running from the glare of neon fantasies, cars growling by in a procession of self-regulating

galaxies, their hoods reflecting streetlights as stars. Maybe time protects our past like crickets in amber, like the drowned town at the bottom of the lake, waiting for some future sorcery to bring back all our yesterdays as though the years between were the dull dream of sleeping adolescence.

But the green numbers on the dashboard clock are the brightest thing in this car, and they disagree. Tomorrow is coming, they say; today is history. He watches his friend disappear into the darkness with his head held high, and he knows he's seen him for the last time.

*The valley was flooded in 1952 to make the reservoir at Maderuelo. The village of Linares del Arroyo, pop. 120, was evacuated in order to build the dam. The villagers were relocated to Aranda de Duero, Valladolid and Madrid. All that remains visible above the water line is the partial ruin of the church of San Juan Bautista, peering out of the trees on what used to be a hill above the now-submerged houses.*

Chris flicks a nervous fly away from the guidebook's imperishable white page. The book was a product of happier times, when the world was the way it used to be, knowable and safe. He looks out across the reservoir, the murky water casting shattered reflections of trees and hills, a Picasso torn to shreds. The crumbling brown heap of the church looms far above the water line, presiding over a waste of dry dirt and tumbled rocks. Ancient brick walls rise up from below the surface, roof and gable breaking through into the light for the first time in half a century as the countryside slowly dies of thirst.

Leaving the shadow of the trees, he steps out onto the cracked mud that used to be the bottom of the lake. Fresh fissures appear beneath his feet.

He thinks of the room last night, the hostel, empty but for him, a woman's voice calling in some other window he could not see.

He thinks of the ragged children on the streets of Barcelona, their dark eyes like feral cats, watching hands, pockets, eyes, picking out the vulnerable tourist in a sea of strangers.

He thinks of the villagers, dead now, mostly, memories disappearing into impassable waters even as the town they built rises under a hostile sun.

There are moments too massive to be understood: the vulture's trail across the torn sky;

the woman's invisible voice in the cloudless night;

the wounds the stars make in our flesh;

schoolyard victories, schoolyard shadows;

the face of a friend in a foreign land;

The beaded sweat on a bus driver's nose.

Last night; the singer. The singer in the cantina, sending her voice this way, that way, now a breathy whisper, now a rising roar, each note a crystalline rivet in the smoky air. The song ended; there was no applause. The room was silent, the young woman trembling on the edge of the spotlight, blind to the impassive faces in the gloom.

“Perfecto, perfecto” an old man sneered, his thin voice echoing in the silent room.

The singer’s lip trembled. Her eyes burned. For a moment, Chris thought she was about to burst into tears. Her face blasted into a fearful mask, she stormed to the bar, drank down a glass of liquor in a single draught, and, seated still at the bar, began to sing, her throat torn open by the fiery potion, her voice breathless, raw, a howl of wind and sand, nailing every man to his seat. All nuance, all artifice was stripped away, and her naked soul shivered on the raw edge of every word, her pain so raw he wanted to hide, the song sweeping about the small room like some demon angel dancing in the thermals of perdition, trailing the rusted blades of its wings along the ground.

Now I’ve dropped Mum’s letter.

Got it.

It was the sound of torn clothes and widow’s weeds, the sound of absence, loss, entire generations torn from their birthplace and scattered like dust on the face of an indifferent world, the collective roar of every human heart that longs to find a home. Before the song had finished, the entire room was on its feet, roaring approval and sympathy, brava! Brava! The cry of longing and loneliness echoed in every heart, the girl’s tears shone in every face, and a great green wave of nausea swelled in Chris’s throat as he watched the room explode, sixty Spanish peasants drunk on the fumes of loss. For a shining moment, a tangle of ungrateful bipeds became a unified being, an angel in the smoke, a single saint of pain. One moment.

*From what the police tell me, Warren was out at a bar – Amigo’s; maybe you know it – and he got into some trouble.*

*A fight broke out over something; we’ll probably never know what started it. You know how easily these things happen when young people have been drinking. There was some kind of scuffle in the pub, and the doormen intervened. They threw Warren out of the bar.*

*He was walking down Fisher St, maybe hoping to get a taxi, when the same men from the bar caught up with him. No one knows exactly what was said, but I can’t imagine Warren bringing that kind of trouble on himself; he was always such a nice, polite boy. He’d never hurt a soul, you know that. Anyway, there was some kind of fight, but there was four of them and Warren was by himself; he never stood a chance. Luckily, another group of young people going out for the night saw what was going on and came over to stop it.*

*The four who attacked Warren ran off, and the passers-by helped him to his feet. According to them, he seemed alright; a little worse for wear, obviously, but not too badly hurt. He insisted he was fine, of course, thanked them for their help and walked off.*

*He had had quite a bit to drink, so maybe he didn’t feel the pain the way he should have. His head was clouded with shock and alcohol, and he just wanted to get home and sleep. But his legs gave way fifty yards up the road.*

*One of the men who attacked him had a knife. By the time the ambulance got there, poor Warren couldn’t wait any longer. He died on the way to the hospital.*

The desiccated earth crumbles beneath him as the ruins of the forgotten town loom out of the water, triumphant in a drying world where no swamp is safe, no lake can last, the triumph of the dead over the living, the horrible power of the past. He thinks of that, and his home, his family, his friend, until the sun runs like a river flowing backwards, drowning memory in featureless light.

his mother`s voice;

Warren`s smile;

the singer`s tears;

the eye of the vulture above;

fish swimming through the bedrooms of dead villagers;

a world vanished beneath utilitarian waves.

Home becomes home, he reflects, only when we can no longer go back to it. Even the past is not safe. Crunching through the parched mud, he heads back to the car and the waiting highway.