THE CAMPO SANTO QUARTERLY REVIEW

From the Desk of a Campo Santo Ombudsman

- DUNCAN FYFE -

Overland Limited

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Written and Curated by Campo Santo Ombudsman Duncan Fyfe
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~ Acknowledgements ~

For Aisling

A Note from the Campo Santo Ombudsman

REALLY, the Ombudsman had to admit, Rachel Medina was the one to thank for everything. “I don’t know if you’re the right person,” she had said, like everybody says, “I don’t actually know what you do.”

Well, the fact of the matter was that he did a great many things, as he told her, proceeding to explain with generic examples rather than induct her into the specific boredom of his workday. By the good grace of the City of San Diego did James Sallis serve as its Community and Customer Ombudsman, a noble position with no power. It was his job to listen to public complaints about the City – like those of Miss Medina, though a complaint could be about traffic fines, or a Nixon-era Council decision to transfer maintenance of a drainage easement on the San Bernardino Meridian to an unaccountable private operator – and bring those complaints to the appropriate City employee for rebuttal, and upon the Ombudsman presenting the facts of the matter and asking what could be done, the employee would generally put his feet up on his desk, smirk and say “Oh, whoops! We’ll do better next time,” which was the same thing as telling the Ombudsman to go fuck himself. In the opinion of the Ombudsman, anyway, which as it should be clear does not carry much water in the City of San Diego.

Sallis was the City's first Ombudsman. When the chief operating officer created the post and appointed Sallis in '85, he'd said, "We must be great. The President spoke of a shining city on the hill. I want San Diego to be that city." A week later he was fired for harassment. In the four years since, Sallis had languished without allies in a basement office where the community service juveniles stashed their jackets. This year he had taken to showing up for work in rumpled suits, no tie, and getting stoned in his Volvo 240 on lunch break, then rubbing his eyes even redder so it looked like he had been crying, making his co-workers too embarrassed to comment.

Walk-ins like Miss Medina tended to fill the Ombudsman with the most dismay: typically they were the ones who cared the most and the ones he could do the least for. Walk-ins were the type who'd found out that the whale at SeaWorld wasn't the original Shamu from the sixties, just some no-name asshole they called Shamu, and wanted to know wasn't that false advertising? "But that's all private sector," he'd apologize, and are you saying the Mayor of San Diego can't do a thing about that and the Ombudsman would shake his head and say: no, private sector.

Rachel Medina announced herself as an activist and sat beside the Ombudsman's desk. "I have a problem with Campo Santo."

"What?" Discreetly he shifted in his chair and pried the underwear out of his crack.

"It's – you know, the cemetery?"

"Yes, I mean, what's the problem you have?"

Campo Santo was a small plot up in Old Town, about three, maybe four, miles north from the office. Officially known as El Campo Santo Cemetery, which literally translated to something like 'the cemetery cemetery,' but hey, whatever, it was named in the 1840s. It was for murderers and Catholics, mainly. Closed for burials, he wanted to say a hundred years ago? but still in business as a historical landmark. There was probably plenty there to complain about: vandalism, the noise on Dia de los Muertos, general upkeep… with budget cuts across the board, it wasn't a priority to keep pristine the grave marker of a nineteenth century loser who was hanged for stealing a rowboat. That was it, usually: a distant descendant unhappy with the length of grass around a chipped and weathered gravestone.

"My problem is that you're hiding dead bodies," said Rachel Medina.

"Who is?"

"Twenty dead women and children – you are. Or the City is. Again, I don't really know what you do."

"I don't understand," and he didn't.

So she explained. El Campo Santo, according to Rachel Medina anyway, used to be bigger, about a hundred years ago. In 1889, the City cut a path through the cemetery to make way for a streetcar line. And in 1942 – the years rolled without hesitation off her tongue; Ombudsman Sallis rubbed his eyes blearily – the City paved over that, making it part of San Diego Avenue. Only problem with that: the City built a road over a cemetery, graves included, destroying all the gravestones and grave markers in the process. So every day, said Medina, San Diego commuters drive over unmarked graves. Twenty at least, many of them for children.

"And the City won't even acknowledge it," she said. "You won't even say that you did it. I know it's just old bodies. But it isn't right."

"Who'd you talk to about this?"

"I talked to the Mayor's office, three times, I talked to my Council member, I talked to four different people in the Park and Recreation department, I talked to the City Clerk's office, and they all denied it, they all told me that I had my facts wrong. So now I'm talking to you."

It was a new one, the Ombudsman had to give her that: the first time since the twelfth grade writing competition scandal that he'd been surprised by the job. There was something about this: it was so morbid, so inexplicable… and what did the City stand to gain by any of it, supposing it were true, which he was not yet ready to suppose…

"You won't help either, I can tell."

"But I haven't even looked into it yet."

"Still, you won't."

The Ombudsman promised he would check it out, though to his eye Rachel Medina left unconfident in his potential as a public advocate. It was noon, and he made the decision not to go to his car but up two floors to Records, where Angie and her assistants were out to lunch. Sitting down by a file cabinet with the Council minutes for… well, for all of 1942, she hadn't been any more specific… he spent an hour searching a history of municipal minutiae for anything that might support Medina's claims.

So the search began in January 1942, with a unanimous City Council vote to have the personnel department investigate the loyalty of all City employees with Japanese ancestry, followed by another unanimous resolution noting the numbers of enemy aliens in San Diego, many of them Japanese and many of them subversive, and petitioning the FBI to remove them. In February, the Council voted to make entry to the Fine Arts Gallery – including exhibitions – free to servicemen. A building the City sold off last month. March 1942, the Council formally noted the birth of Dean, a baby condor at the San Diego zoo. Forty years, thought the Ombudsman, Dean's gotta be dead.

And there it was in August: Item 29, a City Council decision to commence road works near El Campo Santo Cemetery, paving over an obsolete streetcar route to extend San Diego Avenue so it ran parallel with Congress Street and connected with the avenue joining Arista, Conde, Harney and Twiggs. But not a unanimous decision this time: the motion passed over one 'nay' vote from a Councilman Montague, who had objections…

…objections nowhere to be seen here, because the rest of the page was blank, like it had been photocopied with half the page covered up. The minutes resumed overleaf with Item 30, regarding provision for the design and construction of a storm drain system on Landis Street, and the Ombudsman let this sink in for a good thirty seconds, and then thought: You're fucking kidding me.

The rest of the day, the Ombudsman looked through everything he could, telling everyone who asked that he was investigating a confidential complaint about a golf course. Sallis looked at planning documents, surveyors' maps, land titles, complaints histories, and especially the personnel records for reference to a Councilman Montague, of which there was none, and how could that, he wondered, even be possible? The effort continued in vain until he found, inexplicably filed in Transportation and Storm Water's archives, a map. A map of El Campo Santo Cemetery, hand drawn by a man named Richard Marston in 1881 that appeared to show, in the lower left corner occupied in the present day by a stretch of San Diego Avenue… gravestones. Grave markers. Wooden crosses. There really are bodies there, the Ombudsman realized. After a moment, he grabbed the map, jumped, and ran up and down the stairwell punching the air until he doubled over with exhaustion.

The Ombudsman made two phone calls that evening. The first was to the Deputy Director of Park and Recreation to arrange an urgent appointment for ten a.m. the next day. The second was to Rachel Medina. "You were right," he told her, and she unloaded a massive sigh.

"Thank you. I mean, what a relief to finally hear that."

"I should be the one thanking you," he said, and stopped himself there, for she couldn't understand what it really meant.

"I was honestly ready to give up on it," she said. "I didn't expect you to even listen."

"Of course I'd listen," he said. "I'm an Ombudsman."

He had Rachel Medina to thank for a lot, really. When he sat in the Deputy Director's office the next morning – clean-shaven – it wasn't like all the other times. He honestly had something here: a grievance for which someone could and must answer, and not with that smug "we'll do better next time" bullshit, either. The Ombudsman was holding the sword of justice. Figuratively, anyway. Actually in his hands was a manila folder full of evidence: the edited Council minutes, Marston's map, and a list of past councilmen that conspicuously made no mention of any Montague.

Around the office were framed photographs of the Deputy Director waving happily in front of San Diego parks. The Deputy Director himself was late, by three minutes now, almost four…

“Sorry to keep you waiting.” And it wasn’t the Deputy Director who strolled in, but someone else, new suit and a blue shirt with a white collar, who sat down on the desk in front of the Ombudsman – whose stomach sank.

“Bédard?”

“Sure is, cowboy,” said Bédard, clearing away the scattered papers on the Deputy Director’s desk. “Isn’t it funny how we always seem to meet in this way? Why don’t we try to break this habit? Perhaps one night you and I should go out to dinner. We can bring our wives. Are you married, James?”

“No.”

“Ah. Well, neither am I, ha ha.”

Bédard was private sector: an Ombudsman with one of the downtown consulting firms that contracted premium mediation and ombudsman services on a per case basis. “Oh, James… what have you done? El Campo Santo? You’ve been a nosy little badger, haven’t you?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“I’m sorry to say, it is… after your telephone call last night, the Deputy Director decided that the Campo Santo matter called for a defter touch. Is this everything?” he said, lifting the manila folder out of the Ombudsman’s hands. “The map, too?”

“Hey,” protested the Ombudsman mildly.

“Now, James, don’t pout.” Bédard flipped through the contents of the folder. “I’ll give it the best investigation that money can buy.” Sallis stared dead ahead.

“Oh, and don’t worry about Miss Medina.” Bédard said on his way out the door. “I will make sure to look after her, too. Be good, James.”

The Ombudsman sat alone in the Deputy Director’s office until his assistant told him he had to get out. At lunch, the Ombudsman went outside to his car and afterwards he did not need to go into the bathroom.

Overland Limited

THE PALACE HOTEL occupied an entire city block of San Francisco real estate. It was claimed to be the largest hotel anywhere, though to be exact about the square mileage would debase it of its beauty: this was something of art, not science. Violet exited the carriage in a state of plain awe, despite her better nature. Her eyes climbed the balconies: seven stories, adorned with Roman columns and little candelabras of electric light, crowned by a latticework of iron and glass.

If she wanted, she could unmake all this – think back to the San Francisco she was born in, brown and dust, all the worse for the troubles with her father, but she liked to think of how the city was now. San Francisco had changed for the better, and so, Violet was pleased to report, had she. This was the Violet of today: a porter carrying her baggage, her chin held high, striding down the promenade of the Palace Hotel flanked by white marble sidewalks and tropical gardens and fountains, wearing a dress of fine blue silk made for her, and her hand on her husband's arm. "Mr and Mrs George T. Bertolacci," announced her husband to the attaché, and yes, oh yes, so perfect.

Nineteen, and she was the first of the Whaley daughters to be married. Tied for first, anyway: she was married the same day as her older sister Amelia, wed to their cousin John. Their father seemed to prefer Violet's match (as did Violet) and showed his happiness with wonderful gifts, despite the hard times. He had given George money for the honeymoon at the Palace Hotel, in a suite surely costing upwards of seven dollars, and to buy first class tickets on the new Overland train, bound for Chicago via Omaha. Then onward to New York, where George was a civil servant and where their new life would be. On the carriage journey north from San Diego after the wedding she had watched George sleep while her heart spun in circles until it was dizzy, thinking: he is handsome, he is witty, he is overpowering, he is mine…

And then Violet woke up alone the next day. George was gone, and with him their suitcases, her pocket book, all her jewelry, even – she checked, and her stomach clutched – the wedding ring from her finger. Panicked, she dressed herself with as much haste as was possible when fitting a corset and bustle, and paying no consideration to her hair or face, fled from the hotel out onto Montgomery Street. She ran, insofar as she could run, east on Market, pushing past pedestrians and failing to keep pace with the streetcars. She did not remember San Francisco very well but had recited this route to George innumerable times for fear he would forget. The Overland departed from Oakland Long Wharf, which meant that if George had gone ahead he would have gone by ferry – and perhaps she would find him at the bay, unless he was at the platform already, waiting for the train's approach, announced by a distant whistle and the rumble of something heavy underneath his feet…

No, Violet found George in line for the ferry, and out of breath, she doubled over beside him, the corset forcing her to take short, repeated gasps; she looked hysterical.

"Oh, Vi," he noticed her, "sorry about all of this, you know. It wasn't anything personal." Some sleepy-eyed saloon girl hung off his arm.

"I don't… who is this?" Violet managed. "Who is this person? Is she wearing my wedding ring?"

"Look, don't get your back up. It's over now and nobody's hurt, so why don't you bounce?"

Her heart pounded against her chest. "I want you to put a stop to this right away," her eyes choking with hot tears, "do the clear thing and come back with me this minute."

"Now she's boo-hooing," muttered the saloon girl.

George procured the ferry tickets for the attendant. "Mr and Mrs George T. Bertolacci, for the Overland from Oakland."

“I’m Mrs George Bertolacci,” Violet insisted. The attendant looked back and forth between the two women. “Pardon me, ma’am, what’s your name?” he asked George’s girl.

“Oh, my name is Violet Bertolacci, sir.”

The attendant gave half a shrug. “Miss, you’d better leave,” he told Violet. “I’d rather not involve the police.” George tipped his hat to the man, and without sparing even a second’s hesitation or a quick glance over the shoulder, strolled up the gangplank and laughed. Violet, tear-stricken, watched from the wharf as the ferry chugged into choppy motion along the water.

What happened after that Violet would not completely remember. In a daze, she turned back onto Market and then started walking south in the direction of home. She walked for so long that her feet were bloodied and raw and when she stopped inside a saloon to take off her shoes she was yelled at. Standing outside by the horses she tore strips of silk from her dress and bound them around the soles of her feet. Later, she would recall that she had been in the backs of wagons, maybe beside animals or groceries, and abandoned her bustle on the side of the road. She would recall sitting in the backs of coaches or carriages, and the impertinent attentions of other passengers. She lost the corset somewhere around… well, she did not know, but she remembered that powerful exhale of breath, and the racking sobs that followed, attracting sympathetic glances from strangers. She remembered how low her hair hung down her back and how filthy it must have been. She remembered begging for water and how just a drop remade the texture of her lips. She remembered not seeing water again until, from very far away, glimpses of the Pacific Ocean, which meant that somehow and after however many days she was back in San Diego, and she walked the dusty roads past familiar houses and cemeteries until she felt the boards of the porch creak underneath her bloodied feet and she crumpled into a tiny heap outside her parents’ house. And this was where her troubles began.

Her parents, of course, were filled with concern for her well being. While she recuperated under the direction of their physician, her parents attended to her every comfort and assured her that she was safe and well, yet the worry was plain on their faces and in good time Violet began to understand the deeper reasons for it. Much about her return to San Diego had been judged as scandalous. It was entirely unladylike to appear in town as she had: unexpected, without a chaperone and missing her husband, dressed in shredded finery stained with mud and blood, stumbling speechless down the streets as if in an opiated stupor. It was vulgar in the extreme, and Violet knew it. The Herald, whose editor was an old enemy of her father’s from his days on the City board of trustees, wrote gleefully that Thomas Whaley’s second daughter had made a complete spectacle of herself. Reportedly, her debasement had gravely offended some high-ranking members of Old Town society, all of whom opted to be quoted in the paper anonymously. Violet’s father told her that all anonymous quotations were inventions, and Violet thought this was utterly irrelevant.

In the passage of time, members of society both high and low would put their names to their disapproval of Violet, so it had been fairly irrelevant. The Whaley household was well-known for its evening parties and receptions, and the Whaley women well-known as great hostesses. After Violet's reappearance, these events generated more excuses than attendees. On the fourth of July, the Whaleys traditionally staged a boys and girls' dance at the house, preceded by a town picnic in Rose's Canyon. That year, instead, Violet sat alone in the girls' bedroom reading notes from Old Town families all professing regret that "prior engagements" – what coincidence! – would prevent them from attending. The gall of these people who had never been blessed with competing engagements in their entire lives.

Violet was invited to one dance that year: the birthday party of Emily Balfour, not a friend. Their mothers were close, though, and who was to say what use Violet's friends were anyway, they had not spoken much since it happened, and those relations which had once been so free and collegial were now congealed and smelling of blood…

"Oh," said Emily Balfour at the doorstep.

Emily sat Violet in the parlor and excused herself, never to return. Emily did not speak to Violet again. The guests seemed to avoid Violet's gaze, except for Hudson Ames – oh, sweet, simple Hudson Ames who had once told her, "I'm desperately in love with you – please don't marry that idiot" – whose eyes met hers across the parlor and instantly darted away as though he had been caught spying upon a woman in her bedroom. Violet, to her shame, waited over an hour before getting up to leave.

Months later, Violet proposed to obtain a divorce, and that was met with resistance. Violet asked why she should not be entitled to divorce from a husband who stole from her and left her to die in a foreign city, and the courthouse clerk did not argue with this but commented that it was dishonorable to seek divorce. Upon which Violet fantasized of stabbing him and tearing his fat flesh to ribbons, though she supposed that too might be considered dishonorable.

"They hate me, they really truly hate me and I don't understand," she said to her mother one night in the kitchen. "Oh, Lord… have they always thought of me like this? Have they always thought of me as this awful… and I was just the last one to realize it? I was happy and smiling like an idiot and all the time they all thought I was disgraceful…" Her mother hushed her and held Violet close while she wept into her shoulder. "I don't know, angel," she said.

The family physician took an interest in Violet's melancholia, which along with her disinterest in attending events or even getting out of bed, he considered symptomatic of some kind of mental aberration. Her parents protested the seriousness of the diagnosis but could not otherwise explain Violet's moody, distant comportment, which had gripped her for months. "I am worthless," she had taken to saying, or "I'm a horrible person." No, you're not, Lillie would say, before departing the house for a county fair or ball to which Violet was unwelcome. One afternoon Violet jumped into a well.

The cistern was behind the house. Her father ran outside after hearing Violet's screams for help; he found her hanging by her fingertips from the edge, her bare feet waving around over the darkness. Violet was lifted to safety, and nobody in the family ever remarked upon the strange episode of Violet in the well.

That night Violet remembered arriving in San Francisco with George and how the proprietor at the Palace Hotel had treated her. He had received her so casually, and with such respect, as if there were no reason why Violet should not be a rich, married woman staying in the grandest suite in the grandest hotel in the world, and deferred to appropriately… Didn't that idea make so much sense then, and now she was a woman who had thrown herself into a well in hopes of ending her life, and nobody commented on that or found it particularly unusual. Was this just expected of her, now? Was this the person she was?

Without society to occupy her Violet spent more time alone in the house, reading novels and poetry in her father's library. She was taken with one particular passage from a collection of Thomas Hood, which she meticulously reproduced in her copybook:

> The bleak wind of March
>
> Made her tremble and shiver;
>
> But not the dark arch,
>
> Or the black flowing river:
>
> Mad from life's history,
>
> Glad to death's mystery,
>
> Swift to be hurl'd—
>
> Anywhere, anywhere
>
> Out of the world!

Yes, that's it, thought Violet: how true a representation. And yet how irresponsible, she thought it was, to write and publish something that nakedly emotional when it could be read by any sort of person in goodness knows what sort of state. An observation that did not prevent her from attempting to write poetry of her own:

> There is a place
>
> Where we will never go.

…on a sheet of notepaper that she promptly tore out of the copybook and threw away.

Her mother remarked that Violet's activities had turned "unwholesome," a comment she made not knowing about the poetry but knowing about Violet's increasingly common trips to the cemetery across the street, by herself, often for hours at a time. If she wasn't an odd pariah in San Diego already, Violet figured, she certainly would be now, though if she were not a pariah in the first place she would not have sought solace in the cemetery, and so on and so on: it was too tedious to think deeply about.

El Campo Santo Cemetery was a small tract of land, of loose brown soil and patches of grass here and there, whose few internments were marked with modest crosses of white pine, or red brick arranged flat on the ground. Violet sat in the shadow of a knotted oak tree that worked in tandem with her bonnet to keep her safe from the sun, and read novels or the names on the grave markers. She could see her house from there, across the dusty expanse.

Campo Santo was not for good people. It was a place to bury criminals, or strangers, and the lack of compassion afforded those souls by the living festered there like a wound. It was not a place for Violet Bertolacci (Violet Whaley, she corrected herself with a modicum of pride,) living or dead. Violet already knew where she was to be buried, thanks to her parents: expensive and stately Mount Hope, seven miles away, built so that settlers like her father could be remembered at the appropriate level. There was already a Whaley family plot there, as of yet unoccupied. Violet supposed they all thought that their money would buy them dignity in death – like they would be buried in Mount Hope looking beautiful and virginal in their finest dress, and Mount Hope would keep them looking them that way, perfectly preserved forever like the Pharaohs…

At Campo Santo Violet visited the graves of forgotten degenerates (she presumed) like James Robinson, who was hanged in 1852 on the land where her house now stood. Her father had been present at the hanging, but what she knew of James Robinson she'd heard from other people: her father would not discuss it. Robinson, so the story went, was a petty crook, a flagrant horse thief wanted in Canada, hanged in San Diego for stealing a rowboat. Surely nobody would miss a rowboat, he must have thought – but as it happened, the rowboat Robinson stole belonged to the city of San Diego, and it was, somehow, the only one they owned. The embarrassed local militia descended on Robinson with full force, reclaimed their rowboat and sentenced him to death. Robinson was hanged on a makeshift gallows so short that his toes grazed the ground for the whole hour it took him to die. Then there was the grave of Henry Rippey, a wandering drunk trampled by a horse. The story on Rippey went that he had been chased out of San Francisco in the 1860s when, in a drunken episode, he kicked a stray dog down a flight of stairs. The dog happened to be a local legend, a ratter famed for his heroic deeds and much beloved by credulous San Franciscans. How odd and vulgar the circumstances of their deaths, thought Violet, and I know nothing else about them. Were their lives consistently so queer, or, like hers, refocused by one unplanned moment of absurdity? Will that be how I am remembered, as the girl so stupid she could not see she was giving her heart and herself to a despicable con man? A con man – how

trite! She wanted to laugh: she had married a swindler who nabbed her jewels and cackled as he walked away with a whore on his arm. No master criminal for Violet, no, was she so ugly and so stupid that she could be taken by any cliché thug – who deceived her, ripped her up, used her up, made her worthless –

That night at the Whaley family dinner table, celebrations were in order. Lillie was engaged, having chosen from a pool of well-to-do, interchangeable suitors. A party was called for. Their mother ran ahead of herself describing the lavish sorts of parties they once threw at the house, and who would be invited and what food would there be, before remembering Violet's situation and adjusting her expectations accordingly. Violet hunched over her uneaten supper feeling like she had been hollowed out, as her mother hemmed and hawed about how Violet could still be involved somehow. She could lend a hand, perhaps, with the duties of penning the invitation cards, directing the waiters to the tablecloths and napkins, and ensuring that the ladies' room would be fully stocked with hairpins and pincushions. Not, of course, how it used to be, when Violet was a girl of fifteen or sixteen in a brand new dress and a ribbon in her hair who would welcome the guests with a polite smile and inquire about their day as she showed them to the dressing room. When everyone was in the drawing room it was her job to flit from one conversation to another like a firefly, and then, always, every night, when the clock struck ten her father would announce her and she would sit down at the grand piano, smoothing her dress, and the whole room would stop to hear her play. And she shut her eyes gently and let her hands sing across the keys, and one time she opened them and saw her father dabbing away a tear from his eye and he was so proud and her heart swelled and she brought herself to tears. I am not that person anymore, she told herself: I do not make people proud. Her mother was listing everyone they must invite: the Balfours, the Ameses, the Roses, the Cassidys, the Hamiltons – and these, Violet thought, are different people from me now. I am a miserable fool of a person. I don't belong with these people anymore. I am shameful, and bad, and when you say my name you should say it in the same breath as the name of James Robinson, or Henry Rippey, or, God help me, George Bertolacci. God help me, I am Mrs George T. Bertolacci. So do not bury me in Mount Hope, bury me in Campo Santo –

The next morning, Violet left her room at about six o'clock. Trying not to wake anybody in the house, she entered her father's bureau and removed his revolver from its box. She wandered outside into the yard with the gun hanging in her hand. Violet sat down in the outdoor water closet, thinking it may as well be here as anywhere else, and shot herself where she hoped her heart was.

OMBUDSMAN REGINA

NOVEMBER 2, 1998: for one day, the dead can find their way back to us. So we guide them with food, drink and blankets we lay out on the altars so they may rest after their long and difficult journey. We decorate their graves with photographs, messages, gifts and things that remind us of them – and them, we hope, of us. The Day of the Dead, Dia de los Muertos, in Old Town is beautiful. When the stars come out, all the stores are still open, their frescoes adorned with candles, calaveras and orange marigolds. There is music, and costumes, and it is lively, and not sad, and my heart beats for the dead hearts that beat no longer.

I don't even care if that sounds pretentious. Here in this crowd I am in wonder and I have no time for irony. I pass all of these gorgeous faces: painted white, thick black makeup around the eyes and the nasal aperture, petals painted over the eyebrows, flowers painted over the chin, teeth stencilled over the whitened lips. I walk with the women who wear black bride veils, red dresses and have giant roses in their hair. We are sisters in mourning. We sing 'Las Calaveras' and rancheras with the band. We take free hot chocolate and churros, leave dishes of pan de muertos at the ofrendas, clink glasses of mezcal, and some of us pray before the crosses. Later tonight we will hold candles and

join in a procession from Whaley House down San Diego Avenue to El Campo Santo Cemetery. But right now we are looking for one catrin, that piece of shit from City Hall who is smug and condescending and ducks all our calls…

“Aw, fuck,” he mutters to his friend when he spots us, “it’s the Ombudsman.”

Her face is painted like a calacas in white and teal, with a series of musical clefs inscribed tastefully in black across her chin. She has on this navy blazer, white roses on the lapels, like she’s dressed up for the conference room of the dead. But I like that. I like that she’s all business, even here. I like that she still finds a way to be intimidating when everyone looks like a skeleton.

“Buenas noches, Councilman,” says Rachel Medina, the Ombudsman, my boss.

“What do you even want, Rachel?” huffs Chris Welch, giving a glance to whatever press secretary or strategist he has by his side. Old Town is in his district, so I think he is smart to be here tonight, and to have made such an effort on his costume. His makeup is pristine; must have been professional.

“Well,” Rachel begins, “I’ve been trying very hard to get in touch with you…”

“I think it’s deeply inappropriate for you to bring up politics at a community event, and, actually, I’m offended by that.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that you’re offended, Councilman, but I’m apparently unable to schedule an appointment with you, and I’ve left several messages with your office that I’m afraid don’t seem to get to you. And that’s troubling, and a problem with your office I encourage you to look into, because when I come to you with problems your constituents are having in your district and you don’t respond, well I’m sure you’re not actually ignoring that information, but there is a perception that you are indifferent. So let’s talk about this now, OK, because there actually happens to be a lot of your constituents here tonight, and I think it would be very good for you to be able to tell them, ‘yes, I am aware of the problem you’re having, and here is my plan to fix it.’”

The Councilman appears resentful and after a moment spares a look in my direction. “Who are you?”

“Marianthe. Ms Medina’s intern.” I stare at him through a white wedding veil that my mom wore. The gold sequin dress is new – well, old, actually, I found it in a Rescue Mission thrift store. The calacas makeup I did myself, looking in a mirror. It’s fine, Rachel’s is better – did she do that herself? I don’t know, six months and I still don’t know her, does she have a husband or a girlfriend or children or…?

“So you’re not even getting paid to wear that?” says the press secretary.

Rachel snaps her eyes to him. “Do you think it’s OK to talk like that?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you think it’s professional behaviour to speak to a co-worker like that?”

“Come on.”

“No, I’ve asked you a question, do you need me to repeat it?”

“No, Miss Medina, it’s not professional,” he deadpans.

“Anyway, Rachel,” Welch cuts in, “what’s the problem, somebody with a broken faucet, or what is it this time, a housing thing, or zoning, or something else like that which could easily wait?”

“None of those, my office has been hearing a lot of complaints, suspect yours has too? about Campo Santo cemetery down the street. It’s not in great shape, and really it hasn’t been since ’93. There’s broken crosses, damaged headstones, broken enclosures. And I’m asking you, because you did say that this year you’d allocate some funding to Park and Recreation for it, and you didn’t do that. It’s only a little bit of money, Councilman, and it’s our history, which I can tell you means an awful lot to the people in your district.”

“Look, OK, it’s a cemetery that hasn’t been used in a hundred years, and who’s buried in it? Scumbags who passed out drunk and got eaten by coyotes, you can’t think of a better use of money? Say, infrastructure? What about a grant, to a local business that does multimedia? Entertainment software, the World Wide Web, Rachel? Have you heard of Myst? How about investing in a local business that wants to make a Myst?”

“Rosa Serrano de Cassidy,” Rachel recites, “married to a city administrator, died 1869. Buried in Campo Santo. Grave marker cracked in half. Don Miguel de Pedrorena, San Diego founding father, buried in Campo Santo, grave destroyed. Thomas Wrightington, original settler, buried in Campo Santo. Headstone broken…”

One person complained to her about this. Disrespectful to the memories of those buried, disrespectful to their families… that’s what he told us last week. Rachel said we would do whatever we could. And I think Campo Santo will get the money, in the end: Welch looks like he doesn’t care enough not to cave. But preserving El Campo Santo, Rachel said in the office this morning, is a losing battle. It’s not the same Campo Santo that it was a hundred, even fifty years ago. It has been decaying, or just changing, ever since it was possible for it to decay. Parts have been given away as roads and streetcar lines. In the ‘30s, it was redone almost entirely, with new crosses, fences and adobe walls installed around the perimeter, all based on one photograph and someone’s memory of what it looked like, or should have looked like. These days there are some voluntary preservation efforts, but the effect is strange, out of time: think replacement grave markers for an unknown wanderer or executed Native American leader printed in

Courier or Times New Roman on plain paper, and sealed in laminate. There is no platonic ideal of Campo Santo left to restore; it has succumbed to entropy as much as the bodies buried within it. But we fight for it anyway, fight to fund some idea of a memory because, well, because we were asked to. Because the person who asked was ignored by his representatives, and there's got to be at least one City employee you can guarantee will act in your interest, not their own, and I'm pretty sure Rachel is the only one who wants to be that person…

Chris Welch caves, grudgingly. He gives Rachel a handshake and a promise that he'll lobby the Mayor to allocate something from her discretionary fund for repairs. Then he and his friend shuffle off into the crowd, with me watching fiercely should they dare look back.

Rachel buys me a beer. As the sky darkens, we sit in the little plaza near Conde Street, lit up by the glow of the candles on the public ofrendas. At the public altars, people leave offerings – bread and candy and cans of Coke – for loved ones buried elsewhere. The Aztecs believed that when we die we go to Mictlan, the underworld, deep beneath the earth. Death was the beginning of a journey, from the first level of Mictlan to the ninth. It is a journey of many years for our souls, which must pass through breakneck rivers, never-ending snowfalls and brutal winds, and over mountains of jagged razors of obsidian… and on one day every year, we have the chance to turn back and visit our families in the land of the living… would I go back through all that for a Coke? I guess that isn't the point.

I push my wedding veil over my head and drink the beer, watching the costumed catrins and catrinas dance to the live band. Rachel cautions me to pay attention to what happens in the wake of the battles we think we won. Fifty years ago, she says, the City built a stretch of San Diego Avenue over a couple square feet of El Campo Santo. They paved over twenty graves, grave markers gone, no acknowledgement, effectively consigning all the bodies buried underneath to historical oblivion. Rachel fought for years to get that rectified and the bodies acknowledged. The City didn't even admit there were bodies until some scientists in '93 used ground-penetrating radar to prove it. Twenty San Diegans buried beneath the road, and what did the City do? Exhumed the body of one man who'd been a state assemblyman in the 1870s, gave him a proper grave, and just left everyone else down there. At the spot in the sidewalk above the bodies they embedded a little brass button into the concrete that said 'grave site,' and that was it. They told Rachel they couldn't have done it without her. As if the City were a terrible Greek god who subverts the wishes of mortals to teach a moral lesson, but whatever the lesson they tried to teach Rachel was, it escapes me. Rachel says, the lesson is don't trust anyone who has power. But I can't agree. I trust her.

Rachel and I don't hang out and drink beer. I work with her Mondays and Wednesdays and beyond those days I don't know what her life is like. I wish I did, because the time I do spend with her is… I was meant to answer her phone and do her filing, and in two months she had me briefing the Mayor about staff misconduct and sitting in on closed Council sessions we weren't invited to. There aren't many people who would ask a

twenty-one year old community college student to write a public statement calling the City of San Diego's chief financial officer misinformed and irresponsible. Rachel does that. She is fearless. I owe her so much.

Rachel finishes her beer and stands up, starts to say goodbye. "Thanks for coming tonight. I know it's a little more than we usually do; I really appreciate it. You can take Wednesday off, if you want to."

"No, it's okay, I mean, it was my pleasure. This was really fun."

Rachel glances down the avenue toward Campo Santo. "Well, think about it. And you should stick around tonight, see more of the festival. If it's your first time, I really recommend it." She insists on giving me cab fare for later.

"I will – actually, um, do you want to stay? Some friends of mine are meeting me here later and we'll probably get a few drinks and something to eat around here, maybe after the procession, do you want to come, it's totally cool if you wanted to…?"

For a second she actually looks startled. "Oh – thank you, I would, but I've got my son at home – maybe another time?"

"Oh, yeah, of course, absolutely, yeah. Yeah, I would love that."

After she's gone, Rachel stops outside the short adobe walls of El Campo Santo, between the sparingly planted palm trees. She crouches and opens her bag, and by the unattended brass marker that says Grave Site, she makes a circle out of marigolds. I am proud of her. And it reminds me: I am beginning to think that the friendships one has with other women might be the most important of all. Men will come and go. I think it is friendships with other women that can always be relied on. And can show me how to be a better woman myself. I walk back alone into the crowd surrounding the public ofrendas, near the little stage where the folk musicians are playing, and I am singing again with my sisters and my brothers, and the history of this moment grips my heart like a vise and I begin to cry. A woman dressed boldly in black and red calls at me over the sound that she likes my outfit and my makeup is fantastic. My mind slips away and wanders to the end of Mictlan, where awaits the traveling soul a windowless house, filled with spiders and owls. In this house sit the Lord and Lady of the Underworld upon their thrones. They are King Mictlantechutli and Queen Mictecacihuatl and they wait for the dead to come to them bearing the gifts with which they were buried. Dia de los Muertos comes from her: Mictecacihutal, goddess of death, whom the Aztecs honored with festivals lasting many weeks, and celebrated – not mourned, because death is the not the end – the memories of their ancestors, the lost and the dead… I feel like she would have liked Rachel… is that silly to think?

Black River

ONE MONTH AFTER Thomas Whaley had settled in San Diego, he took up arms to defend it. His gun was a six-shooter, never fired. Being a merchant, and before that a shipping clerk, he didn't ever have occasion to use the weapon. The fact of the matter was he had never been in a fight at all. That was surely why he was left to guard Old Town, while seventy volunteers went to hunt down the Indians in the mountains.

A thousand Indians. He heard. That would be the Cupeño at a minimum, maybe the Yuma and the Cahuillas too, but the seed of the revolt belonged to the Cupeño, who had the notion that they weren't going to pay any taxes. It started at Warner's Ranch, sixty miles off, they burned that to the ground and killed nine whites between there and the Colorado River crossing.

Whaley had stood watch at the outskirts of Old Town every night for a month. The night sky was pleasant, calm, pretty much standard as night skies go, and Whaley's vigil was interrupted only by a fellow watchman, inebriated, who threw his carbine to the ground and took out his penis. Whaley watched the man urinate in a careless arc over the desert.

"Where are you from?" he called out.

"San Francisco," the stranger shouted, too loudly. "Came by boat."

"I remember you. You're one of the Regulators."

He shouldered his rifle. "We call ourselves the Rangers now."

"And who's in charge of you?"

"What do you mean?"

In December, the volunteer company began to return with news of victory. It seemed that Cupeño had struggled from the start. The Yuma abandoned them wholesale but the Mountain Cahuilla did them one worse. Their chief asked to meet with the Cupeño leader at the village Razon, then tied him up and handed him over to San Diego. His son was there and they shot him. The volunteers shot all the rest of the Cupeños at Los Coyotes and Chino. Some were tried for the burning of the ranch out there in the desert and then shot.

Antonio Garra was the chief's name and it was only him that was remanded to San Diego to stand trial. At dawn, the militia led him in chains up the main street to the jail. Whaley was still on watch and the town's early risers got up to join him. Garra looked to be about fifty years old to Whaley's eye. Confused, probably beaten. Henry Montague, the sheriff, mixed with the on-lookers and confided to them in hushed tones about who

this man Garra was and what he had done. Garra was the one who gave the order, Montague said, the order to – and he slowly spoke the words kill, all, whites and watched for the person to contort their face into the right mask of horror.

“Does he admit to it?” Whaley asked when the sheriff came around to him.

“No, not to any part, but that’s fine, we don’t need it.” The sheriff put a hand on Whaley’s shoulder. “Tom, you know what we need now most of all is for commerce to resume its natural flow.”

So Whaley returned to business at Tienda General, his store on Juan Street. He slept on a cot on the upper story. Christmas passed. In the new year Antonio Garra was tried on charges of murder, treason and theft. He spoke little, but to deny he participated in or ordered the attacks. Nonetheless the jury found him guilty, no surprise, on everything but the treason charges. He was sentenced him to death later that day. January tenth, 1852. And shortly after the verdict came in, Sheriff Montague walked into Tienda General and rapped his knuckles on the doorframe. Whaley looked up. “Get your gun.”

You will understand, of course, that I had to leave, Thomas Whaley wrote his mother from aboard the Sutton, three years ago. The ship sailed from New York on the first day of the year, bound via Cape Horn for California. Only days earlier had Whaley fixed his prospects in the West and arranged passage on the ship. Whaley’s mother and sister had been visiting in Virginia at the time and returned home later that month to find Thomas departed for California gold.

“And I may as well inform you,” he decided to put in the letter, “that I am in love with a young woman in Brooklyn, Anna DeLaunay, and I intend marrying her. She is sixteen or seventeen, of affectionate disposition, innocent as a lamb, and should she succeed in obtaining her education she will make a smart and talented woman. Of course, I must be able to support a wife, &c. I believe that I shall soon be able.”

Whaley, then twenty-five, estimated he could return home after two years in San Francisco with fifty thousand dollars, maybe as much as a hundred. He reckoned the smart money to be made in the gold rush was by establishing a business and trade in general goods. In the hold of the Sutton Whaley carried large consignments – window sashes, hardware, some guns – destined for sale in San Francisco, and intended on petitioning his mother to deliver premium merchandise from his late father’s still-thriving locksmith business. This was a safe calculation for success, thought Whaley, and other different circumstances, he might have been proven correct.

Things, as they tend to, got worse. The voyage around the Horn, some fifteen thousand miles, expected to take no more than four months, lasted closer to seven. One passenger blew his brains out on the deck. One was lost overboard. One was murdered in a brawl in a saloon ashore at Valaparaíso. The Sutton’s novice captain, ever more indecisive and paranoid, confiscated a passenger’s personal journal under the suspicion that he was being made the subject of seditious commentary. If he had tried that with me, thought

Whaley, I would have run him through. During these times, Whaley consoled himself with thoughts of Anna, and examined and re-examined the gold locket he carried that guarded her daguerreotype. At night Whaley watched the sky and wondered whether, at that precise moment, Anna might be at home in New York gazing upon the very same star.

When the Sutton docked at San Francisco, Whaley found he did not care for the city. It was hot, expensive, and subject to the random mayhem of a thuggish gang called the Regulators: thirty men who roamed the streets together committing mindless acts of property damage. Whaley built a general store on Montgomery with a bedroom on the upper floor, optimistic about his investment and the commercial prospects of the locks his mother had sent from New York. Whaley paid dearly to receive the shipment, only to discover that the locks were too good: too up-market and carefully designed for the needs of the miners. In the absence of quick profits, two years in San Francisco stretched into three, and in the third year Whaley's store and home were destroyed by an arson fire. Having watched his prospects collapse to cinders, Whaley, who considered himself temperate, entered a saloon and had a drink. Here, he spied a young man he suspected was a member of the Regulators and, speculating on top of that that the Regulators were responsible for the fire, imagined himself seizing the tufts of the man's hair from behind and bringing his head down hard against the brass rail of the bar. And he could do this. It was entirely up to him. Whaley lost himself in fantasy until the man left with a girl on his arm. That night he wrote a letter sending for Anna. Months later he received a letter from her mother saying no.

Though the two years had long expired, Whaley could not countenance returning to New York a failure, not even to 'start over' back east – as though to admit all the work he had done in California had no meaning. Among the merchants Whaley heard promising news of San Diego, an old Spanish town of three hundred citizens. And thus, with no physical evidence in San Francisco to testify that Thomas Whaley had ever been there, he left the city behind by steamer, headed to that southern settlement to find the riches and the luck that had so far been denied him.

Whaley put up stakes in what they called the Old Town. The state of the market was not, perhaps, as healthy as he had been led to believe: the town did not boast of, but made excuses for, its six stores, two hotels, one doctor and a lawyer's private sitting room that doubled as the town's Catholic church. The certainty of making a fortune in a very short amount of time – what had drawn Whaley to California in the first place – no longer seemed likely to be a very short time at all, or a certainty. But Whaley would succeed here, because of course he must: and so with Protestant work ethic devoted himself whole-heartedly to the business of running of Tienda General, working long and tirelessly, and closing early only once, when the painful duty of executing Antonio Garra fell upon his shoulders.

Three past noon at El Campo Santo Cemetery. Thomas Whaley was one of twelve men in the ad hoc firing squad, all assembled in a loose gang amongst the gravestones. Of course, there was no law on the books to say he had to do this. It would still be possible,

if not respectable, to back out, and Whaley would be a liar if he said he did not see the appeal. But he was asked in the first place for a reason, because in this community he was a kind of, well yes he was a leader in the community, prominent and successful in business. Two months in San Diego and to have that sort of reputation – and dare he say it, prospects – was not a thing to treat lightly. This was messy, inconvenient work but it was the necessary cost of having responsibilities and, frankly, being an adult.

Of the others, he knew Painter, the town doctor, then Stephen Ames, and the three lawyers who practised in Old Town. The others he had seen in the store at one time or another. Each carried their own guns: Colt revolvers, to a man. Whaley had struck a good deal with the law here. The sheriff would purchase ammunition from Tienda General at seventy cents on the dollar so as to reimburse to each of the men. The sheriff always paid in cash, and the favorable rate would ensure future business. Quick returns, small profits: Whaley lived by this.

The old padre – dressed in black, as was the fashion – stood a couple feet away from the firing squad, gloomy. Montague was to escort Antonio Garra to the cemetery, where a freshly dug grave at the edge of the road awaited, the shovel temporarily lodged in an adjacent heap of soil. The idea had been to make Garra dig his own grave: a plan hastily revised after the sentencing, when a debate ensued over whether Garra was too frail to dig a grave in a reasonable amount of time. He probably was, went the consensus. The youngest of the twelve men was volunteered to do the digging; he did this hastily, and with much complaint.

There were only five graves in El Campo Santo, most of them filled in the three years prior to Whaley's arrival in San Diego. From a distance, one would not even perceive it as a cemetery: only a flat tract of land, a few pieces of wood sticking out, stretching uphill into the haze of an empty horizon. Miguel de Pedrorena and Maria Zamorano were two of those interred there. Both of them died at an advanced age of long illnesses. The small plot was intended for the Catholics. Antonio Garra was not known to be a Catholic, but that was not thought to matter very much.

Whaley removed his revolver from its leather holster, and felt the weight to reassure himself that he had loaded it before leaving the store. He nodded confirmation to the others, as if they were observing this process, but each of them looked preoccupied and bored. Montague was late. Whaley thought about the drink he had in San Francisco, and who would craft the grave marker for Garra. What would it say, did anybody know his date of birth, or would Garra's marker end up something like the one nearest Whaley:

THE GERMAN

R.I.P.

…which continued, underneath:

Who is spared in the end from leaving?

Despite his gold and all his jade,

is a man not bound to go there?

Am I a shield set with turquoise?

A stone secured in a mosaic?

Will I ever walk this earth again?

Will they shroud me in fine mantles?

Here on earth, I think of those

who ruled before me, as the place

of sounding drums draws near.

Whaley read almost to the end of the inscription, and turned away out of disinterest precisely as Montague and Garra came into sight down the road. Some of the men and hollered at Garra's slow approach. "Hey – we dug yer grave for ya!" shouted the boy who'd done it. Garra paid him no notice. "Free of charge!"

Montague stopped the Indian in front of the mob. His hands weren't bound. Whaley gripped his gun, wondered if Garra would try something. Probably not: the Indian looked worn out. He seemed sad. Important to remember, thought Whaley, that this sad old man was getting his comeuppance. He was responsible for the death of ten men and would gladly have killed hundreds more. He had his day in court and he was over.

Montague turned Garra by his shoulder and gave him a push in the direction of his grave. "Stand there." Garra took a few steps forward, stopped at the edge of the hole. The men slipped their guns from their holsters and kept a wary draw on Garra. Softly, Garra began to cry. Over that unpleasant noise, Montague recited Garra's crimes. The padre readied himself to deliver whatever administrations were appropriate and Whaley shut his eyes and inhaled sharply –

Tom Whaley you are going to do something horrible. This is a thing against God. Yes he is a sinner and a guilty man but you will take a life which is something no one but God should take. And you Tom Whaley are not a Killer I pray that I may look at myself after this is done and see that I am still an Honest and Good Man, oh God I pray to You grant me that. Tell me it is His will that we must do things that are against God so that we may fully know Him I do believe it I do believe it I do believe it. Tom Whaley you must look him in the eye when you do it there is no honor in it other-wise and ah FUCK just give it to the shit-sack put him in the ground I want to see him dead I want to see his blood

"Will you seek pardon from these men?" said the padre. "Will you seek pardon from God?"

Garra turned and raised his head to meet to the padre and the firing squad. "Gentlemen," he said, and Whaley shot him in the throat. His neck blew open and Garra fell to a knee, away from the grave, spitting up and clutching at the wound. "Well – fire!" yelled Montague, and the rest of the men unloaded their pistols into him, one shot then two each, Whaley firing again, not seeing amongst all the blood where his second shot landed. Garra collapsed onto his back, twitching then not, until he lay still beside his open grave. "Someone push him in," said Montague, and Whaley made himself watch this happen as bile gurgled up into his mouth and he forced himself to swallow that too and not look away. Two men rolled Garra, all burst and hanging pieces, into the hole and looked around for a cloth with which to wipe their hands clean. "That's fine," said Montague. "Back to work." Whaley vomited.

Three nights later, asleep on the top floor of Tienda General, Whaley had a dream. In this dream, he saw a girl, or rather a young woman, walking alone in the dark. There was no sun, nor sky, so it was difficult for him to see her face, but as he waited and looked closely he could see that she had brown hair falling around her shoulders, and eyes just like his own, and in the dream he knew that this was his daughter. She was wandering barefoot in the bottom of a deep canyon, dressed in a white night-gown stained with blood that flowed from a hole in her chest down to the hem. She was cold. Inside the canyon, a sharp wind raced along the walls and falling snow transformed into ice upon

her skin. After some time, the girl came through the canyon to a black river with no bridge in sight. With no other way forward, she waded in cautiously, the water lapping hungrily at her ankles. She walked along the riverbed until the water came up to her neck, and the floor dropped abruptly into a chasm. She kicked and swam towards the far-off shore, the current increasing ever more in force until, out of breath, she was swept underwater. For a moment, she was gone, and the river still. Then she emerged naked by the other shore and walked out onto the bank, the blood streaming down her body in a trail wending back into the void of the river. She dropped to her knees and collapsed upon the stones. For what, in the dream, felt like hours, the girl lay face down in the sand. At some point she was come across by an old dog, who ventured close and nudged her face gently with his nose. A smaller dog, running behind him, stopped as well, and made pleading noises at her. Drowsily, the girl woke up and rose to her feet. Climbing the riverbank, while the dogs watched her curiously, she saw a mountain up ahead, and a winding path strewn with pieces of jagged rock leading around the peak. She nodded and started down the path with the dogs close behind. Whaley looked beyond the mountain, where there lay a long gorge crawling with strange creatures, and further past that to a black lake, larger than the one before, and further past that to where he understood his daughter must go. A windowless house on top of a hill, its insides swarming with flies, worms and spiders, where in the dark a man sat naked on a chair of bones; the flesh rotted away from his chest, fingernails black, and a knife driven through his nose. Whaley drifted towards this man, who sat patiently upon his throne, watching the open door and waiting, breathing softly and raggedly, in and out, and looming as he had loomed ten thousand years before. Then he woke up.

It was not yet dawn. Whaley rolled over in his cot to look out at the stars, and he wondered in that moment if Anna might be seeing the very same thing. Then he remembered that it would be day-time in New York now, and Anna would be rising and eating breakfast and preparing to face the bright day and not looking at any stars at all. More than anything, he longed for Anna, and to hold her in his arms, but Anna was in New York, and New York was very far away indeed.