

Return to Sender: The Search for Home Amidst Transnational Migration

by Rusty Whisman

Darkness shrouds the tropical coast of La Libertad, El Salvador, turning this poverty-stricken city into a playground of gangs and equally corrupt police. Both are menacing to Junio. As he steps from his boss's car, it pulls away en route to the other cooks' homes, leaving him alone and adjusting to the lack of light. Smelling of marijuana and lingering traces of the cornmeal used for pupusas in the kitchen of Lo Nuestro, Junio begins to pace the two and half blocks to where he lives. Teti and their newborn Dani await in the clay-tiled, bat-inhabited room they call home.

A shade over five and a half feet and chunky, Junio is in his thirties, but could easily be mistaken for a man in his early twenties, especially while carrying his backpack as he now does. His receding hair line, usually covered with a hat, and his hidden tattoos, however, suggest a more experienced man.

Before an apartment complex, Junio hesitates as his mind races to overcome his high: to take the dark shortcut down Pasaje Alamendro or to walk around the well-lit corner past where the police loiter. His aversion to police does the deciding for him.

As Junio strides down the right side of the rock-strewn dirt road, giving him a vantage point of his surroundings despite the obscurity, his well-worn shoes kick up pebbles, breaking the quiet of the night with the sound of their collisions. He passes the tortillería and the mechanic's shop separated by mango and cashew trees. Up ahead something moves, but Junio thinks little of it. Maybe it's just the marijuana.

Movement again, and this time Junio knows his mind isn't playing tricks—the tall, skinny frame of El Dulcero, the prodigious candy seller, towers before him. The corners of El Dulcero's mouth reach skyward as a sinister smile forms beneath his moustache. As El Dulcero shoots his hand down for his belt buckle as if to grab a gun tucked at his waist, Junio instinctively turns to reach for his backpack and catches a fleck of green surrounded by white before hearing a moist squishing as a knife plunges into the crook of his neck. Junio falls to the ground, as the green-eyed assailant wildly slashes the kitchen knife across his right cheek, a sweep of agony cutting through to the oral cavity.

After a moment of wavering, the attackers decide the ambush has been a success: “*Lo matamos!*” We killed him. El Dulcero flees, aided by his nearly endless legs, as his partner pulls a bike from the side of the road where it lay waiting for a rapid exit. Junio stretches and yanks the man's leg, causing him to ditch the bike and escape on foot.

With a puncture wound to the neck and the right side of his mouth vented, Junio stumbles to his feet. Holding his neck and spitting the blood that seeps into and accumulates in his mouth, Junio gets on the bike and pedals down Pasaje Alamendro, all the while saying to himself, “*Me voy a morir.*” I'm going to die. Death. What will Dani and Teti do?

The stab to the neck worries him, but surprisingly, there is little pain. As Junio pushes the pedals toward the ground, he makes his way to the police. He is hopeful this time they will serve and protect, and not harass and beat as they oftentimes do. The slit

through his cheek, held to his face where his lips meet, makes it difficult to talk, but he manages to explain his situation to the police.

Abandoning the bike, they put Junio in the back of the four-door Toyota pickup that sits parked on the curb...safety. But where are they taking him? He can't go to the hospital; it is in the territory of Mara Salvatrucha, the gang to which his assailants belong. If they hear he is in the hospital, they will come to kill him. Relief. They would take him to the nearby health clinic.

A week passes. The cheek seals. They push you. You must react. Or you're gone.

Flipper, an MS shotcaller, had made the call for his gang to kill Junio, thinking he was spying for Calle 18, the mortal enemy of Mara Salvatrucha. In reality, Junio was living in Calle 18 territory and working in MS territory, trying to feed Dani and Teti on \$35 a week. He didn't want to get involved. Flipper had seen Junio hanging out with members of Calle 18—his neighbors, with whom he would sometimes smoke weed. Guilt by association. Shot called.

Junio is working out a plan. Lennox is in. Chopa and Spider from the neighborhood, but also from Calle 18, are in. Word comes that El Dulcero and his boys from MS are drinking and smoking in a nearby neighborhood. Junio phones his friend, a small business owner for whom he sometimes collects wood as a favor. They talk and Junio secures a ride. A short time later, he shows up. "I don't want to know anything about it," he says to Junio.

The four men are dropped off 200 feet from the place where MS is rumored to be hanging out. Confidence and anger combine to form a feeling of invincibility. The metaphor of the dragon's den doesn't work; there are too many here. The darkness offers them a bit of protection.

"That's him," Junio says, pointing to El Dulcero. Lennox pulls the .38. Click. Click. Empty. The gun of El Dulcero is out and Junio lunges toward it, arm outstretched just in time to receive the bullet exiting the chamber. The bullet tears through the base of his thumb, and the surrounding skin is littered with gunpowder, searing his flesh as it cools. Another shot. El Dulcero is down. Run!

The chase separates the quartet. Junio escapes to the beach, trying to keep himself upright with all the rocks and the steady stream of dark color that flows from his hand. Blood all over his clothing, lungs burning, Junio climbs over fences and runs through yards. Only four blocks until home. Shit. Cops.

They pick him up and drive him to a nearby cemetery. Foreshadowing? No, they want bribes, so Junio offers them \$100. They let him go but tell him not to go home. They will collect their money or arrest him the next day. Junio goes to Burro, who tells Junio he will take him to a safe place. They arrive at a palm hut. Tiny and unstable, it is safety nonetheless. Junio tries to calm his racing heart and his mind, and the bleeding from his thumb all at the same time. Teti will worry. Sleep comes slowly.

Flipper is the next target, and this time Junio goes it alone. He hears that Flipper is smoking crack at a place owned by La Jefa, a woman for whom Junio had worked. He waits. Flipper emerges from the crack den in the morning, high and unaware. Junio waits. Flipper haphazardly makes his way home. As he takes his next step, Junio releases three bullets from the chamber, one entering Flipper's head. The lifeless body lies on the ground between shade and the morning light.

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In 1978, on the eve of the Salvadoran Civil War that would officially last until 1992, eight-year-old Junio enters the United States, sitting in the passenger seat of a van driven by a *coyote*, a smuggler of illegal immigrants. Behind him sits Carla, his younger sister. Behind her, in the trunk of the van, Junio's aunt Martha lays, waiting to be freed from her temporary confinement. A lax Border Patrol agent waves the van through, and it proceeds northward on the 5.

A family reunion usually takes place at a park under a banner proclaiming the title of the event. Hamburgers, hotdogs, and potato salad. Distant relatives, having only met once or twice before, hesitantly decide between a hug and a handshake for their flesh and blood. This family reunion takes place at a San Pedro gas station, with much kissing and hugging. It has been two years since Junio has seen his dad (in reality his stepfather), and a few months since he has seen his mom. The joy of the reunion abates when the *coyote* demands his money. A beat-up Ford Falcon takes them back to their single-room apartment in Hollywood.

By 1990, there were an estimated 700,000 Salvadorans in the United States, fleeing a civil war that ultimately killed 75,000 civilians. Most of these killings were committed by soldiers trained or supplied by the U.S. Los Estados Unidos, ironically, was the country where refugees came. More specifically, they came to Los Angeles, with its seemingly endless opportunities, unadulterated prosperity, and sizable Spanish-speaking population. With Jimmy Carter's 1980 legislation that granted temporary asylum to people with a "well-founded fear of persecution," many came to the U.S. legally, but the majority of Salvadorans were undocumented.

The melting pot serves as a metaphor for idealized ethnic relations in the United States, creating a stew of ethnicities and religion. Beef, potatoes, carrots, onions lend flavor to one another and to the dish as a whole, nourishing the nation in the process.

Junio is twelve years old. His dad, Herman, has increased his drinking, taking sips from a fifth of Jack Daniels while on breaks during painting jobs for Best Western. Junio's mom has been receiving the brunt of the drinking, sometimes ending up with blue rings around her eyes, requiring an explanation to the owners of the houses she was cleaning. Junio, under the direction of his mother who spoke limited English, would explain to them that she had been robbed so as not to worry them. Arguments more heated, beatings more violent, Herman decides to leave for El Salvador. Rent, food, clothing; they need more income, especially with Junior about to be born.

Economic hardships, antagonistic relationships with U.S.-born Latinos, worries about performance in school are just a few of the issues that young Salvadorans face in their new home. Family life only adds problems, with a burgeoning culture gap on top of the generation gap between parents and children. If the U.S. is considered a melting pot of stew, young Salvadoran immigrants are the carrots left in the bowl of a picky eater.

The street, abstract yet real, offers solace. Some choose gangs; Mara Salvatrucha and Calle 18 (referring to L.A.'s 18th Street) have their roots here in Los Angeles. A gang offers protection, drugs, tattoos, and most importantly, a sense of acceptance. Although there are gangs in his neighborhood, Junio opts for drugs without affiliating with gangs. A friend at school tries to help with his monetary situation, "Why don't you start selling dimes?"

“What the hell is a dime?” Junio asks.

After school, his friend takes him to Lillian Way, a street five blocks away from Bancroft Middle School. Here, Junio meets Jarrocho, who shows him the magic of the dime bag. Holding the tiny, glinting tinfoil packet filled with ten dollars worth of marijuana, Jarrocho steps into the street and quickly fires off a round of “Dime, dime, dime!” at an approaching car. The car stops, takes the bundle of weed and gives him ten dollars. It’s that easy? Junio begins to skip class, and the money rolls in. Two or three hundred dollars a day, more than enough to buy a few pairs of Vans and help his mom out.

No trouble from the police except for a warning, but his mom finds out. “I don’t want you doing that anymore.” A mother’s disappointment; there’s nothing worse. “Why don’t you teach me how to do it?” she says. She becomes involved in the process, diversifying and selling cocaine. Junio takes some to his friend Jim Johnson, a mechanic who fed Junio’s appetite for knowledge of Volkswagen Bugs. Cooking up cocaine with baking soda, Jim also gave Junio his appetite for crack. They would stay in the shop for a week at a time, continuously high, experiencing what users describe as “whole-body orgasms.” A mixture of pure ecstasy and living hell, crack takes control of Junio’s life from the first hit. Highs followed by their inevitable crashes are put to an end. His mom tells her fifteen-year-old son to go to El Salvador to clean up. For Junio, war-torn El Salvador is safer than the crack-induced horrors of the streets of L.A.

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Returning to the States at age seventeen, it is hardly the return of the prodigal son recognizing the error of his ways. Teenage hormones at their peak, Junio gets involved with multiple women, who themselves are involved with multiple men. Love triangles shatter like the glass of windshields. Junio shoots out of the window of a car at the car of his rival suitor. Nobody is hurt. He spends his eighteenth birthday in prison.

Tattooed and artificially aged by his time at Ironwood State Prison, Junio gets his freedom in 1990, a sex-starved twenty-one-year-old. He meets Sara and they marry within three months. Junio’s probation officer comes to the wedding, and later cuts him loose, realizing that he was not going to make trouble. In the next two years Junio and Sara have two kids, Bryan and Jasmine.

Friends had been warning Junio that Sara was a gold-digger. Junio was moving between jobs at Uniworld delivering fish and driving a truck for Staples, trying to make ends meet for his new family. He would arrive home to find new items in their apartment. Junio would see less money in his account than he thought he had. Sara was giving money to her family to help them out, but when Junio wanted to help his sister buy books for her nursing program, she wouldn’t allow it. Strife over money emerged as a recurrent theme in their relationship. An ultimatum: Junio tells her to get a job if she wants to keep spending like she is. The next day, Junio returns from work to an apartment empty except for his clothes. They had gone to Las Vegas.

After a brief period in Oregon, Junio longs for his kids and goes to Las Vegas to mend the relationship with Sara. For six months, happiness. Sara helps financially and life is good. But money again becomes a problem, and Sara takes the kids and moves. Junio cannot find them this time, and sinks into depression. He asks his boss Donny, a

speed addict from Arkansas, to get some rocks for him. After ten years without crack, Junio finds his old friend consoling, taking hits in the bathroom while at work.

He returns to Hollywood in a stolen Dodge, and begins to live with his mom, still smoking crack. He's living under his mother's roof, but feels alone. With nobody to care for him but sixteen year-old Jennifer, he begins to get clean.

Junio knocks on the door, ready to begin a new chapter. He has been rehearsing what to say to Jennifer's father. He wants to be with her, and to care for their child that is on the way. The door opens, and he starts to explain. He is told to wait, and the door shuts. Minutes later, flashing lights, cold metal around the wrists.

A few weeks pass. Junio looks into the eyes of Jennifer's father during visiting hours. Phoebe has been born. He's made a mistake, he says. He tried to withdraw the charges. Too late. They're sending Junio back to El Salvador.

His welcome in the United States had ended, as it had for an estimated 20,000 Central Americans deported between 2000 and 2004. They are sent back to countries they know little about, bringing their lives of crime and gangs to an already unstable region. Leaving the gang-run barrios and the prison system of the United States, the tattooed generation returns to a culture that is not ready to accept them.

In El Salvador, tattoos are feared, and tattoos are discriminated against. They signify a history of crime and gangs. If an employer sees a tattoo, you are fired on the spot, as happened to Junio on one occasion. Police target you with handcuffs ready; it is rumored that for every arrest an officer makes, he will get two days off from work.

Discrimination and harassment are annoying, but La Sombra Negra (The Black Shadow) is something different. During the Civil War, these death squads derived much of their support from U.S. military aid to El Salvador. Although not officially condoned by the Salvadoran government, they were active as governmental repression agents, indiscriminately killing leftist guerillas and civilians. With their own brand of *limpieza social*, or social cleansing, remnants of these paramilitary groups now prey on criminals, homosexuals, gangs, and those suspected of being in gangs. Between December 1998 and January 1999 there were reportedly a dozen killings of gang members in this country which has less-than-thorough investigations of its homicides.

When rumors circulate about the extensive campaigns of sweeping patrols of the death squads, those with tattoos seek safety. Some try to get rid of their tattoos; there are reports of tattoo removal attempts using clothing irons, acid, and cheese graters. Others go into hiding. Junio found his safe haven in the hills outside La Libertad. He couldn't survive on only beans for the month he spent in the hills, so he did some hunting. Snake, armadillo, and opossum supplemented the beans. Teti came to visit when she could, staying with Junio for a few hours before returning home. Welcome home, Junio.

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Nearing thirty-eight, Junio bears scars on his right cheek, his thumb, and his back and armpit. The wounds on his back and armpit come from a single bullet, which tore through his chest cavity, hitting two ribs before exiting. Damage to his lungs, exacerbated by a nurse's unwillingness to work on him because of his tattoos, prevents Junio from taking a deep breath without pain.

He, Teti, and three-year-old Dani live in Pasadena in a single-bedroom unit in a house owned by his employers, Joe and John. A big screen TV, which sometimes doesn't turn on, a computer with the dresser it sits on, and an outdoor table set have been given to him by various people. A collection of model VW Bugs adorns a shelf. Pictures: a framed one of newborn Dani with plump cheeks and narrow slits for eyes; one of Jasmine and Bryan is unframed and beginning to curl. A tiny kitchen and a bathroom give way to a bedroom with two full-sized beds pushed together, which dominate the room.

Joe and John have been saints and demons to him. Junio works for them as a handyman in a coffee-colored house, painting and repairing the aging building. It has been renovated and turned into an office space for various attorneys, one of whom charges \$400 an hour. Junio makes \$480 a week. Of that money, \$350 goes back to Joe and John for rent and repayment of the \$13,000 debt he incurred when he had Teti and Dani brought to the United States by a *coyote*.

Grocery stores, while nearby, are expensive. To save money, Joe lets Junio take his behemoth of a spare truck to Grand Central Market near downtown L.A. The 110 is a winding, potholed drive, slaloming down into the heart of the city. Junio drives without a license in a truck that is not his in a country from which he has been deported. A minor accident, a broken taillight, or an inkling of police suspicion could result in his expulsion to El Salvador, where he is wanted for murder.

Diapers are expensive. Dani can't eat that much solid food because it makes her constipated. Will there be enough food at the end of the week? Teti might be able to find some work soon. They want to get married, but her illegal status and his illegal status with prior convictions prevents this. No slip-ups, or they'll be back in El Salvador with a prison term waiting for Junio.

A left turn into the adjoining parking structure of the market. Push the button for a ticket and the bar rises. Parking in the cramped complex with the white beast is like playing Operation, but with higher stakes. No scrapes, no brushes. The tension breaks when the car is parked and Junio exits. Reaching the elevator, Junio pushes the arrow pointing up a few times. Once inside, he hits the desired floor level, and tap, tap, tap on the close door button.

Advertised as "Los Angeles' oldest and largest open-air market," Grand Central Market is in a multi-story building and has a roof over it. Concrete walkways sprinkled with sawdust separate the plethora of ethnic vendors, some under neon signs. Junio puts fruits and vegetables quickly into individual plastic bags before checking out with an old Asian man. An exchange in Spanish yields a pound of dried fruit mix; Salvadoran pupusas from the pupusería; Peruvian-style ceviche from Maria's Fresh Seafood; boiled ham from an Eastern European man. Junio negotiates the cultural landscape of the market with ease, resulting in a heavy bag for \$25 in ten minutes.

Back to the elevator and the tapping of the buttons continues. At the car, he realizes, he forgot to get validated. \$1.50 for every fifteen minutes; it's too much. More button tapping, a quick stamp of the ticket, and back to the car.

No frills and no luxuries except for the safety of his family. He didn't feel like drinking this New Years' Eve, and a bottle of liquor given to him as a gift remains unopened atop the TV. A quiet, humble existence. He thinks about the past and what he's done, of his children, and the uncertainty of the future. Above Junio's right temple,

barely visible through the shortly-cropped hair, there is the blue ink of a prison tattoo. It reads "Bad Luck." Dani, chubby cheeks releasing squeaks of inaudible Spanish, climbs the chair where Junio is sitting and crawls into his lap. She rests her tiny head of light brown hair against his chest.

Some of the names in this story have been fictionalized

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