Rodolfo had known her when she was just a little bird, just another Juarez-child with a face like a lily pad and lips like a scuttle fish, whose parents brought her across the border, to New Mexico during the picking months, a little strawberry on life’s vine. He was only two or three years older, a boy from the valley and a prodigy of misdemeanors and small theft, but he had hankered after her even then, watching her work, watching her drudge in dry fields, and slipping her the bits of scrap metal he had wound into a necklace that would, of course, have been death to wear. And then she had bloomed into the thing she was, a beauty among beauties and a tender little fig. There was nobody like his Nélida. She was scarcely bigger than she had been when she was twelve, a little pocket elf in derelict tennis shoes, who could outrun any man she met, outfox any pig that tried to bag her, and traffic across forlorn deserts and mesas more narcotics than anyone, man or woman. He didn’t know what had happened to her parents, where they had gone, and he had asked around among his circle, if only because he thought that he would observe the rituals of courtship if he could, and put in a formal petition for their daughter’s hand. But nobody knew what had become of them. She might have remained a rambling fruit picker, but she had been initiated into the world of drug running, and he had graduated, from the college of his humble days, to that of a seller, a distributor of powdered jubilants and smokeable desserts.

Was there anyone as beautiful and as kissable as his imponderable Nélida?

“Her breasts are too small,” his friend Senal said, counting out little white bags at the kitchen table of their shared apartment. “They’re like sad little poodles. Who would want to pet them?”

“They are not like poodles,” Rodolfo cried.

“They’re like teacups.”

“They’re not like teacups,” he bellowed.

She was a night-blooming desert flower and he was an insomnia-riddled bee.

He had known, since first seeing her, that she was his other, and his dreams, for twelve years now, had been nothing but scenes from a future
happiness whose backdrops were incurably vague. He envisioned impossible mornings and afternoons with her cuddled like a moon-stilled coyote in his arms, cooing to her the songs that he had written, because, of course, there were songs. How could there not be?

At thirteen he had heard Bob Dylan scraping his way through some cocaine lover’s ballad on a radio stolen from the electronics department of Sears. He had wanted to write something of his own, something more applicable to his situation, and had gone scavenging for guitars. But there were no guitars. Not in that city anyhow. So Rodolfo was forced to settle for the nearest approximation.

“It’s called a mandolin,” the clerk at the music store had told him snidely.

“Okay.”

“You going to buy it, chief?”

“No,” Rodolfo said sincerely. “But there’s a fire outside in one of your trash cans.”

“What?”

And so he started writing long love songs that even the most devoted mistress would have found insufferable, songs with triple rhymes and ingenious similes, comparing his love to a burning tire and so forth, that Nélida never heard, though everyone in town did.

“Shut the fuck up,” his neighbor, a Pharaonic scrooge told him.

The instrument was like a bucket of thimbles but it conveyed the bare sense, the adumbration and silhouette of his affliction, and he had been working for years on a hymeneal number, already sixty verses long, that he would play at their wedding. He had carried it with him, from job to job and from home to home, for years now, in the event that an occasion and an opportunity would arise when he could play for her. She was constantly moving and, on the occasions when he would meet her at the border for a pick up, sometime after midnight in the mountains, in a black pickup truck with new rims, she was in too much of a hurry and too wary of patrolling policemen to have consented to a proclamation of his unblinking adoration. Which was a pity, because there was no better stage than the southern foothills and no better time than midnight. He wasn’t always dispatched to meet her, because he was primarily, by twenty-two, a salesman for one of the smaller narco-traffickers in the state, but he petitioned to meet her as often as he could. He packed the mandolin in its little carrying case and drove the two hours for their rendezvous, listening on the way to country music that came and went in giggling static.
Nélida came with a handful of other Mexican moon-children, some of them women, some of them men, and divested themselves of their grifted goods into the unbuttoned seats and floorboards of Rodolfo’s truck as quickly as they could.

“Nélida—”

“Yes?”

“How are you?” he asked uncertainly. He blushed brighter than a pumpkin and prayed that she couldn’t see.

“Busy, Rodolfo.”

“Of course you are.”

“We’ll be back in three weeks,” she told him. “You’ll tell Juan Diego that I said hello?”

“Of course, Nélida.”

“And you’ll drive carefully?”

“Of course, Nélida.”

“There are more cops on the roads now than there were before, and what good will you be in prison?”

“Nélida—”

“Yes?”

“When will you marry me?”

“Who has time for marriage, Rodolfo?”

He was a bully for her love, to the point that he was a nuisance to patrons and a risk for his employer, the eminent Juan Diego, and he canvassed for her during his sales like a Mormon for Jesus.

He confused people who were already anxious of prosecution and jitters with withdrawals, as he asked them if they had heard of his Nélida. Who? they would ask. Nélida, he would answer: She is a cosmic blossom and a high steeper than anything you have ever sniffed. How much? they would ask. For what? he would reply. For ten grams. Of what? Of Nélida. Buddy, he would say, waxing full with offense at this heathen irreverence toward the eucharist of his mass and the saint of his shrine, the holy Nélida is not for sale and it is fortunate, for you, that I’m not carrying my gun because I swear upon her bridesmaids that I would play Mexican roulette with your head. Mexican roulette? they would ask in shivers. With all the barrels loaded. Dude, don’t wig out on me, I just want a pinch of the shit. Is it new? I won’t tell nobody where I got it from. How much for ten grams? Nélida is not for sale! I’ll give you the money tomorrow, man. She isn’t a drug, Rodolfo would reply. What the fuck, man? the junkie would say, more thoroughly disturbed and shaken than he had been that morning, when he
discovered that somebody had pilfered his crank and taken a bite out of his love seat.

The patrons who didn’t think that Nélida was a drug disputed her allegedly incomparable beauty, and told him that they had a girl who was twice as head-turning as any folded rug rat that Rodolfo could pull out of a Mexican thunderbrush. They had a whole harem of girls who had won pageants in twelve states, who had breasts that stood up like soldiers at roll call and nipples more exquisitely spun than Belgian chocolate, and they were taller than California redwoods.

“Yeah,” Rodolfo would reply, “but do they make you want to pick up a mandolin and climb into its belly?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

Juan Diego, the narcotics dealer extraordinaire, who supplied seven counties alone with fairy dust and mollified the pains of innumerable junkies, relied, of course, upon the megalithic efforts of Nélida and he had himself recruited her from the strawberry and grape fields of the New Mexican countryside, but he was tired of hearing her name in the mouth of Rodolfo, his cloyingly love-struck but otherwise reliable front man. Juan Diego was unusually clean. He had never tried the product he shuffled through the weary noses of his clients and he wasn’t associated or in collusion with any of the gangs of the Southwest, which had made him almost blissfully anonymous to authorities. Empty cartons of orange juice were piled up in the corner of his office in a trash can, which he brought to the recycling plant once a week.

“I drink it for the calcium,” he told Rodolfo. “And I take folic acid supplements for the heart.”

“Okay.”

“Do you take folic acid, Rodolfo?”

“No…”

“Take a bottle when you leave. There’s a box in the kitchen.”

“Okay.”

“Rodolfo.”

“Mr. Diego?”

“I’m getting complaints.”

“About the product, sir? Emilio assured me, when I—”

“About you, Rodolfo.”

“Me?”

“Don’t bother my clients with litanies of the virtues of Nélida.”

“Mr. Diego—”
“They don’t want to be frisked for their dissent from your madness—”
“Mr. Diego—”
“Or harassed with encomiums—”
“Mr. Diego—”
“Or accosted with amorous hyperbole—”
“Mr. Diego—”
“They want their joy stick. That’s it. Got it?”
“Yes.”

Rodolfo had been given no indication that Nélida’s reciprocation was imminent, that he would be able to grab her fox’s body and rinse her with his kisses, but her repeated dissents were hardly caveats, for him, of failure. The twelve years of his pining were merely prelude and prologues to something even greater than his four- and five-sentence conversations with her every couple months. He was refreshingly free of the lover’s melancholy that crippled so many hearts and perforated so many spirits, but he had more than his share of the lover’s madness.

He never got himself a tattoo of her name on his chest or any emblem, for that matter, in ink on his body of the unresting and unremitting adoration he had for her, because that seemed perhaps too obvious and too weary a gesture, but he dragged Senal along with him to the border to burn their names on the mountainside. She would, he explained, see it on her way to the drop off and it was a purging, in any case, of what he wouldn’t purge in a barbed wire heart on his chest. They brought gallon upon gallon of gasoline in little red refueler cartons and dripped it in lettered patterns on the brush that faced the meeting point, but they had never executed or attempted a controlled burn before and the alphabet declared war upon itself. Letter attacked letter in furious lisps and swipes until the entire hillside was blazing with the misadventure of Rodolfo’s love letter.

They barely escaped with their lives and when they met Nélida and the other mules they were already four hours late. Rodolfo’s eyebrows were singed and his pants had been frayed by fire.

“There’s a fire in the foothills,” Nélida said with concern, unloading baglets of nose candy into the truck.

“I tried to spell your name out in burning bushes,” Rodolfo explained.

“So the police will catch me?” she said with incredulity. “You want to advertise my name to the authorities?”

“I want to bind you like a bundle of wood and immolate myself on your pyre. I want to be the Isaac to your Abraham, Nélida, the Christ to your cross. The spreading fire in the foothills is a metaphor, Nélida.”
“Who has time for metaphors, Rodolfo?”

At twenty-five, twelve years after first seeing her with her picker’s basket, he had taken to stealing cars to supplement his narco-trafficking income and was saving money in order to buy his love a house in the desert, where they could linger around beds and on brick floors. He planned to put fireplaces in every room of the house and curve the roof to make the house look like a fox’s den. He discovered the locked car garage of a retired physician in Taos stocked with the retired models of Firebirds and Mercedes and Bentleys, and he grifted the coveted collection for three months until the only things left were spare wheels and canisters of sealant. Naturally it made the news and Senal insisted on taping, against Rodolfo’s protests, the tearful interviews of the doctor and his wife.

“It’s like we have lost sixteen sons,” the man wept. “My god … ”

“I just hope they’re safe,” the wife sobbed. “We love you my darlings! Oh god, I hope my babies are safe!”

Rodolfo was going to sell the last car, a silver 1960 MGA 1600 Roadster with limited edition tweed seats, to a dealer in Albuquerque, but Senal had argued that it was too beautiful a thing and too much like a getaway car to part with.

“You cannot sell this car, Rodolfo.”

“But what will we do with a getaway car?”

“Who knows? Does it matter? Rodolfo please, I’ve never asked you so keenly for anything before—”

“You stripped to your skivvies and begged me on both knees for five dollars last week.”

“I needed a carton of milk! And I was high, Rodolfo. It doesn’t count when I’m high.”

“You have a joint in your hand, Senal!”

“Sweet merciful Jesus, Rodolfo,” he cried out, taking off his shirt and his socks and prostrating himself before his friend, “you cannot sell that car.”

So when the news came from Juan Diego one morning that his Nélida had been nabbed by cops during a bust at the border, and had been sent to a women’s prison in northern New Mexico, Rodolfo’s heart leapt. Juan Diego told him that the band of border patrollers, who had been frustrated in their attempts to catch her innumerable times before, had singled her out for arrest and pursued her with diabolical ferocity. She had been, Juan Diego said, among narcs whose fagged speed was a liability to him, among kids who couldn’t outpace a tied goat, and yet the authorities, instead of bagging four or five slow mules, megalomanically pursued one in

Lewis 11
particular. She could run like a rabbit and, after chasing her on foot and failing to catch her, the police had retired to the cars and pursued her in those. After a quarter of an hour of desert chase Nélida’s pants got snagged on a bramble and she tripped horribly. The cops jumped out, handcuffed her, and threw her in a canvas bag like a stray cat.

“Nélida!” her companions cried out from the distance, as she was hefted through the night toward the back of a car. “We’ll pray for you!”

But a fog had begun to descend on the desert, it had started to rain, and she could only barely make out the night echo of her name.

“I will meet you back here in a month,” she replied defiantly from the confines of her bag.

“What did she say?” one of the stragglers asked.

“I think she said she has a golden tooth,” one replied.

“What am I going to do?” Juan Diego cried. “There is nobody that can work like she works, or run like she runs, and without her to lead, the rest of my runners are like beached whales, like buried ostriches, Rodolfo. They were a mile from the border and I would bet you the rest of the sops couldn’t even make it back to Mexico. And now my little homing pigeon is caught and tagged! My little Nélida!”

“She’s my little Nélida,” Rodolfo corrected, but Juan Diego paid him no attention. They were in Juan Diego’s office, amidst cups of unfinished orange juice and unconsumed vitamins and supplements that the crime boss had been too distraught and pained to take.

“What am I going to do, Rodolfo? How am I going to make money without her? She was my little lace angel! My precious blow cherub! And now she’s been locked up, Rodolfo, and for what?”

The newspaper, for one thing, said what. Sprawled out across his desk was the previous day’s paper, which, in a tone of indubitable disapprobation, asserted that the semi-notorious Mexican drug mule, Nélida Luisa de La Luna, had been arrested the previous week in a border bust that had been met with much ballyhooing among New Mexican minutemen, the Department of Immigration, and the governor, who was up for reelection in November. She had not, the Albuquerque Journal reported, been found with any traces of cocaine on her, which had come as a surprise to Juan Diego—“She must have thrown it away during the chase,” he reflected—but authorities, now that they had her, were eager to keep her, and she was charged with seventeen counts of faulty or smudged documentation, two counts of suspected profanity, one count of jay walking, nine counts of panhandling and, because it seemed to close so nicely a case of stolen
sneakers from a locker two weeks previously in Santa Fe, one count of theft and intended emotional malice, and slapped with two consecutive life sentences of hard labor in a women’s prison without the possibility of parole. One of the officers who had helped make the arrest, who had, in fact, been the one to help hoist her into the backseat of the cop car, was afforded prominent space for commentary and he stressed how much of a relief it was to finally have her.

“She will serve out the terms that she has, in gross transgression of the law, earned for herself, and she will be an example to other traffickers,” he explained.

Juan Diego wept like a woman wronged and splayed himself upon the newspaper as though it were a crucifix. His tears made salted blotches on the pages and Rodolfo scrambled to rescue the relevant article and the accompanying picture of Nélida in her newsprint prison blouse from the threatened deluge. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail, as it always was, and she had on her fox’s face a look of devious plotting.

“They’ve put her away for life, Rodolfo! Her cell mate will barbecue her! She will be smoked like Florida snow, Rodolfo!” Juan Diego cried.

“And I will be ruined!”

“You won’t be ruined, Juan Diego.”

“Why aren’t you weeping, Rodolfo? How can you stand there like a traffic sign and blink at me so mutely? Why aren’t you rending your garments, Rodolfo? Your love is incarcerated in a chicken coop and you will never see her again!”

“I will see her again—”

“You won’t, Rodolfo!”

“My love,” he cooed, ignoring the exclamations of his boss, “is clipped and tethered.”

And she was. Nélida was at long last confined to one place, a shared cell in a women’s prison in a city that Rodolfo could find on a map, the city moreover of his birth. He had, it was true, only lived there for a matter of months before being moved to a city in the southern mountains, and he had no proper memory of the place, but the fact that his love, his life, his heart’s turtledove, had been sentenced to spend the rest of her life in the shadows of the town that had marked his entrance was, he thought, no small coincidence. It was a prodigious closing of the circle. Nélida was no longer a vagabond, a student of the winds, and a rummager, and Rodolfo’s heart pulsed endlessly at the thought that she was, for the moment, enclosed and confined. He had suffered, in his time, relentless pains
and jags in reflections on where his Nélida was. Was she in Mexico City? Was she in Léon? Or Chihuahua? Where for the love of all things holy, he had interminably moaned, was his Nélida?

But now, God be praised and the angels in heaven be blessed, she was somewhere. He didn’t take pleasure in the fact that she had been caught, that she was an inmate in a forlorn city whose only glory was a car dealership that could boast of being the largest in the state, all the less because he knew that she wouldn’t be there long. He knew in his heart of hearts that there was no amount of chicken wire and concrete that could keep his love for long, that it was only a matter of time before she rushed her keepers and broke her leash, and that the time he had was a heavenly bequest. He considered her reputed promise to be back out in the desert a good one and prescient, and he suspected that he wouldn’t be given any more.

“But I don’t want to go,” Senal complained, when Rodolfo told him he would be helping him spring his Indian summer from prison.

“You have no choice.”

“But if she’s going to spring herself in a month anyways—”

“Then she’ll be gone again. If I’m the one to free her she will be eternally indebted—”

“Rodolfo!”

“God is giving me a gift, Senal! I have to be there to accept it.”

“Why would she owe you anything if she herself knows that jail breakers are superfluous, Rodolfo?” he asked, growing sagacious under chemical stimulation. His eyes were crimson and ringed with more circles than Saturn.

“You don’t know anything, Senal!”

“You’re ghost-busting, Rodolfo. She’s a phantom: you can’t have her. You’re worse than the Quijote! Nélida is the earth’s beauty mark, a desert-specter, and she’s more elusive than truth in the mouth of a politician. There are more women than are dreamt of, Rodolfo, in—”

“There is no other woman besides Nelida!”

“She’s a coke bug, Rodolfo.”

Of all of them, this last of Senal’s tropes cut him the most, and for the first time in his life Rodolfo shuddered at the idea of an illusion burrowing under his skin, but he shuttered back.

“We’re going to free her, Senal. Grab the shovels.”

“We have to dig?”

“I’m driving.”
It took nine and a half hours to drive to the last outpost of the state in a stolen car that was as conspicuous as a prostitute in a headlamp. Rodolfo had brought with him, of course, the mandolin and sheets upon sheets of notational music. They passed the hospital, now defunct and dilapidated, that he had been born in twenty-five years and seven months before, and he said that they should cross themselves as they passed for good luck.

“Cross what?” Senal cried.

The moon was high and ripe when they arrived at the women’s prison but, despite the fact that daylight had retired hours ago, it was wiltingly hot and Rodolfo kicked himself for not bringing bottles of water. They had, by his math, a week to dig a hole from the outside gate of the prison to Nélida’s cell, the precise placement of which he didn’t yet know. He handed Senal a shovel.

“Can’t we get something to eat first? I want an enchilada.”

“No.”

“So we’re just digging in a straight line or what?”

Rodolfo worked tirelessly with little effect and he wondered if he shouldn’t have brainstormed another route or method of ingress, but within an hour Senal spotted something small, the size of a June bug he said, slip over the barbed-wire fence twenty feet away and the alarms in the watchtower suddenly sounded.

The trumpet band in Rodolfo’s heart struck up their music as the silvered little she-wolf slunk into sight.

“Nélida!” he cried out.

The guide lights of the prison swiveled on their axis in search of the escapee, in search of the jailbird, and added to the sudden hullabaloo were three rifle shots in the distance, as a guard mistook a rabbit leaping across the prison yard for a convict.

“Thank god,” Senal exclaimed with immeasurable relief. “I was getting tired,” and he threw his shovel down.

“Nélida,” the love-splintered Rodolfo said, “you are a week early!”

“Rodolfo,” she replied with breathtaking equanimity, “you are a week late. You have a car with you?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll drive.”

“Of course, Nélida.”

The bitch sirens of the prison roared and the lamps spun epileptically, illuminating nothing in particular.

“I’ve brought my mandolin, Nélida,” he blushed.
“Yeah?”
“Yeah.”

Bloodhounds were presently added to the hunt and they yelped and whined upon their release, but they quickly found the bullet-slumped hare among the parched lawns and satisfied themselves with *that*, to the immeasurable agony of the guards.

“Senal,” she said. “How are you?”
“I’m hungry.”
“We’ll eat in Peñasco.”
“Nélida?” Rodolfo said.
“Yes, Rodolfo?”
“I love you fearfully.”
“Oh, Rodolfo, who has time for love?”