

By Gretta Penélope Hernández*
Illustrations by Armando Fonseca**

Of All My Daughters

Living with a bloody snout is no big deal, if you've developed a taste for brawls and revenge.

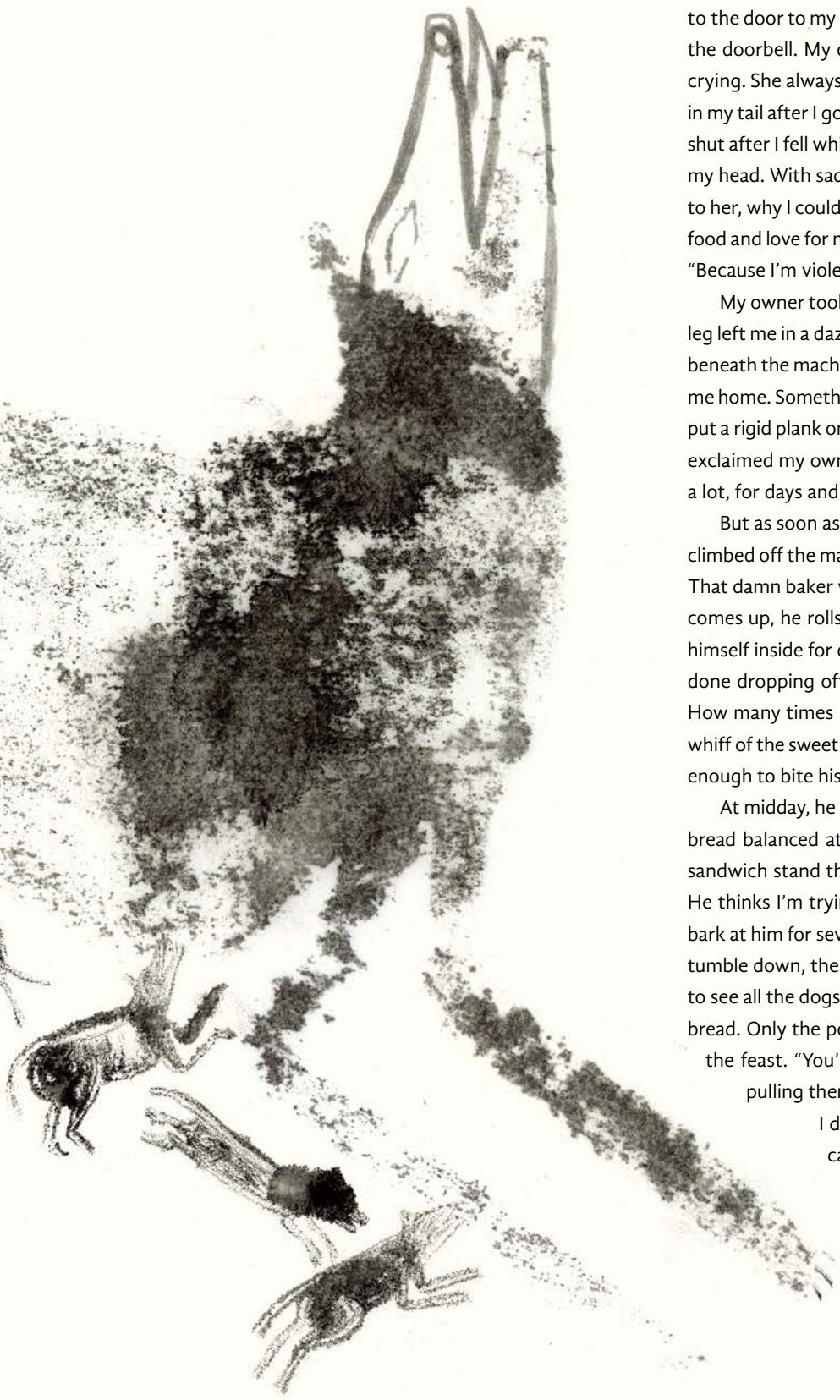
"Of all my daughters, you're the most violent," my mother sentenced. That's how she gave me the mark of Cain. Little had the blows from my first owners or the viciousness of strangers on the street mattered to her. I always acted in self-defense, but to my mother, I was violent. There's no two ways about it. I must carry the cross.

When the sun goes down, I like to dig a hole so I can escape and nose around the neighborhood. The same old bunch, with their same bored faces, always hangs around Francisco Villa Street. We're usually calm, but sometimes, I don't know what it is, but a screw comes loose, or maybe the devil gets inside us, and we end up in fights. We drop to the floor and roll from side to side. Whoever bites the hardest wins. One time, my jaw locked. My fangs hurt from the effort, but I couldn't let go of that darned pit-bull's neck. I was clamping down on it with my jaw until the bakery owner came out with a broomstick and stuck me on the back until the wood snapped. The howling made me let go. I dragged myself to a safe place, as best I could. The human gave his dog a kick. "That's what you get for being such an idiot," I heard him say. Then he carried him off. That human relishes in beating. The same fate befalls the kids who strike his wall with their soccer balls, and the poor drunks who have the bad sense to fall asleep outside his store. He comes out in a huff, tugs at their ears, dumps cold water on their heads, and literally kicks the drunkards out. An enemy who deigns to fight with a stick covered in nails, with the fury of a human, is no fair opponent at all. A lot of us have grown to hate him, and I think it's time we teach him a lesson.

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The only time I ever made myself scarce on the streets was after I took that beating. With great pains, I dragged myself to the door to my home, and a neighbor was kind enough to ring the doorbell. My owner came outside and started howling and crying. She always cries. She cried when I came home with holes in my tail after I got in a fight; she cried when my eye got swollen shut after I fell while hunting a bird. Her teary mess dripped over my head. With sadness in her voice, she asked why I'd done that to her, why I couldn't just stay put at home, where there's plenty food and love for me. I wish I could have comforted her by saying, "Because I'm violent, as my mother once told me."

My owner took me to the vet. The cold liquid they put on my leg left me in a daze. With my eyes half shut, I peered at my body beneath the machine. I fell asleep, and when I woke up, they took me home. Something serious had happened to my right leg. They put a rigid plank on it and let me sleep on a bed. "You were lucky," exclaimed my owner's son as he gently stroked my back. I slept a lot, for days and days.

But as soon as I noticed that my hind legs no longer hurt as I climbed off the mattress, the first thing I did was run away again. That damn baker will pay. I started to watch him. Before the sun comes up, he rolls up the steel door outside his shop and shuts himself inside for quite a long time. By the time the mothers are done dropping off their children at school, the bakery is open. How many times had he flung bleach at me, just for catching a whiff of the sweet scent wafting down the street? I've got reason enough to bite his leg.

At midday, he rides his bicycle, an enormous basket of *bolillo* bread balanced atop his head, and he pedals over to the *torta* sandwich stand that's just a few feet away. I enjoy chasing him. He thinks I'm trying to bite him, but I just want to rattle him. I bark at him for several blocks, until I manage to get his basket to tumble down, the bread scattering across the asphalt. It's lovely to see all the dogs and birds flock over to steal themselves some bread. Only the poor idiots being walked on a leash lose out on the feast. "You're not allowed to eat starch," they tell them, pulling them away.

I don't take any bread. I have to escape before I can feel his disgusting foot prodding my stomach. I hide behind a tree, where I can take

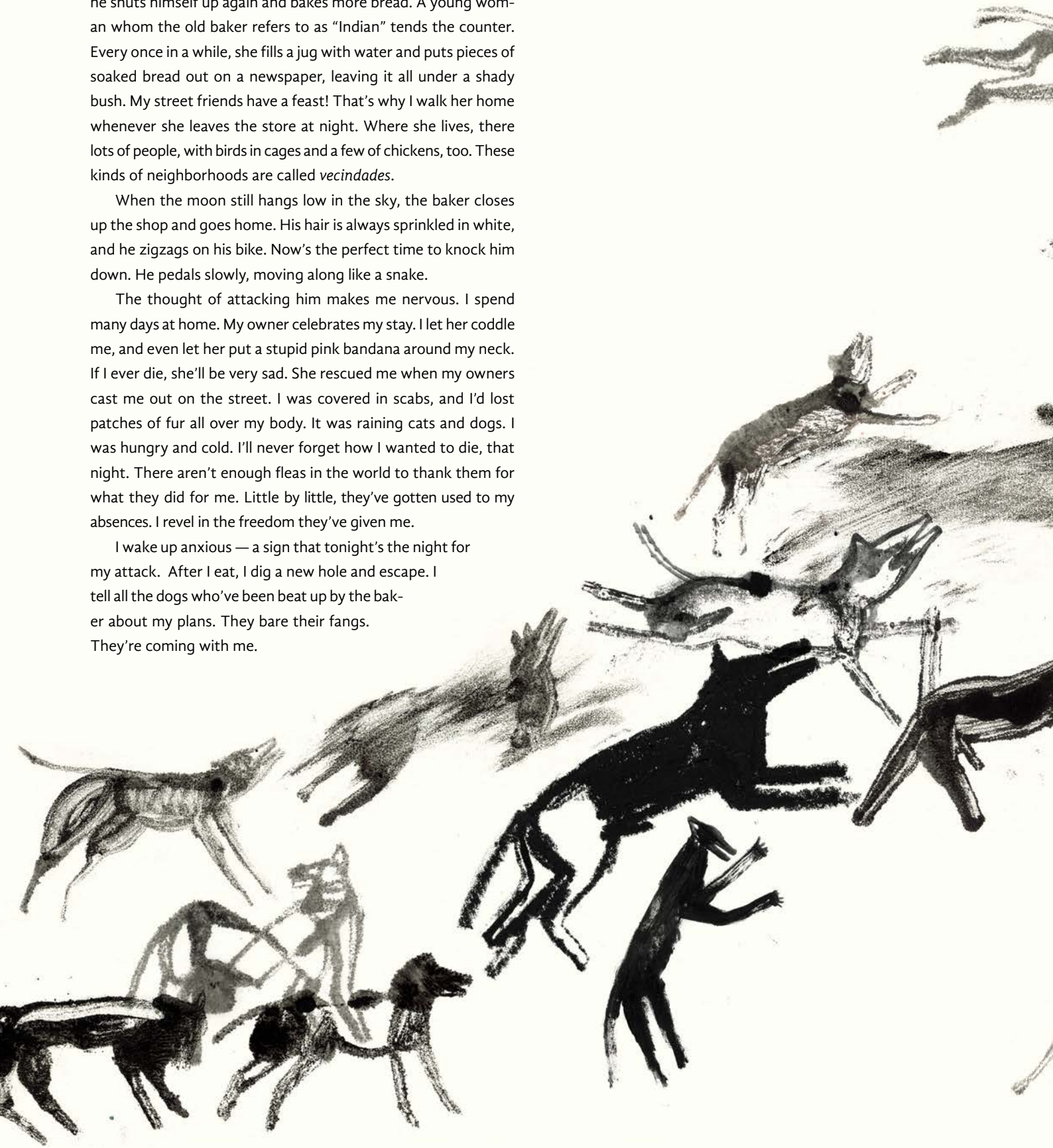


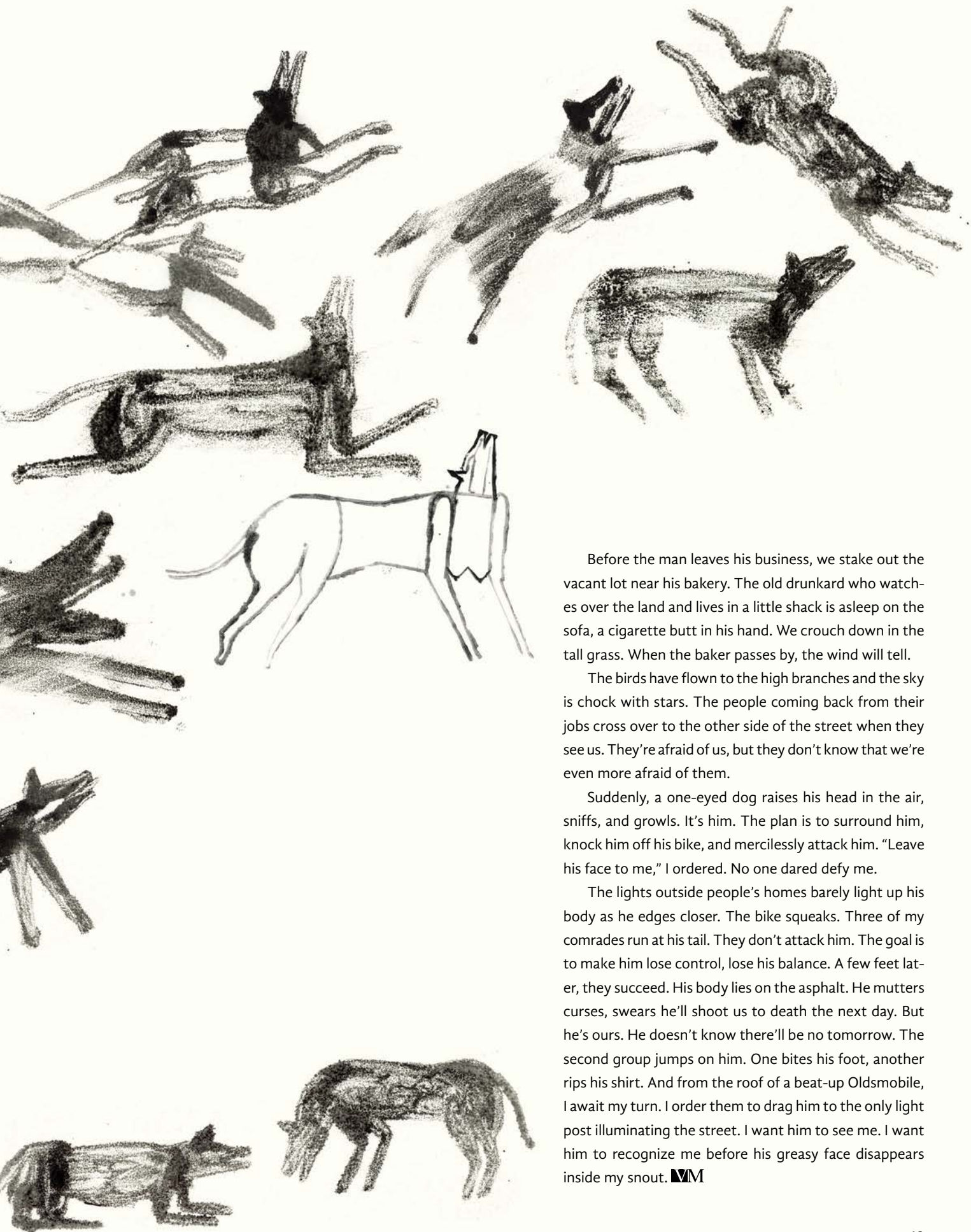
in the triumphant scene. The shameless man never tosses his dirty bread in the trash. He just brushes off the dust, puts everything back in the basket, and is on his way. After his deliveries, he shuts himself up again and bakes more bread. A young woman whom the old baker refers to as "Indian" tends the counter. Every once in a while, she fills a jug with water and puts pieces of soaked bread out on a newspaper, leaving it all under a shady bush. My street friends have a feast! That's why I walk her home whenever she leaves the store at night. Where she lives, there lots of people, with birds in cages and a few of chickens, too. These kinds of neighborhoods are called *vecindades*.

When the moon still hangs low in the sky, the baker closes up the shop and goes home. His hair is always sprinkled in white, and he zigzags on his bike. Now's the perfect time to knock him down. He pedals slowly, moving along like a snake.

The thought of attacking him makes me nervous. I spend many days at home. My owner celebrates my stay. I let her coddle me, and even let her put a stupid pink bandana around my neck. If I ever die, she'll be very sad. She rescued me when my owners cast me out on the street. I was covered in scabs, and I'd lost patches of fur all over my body. It was raining cats and dogs. I was hungry and cold. I'll never forget how I wanted to die, that night. There aren't enough fleas in the world to thank them for what they did for me. Little by little, they've gotten used to my absences. I revel in the freedom they've given me.

I wake up anxious — a sign that tonight's the night for my attack. After I eat, I dig a new hole and escape. I tell all the dogs who've been beat up by the baker about my plans. They bare their fangs. They're coming with me.





Before the man leaves his business, we stake out the vacant lot near his bakery. The old drunkard who watches over the land and lives in a little shack is asleep on the sofa, a cigarette butt in his hand. We crouch down in the tall grass. When the baker passes by, the wind will tell.

The birds have flown to the high branches and the sky is chock with stars. The people coming back from their jobs cross over to the other side of the street when they see us. They're afraid of us, but they don't know that we're even more afraid of them.

Suddenly, a one-eyed dog raises his head in the air, sniffs, and growls. It's him. The plan is to surround him, knock him off his bike, and mercilessly attack him. "Leave his face to me," I ordered. No one dared defy me.

The lights outside people's homes barely light up his body as he edges closer. The bike squeaks. Three of my comrades run at his tail. They don't attack him. The goal is to make him lose control, lose his balance. A few feet later, they succeed. His body lies on the asphalt. He mutters curses, swears he'll shoot us to death the next day. But he's ours. He doesn't know there'll be no tomorrow. The second group jumps on him. One bites his foot, another rips his shirt. And from the roof of a beat-up Oldsmobile, I await my turn. I order them to drag him to the only light post illuminating the street. I want him to see me. I want him to recognize me before his greasy face disappears inside my snout. **MM**