

Raúl Motta*

THE DEVIL'S ROCK

Illustrations by Juan Palomino**

*Light may be artificial
Only shadow is always true*
Eduardo Parra Ramírez

I remember running toward a tree to take shelter from the downpour. It was early summer, Saint Peter and Saint Paul's Day. My father said it always rained that day and told me to put on a jacket before I went out, but I didn't. The patter of the rain against the earth was peacefully musical to me, and I knew that if I came home wet, my mother would fling her high-heeled shoe against my back. The dampness turned to mist and scurried up the empty wasteland. The mist looked like the quiet, heavy breath of an underground beast. The rain suddenly picked up, thumping against the creviced earth. The torrent picked up the smell of decay, the miasma of roadkill and shit. Suddenly, a fat boy with a shaved head showed up beside me, beneath that solitary willow that had grown at the heart of the field. The boy was soaking wet, water dripping down from his forehead to the collar of his ratty shirt. With his chubby hands, he rubbed his face and fixed his big, amber eyes on me, trying to figure out what kind of animal I was: wild or domestic. The river that ran at the field's edge started to roar. It was the neighborhood sewage, enlivened by the rain. Sometimes the river would flood all the way to the lowest parts of the wasteland, where burrs and shrubs grew untamed. All of the sewage from Independencia county also flowed into the river. In the summertime the stench would grow so pungent that it'd waft all the

way the avenue. I knew for a fact that that filth could impregnate everything, even one's thoughts.

"Don't be creeping up on people. Where did you come from?"

"I came from the devil's rock."

"What's that?"

"I'll take you there one day. It's next to the bridge that leads to Flores."

"Why do they call it that?"

"Seriously? Why do you think? There's a rock where they say that, at midnight, the devil appears."

"Only idiots people believe that."

"Lincoln saw it once. He was drunk and had to cross the bridge to get home. He's my friend Pozole's father. Pozole told me all about it. The worst part is that he couldn't run away because he's only got one leg. He had to hop his way home, yelling his head off. He was shitting bricks," he cackled.

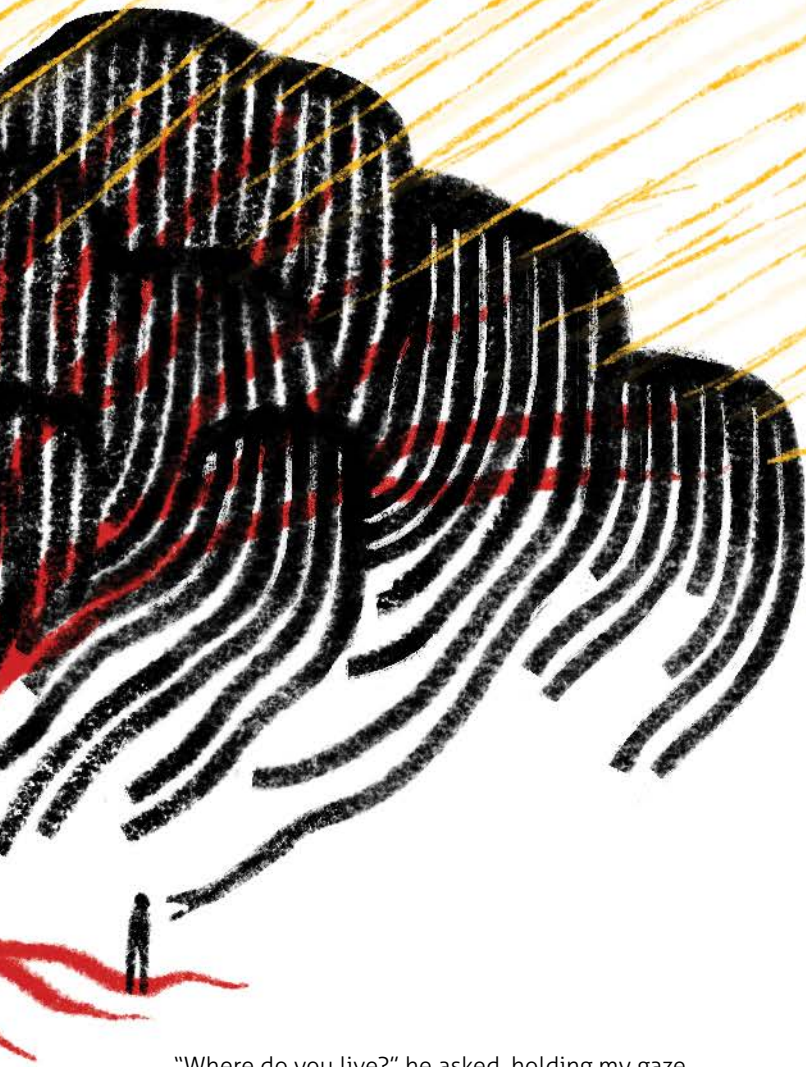
"Lincoln?"

"The one who's not all there." We both doubled down laughing.

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"Where do you live?" he asked, holding my gaze.

"In that white house over there," I pointed.

"The two story one? You rich little twat. Your dad's the policeman isn't he?"

"He's a public prosecutor."

"Same shit. He's got a gun. I live in the first house on that street. The one by the repair shop in front of the school. My mom told me that your dad is a corrupt pig. And that that's why you have all that dough."

"Your mom's a moron."

"She might be a moron, but she's no liar. I think your daddy's probably a crook."

"You'd better shut your mouth, boobie man."

"What are you gonna do? You're a bag of bones. They don't feed you much for being such a rich boy."

"And you get fed all day long. That's why you're always broke."

"Alright, alright. Let's go throw some rocks at the abandoned house."

"But it's still raining."

"I bet your pig-ass daddy'll beat you if you come home dirty."

His hair, face, and shoulders were soaking wet.

The wind made the rain pound down, thick drops swatting us in the face. I crossed my arms over my chest and started shivering from the cold. The fat boy wouldn't budge. He was waiting for my reply.

"Scared shitless? You're shaking."

"I'm cold, not scared."

We walked through the wasteland under the rain until we reached the side street. We started picking up stones and pooling them in our t-shirts, which clung to our skin from the rain. The abandoned house was at the end of the street. We got there and stood before of the house. I was shaking from the icy downpour. The two-story house had a sturdy, black door made of metal, with bay windows in each room. The fat kid let the rocks he'd cradled in his t-shirt fall to the ground. After a quick survey, he picked up the biggest one. I picked another up, emulating his every move, without really knowing what he was up to.

"Go for the windows," he ordered, flinging the first stone with all his might.

The shattering window echoed like false thunder amid the storm. I felt the weight of the stone in my hand. The longer I held it, the heavier it got. I gathered all my strength and flung it. For a brief moment, it seemed to be suspended in the air. It barely made it past the fence. The kid grabbed a smaller rock and decided to test his aim, shooting for the house's little skylight. He missed, but then he tried again with a smaller rock. I did my own thing—I picked up another stone and missed again. He hit the skylight. A dry thud boomed in the air, but the glass didn't break.

"Third time's the charm. The pointy ones are best, but they don't fly as high," he said, handing me a stone from my own pile.

I took the stone, grazed its sharp edges with my finger, and put my entire body into my next throw, without thinking. I fell on my ass from the inertia. The master bedroom's glass shattered like flashing light, or at least that's how it felt at the time. An old man came running out of the house next door to see where the noise was coming from. His wrinkled skin was mysterious and frightening in equal parts. He moved stiffly, probably from the cold or out of old age. The only youthful thing about him was his rage. In the middle of the street, he flailed his arms and yelled at us in a fury.

"You fecking kids. I'll grab you and kill you."

The old man didn't turn back. He kept trudging toward us. We ran straight at him, each taking a different flank. He got confused and couldn't catch either of us. My house was nearest. I pulled to a stop right as I reached my front door. The boy didn't stop. Still running, he yelled, "The name's Diego. I'll ring your doorbell three times tomorrow."

I opened the white front door and went inside. My mother had fallen asleep on the couch, a soap opera blaring on the television and a half-empty cup of rum and coke in her hand. I slipped past her, trying to make as little noise as possible. I took a shower and tried to scrub off the stench of shit that had clung to my skin like kitchen muck before I put on my pajamas. Late at night, my mother came into my room to plant a kiss on my forehead. It was one of those nights when my father wouldn't come home, from all the work he had to do. My mother woke me up, but I pretended to be asleep so I could avoid her. When she left my bedroom, I opened my eyes. It was hot. The rain was down to a patter, but the river was still roaring. My window faced the field. I poked my head out to cool down. A few soft lights twinkled by the riverbend. They were fireflies, flickering at the water's edge. The frogs' croaking intermingled with the sound of rushing water. I tried to imagine what they might be telling each other, the frogs and the river. Their voices soothed me. I went back to bed and fell asleep.

The following day, Diego did as he said he would. He came by my house after lunch. He'd brought a tin pail with a bunch of desperate tadpoles wriggling in their cramped quarters. We peered at them up close. They'd open their mouths and squirm like living mud. I drew closer to the pail, poked my head in, and saw that some of the tadpoles had already developed tiny legs, with four minuscule toes jutting out of them. They'd use their legs and tails for propellers, creating ripples in the stagnant water. They smelled like an old, damp attic, like bygone creatures.

"Where'd you get these, Diego?"

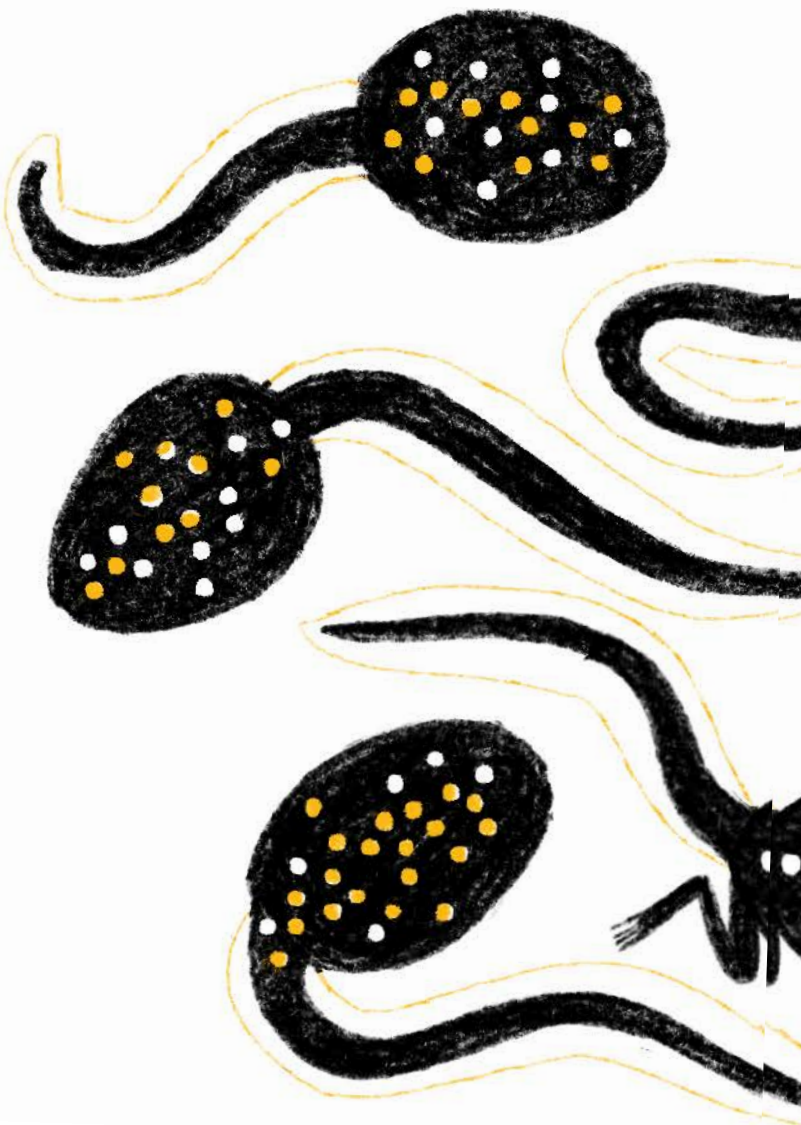
"From a puddle in a pothole near my house."

From the back pocket of his faded denim shorts, Diego pulled out a bottle of 192-proof ethanol. He cracked it open and poured the clear liquid into the pail. From his other pocket, he extracted a yellow matchbox. He took three matches in his stubby fingers, struck them against the sandpaper, and dropped the fire in the pail. The bucket erupted in flames, which faded away just as quickly as they'd come.

"What's wrong with you? What'd you do that for? You're a fucking lunatic."

"You can't take shit! I just wanted to see what happened."

I watched the fire die down. I felt like I could hear the little creatures screaming, but I knew that was impossible. When the flame had been completely consumed, we both looked back inside the pail. The mud was giving off smoke. It smelled charred. Nothing moved in that black mass. The qui-



et was palpable. Diego grinned from ear to ear. I felt my stomach turn and a flutter in my chest.

"You're an idiot."

"No, the problem is you've got a stick up your ass. It's probably all the worse from those tight, new pants of yours."

"You can't even button up those shorts your mamma lent you."

"You'd best shut your mouth if you don't want to get your ass beat."

I dug my hand into the mud. It was lukewarm. I felt several dead tadpoles with my fingers. I grabbed one by the tail and fished it out of the bucket to get a better look. I drew its little body toward me. Its legs had melted off, so it only had little stumps left. Its eyes were like Jell-O, melting out of their sockets. I swallowed and felt my stomach churn, but I couldn't peel my eyes away from that little animal. I stared at Diego,

trying to mask my rage. He jeered at me, loud and whiney as ever. We heard someone yelling from far away. It was Diego's mother. "You little twat, bring that bucket back home or I'll shove it up your ass, Chico Che. I'm going to make you mop the floors, you little asshole." Diego's eyes grew wide. He poured out the pail in the middle of the street and handed me the empty bottle of alcohol.

"Get rid of it. I'll see you later," he said as he took off running.

That night, I dreamt of the fire and of the screeching tadpoles. They were crying for help, making signs with their minute hands. I woke up at dawn, out of breath. I went to the bathroom and came across a shadow. It was my mother, stumbling around and clinging to the wall with her nails. She jumped when she saw me. She was in tears, whimpering. The gray moonlight poured in through a round window, shining on some of the hallway. My mother edged toward the pale light. Her face seemed like that of a little girl, her eyes watery and red. Mascara ran down her cheeks. It was as if the moon had brought her back in time and lightened her body. I'd never seen my mother cry before. My legs wobbled and my palms started sweating, but at the same time, I felt as if a string were binding us together, drawing us close.

"How come you're up so late?" she slurred.

"I'm going to the bathroom."

"You're starting to look a lot like your father. Come close so I can see you better."

I walked toward her, stepping into the shaft of moonlight. With her two cold hands, she grabbed my face. I felt



her nails dig into my cheeks. She pulled me in and kissed me. The taste of alcohol and very sweet perfume bore all the way to my tonsils. A chill ran down my spine and the tips of my fingers went numb as my head spun softly. I could feel the rain against my body again. My mother peeled her lips away and left behind a tang denoting something I couldn't quite understand. She took a few steps back and retreated into the darkness in the hallway.

"Go back to bed. It's late and you've got school in the morning. Your father won't be coming home tonight. As usual."

I fell speechless and forgot about going to the bathroom. I went back to my room, smothered in drowsiness as the muggy darkness enveloped me. I took my pants off so that I could sleep in underwear, but even so, I didn't manage to cool down. The stench of shit wafted in from the river, biting at my nostrils. I tried to get rid of that sticky feeling, scratching away at my arms and legs with my nails. The night drew on and I couldn't shut my eyes. I thought I might be sick. Sweat ran down my spine. I couldn't stop shaking.

The next day, the doorbell rang three times. I opened the door. It was a cloudy and somewhat cold afternoon. Chico Che was there, waiting for me. His mother had gotten the nickname from that cumbia singer from Tabasco. It suited Diego well. He'd shown up in a yellow, striped shirt and aviator sunglasses that matched his t-shirt. He seemed shy that day, with a sparse mustache that I hadn't noticed before. The down on his upper lip highlighted his usual smile, unfettered and mocking.

"Needed more sunshine in your life, Chico Che?"

"Where's Waldo? You ugly, skinny dweeb."

"You're chubby as a newborn whale. Sing us one of your greatest hits, like that Sirenito song."

"No, dude. Sirenito's not by Chico Che. I'll sing you Baby Beluga if you miss your momma. Come to my house. I've got a surprise for you. My mom's on call at the hospital and won't be back until tomorrow."

I shuffled behind Diego, dragging my feet. I felt a hole in the pit of my stomach, a fluttering of air hinting that something would go wrong. We arrived at Diego's still unpainted, rusty entryway. The gate was open. We walked right in, taking our time. The patio was all dirt, with construction materials piled up in the corners: gray bricks, gravel, sand, a few rods. They'd started to build another floor above the house, but it was left unfinished when Diego's father abandoned them, he told me, his voice cracking as he pulled a large egg carton out from inside an unfinished room. Those yellow sunglasses were the only thing he had left of his father, he told me, almost in tears.

A high-pitched mew rang out from inside the box. We walked down a dilapidated wooden staircase to make our way back to the patio, taking care not to trip and fall. I pried the box open. A little, black cat with its hair standing on end shot me a feral look. It was scared to death, shaking as it mewed. It tensed its little tail, trying to look bigger than it was. I pulled it out with both hands, holding it by the belly. It was warm. Its heart was pounding out of its chest. I placed it on the ground, and it bolted behind a pile of debris to hide.



"I know how to make it come out. Don't let it get away."

Diego went back inside his house. After a while, he came back with a plastic Tupperware container packed with some stewed chicken *tinga* that his mother had made. We set it down besides the pile of debris where the cat was hiding. The scent of chicken scampered across the patio. The aftertaste of shit still lingering in my mouth. We crouched down, knees on the ground, and looked the little cat in the eyes. It was taking shelter among chunks of cement. I could feel a certain dampness in the air, a harbinger of rain, and a stab of pain flashed through my head. I felt my temples with my fingers and shut my eyes. When I opened them, Diego smiled genuinely for the first time since I met him, in an open, non-sardonic gesture. We backed away from the rubble and waited for the cat to approach the food.

"Once it's dark out, let's go to the devil's rock."

I didn't reply straight away. I hesitated for a moment because I couldn't remember if my father would be home. The kitty poked its head out slowly, distrustfully, turning its head from side to side, noting our presence. But hunger prevailed. Pulled in by the scent of chicken, it sniffed its way to the



Tupperware. It dug its face into the food, devouring the chicken so quickly that it almost choked. It breathed heavily, shaking from the meat greeting its palate. I thought about where I might hide it so that nobody would find it. I thought about the spare room full of knicks and knacks where the cat could stay warm and comfortable. In my head, I named the cat Domingo. I inched toward its makeshift bowl and the cat didn't even notice me. That little ball of fur seemed drunk from the food it had just gobbled up. Then it rubbed itself against my leg, bunting its face on me. It looked ragged, abandoned, like it'd lived a tough life.

The sky closed in on us and the clouds swelled with darkness. I extended my hand to caress Domingo. It purred as I pet it. The cat hopped back to the Tupperware with its tail tensed up, looking for more food, but the container was already empty. Out of the blue, Diego let a gray brick crash onto its head. I heard a crunch. The left side of the kitty's head was flat against the ground, one eye and some of its brains oozing out. Domingo was still panting. It didn't even know what hit him. A mixture of chicken and blood foamed in its mouth. It twitched its legs, trying to escape whatever it was that had happened to it, but it was too late. I was blinded by a flash of light for a brief moment, and when I came back to myself, I saw Diego laughing in the mist. With that crunch, a dam in me also burst. I was overflowing, boiling over. My hand shook, my stomach twisted, and I wanted to puke. I could feel my face burn. My head swelled with air, and I was overcome with nausea.

"What did you do, pig tits?"

"Are you crying? You pussy."

"Son of a bitch! This is why your father abandoned you."

"Fuck you, asshole."

I saw his eyes well up. I ran and grabbed an iron rod. I struck him with all the strength I had left, which wasn't very much. He yelled, "Stop it man, fuck, it wasn't that big a deal," huddling into a ball. I kept thrashing the rod against his back until my arm got tired. The tears wouldn't stop flowing. His aviator sunglasses toppled to the floor. I stepped on them until they broke. Suddenly the rain unleashed its fury upon us. Diego picked up one of the lenses from his sunglasses and desperately tried to stick it back into the broken frames. The dirt got muddy with the rain. I dropped the rod and ran home, caked in dirt, casting one final look at Domingo, now motionless.

The rain kept pounding. I woke up feeling agitated. I'd fallen asleep hours ago, fully dressed. It was dark and cloudy out. The alarm clock read 11:30. The rolling river hissed like a giant snake. The door creaked open and let in a soft glow. I

recognized that syrupy smell, like vanilla, coffee, and dried fruit. I heard footsteps shuffling in my direction. In the beam of light, I saw my mother in a black robe. She lay down next to me. I pretended to be asleep, exaggerating my breath so it would seem like I was in a deep slumber. My mother pressed herself up against me. The robe felt soft. She twisted my hair with her fingers. Then she edged her face toward mine and kissed my forehead. That scent became more pungent, sour even. She smelled like rotten fruit. With the tip of her tongue, Inés, my mother, grazed my earlobe and uttered my name in her hoarse voice. "Román, are you awake?" My palms started sweating. I tried to keep as still as possible, but my legs were shaking. Inés kissed my neck with her wet lips. The summer heat scurried across my entire body. She loosened her robe, grabbed my hand with hers, and submissively placed it on her breast. "Touch me," she said, her voice drowning in a blanket of clear water. Pressing my eyes shut in the rough shadows, I felt like I was still asleep. I squeezed Inés softly, feeling her nipple tense. Her cold hand slowly sunk into my pants, blood erect and beating. "You're more handsome than your father, Román." With her middle finger, index, and thumb, she started moving up and down my burning flesh. My breath quickened, my body shaking from head to toe. I feared that my father could walk in on us at any moment. Her fingers were moving more and more quickly. A cramp shot through my underwear, along with a soft moan. I opened my eyes and got up from my bed, a hidden tautness from who knows what depth of me spurring me away. I couldn't turn back. I heard Inés slurring her words:

"Where are you going, Román?"

I stumbled over the furniture and walked out of our house. I ran as fast as my legs could carry me, all the way to Diego's house. The gate was still open. I staggered into the patio, wheez-

ing. Diego was burning trash in a fire, the embers crackling. I grabbed an empty box and flung it into the embers. The flames came alive, reddening Diego's face.

"Did you pee your pants?" he asked, looking at the stain on my leg.

"You pornographic fatty."

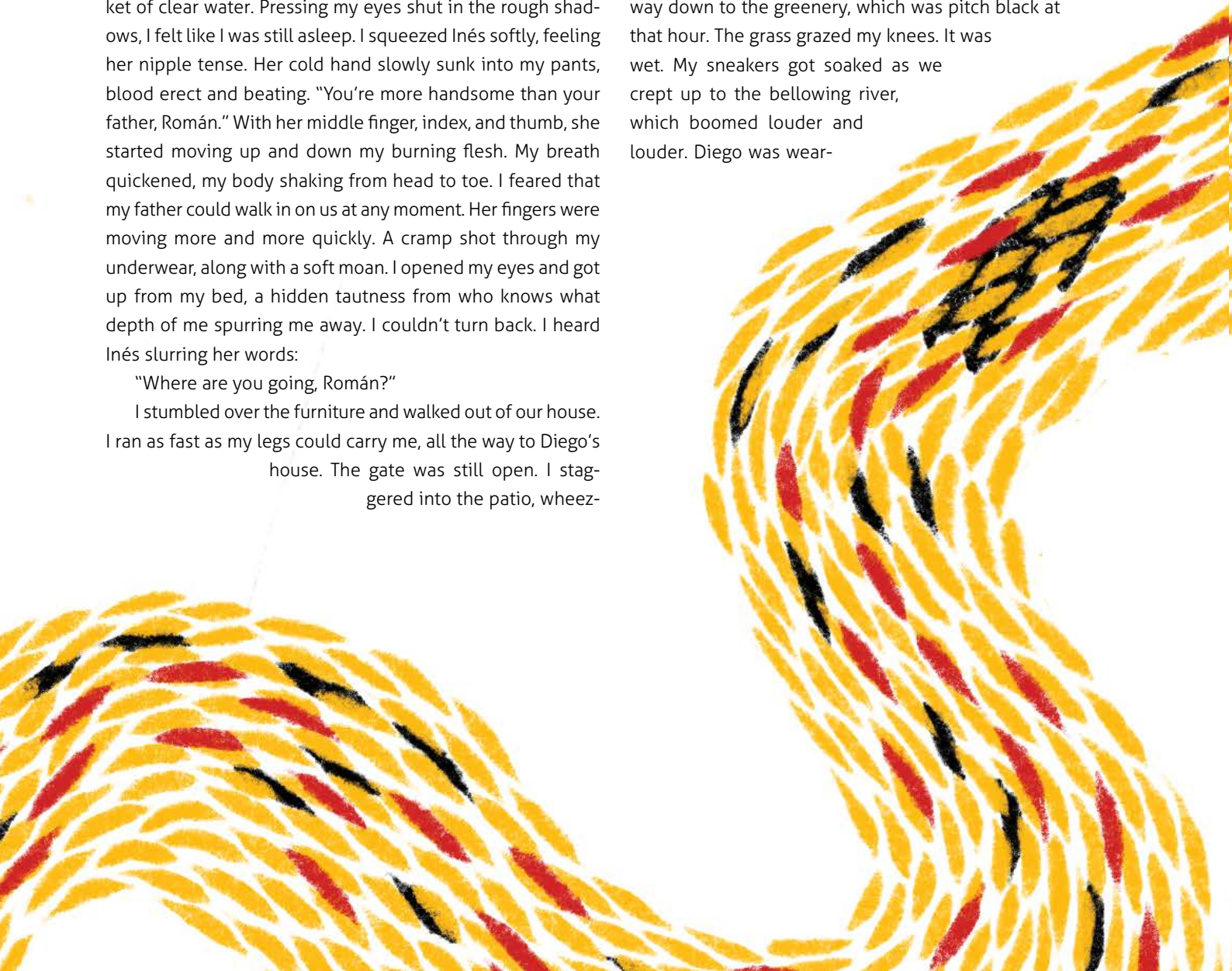
"Pornographic?"

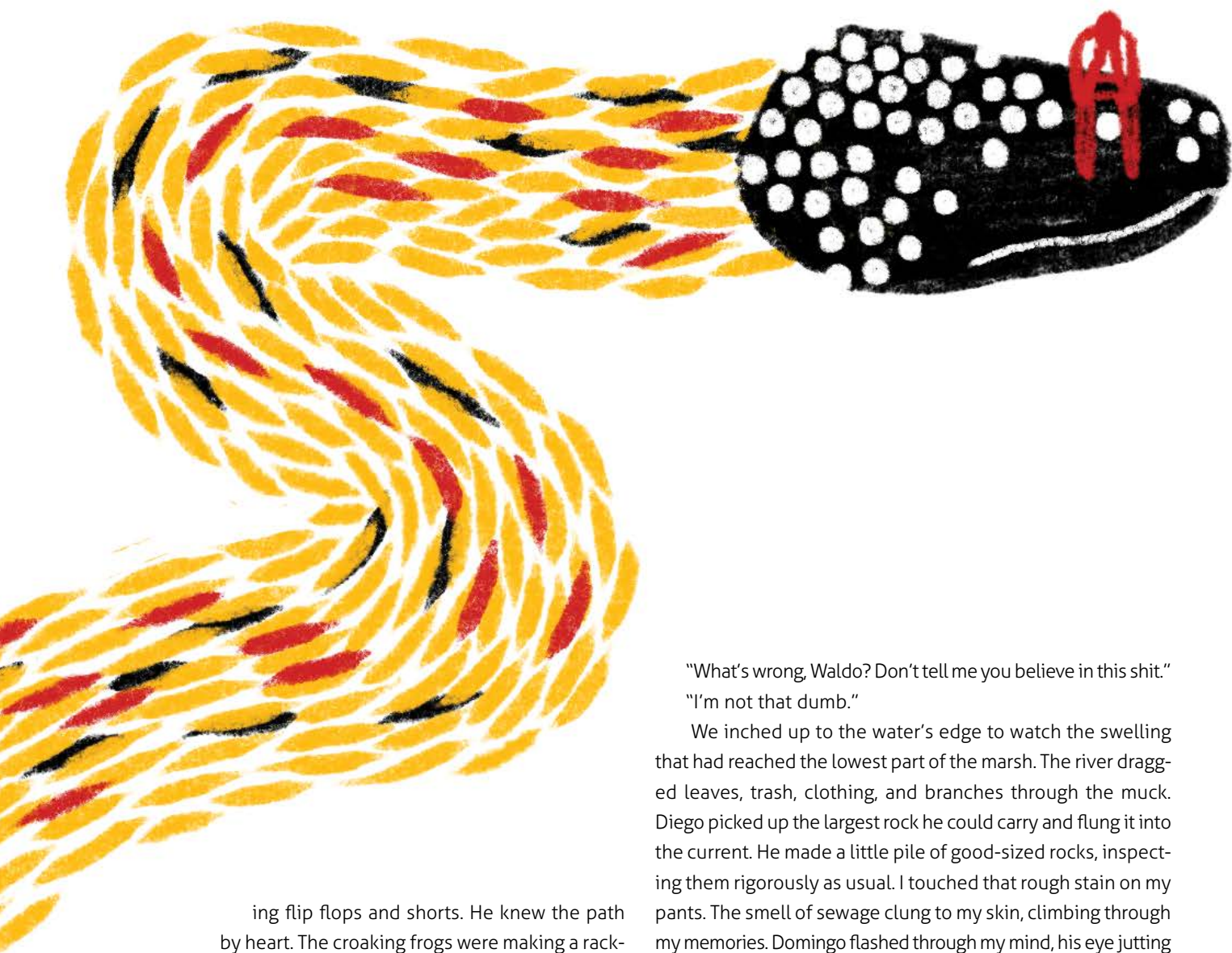
"Didn't shit myself though, did I?"

We both bent over laughing. Chico Che tossed a gossip magazine into the flames, tainting the flames green for a brief moment. The smell of charred trash intermingled with the scent of shit that the rain had stirred up. Diego glanced at his plastic wristwatch.

"It's almost midnight. Let's go see if the devil comes out."

We walked down the street, following the rumor of sewage under the glow of a scant few streetlights. We made our way down to the greenery, which was pitch black at that hour. The grass grazed my knees. It was wet. My sneakers got soaked as we crept up to the bellowing river, which boomed louder and louder. Diego was wear-





ing flip flops and shorts. He knew the path by heart. The croaking frogs were making a racket. The stench of shit seemed to be spilling over from the swelling river. We reached a little concrete bridge that connected the county of Independencia to Las Flores. A little altar light that had been nailed into a tree trunk glimmered over a boulder that was about the size of a large dog. Diego crept toward the rock until he could touch it. He peered at his watch and said something to me, but the roaring river drowned out his voice. I got closer so I could hear him.

"It's midnight and nothing's happening. Look, those are the hoof marks," he whispered.

There were two clefts in the boulder, like the cloven hooves of a goat. My palms started sweating. The cold gnawed at my toes, which were drenched in the grassy mud. It reeked of dead dog and shit, which made my stomach rise and my eyes burn. "Come on and show yourself, fucking devil!" Diego cried as loudly as he could, though I could barely hear him above the rumble of the river. Suddenly my guts started burning, and then a hollow in my chest seemed to steal my breath away.

"What's wrong, Waldo? Don't tell me you believe in this shit."

"I'm not that dumb."

We inched up to the water's edge to watch the swelling that had reached the lowest part of the marsh. The river dragged leaves, trash, clothing, and branches through the muck. Diego picked up the largest rock he could carry and flung it into the current. He made a little pile of good-sized rocks, inspecting them rigorously as usual. I touched that rough stain on my pants. The smell of sewage clung to my skin, climbing through my memories. Domingo flashed through my mind, his eye jutting out, then the screeching tadpoles and Inés's face throbbed inside my head. I heard Inés's voice again. "You're more handsome than your father, Román." A queasy feeling whirled inside my brain. I covered my ears with my hands. Diego was holding a rock. The folds at the back of his shaved head repulsed me. It seemed to me that the stink was coming from his body, not the river. The light on the tree blew out. Without thinking, I pushed Diego into the giant river with all my might. I saw his body sink into the furious darkness with that single plunge. The water swallowed him whole. I took off my t-shirt, sneakers, and pants to try to get rid of the fetid stench, but I could feel it sticking to my skin, it was as if I were going to smell of shit for the rest of my life. I was left there in nothing but my underwear, shivering from the cold. I felt all of the strength in my body leave me. I couldn't breathe. The light flickered back on, brighter than before. I stumbled toward the rock and sat where the hooves had made their marks. I hugged my knees in and dissolved into tears. **NM**