Guatemala 1954—
Funeral for a Bird

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Maximo Sanchez crawled into the light. He had been hiding with his mother under the big old desk. Now that the bombs had stopped, he could see the world. He wanted to see the things his mother had told him about: elephants, houses, spiders and streets. Maybe he would hear someone call his name, and if he did he could answer. His mother had told him this, and his age too. He was five years old and already knew so much! Well, he was four and a half in truth, but Maximo felt bigger if he said five. He said so with scars on his cheeks. They were scars from something called welts. Everything had its name. Maximo went through the zigzagging streets, between the ruins of the houses. He looked for everything, and its name.
And We Sold the Rain

Soon a circle of children surrounded it, and the eldest watched that no one got too close. Careful there! Don't step on it! Be sure! One of the little boys started to cry. But Mázimo wouldn't do that. In sepulchral silence, the eldest kneeled, facing the body. Poor bird. He touched it and trembled. Murmurs. He extended his middle finger to stroke its tiny breast. The murmurs grew. Someone pushed through the group to see, and stepped on Mázimo's foot. But at this moment, only the bird mattered. Poor bird. Let's touch him too. No. Such a delicate body would be torn to pieces. Poor bird. Its rounded breast was covered with dots white and soft as the drops of rain. Its wings pressed down around its body as if in protection from the cold. Its neck was long, almost too long, and ended in the head where a big black eye and open beak protruded. Sift feet stretched directly upward. You think the hail killed him? No. When something hits, it leaves marks. Look at what the bombs did. But this is different, bombs explode. Why should this be different? They kill don't they? Yes, but they kill differently. Maybe he broke his neck. Maybe. The eldest crouched down, and carefully took the head of the bird between his forefinger and thumb. He lifted it a little. Everybody bent down to be able to see better. What are we going to do with him? He laughed, already knowing they had to bury it. Of course, everybody shouted. We must bury the bird. Poor bird. Mázimo saw the beautiful bird, as he had seen the colors fleeing from the dead walls. All the birds were gone.

Everyone ran towards the ruins to look for objects for the funeral. Mázimo didn't know what to look for. He had never been to a funeral. He hadn't heard anything about them. He had seen pictures, but wondered what a funeral could be. The eldest said they should bring pretty things, but Mázimo knew he couldn't grasp the colors. Nevertheless, he searched for something, something that glowed, and he began to dig through the ruin closest to him.

Beautiful things. I only want beautiful things!

One of the boys brought a board. Another brought a colorful cloth. One found a picture of a rose. A tall freckled boy rang a silver bell. Someone had tallow candles. There was a watch. An oilcloth slipper. A medal from the air force. Two pairs of pants. A yellowed laundry ticket. Mázimo was the last to arrive. I found a ring! A precious ring, he shouted. The circle of children parted so he could pass and place his offering at the feet of the dead bird. He was proud of his discovery. And it was truly precious. Solid gold with a delicious aquamarine mounted exactly in the center. The finger it encircled also seemed beautiful.

Was it the finger of a woman? Look at the fingernail. Maybe. But it isn't painted. Some women don't paint them. Maybe it's a Martian finger—it's half green. No, that's because it's rotting. It isn't rotting. It's only half burned, if it were rotting it would stink. Perhaps then it would smell good? You haven't by chance smelled a corpse, ever?

"Okay, enough," said the eldest. "We have to bury the bird. Is everyone in agreement? Good." With everyone pushing for a good view, he crouched before the body and gathered it up in cupped hands. He put it on the board, and some of them applauded. "Good. Now you cover it with this cloth," he ordered, "and we'll put the insignia above the head. Like that. The great dead pilot. Put the ring at the feet, finger and all. It's the finger of its owner."

The freckled boy with the little bell led the procession. Stopping on each corner, he rang it shouting, "There is a dead bird! A dead bird!" A line of pious boys carried candles and followed the photograph of...
the rose held high in the air so that everyone could see. Two boys hung the trousers on pointed sticks like flags. One brought the golden crucifix without any body. The board with the deceased, carried on the shoulders of the six eldest boys, came next, with the youngest children, Máximo among them, scrambling into the rear of the line. The rain continued falling. But the bird was dead. They would have to bury it in the rain.

They decided to bury the bird by an intersection in a vacant lot. The youngest ones dug the hole with sticks, the oilcloth slipper, an old broom. The land was soft and moist, and in almost no time at all they had a large enough hole.

The trousers were put in place at the bottom. On top of them, the flowers of the dog, face upward. And after that the board with the body and its precious adornments. Everyone stood in a circle around the grave, with their eyes fixed on the lifeless feathery body. The only movement was the murmuring rain. The oldest boy took the crucifix and let it fall on the body. Good. Cover it. All at once, they dug into the mud, each trying to throw more dirt than the others. No one saw the old man who approached.

“Children, hey, you over there! What’s going on?” They all whirled around. Máximo saw the old man, a black coat drooping in the mud, legs bent and half useless. He was leaning on a wooden stick, and there was mud and food on his filthy gray beard. His pallid skin was covered with splotches of weal, especially on either side of his broad nose. His jaw bone shook.

“What are you doing?” he asked. They stood there paralyzed, afraid. The smallest one cried again. Another one ran away. Soon, very soon, there was an avalanche of boys pushing, elbowing, scrabbling, all to get away from the place as fast as possible.

"Don’t leave! Don’t leave! I just asked what you were doing!"

Máximo was the only one left. He scrutinized the old man. Could this be his father? No. The old man had no mustache. If he were his father, he would have a mustache. This is how he had always seen him in pictures. His mother had also mentioned that the gringos had no mustaches, but his father did. He wondered why everyone else had run away. And this old man—why were his hands trembling? His feet twisted? Why did he have hair in his ears? Should he have fled also? Maybe the old man only wanted to talk. Why should he be scared?

"Hey there little fellow! Will you come here?"

Máximo was scared. "I have to go home. My mother is waiting for me under the desk."

"Don’t worry, my boy, this old man isn’t going to hurt you."

"I have to go. It’s simple."

The old man shouted to the other boys. "I see you! There you go! You act like rats scurrying around the ravines. There—by the Street of Illusions and Street of Sighs."

Máximo looked. Street of Illusions. Street of Sighs. For the first time he realized that the streets, like people, have names. Máximo had a lot to learn.

"By the bones of my grandmother!"

The old man hobbled over to Máximo.

"What were you rascals doing here anyway?"

"A bird died. We were burying it."

"A funeral for a bird?" said the old man.

"Yes. We found it on the street and couldn’t leave it there. It was so beautiful and soft. Someone might have stepped on it."

"Of course. Did you find it on that street? The Street of Sighs?"
phrase by Am Kamal

"Of il a open the mouth to hush but nothine can on
and a model of gold.

"We did the pocession and gave it a type

"correted it.

"You did this and nothing more. You didn't know

"something to accompany it and so proceed it from

"it.

"correted it.

"You didn't know.