



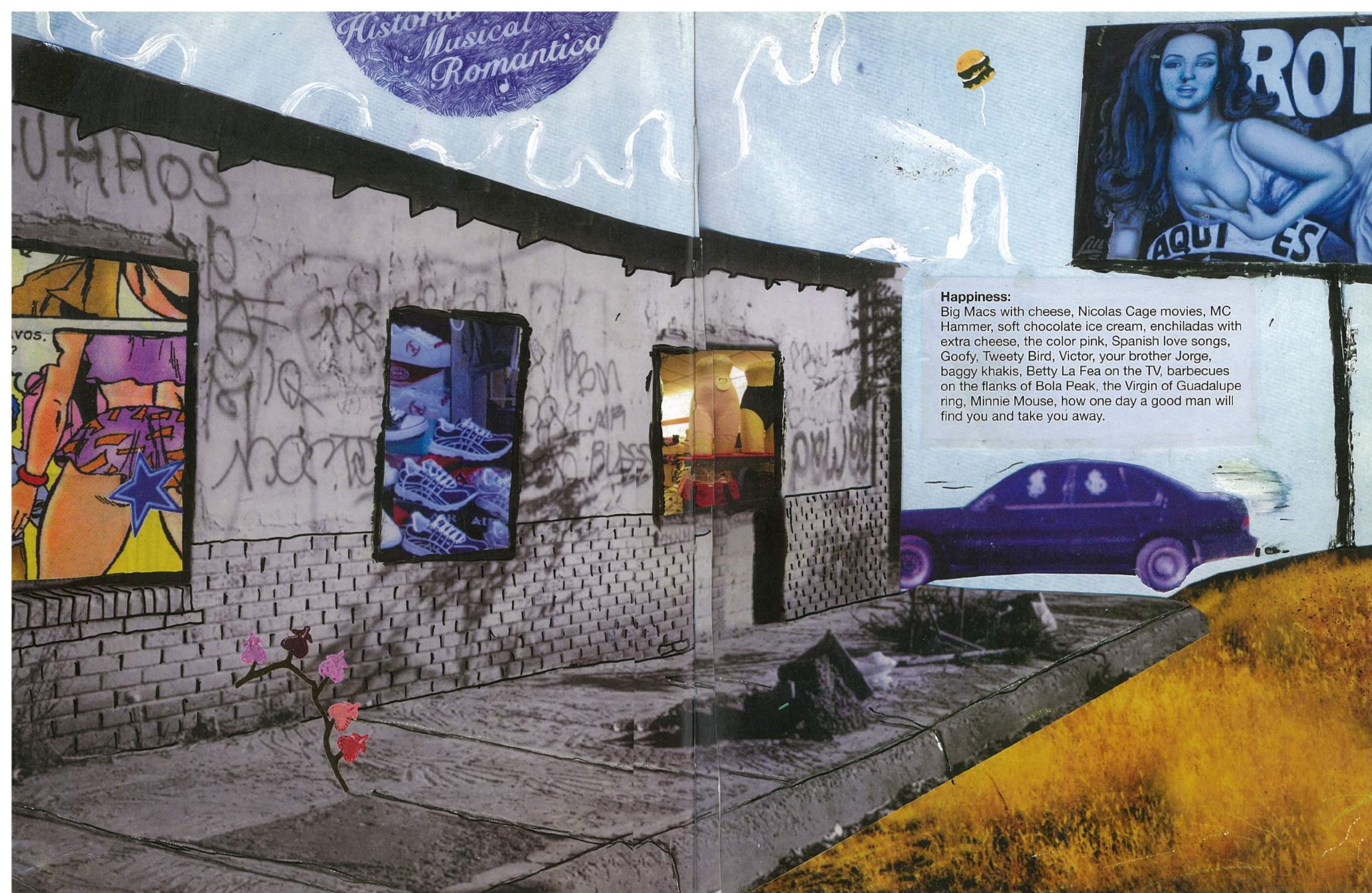


Twenty poems

Claudia, you came into my life last summer in a twenty-five-kilogram FedEx box. I carried it up to my bedroom and shut the door. There was no music, no sound from outside. I took my penknife, slit a line in the top of that box, and opened it carefully, peeling back the cardboard. Inside were notes by your family and friends. There were photos of a place where the sun hangs low and hungry between plumes of industrial smoke. There were the missing-person posters: Claudia Ivette González, age twenty. Pale skin, brown eyes, light brown hair.

I was thinking how the only time I ever went to Mexico, I sat on a beach in Puerto Vallarta and later bought a papier-mâché puppet at the marketplace. I got home, took it out of my suitcase, and the strings were all tangled. There was nothing to do but throw it out.

about Claudia



Historia
Musical
Romántica




Happiness:

Big Macs with cheese, Nicolas Cage movies, MC Hammer, soft chocolate ice cream, enchiladas with extra cheese, the color pink, Spanish love songs, Goofy, Tweety Bird, Victor, your brother Jorge, baggy khakis, Betty La Fea on the TV, barbecues on the flanks of Bola Peak, the Virgin of Guadalupe ring, Minnie Mouse, how one day a good man will find you and take you away.



It is hours past dusk, and a white-painted bus snakes through a town that is falling asleep. A girl, twenty years old and a little stooped, sits near the front, watching the road. She passes Wal-Marts, Blockbusters, shopping malls, black-tinted cars, girls with waxed eyebrows and brown lipstick. Men sniffing glue from brown paper bags, eleven-year-olds still in their checkered school uniforms. In the distance, huge factories puff the odor of metal and fire. A sign on a clothing store: *si se puede*. Yes, you can. On \$55 U.S. dollars a week, you can buy half a pair of blue Guess sneakers or a beige denim jumper and white blouse with stripes. You can buy nine Big Mac meals or just a little less than one pair of American jeans with broncos on the label, made right here in Ciudad Juárez, the city of missing women. You can buy a swatch of fake, plum-red hair and pay the beautician on Avenida Juárez to take up her half-moon needle and sew it in. You can buy the hair of a beauty. *Si se puede*. It can be done.






People call it the cotton field—some long-ago memory, because there is no cotton here. There is a filmy yellow sun and shattered earth. In some places, that burned earth is littered with crushed gasoline cans, women's shoes, empty chip bags, broken Budweiser bottles. There is so much waste that it is hard to see the ground.

"We found out through the radio. We turned the TV on and they were broadcasting live. The neighbors heard, too, and since they knew what was going on, they came to the house."

"They were pulling the bodies out of an irrigation canal. And we kept on seeing eight body bags. And they wouldn't give us any information."

Claudia, I've written your story five times, scrapped every one of them. I was trying to explain things that I had no way of knowing. Now I know what the problem was. I was thinking of myself instead of you. How I wanted things to make sense, to find logic in the fragments. Your story is not logical. The story will never be finished.

You are an object out of four hundred others, one that no one wants to touch.



"Her first period came when she was twelve. And she's like, 'Ana, guess what? I got my period.' I made her tea and told her that it was just another normal day."

Claudia, I don't want to presume. I'm only trying to understand you, imagining the things we might have shared. Did the girls in grade seven titter around the Coke machine, talking about how their mothers celebrated? Maybe you were like me, too thin, seeming to take forever to bleed, spending lunchtime dreaming of getting fuller, bolder, like the bright liquid in TV shampoo bottles.

Did you hang around the local convenience store watching the boy you loved feed quarters into a ruined Pac-Man machine? If he refused to notice you, did you try the things that the magazines recommended? "12 Easy Steps With These 12 Simple Products." I bought the shimmering opal nail polish, tried to straighten my hair.

The feeling in the chest, Claudia, when you want to taste someone's skin. Lying in bed at night, thinking about the boy, the hot feeling dripping down.

Some of the men in Claudia's life:

- Her brother, Jorge, who is always smiling. Nothing ever stops him.
- Jorge's father, who beat their mother and then left her.
- Her sister Mayela's father. Their mother met him at a dance hall, they fell in love, and he gave her a daughter. Then he died in a car crash.
- Troy Aikman, legendary quarterback of the Dallas Cowboys.
- Her sister Gema's father, gone.
- Gema's boyfriend, in jail in America for sexually abusing their nephew.
- Idet's boyfriend. Idet is Claudia's best friend. Her boyfriend is in prison, and Claudia helps buy diapers for Idet's baby.
- Snoop Dogg.
- Her own father, gone.

"My mother got these calls on her cell phone. Like four of them. And the people would be laughing and shit, and would say that they saw Claudia. They wouldn't give their names. They told me that she was downtown and real skinny. She was using and selling drugs and going crazy. She was shooting herself up. And this person knew my name. And this guy on the phone told me to go and look for her."

602 595 034

180 04098609

AYÚDANOS A ENCONTRAR A ESTA PERSONA

NOMBRE
CLAUDIA IVETTE

GONZALEZ



CARACTERÍSTICAS

Sexo: Femenino
Edad: 20.0082191780822
Estatura: 1.62
Peso: 56
Complección: Delgada
Piel: Blanca
Ojos: Café
Cabello: Castaño Claro

Vestimenta

Usa blusa con pañuelo de color, blusa de manga blanca, blusa blanca de tirantes, blusa azul, blusa blanca en la cual lleva tres tirantes de oro, un diferente tamaño, esclava de oro, cascabel de oro con un ojo de jesucristo, dos anillos de oro, uno con un jesucristo el otro no lo recuerda, en la espalda tiene una bernuga y un molar relleno.

FECHA DE LA DESAPARICIÓN:

Lugar de la Desaparición:
Reforma y niños heroes

"And we went to this house near the Lear plant. We broke into the house and there was blood on the wall and girls' soiled underwear on the floor. And there were some cops riding by. We showed them the missing poster. And they told us to mind our own business."

En caso de contar con información comunicarse a los teléfonos: 04415637452 ó los teléfonos 04415-63-74-52; 04416-01-81-71 con mari cruz, y también el de mi cuñado Gabriel Hdez. 814-19-81

(16) 233300 ext 6448 Cd Juárez
(14) 293300 ext 4413 Chihuahua
(15) 818300 ext 7008 Cuauhtemoc
(13) 238300 ext 7260, 7261 Parral

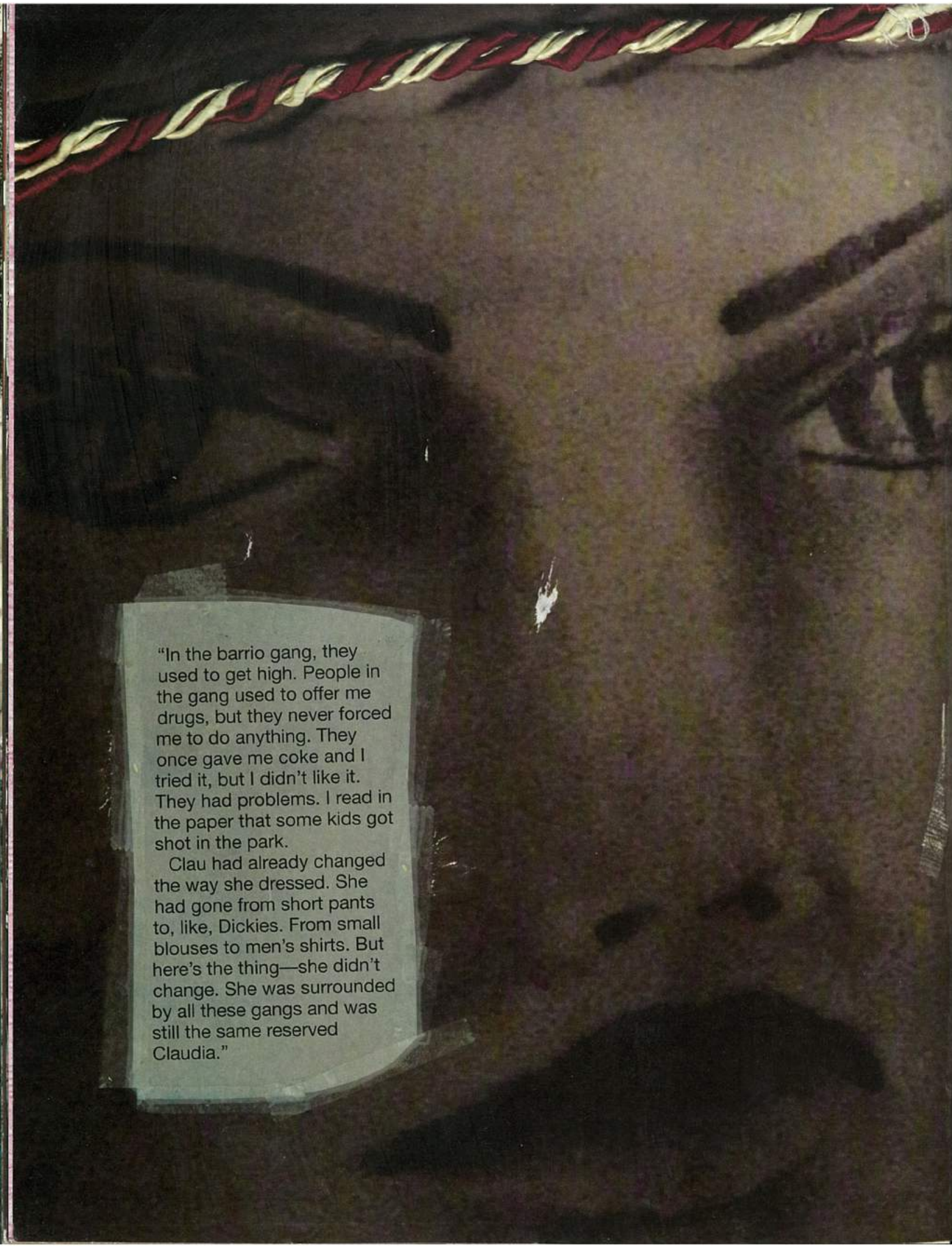
Claudia, we were born in the same year. When you started working a forty-five-hour week, I was in high school cutting pictures of Kurt Cobain out of *Kerrang!* magazine, pasting them onto the cover of my agenda. I was in the washroom with an eyeliner pencil and a compact of powder trying to cover it all up. You were coming home so tired, maybe smelling like the exhaust from the bus that took you into and out of the maquiladora factory zone. Maybe you sat with your best friend, Idet, drinking coffee with condensed milk. Or maybe you made your favorite dinner, enchiladas with extra cheese. Maybe you sat twisting the laces of your blue Guess sneakers and dreaming of transformation.

Claudia, it's been four months, your life sitting in my closet. Am I any closer to knowing what it feels like to start assembling electrical cables from the age of fifteen? To kneel in front of a statue of the Virgin and promise to be pious? Me, with the blue eyes and the bagful of Barbies in my basement? Your life in my closet, Claudia. It hasn't felt right from the start.

Mis 15 Años




La quinceñera, your fifteenth birthday, the day the world is pink and white, pearls and lace, the girl becomes the woman, the day she receives the body of Christ in communion. When a young lady celebrates her *quinceñera*, it is not only a celebration, but also a time to reflect. Usually, there will be a theme: Cinderella, bears, angels, dolls. The young lady will carry a bouquet of roses. The catering is traditional: mole, rice, chicken, tamales. To begin, the young lady will present her bouquet to the Virgin Mary. She will recite a poem that she has written herself. There will be a live deejay or a mariachi band. She will be given a last doll made from porcelain to represent the final offering of childhood. A carriage will take her to and from the reception. She must attend the beauty salon that day. Her hair must be arranged in rolls and knots, the silver-frosted flowers arranged with pins; her nails should match the pink of the dress. Then there is the jewelry. A ring symbolizes the commitment between the young lady and Christ. She will wear the metal charm of her patron saint. On her head must sit the crown, which represents the Crown of Life, promised in the Bible to faithful Christians. Gloves are optional, but pretty.



"In the barrio gang, they used to get high. People in the gang used to offer me drugs, but they never forced me to do anything. They once gave me coke and I tried it, but I didn't like it. They had problems. I read in the paper that some kids got shot in the park.

Clau had already changed the way she dressed. She had gone from short pants to, like, Dickies. From small blouses to men's shirts. But here's the thing—she didn't change. She was surrounded by all these gangs and was still the same reserved Claudia."



The worst pain is silence.

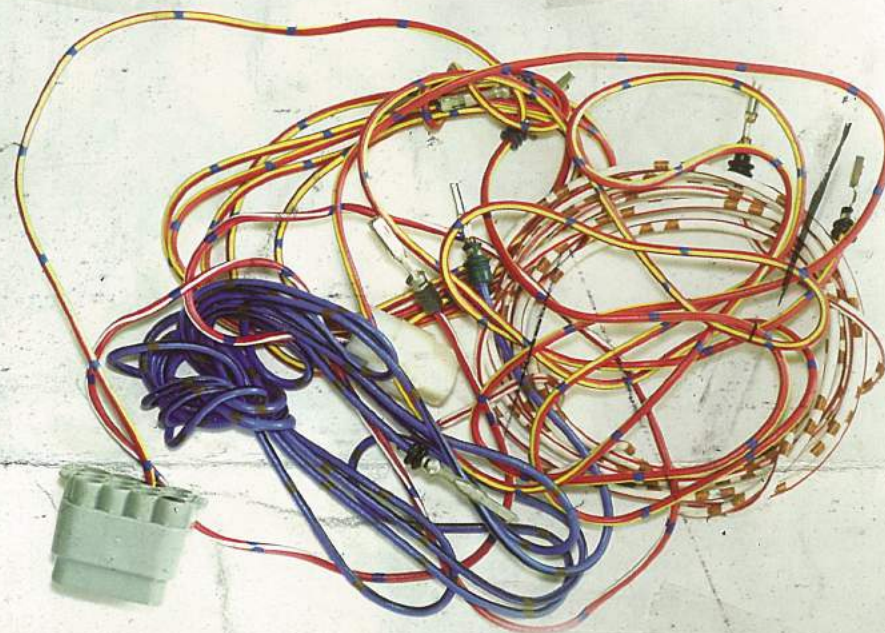
Now that you've come into my life, Claudia, I've been contemplating a kind of pain that makes no sound, a silence that comes from no one speaking your name.

Three weeks before Claudia turned fifteen, her brother Jorge died. The cause was a tumor the size of an orange. No one expected it. Nobody knew.

"When she turned fifteen we made her a small cake and she was happy. She wanted something bigger but her family didn't have the money. She started making plans to find a job. We altered her papers and she got what she wanted—a job in a factory."

Lear Corporation is a manufacturer of automotive interiors. Factory 173 is housed in three sprawling buildings in the maquiladora zone. Buses let the workers off two blocks from the entrance and everyone walks in their blue smocks or coveralls. At age fifteen, Claudia joined the procession. She would forget about Jorge in his inexpensive casket. She would forget her *quinceñera* because there was nothing to remember.

There is no sense in waiting for someone else to organize your party. If you want a beautiful life, you must work for it.



"To assemble the cable, you need connectors. There are sequences you need to follow to prevent any inverted circuits. For example, the sequence that we work with shows the color of the circuit, the connector it has to go to, and the connection point that completes the assembly. If it requires a red with a white, and instead I use a rose with a green, that circuit will be inverted, and that is a defect that will be rejected by the quality department. If we have two or three inverted circuits, we get a warning. If there are a few over a week, they can send us home for a day."

00786

CORPORATION		Lear Electrical Systems de Mexico S. de R. L. de C.V.		INSS 3303572107		FOLIO 00786	
NOMBRE		GONZALEZ CLAUDIA IVITH		RFC. 050234715		PLANTA 173	
FECHA INGRESO		FECHA PAGO		PERIODO DE PAGO DEL AL		DEPARTAMENTO CELULA	
02/12/1998		01/14/2001		01/05/2001		02/14/2001	
PERCEPCIONES		DEDUCCIONES		TOTAL PERCEPCIONES		TOTAL DEDUCCIONES	
Sueldo normal		44.24		167.11		22.24	
Bono Asig. Seguros D				64.92		40.95	
Bono de Antigüedad D				47.03		0.50	
S. normal Adeudo Gra		18		190.18		55.76	
Credito al Salario				15.28		559.30	
TOTAL PERCEPCIONES		784.42		TOTAL DEDUCCIONES		129.85	
DEPOSITO EN BANCO CUENTA BANCARIA		TOTAL CUENTAS		202.00		NETO EFECTIVO 555.57	
LUNES	MARTES	MIERCOLES	JUEVES	VIERNES	SABADO	DOMINGO	
8.87 Tiempo Reg	8.80 Tiempo Reg	8.87 Tiempo Reg	8.87 Tiempo Reg	8.53 Tiempo Reg	8.00 Tiempo Reg		

REGISTRO DE CONFORMIDAD LA CANTIDAD ANOTADA EN ESTE RECIBO POR LOS CONCEPTOS EN EL ESPECIFICADOS CON LO CUAL NO HAN SIDO PAGADOS POR LA EMPRESA TODAS LAS PAGAROS Y PRESTACIONES LEGALES Y CONTRACTUALES A QUE PUEDA TENER DERECHO.

La confianza es la pieza mas importante para el éxito de proyecto

FIRMA EMPLEADO



Q: "And what do you think about on the assembly line?"

A: "Well, you cannot go thinking about anything. You have to be 99 percent concentrated on your work to prevent any defects."

The cotton field that is not a cotton field: The imagination goes to work, looking at this empty place. You want the blankness to yield answers, to communicate a story. But no. The field is a kind of nowhere, a clearinghouse of objects left behind and unwanted. There is no possession here, only supervision. A stern sun overhead. A police car at the edge of the cracked earth, idling.



"And then she met Victor.
She met him on the assembly line at Lear. He told her that he liked her and asked her to go to the movies. And then she fell in love. And it was the first time. They would spend Sundays together.

And one day she asks me if she is walking funny. And I said no, and then she told me she had lost her virginity to Victor."



The ritual is to imagine how it will feel, years before it actually happens. Some girls at my school said it would feel the way that expensive fireworks look, a thousand perfect tiny stars tumbling down like streamers. Others said it would feel like something gentler, a sun shower beneath one of those gauzy-looking rainbows on the valentines that fade in a box for years. The fast girls just said it hurt, and to put a sheet under you, and if you should feel the need to cry, go to the washroom because it will just freak out the guy. He's nervous, too.

Some girls did it with anyone, just to get it over with. But the girls who were in love planned it out carefully, reading sidebars in *Cosmopolitan* magazine that recommended burning tea candles and not rushing.

Did his body feel as natural as a soft shadow creeping over you?

Did he wash himself in the bathroom with an open door, apologizing for having to leave? Together, did you make plans for the next time?

Did his face, close-up, create meaning?

I
LOVE
YOU
FOREVER

"And then she told me that she loved him, and I had never heard her say things like this before. Because maybe it scared her to open herself up like that."

Claudia's ideal man:

Good-looking
Clever
Faithful
Treats me with respect
Doesn't beat me up

Claudia, I once loved a man who was married. I was nineteen, the same age you were when you did the same thing. I won't sit here and say it was all blues and rain. He made me feel very wanted and I thought his sacrifice was sexy, like it meant that he wanted me more since he was risking what he'd already earned.

Maybe Victor's arms were hairy, and his eyelashes coal black and soft. He could have been one of those men who have always confused me, those men with lips like cherubs. He gave you a ring for Valentine's Day. The Virgin of Guadalupe. She means sacrifice and she means red tears of compassion.

There are ways to disguise the fact that you've been crying most of the night. Start with a foundation one shade darker than your skin. Use concealer one shade lighter under the eyes. The key is blending. A dab of Pepto-Bismol helps with the swelling. Dark lipstick can take attention away from everything. Try to look nice! It's not the end of the world! Put on a white blouse with a lace overlay, even if the uniform will cover it. It's nice to know you've got something nice underneath, even if no one will see it.

"And once, I thought I saw her. It looked exactly like her from the back. I started to smell her perfume. And I couldn't breathe. And then she turned around and it wasn't her. And I went home and I could still smell Claudia. And I couldn't talk. And my mom thought that I was going crazy."



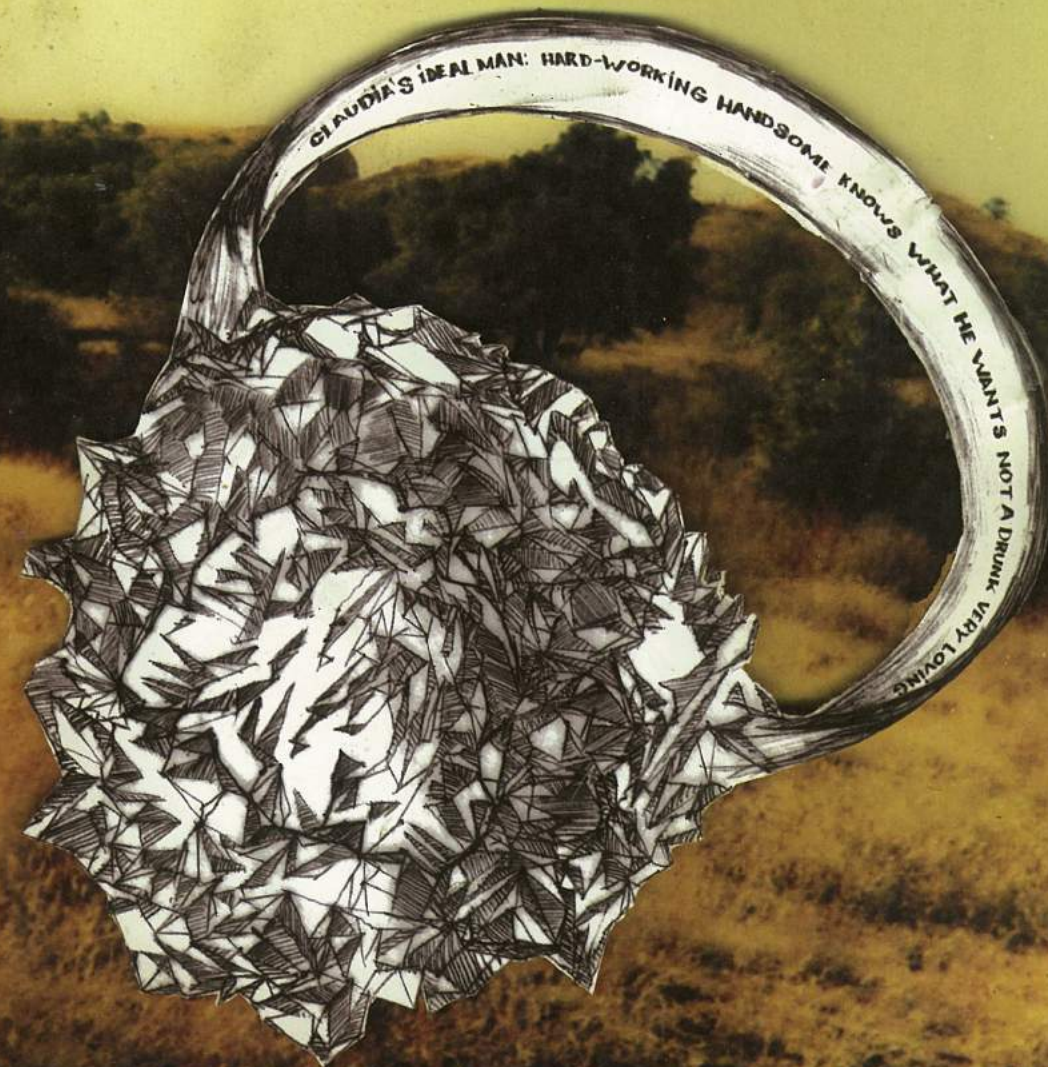
The maquiladoras have their own beauty pageant. It began with the glamour shots, the girls in their makeup, their hair maybe knotted into a chongo, smiling for the camera on the lawn outside the factory. Two candidates would be chosen to represent each plant, and then it was off to *el concurso*, the pageant, to walk through the better shops in town and select the best brands, to have their hair done by professionals and learn to dance with a patient instructor. To open their eyes when their makeup is done and to love, to really love, the person they see in the mirror.


Claudia placed third at Factory 173. She was Miss Congeniality.

"She had always wanted a thicker torso, much more shapely legs."

A twenty-five-kilogram FedEx box. It arrived at my house four months ago. I needed to tell your story somehow, knowing that maybe this was none of my business. So before I cut the box open, I promised you my cuts would be soft. I was trying to cut you free.

Claudia, I'm ashamed to say that many of the promises I've made I have broken.



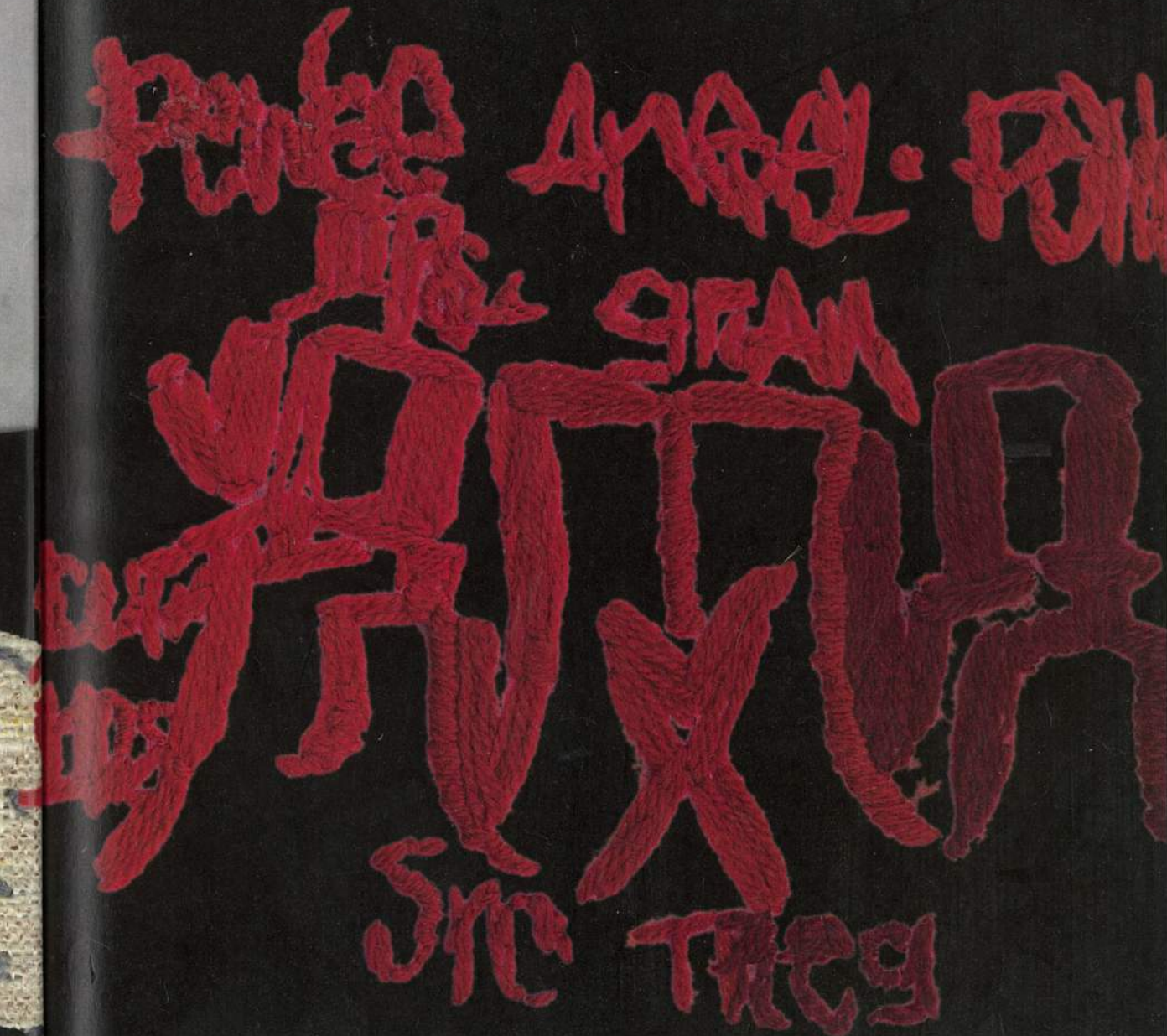


In the box there are photos of gray highways and underpasses. Pictures of you wearing white powder and blue contact lenses with your mouth closed like you've got a secret you want to tell. There's an interview with your mother, who says God will take care of everything. There is a photo of the Lear factory where you worked making electrical harnesses for America's cars. There's a photo of a pariah street dog with an empty potato chip bag on its mouth, one yellow eye visible and disappointed. There are pages from your high school notebook: a few notes about John Locke, the Enlightenment, knowledge for all. The notes stop halfway down the page, where fat graffiti takes over.

The same kind of graffiti is sprayed on the concrete beneath the bridge that connects Ciudad Juárez to El Paso, Texas, across the Rio Grande. You wanted to get papers, Claudia, to get to the other side, to live like your sister Gema, maybe, in her barrio in Las Cruces, New Mexico: poor, illegal, surrounded by gangs, with a boyfriend who writes to her from prison. Unable to cross into Mexico even to touch her mother's hands, even for a funeral. Gema, living in America, and somehow it all still is worth it.

"She is quiet. Kind of weird. People would ask me, why do you hang out with such a weird person? But she is my best friend. She didn't like to talk that much. She didn't like to be hugged or touched.

I never learned how to roll. She would roll the joint. Sometimes we would get the munchies. Like, it was always thirty minutes after we smoked weed. Sometimes we would go to the *panadería*. We used to eat bread and make, like, milk shakes with bananas. Hot Cheetos. She really loved Hot Cheetos."





Claudia, you've made it.
Your strange passage to the other side.
Your life in pieces, the farthest you've ever gone.



"I went to visit her and said hi like I did every day. She was getting ready for work. It was, like, 2:20 p.m. She was wearing beige pants with a white blouse and Guess sneakers. She looked really pretty. That day she had put makeup on her eyes, and her hair was pulled back with a little pair of strings and a ponytail. We talked about the car I was going to buy, and that soon I would start driving her to work. No more busses. No more walking to work. And she was listening to love songs."



Claudia, you picked up your coat to go. Your sister Mayela asked if you could bring her a burger, and you said she'd have to wait until Friday, when you would get your check. You had missed a bus and would have to run. So much in a life is ordinary.

"That day she came to work exactly two or three minutes late. She was really tired. Her eyes were red and puffy, like she'd been crying. I think since she was late she was running or walking faster. She got there at the same time I was leaving with some friends. My shift was over. I said hi and asked her, 'What's up, Clau?'"

She answered, 'What's up?'"

I told her they were not going to let her work because she was late.

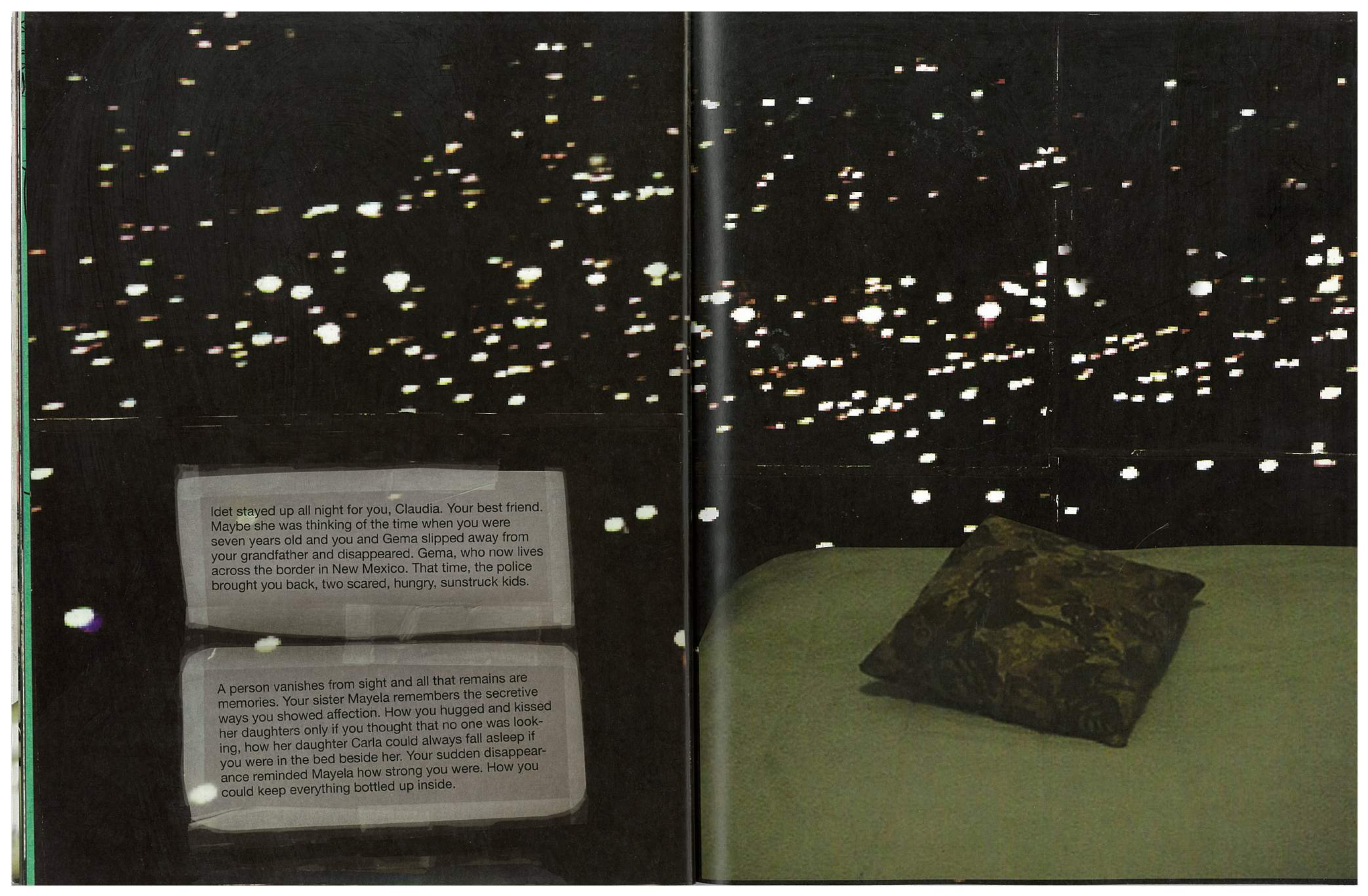
She said, 'No?'"

I asked the guard to let her in because, in the end, it was only, like, two or three minutes. He told her he couldn't but he would ask the people inside.

I was, like, 'She's only three minutes late!'"

And he said, 'No! I'll tell them she's here.'"

Then I told her I'd see her around, and she said, 'Cool.' And she just stayed there waiting to be let in to work."



Idet stayed up all night for you, Claudia. Your best friend. Maybe she was thinking of the time when you were seven years old and you and Gema slipped away from your grandfather and disappeared. Gema, who now lives across the border in New Mexico. That time, the police brought you back, two scared, hungry, sunstruck kids.

A person vanishes from sight and all that remains are memories. Your sister Mayela remembers the secretive ways you showed affection. How you hugged and kissed her daughters only if you thought that no one was looking, how her daughter Carla could always fall asleep if you were in the bed beside her. Your sudden disappearance reminded Mayela how strong you were. How you could keep everything bottled up inside.

SUPERPOSICION OSEO-FACIAL



FEMENINA NO IDENTIFICADA 189/01
CLAUDIA IVETTE GONZALEZ

"At the solicitor's office, they said that they couldn't process a missing person's report. She had to be missing for seventy-two hours.

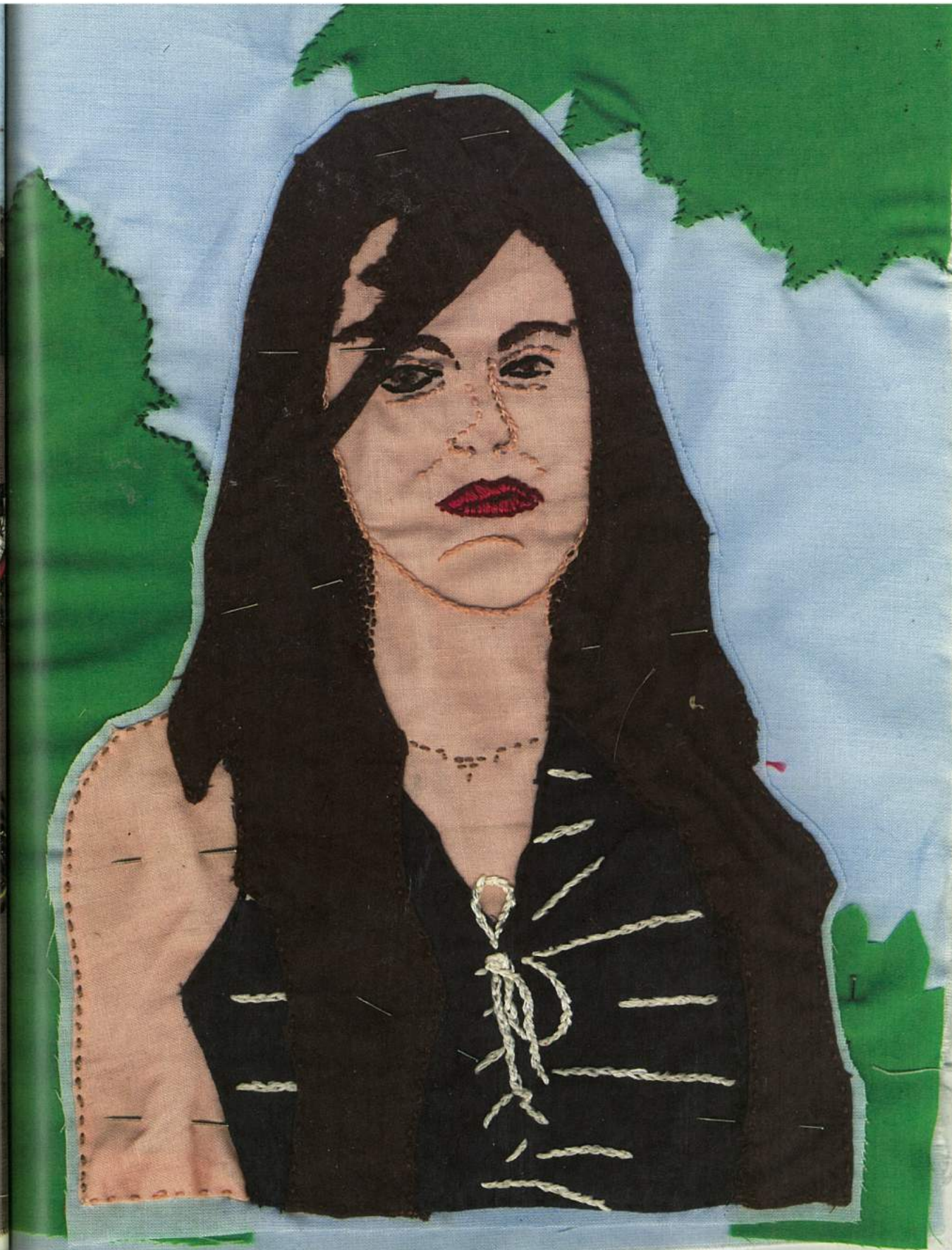
On Friday, October 12, the missing-person's report was made. I didn't understand the questions the police were asking. They wanted to know if she was a drug addict, asking if maybe she ran away with her boyfriend. Then they asked if she was really open and slutty with guys."

The night before, you were crying in your room—crying over Victor. You closed the door to your room, and you cried. Did your body feel like an unsafe house, some terrible containment? Did the crying feel like thunder drumming the walls of your chest? Curled up, maybe you felt a little bit protected. A bean in its dark place. I imagine that you lay in the nest of your bed, curled inside your favorite jacket, the Dallas Cowboys one with the iron-on blue satin star. The music was very loud. Without Victor your body felt uncomfortable, less useful, a sealed and trembling jar.

"Following the irrigation canal in a northwest direction, at an approximate distance of fifteen meters sixty centimeters from the location of the skull, was found a tuft of brown hair, classified as Exhibit No. 2. Following the canal in the same direction, at an approximate distance of seventeen meters sixty centimeters from the skull, was found a second tuft of brown hair, classified as Exhibit No. 3. In the same direction, at a distance of nineteen meters, using the skull as point of reference, was found a tuft of brown hair, registered as Exhibit No. 4."

Her blouse
her bra
a nail
and a hair
braid.

The spot where her body was found.



"She never really talked about her dad. I don't know. She didn't like that topic. I think that maybe it hurt her. All she said was that she didn't know him, and she didn't miss him."

"This is Claudia."

"Kind. Affectionate."

"She listens and gives me advice."

"We never have any secrets."

"She is my best friend."

"I love her."