



11-15-2003

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Recommended Citation

Revolinski, Kevin (2003) "Thirst," *Westview*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol23/iss1/3>

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Thirst

by Kevin Revolinski

Patricia stared out at the horizon where the highway turned liquid and evaporated into the sky between two distant hills. As she plodded across the empty fields, the sun beat down on her dark skin and her limbs grew heavy. She stopped to rest. Juan, absorbed in watching the flopping motion of his untied shoelace, nearly walked into her from behind.

Pay attention.

He nodded. She held out her hand, her eyes still fixed on the horizon, and Juan handed her an old dented canister wrapped in threadbare canvas the color of dried mud. She tipped her head back to swallow the last mouthful of water so warm that it passed through her lips without seeming to touch them. She handed the canteen back to her silent companion who squinted up at her unsure of whether she offered a swig or simply expected him to take it back now that it served no purpose for her.

The canteen was Juan's most valued possession. It had been given to him by strangers some months before on a day that felt like Christmas. No, more than that. Christmas had never been like that day. Not for Juan. The children had gathered in uncertain anticipation outside the compound. The truck had rolled in, trailing a cloud of dust, and fair-skinned strangers had emerged speaking a mysterious language. English, he was told. From the United States, in the north. He remembered hearing of these people from the television. Rich, violent, they lived where everyone owned a car and carried a gun for protecting it.

The rusted hinges on the trailer door had made a hawk's screech as the door swung wide, and the light had glinted off of the bounty waiting there— toys of every imaginable kind. A soccer ball still in the box, board games, typewriters, books, a paddle game, a bat, a stuffed animal with one eye missing, a radio, even a bicycle with two tiny

wheels dangling off the hub of the back tire. More than Juan could count.

Juan discovered the canteen among the tumbling treasures and, from the beginning, his solemn stare never strayed from its target. He recognized it from old movies where people fought in terrible wars and crouched in dusty trenches and drank desperately from these things. He waited in anxiety as the first groups formed lines, taking turns at claiming their gifts. He held his breath, fervently praying to the Holy Mother that this one object be spared for him alone. They started with the youngest first, girls before boys. Juan took his turn with the six-year-old boys which meant he had to wait through two groups of five and under and then the six-year-old girls. But the canteen evaded the onslaught of desperate and grateful fingers.

Victorious, he clutched it in both hands, hanging back under the eaves outside again where the others kicked balls, squirted each other with guns the color of neon and filled with water, and where a group of girls made jewelry with tiny bits of plastic from some kind of kit. His probing fingers felt the rough fabric and then tested its worth by pressing harder along its surface, feeling every seam, every dent in the metal below.

One of the strangers approached and spoke to him in Juan's own language but the way only some of the very young children spoke. "*Es por agua.*" The man pointed and slowly reached for the canteen, all the while watching Juan's eyes carefully. Juan hesitated but relinquished it to smooth hands.

"*Mira,*" he commanded. Juan looked. Along the top of the canister the man grasped the lid, twisting it off to expose the dark hollow inside which the man made a point of showing to Juan. "*Ah-gwa,*" he said, louder this time. Perhaps he is hard of hearing, Juan thought. Or thinks I am.

"*Agua?*"

"*Sí, sí. Agua.*" He smiled widely, and enthusi-



astically summoned over one of his companions, a woman in brightly colored shorts and a white t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up and some words written across her chest. They spoke wildly in their strange tongue and then just stood looking at him and smiling. The man held out the canteen for Juan but with a hesitancy that suggested to Juan that there might be a condition for its return.

"Can-teen."

Juan hesitated, then grabbing his gift, took one step back.

"Gracias." He bowed slightly. The strangers looked at each other and laughed.

"Day-nah-dah."

Juan endured a slap on the back that stung a bit but then ran inside to put his new discovery to the test of water. Since that time, the canteen played an important part in the daily patrols....

Patricia sighed and without looking at Juan began to walk back toward the compound. Almost as a parting thought she called over her shoulder for Juan to follow. There would be no bandits today. It was almost time to eat. Juan followed over earth cracked and faded like the tired skin of an old man.

After breakfast and morning prayers, Patricia and Juan set out to continue their patrol for bandits and rebels. At the edge of the field, out behind the compound, Patricia lifted the wire and its rows of crooked teeth for Juan to crawl under. Goats stood staring at them in the sparse fields. Across nameless land and several barbed barriers they ventured into unscouted territory. The ground sloped a bit and they came to where rains of long ago had cut a meandering scar through rock and soil. The arroyo was deep but empty, a dried vein burning for the blood of the land to run through it again from the quiet mountains in the distance. They climbed down steep banks into a river of sand and scattered stones.

Juan searched through the worn rocks for ones that fit his palm snugly. Good weapons, he fig-

ured. He nodded sagely at several as he hefted their weight before concealing them in his pockets. Patricia warned him that too many might slow him down should the need arise for a quick retreat for reinforcements. The distorted outline of a hawk flowed silently over the cluttered path in front of Patricia as they followed the jagged arroyo, pausing to listen at each bend. As the sun rose, the shadows that protected one side of the gully slipped slowly into the sheer wall that towered over them. Juan followed patiently and squinted up at his sister with a certain admiration. He waited, clutching the canteen.

No one was sure whether Patricia really was his sister or not. No one except Juan. He just knew. They had arrived at the orphanage before Juan could remember. Patricia, who was believed to be only four at the time, simply appeared out of a cold night; a quiet ghost, she stepped out of shadows determinedly struggling to carry Juan under his armpits, face forward, like an offering. He wore only a soiled diaper that sagged with its weight. Juan's wailing brought the staff out into the parking lot where Patricia stood grimly in the cold wind that blew down from dusky skies to beat her tattered dress. No one knew anything of their origin; Patricia, though capable of speaking, did not. They were treated as siblings and Juan never questioned it. Only Patricia may have really known the truth, if it mattered.

"Agua." She held out her hand. Juan scampered up, unscrewed the top and watched Patricia's soft throat pulse as she drank deeply from the canteen. Juan took one swig for himself, tightened the cap, and returned the strap to his shoulder.

Patricia held up her hand. In the distance she heard the sound of loose gravel scattering beneath the roar of an approaching vehicle. The sound grew closer and closer before finally grinding to a halt somewhere just above the rim of the arroyo. Dust passed overhead, momentarily dimming the sky. They heard voices and they both stood motionless, only their eyes searching the sparse clumps of dried



grass along the edge above their heads. A car door. Then another. Footsteps in gravel and dirt. Words indiscernible and then the faint smell of cigarette smoke. Juan pulled at Patricia's arm and pointed directly above them. Patricia scowled and shook her head but pushed herself flat, back against the dirt wall. Juan followed her example.

They blended, motionless like chameleons, until even the swallows took no notice of the two silent figures and flitted in and out of the holes carved into the baked mud above their heads.

They could hear laughing. Closer. Another car door opening and then a slam. Footsteps. Steady and purposeful. A soft noise, barely audible in the breeze. A panting rhythm somewhere between a whimper and a whisper. Juan looked up, squinting in the bright blue sky. Dust tumbled over the lip of the arroyo and fell into Juan's face. He bit his lip and wiped at his eyes with grubby fingers.

Suddenly, the air split open with a loud shot. A sound like all the sounds in the world being summoned together in one tiny instant and let go with a burst; they could be heard retreating back into the world across the land, the hills, and even fading faintly off into the mountains. The swallows fled like bullets from their nests. Juan and Patricia jumped involuntarily. Patricia clutched Juan's arm until her knuckles turned white; her nails dug in like talons. Juan wet himself. The shot still pealed away along the shallow canyon walls and grew fainter in the distant hills.

Juan's ears rang but he could still hear the yelp that had almost blended with the gunshot. He covered his ears, trembling. Another shot and Patricia's nails dug deeper into his forearm as she pulled one of his hands down from his ears. Tears traced gleaming tan paths down his dusty cheeks and fell to the dry earth between his feet. He wanted to cry out but fear made his throat as empty and parched as the arroyo itself. His impulse was to run but his feet were firm, his knees uncertain. He gave no thought to the weapons in his pockets.

He looked to Patricia and she appeared blurred

and frightened, her eyes tightly shut. Then footsteps through the ringing. Several. Coming closer. Patricia and Juan cowered against the dirt.

Then someone counting, "*uno-dos-tres.*" The sun blinked for an instant. All the terror of midnight passed in that frightful second and from the sky the dead fell. The stones clattered like dry bones and out into the middle of the arroyo. A couple of meters to Juan's right, the glassy eyes of a dog stared back at him, the head twisted in an awkward and uncomfortable angle. From Juan's lips escaped a staccato cry, brief but audible. They sensed a pause above them. Then the ringing of metal being locked into place and the dog made an epileptic leap to the sound of thunder. Neither child could hear now; their ears had become numb and muted as though submerged in the earth behind them. They both cried as quietly as possible, praying for the nightmare to end.

They stood there shivering in the hot sun for a long time. Shadow crept toward them, a sheet of oil tumbling over the stones, reaching halfway to their side of the arroyo before either of them could move or even speak. Juan's pants were almost dry and began to stink.

Patricia cautiously looked about for a place to climb up the wall of the arroyo so she could search for the enemy. Juan could only stare at the gaping mouth of the dog, at the torn flesh that no longer oozed crimson, at the mangy patches that spoiled the rest of its lifeless hide, and at the solitary black fly that already drank from the glassy pool of a vacant eye. He shuddered until Patricia returned, jerking Juan's arm to break his horrified stare.

They are gone. She complained bitterly of not having binoculars as a proper patrol should have so that she could have searched the horizon for the identity of these bandits that would so mercilessly attack such an obviously pitiable animal.

She started back home, turning to Juan who was no longer trembling but had dropped delicately to one knee several paces from the limp figure.

"*Ven,*" she commanded with just enough con-



viction that Juan obeyed and followed along.

He ran. The sky loomed behind him, a threatening, purple cloud billowing down into the arroyo. The walls on either side grew higher, stretching steeper until they seemed to be straight up to the very reaches of the lightning that split the black night, shattering the dark window of the sky. The stones seemed to roll toward him and he fell to one knee. Every time he stood to run he would only get a few more steps before his foot would sink into the scattered rocks that seemed to bubble and tremble like the surface of a boiling pot of water. His ankles would disappear between stones and hold fast until he fell. The winds rushed at him from all directions and the howling escalated at every stumbling step. It became so loud that he ran with his ears covered. Out of the wind came a howling so piercing he could hear it with his flesh. First, a tortured wail then a high-pitched continuous yelping. Both feet lodged as if in iron boots and he fell once more. His eyes came up to meet the imploring, glazed stare of the dog. Its tongue lolled out, its head at that unfortunate angle. It struggled to raise itself. Its breath came quickly, shallowly, and reeked of dark forgotten places, of caverns of fetid flesh and scattered bones. Then in a voice like the whisper of sand spilling on stone, the poor creature spoke to him. *"Please, some water."* And from his canteen Juan poured blood into the dog's parched mouth.

Juan awoke to a whimper that he slowly realized must have been his own. In the darkness around him, five pairs of frightened eyes peered back from the edges of their beds. He checked his bedpost where he could see the hanging outline of his canteen. He unscrewed the lid and drank from it.

"I am frightened."

"Why? Of what?"

"The dog."

"The dog is dead."

"It came to me."

"Last night?"

He nodded.

She paused, her scowl softening as she stared at a piece of egg she prodded with a fork. "Me too."

"What should we do? To make it go?"

"I don't know. Maybe if we catch the killers. Justice will send it away." She spoke uncertainly.

On this rare occasion Juan spoke to his sister in certain disagreement. "I don't think so. We are only two. They must be...dangerous."

She shrugged. "Our job is dangerous."

Juan was silent.

"We should go back."

"Why?" Juan, fearful, protested.

"We can wait for them."

"Do you think they will do it again?"

"Who knows?"

Juan shuddered.

"Are you frightened?" she asked, but not unkindly.

"Yes...But I will go."

"Then it is settled."

It was Monday and because they attended school during the day, they had to wait until the hours between dismissal and the evening meal. They shared a classroom, which also served as a cafeteria, with all forty-eight children regardless of age or comprehension level. Older students often helped the younger students and today Patricia's usual tutor, Felipe, watched as she struggled through her arithmetic. Felipe soon would leave the compound. After spending most of his sixteen years there he would begin a new life in the world outside. Secretly, Patricia would miss him.

"You seem disturbed."

She kept at her problems, stiffly avoiding his gaze.

"Something the matter?"

"It's a work matter."

He frowned. "A work matt...Ah," he smiled, "the patrol for rebels."



“And bandits...or murderers.”
 “Of course. And what have you to report?”
 “It’s secret.”
 “I see.... You’re not in trouble, are you?”
 “No. But....”
 “But what?”
 “It’s Juan.”
 “Juan is in trouble?”
 “No. Not exactly. He’s just having visitors.”
 “Visitors?”
 “Well, actually nightmares.”
 “Which is it? Visitors or nightmares?”
 “Nightmares...about visitors.”
 “Who are these visitors?”
 “Actually, it’s just one. A dead one.”
 “So a ghost? Someone you know...knew?”
 “Yes.”
 “And he’s scared?”
 “Very.”

Felipe seemed hesitant suddenly but continued to ask questions.

“Maybe he—is it a he?”—She nodded. “—is just coming to say goodbye. To say they—he—misses you.” She seemed to ponder this. “Do you remember the person’s name?”

“No...Yes. I mean, I think he does.”

Felipe nodded. “Well, I’m sure there’s nothing to be afraid of. Soon he will leave you and go back to where he came from.”

“I will tell Juan. Thank you.”

When they returned to the scene of the murder, the corpse already rested in shadow. Two vultures, their beaks painted in gore, looked up from their macabre feast and eyed the intruders warily. With a wail, Juan began hailing them with stones from the arroyo bed. Missing wildly, the stones skittered across the dog and past it. The birds retreated to the clouds without haste, to resume their patient circumspection of the fallen dog and its mourners. Juan gathered stones in a pile with nervous glances to the watchful eyes above.

“We must stay until dark. Then it will be all

right,” Patricia offered doubtfully.

For well over an hour Patricia watched the dirt road for the returning bandits while Juan remained near the body wishing the flies would disappear after vainly trying to drive them off with stones. The vultures had disappeared and Juan believed Patricia was correct—in the safety of the night at least.

As soon as they came back to Juan’s room, the other children told them that the director was waiting to see them. Upon entering his office, they found Felipe sitting on the old leather sofa along the wall. He smiled sheepishly at them. Patricia and Juan stood before the desk like soldiers confronted with the commanding officer.

“Children.”

“*Buenas noches, Padre Camilo.*”

“Felipe tells me you have been having strange dreams. From the past. Is that true?”

“*Sí, Padre.*”

“Do you remember?”

The children looked at each other hesitantly. Patricia spoke for both of them.

“*Sí...*”

“What do you remember?”

“Terrible things. Frightening. I remember death.”

The old man seemed troubled by this and looked at Felipe who nodded.

“I see. And do you know who this visitor is?”

She shrugged.

“Do you remember a name?”

She shook her head. Padre Camilo, who had been leaning forward over his desk with hands clasped before him, now leaned back with a creaking of his chair and spread his palms along the polished wood surface.

“Patricia. How old are you?”

“Eight years.”

“Do you remember when you came here?”

The silent room turned to her, Juan included. She nodded.



“And you Juan?”

He seemed bewildered. “I have always been here.”

The man smiled gently then returned to Patricia.

“Is this visitor the same person who brought you to us? Family perhaps?”

Now the children looked at each other in perplexity.

“No.” Her voice came softly now, a feather brushing a smooth surface. Juan shook his head in concurrence.

The man sighed and Patricia felt a passing guilt as though she had done something to displease him.

“You are certain of this?”

They nodded without hesitation.

“I see. Well.”

He then settled into his chair a bit more and began telling them about dreams, to not be afraid, to remember they are safe there. The mood had altered somehow and now Padre Camilo sought his words from a spot in the middle of his desk rather than in the eyes of the two children. To all these things, Patricia and Juan listened and nodded.

He stood at the bottom of a dry well. A long tunnel reaching up above him to the sky. The sun lit the rim above and it glowed, a golden halo. Like hot breath the air moved in and out around him, the throat of a giant buried deep in the earth. His tongue throbbed in his dry mouth, his clothes hung heavily on him and stuck to his sweat like a second skin. In the shadows around him, set deep into the dark cracks and crevices of the stones, a whispering. An occasional laugh, the stench of cigarettes, his beating heart reverberating off hot stone, crescendoing until he thought his eardrums might split. Above, the pale blue eye that examined him at the end of this microscope of dust and stone; around him, the murmurings, the gasps of dismal distress, of breath pulling in short and shallow like a hiss, like snakes slipping through sand on their

papery bellies under a desert sky. And above again, the black shadows against the blue, circling patiently, waiting for him to sleep, flying lower, closer to him and though they were still far off he could see their eyes, crimson and flat, tearless. He felt his own breath now, rapid and coarse, his tongue draped over his teeth and lips, and the sound of his own whine now filled the hollow well. He looked down to his ribs and saw the bouquet of fouled roses that bloomed through his mange-infected skin, and water came where there should have been blood. His name, familiar that he knew it was his, but still somehow foreign, a whisper from a tightened fist spilling sand over paper. Juan. And he stared into the light above that alone gave reprieve to his darkness.

“Juan.”

He reached feebly for the light finally closing his sweating fingers around his sister's wrist. Patricia turned off her penlight, eyeing the silent beds around them. Everyone at least pretended to sleep.

“You were crying again.”

“I had dreams.”

“Did it come to you?”

“No. I was alone. No, I was...someone else. I was hurt. Panting. Like a dog.”

She nodded. “We have to rescue the dog.”

“But I thought it was dead.”

“Its spirit is not. Like the crosses where a person has died, we need to help its pain. It is frightened. We need to make a funeral.”

Patricia remembered. She had seen one before. A shrine for the dead. The flowers, some real and withering in the harsh light and many others plastic, faded petals with tattered edges and stems. A white cross stood among them, a statuette of the Lady of Guadalupe with beckoning hands, protecting or offering protection, in a dress the color of a washed-out sky. She remembered the steel rails behind the sorrowful shrine. Rails laid out across mountains and deserts connecting even this small town to other worlds that lie beyond where the two



dark rails met at each horizon. Rails that lay still in the dust, taking no notice of the pounding of diesel and the pounding of unforgiving sun. But on a bitter winter night, stealing behind departed light, these quiet rails brought death to the town. Two teens in a battered pickup truck fell prey to the rails' deception. The boys raced to beat the cold steel with its breath of diesel, and the rails, victorious, claimed their brief lives for a prize. The Lady, the white cross, the tattered arrangements of pale colors, stood testament to their passing and the families kept the shrine watered with painful tears.

There in town stood a sign. A sign of remembrance, of sorrow, of comfort for the spirit that fears to be forgotten. It was this that they must do for the dog.

The dog had really started to smell. Flies probed it, leaping from wound to wound in frenetic buzzings. Patricia and Juan gathered the largest stones they could carry and stacked them near the matted and torn remains. It looked less like a dog after the buzzards had performed their ritual dissection.

"Do you think it had a family?"

"Everybody has a family."

"Not us."

Patricia thought for a minute. "We had to come from somewhere."

"But now we are alone. Like the dog."

"The dog is not alone. We are here, yes?"

"I suppose. So we are its family?"

"I guess so."

They arranged the stones carefully, first outlining the body and then covering it from the outside in, filling in the gaps with smaller stones and handfuls of dirt and sand. The stench was nauseating and they gagged involuntarily, trying to breathe through their mouths as much as possible. The rocks baked in the glaring sun and the air blurred

and shimmered above the pile as though the dog's spirit were evaporating like water into the wind. Patricia had fashioned a cross with two pieces of mesquite bound together with twine. She had trouble keeping the crosspiece in place and in the end it resembled an X. She wiped her dusty hands on her shirt and stood back to survey their work.

"I guess that will do."

"Now what?"

"Now we have to say something. A prayer or something."

Juan nodded and bowed his head.

Patricia murmured some things she heard the priest say sometimes. She ended with a sidelong glance at Juan. "Amen."

"Amen." A whisper.

"Well then, it is done. We should go now."

Patricia turned and began walking back through the arroyo in a resigned manner, like workers returning from the fields and the sun after a long day—tired, with heavy limbs, yet with a certain peace or serenity that comes with the illusory finality of completed work.

Juan followed along with downcast eyes but then stopped abruptly without even looking to Patricia. He slipped the canteen from his shoulder and held it before him with both hands. Then with firm steps, he returned to the humble grave. With reverence he opened the canteen and poured it carefully over the rocks. The water disappeared quickly into thirsty cracks, and the shiny dark patches on the rocks shrunk visibly in the sun until they were gone.

Without reluctance, Juan rested the emptied canteen below the awkward cross and stood back to see. He made a nod of satisfaction and ran back to where Patricia stood watching. Then, holding hands, they began their silent walk home.

