

Little Sister

Someone lives through such a thing, like men home from cruel wars, she should wear a medal; recognize each other, recognize ourselves.

— Jeanne Schinto, *Children of Men*

I know her junior high school. I walk past it
when I take Mercelita to the clinic.
It's an ugly building: it reminds me
of the *guardia* barracks in Guazapa.
The bottom half is orange. The top half
is rough cement. The broken windows
have boards on them, and some have twisted bars,
but there's a patch of soft grass
between the school and 16th Street. If I turn
my head I can see them all facing front.
(I want to sit there too, even
with Mercelita banging on me,
even though I can't read: me
among all those black faces.)
Maybe I've seen her.

The radio said
she's in the 9th grade. He spoke to her
through the chain-link fence.
I know that playground.
The boys play basketball, the girls walk in groups.
He called her away from her girlfriends and said
I've watched you. I know you.
I'm coming for you after school.

When I walk home from the market,
my head hurts, Mercelita gets heavy
and I know this is the way she walked
that day, past the little-kids playground,
by the stone steps of Sagrado Corazón,
where the young monks come out and stand
in long brown robes, watching the street,
down Park Road, where the apartment buildings
are close together and dirty. I continue
to 14th street, but she turned
into her building and he followed her
to the 3rd floor hallway that has no light bulbs.
He held the knife up to her face and said
I know how to use this. Then he cut up
her arithmetic book and he pushed the knife through
the book she was reading for English class.

He held her shoulders down on the stairs
and pushed away her skirt and her knees,
so quick that no one walked out,
with the knife touching her face.

A man from my country, the radio said.

I know that ceiling she had to look at,
how the cement swells in and out
against your face while he moves in you
and when he gets up, the cement comes down
and touches you.
I told only
my little sister, and she's dead.

I watch the girls in groups on the playground,
Mercelita pulling at my hair and screaming.
Which one is she? That red coat?
I could walk around and call to her through
the chain-link fence. I don't know her language.
But I know the room in the Guazapa barracks
is inside her now, and he crouches inside it, saying
I know how to use this.

And the knife comes down
through every book and every pleated skirt,
and every time she touches her own cheek:
a blade.