The working-class neighborhoods of Mexico City, men and women from nowhere.

Palo Solo, the invisible ravine.

If you think China is the world's factory, you're wrong: that place is much closer than you imagine. It's called Palo Solo and it remains hidden in a ravine, right next to the large residential buildings of Tecamachalco and the gleaming boutiques of Interlomas, a stone's throw from Mexico City.

It's a place almost no one notices, hidden beneath the horizon. Yet, many essential items for daily life in the metropolis originate there. In Palo Solo, dinosaur slippers are sewn, tiger blankets are dyed, the rods for the market carts are welded, and the balloons that brighten the Alameda Central are inflated. They also make Chucky costumes for dogs, ice cream carts with the image of Popocatépetl volcano, baskets of bean and chickpea tlacoyos, churros for the Insurgentes metro station, corn husk and Oaxacan tamales, the Mazahua dolls for Paseo de la Reforma, and even the trucks that travel the streets buying mattresses and scrap metal.

The population of the Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico increased from 3.1 million in 1950 to more than 7 million in 1970. Much of that increase was due to rural migration, especially from the Bajío region and the states of Hidalgo, Puebla, Oaxaca, Veracruz, and the State of Mexico.

It was the second major wave of rural migration to the city. The first, between 1930 and 1950, had increased the metropolitan population from 1.5 to 3.1 million. Today, more than 23 million people live there, although that growth is mainly due to migration from other cities and births within the capital after the 1980s.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, many migrants began to head towards medium-sized cities such as Querétaro, Toluca, Puebla, Monterrey and Guadalajara, which reduced the pressure on the capital.

Back in 1960, dozens of towns in the surrounding states were abandoned by their master craftsmen and artists, who sought a destiny in this ravine and on the margins of what was then known as the Federal District.

From the day Maestro Dimas took away his saxophone and trumpets, Pahuatlán was left without a tambora band. Now the plaza lights go out every Sunday, people stay inside their homes, silence creeps between the cobblestones, and the patron saint asks that no one move him from his niche.

In Yalalag, people walk barefoot because no one knows how to cut strips of tire to make huaraches anymore. That's why dances are no longer organized: nobody wants to hurt their feet on the cement.

In Naolinco, the dead can no longer return to their graves. Since Arnoldo stopped carving the tombstones, no one knows the entrance to their resting place, nor does anyone remember why they died.

The industrial boom of Palo Solo erased the signs that announced how many people lived in each of their original villages. Even the goblins who lived under the mushrooms and the headless horsemen abandoned their villages to build new shady dens in the ravine next to the black corrugated iron houses.

Their story was not like that of the first migration of the thirties and fifties, when peasants were invited by the dream of the factories, to become workers and where they managed to invade a flat piece of land, where they built the bricks of their home.

Those of the second migration arrived because farming was no longer a viable means of sustenance. The ambition of the local bosses seized every lettuce, every grain of corn, and every chicken, to resell them at low acquisition cost and high price in the insatiable clutches of the great city.

Many of them, in addition to planting and harvesting, were skilled in crafts such as pottery, textiles, goldsmithing, shoemaking, and masonry. Others found a new way to make a living through trade.

After the sixties, the factory no longer needed so many workers, but they continued to urgently demand food and spiritual substance: a way of life they longed for vehemently.

I will never forget the expression of Uncle Eduardo, that privileged worker of an American company, owner of a 1954 Volvo. With surprise, he identified two small lights in brick rooms, built on the hills next to Los Indios Verdes, which at that time, looked like two lanky drunks begging for alms at the entrance to the city.

"It's incredible, they're even building houses on the hills now," he said.

Palo Solo is the synthesis of a thousand invisible settlements. That's what makes it wonderful: in that mirror, the entire suburban strip of the City of Palaces combs its hair and plucks its eyebrows.

The Macabre Child and the Lady Guest

The peasant soul and its specters arrived in Huixquilucan accompanying the inhabitants of Palo Solo, although some were already there, ready to make friends with the newcomers.

They say that if one night, on the roads to Villa del Carbón, you come across a homeless child who asks where you're going and where you've come from, you should be careful with your answer. The only correct one is: *"I come from nowhere and I'm staying here."*

Many years ago, in a cold grove, a small, frozen child was found clutching a straw doll shaped like a charro. It is suspected that he was abandoned by his parents, who fled to an unknown destination. His soul searches for the place where he was born, but he will never find it: he never knew where it was. His innocence only seeks to guide travelers back to their origins, so that they do not get lost or die of cold.

If you reveal where you come from, a whirlwind of dust will engulf you, and you'll awaken in the place you mentioned. And if you also confess your destination, you'll never reach it or find it on any map.

Many are the beings of the underworld, who migrated in the saddlebags and cardboard boxes of the peasants, though one rarely has the opportunity to witness their birth. In communities that carry their imperishable dead, it is easy to become a specter.

This happened to me one morning in the house I lived in at the entrance to the ravine. When I woke up, I found a woman in the kitchen wearing a brown shawl, heating coffee on the kerosene stove. Accustomed to these apparitions, I thanked her without saying a word. While sweeping the dirt floor, I saw through the window a stack of pillows that extended beyond the front gate. Underneath this pile was Ramiro, a maker of foaming products, and I thought about helping him carry and sell his wares to earn a few cents.

As I was about to leave, the lady from the café asked me: *“Please, don’t step on me.”* When I opened the gate I understood her plea: at the entrance lay her body stretched out, with a couple of votive candles and a young girl kneeling praying a rosary.

The working-class and gang-like soul of Santa Julia.

This working-class neighborhood was the visible face of the first wave of rural migration, unlike the invisible ravines that marked the second. Before the 1970s, the first migrants had already built streets alongside the factories. They traded their straw hats for overalls, their gourds for soda bottles and metal lunchboxes. The dusty villages of the Valley of Mexico were transformed into neighborhoods where their inhabitants sought to leave rural life behind and embrace the allure of the urban.

Santa Julia became famous for the legend of *El Tigre* , a thief captured during the Porfirio Díaz era after a chase interrupted by an intestinal ailment. José de Jesús Negrete Medina, born in Guanajuato in 1873, was a soldier and later a bandit. He robbed the rich to give to the poor, in the style of Robin Hood or Chucho "El Roto." Artists like José Guadalupe Posada immortalized him in engravings and corridos (folk ballads).

His capture, in a cactus patch, gave rise to the popular phrase: *"They caught you like the Tiger of Santa Julia."*

As if by some manifest destiny, the neighborhood became a breeding ground for petty thieves, beer drinkers, marijuana smokers, and street soccer players. Marginalized youths reflected their disillusionment with the values of their peasant parents and with the poverty that oppressed them in cramped housing. The tenement was their common home: one or two rooms that served as living room, kitchen, and bedroom, with shared bathrooms and showers replaced by gourds and metal tubs.

In the neighborhoods of that era, easy money was a constant temptation, whether it came from a lottery win, theft, or fraud through shoddy work or overpriced jobs. While some families

championed hard work and honesty, it wasn't the norm. Poverty coexisted with resentment and envy, and neighborhood conflicts were a daily occurrence.

The 1960s also brought with them the rise of gangs, groups of teenagers dedicated to looting, idleness, and street violence. In Santa Julia, three stood out: *Los Charros* , *Los Nazis* , and *Los Feos* . Belonging to them conferred a reputation that couldn't be earned through education or economic success, but rather through violence. Mass clashes between rival gangs were frequent. They were enemies simply for belonging to different gangs.

Santa Julia was thus a neighborhood where peasant memory mingled with working-class and gang life. A transitional space marked by precariousness, violence, and the search for identity in the heart of the city.

The peasant longing of the working-class neighborhoods and Adolfo the turkey.

The metropolis's new inhabitants transformed it into a diverse storehouse of objects, music, words, customs, ghosts, and pleasures brought from mountains, valleys, jungles, and deserts. Mexico City became a theme park for the entire nation: a usurer greedily dragging the treasures of the country and the world to store them in its coffers. No other place in the world gathers as many characters as it does. Disneyland, compared to this city, is just a drop in the ocean.

In rural neighborhoods, it was common to find pens with birds, pigs, and even sheep. Such was the case of Adolfo, an enormous brown turkey, who sowed terror among the gangs of careless children who crossed his path during his frequent escapes from the pen. Despite his imposing appearance, he was a noble and protective animal. He had seen too many times how the birds that kept him company were slaughtered and how their chicks were crushed. Scenes that for humans belong in horror movies, but for him, they were an everyday reality.

Humanity, puffed up with its false sense of superiority, mercilessly inflicts the cruelest suffering on all other living beings. Recently, I witnessed a four-year-old boy forcefully pulling a puppy's neck to lift it up and down a swing set, nearly strangling it. His parents, far from stopping him, simply handed the rope back to him, as if it were a toy. I am certain that life itself will exact a price for this cruelty.

Adolfo knew that one day the knife would tear his own throat apart. That's why he tried to escape, though he never found a place to hide. In his prison, fear descended every afternoon

at the sound of the human beast's footsteps. Many times he sheltered orphaned chicks under his wings, though he knew they would later live their own tragedy.

One New Year's Eve morning, he understood that his fateful time had come. He lay down on his legs and awaited death as a respite. But before he could rest, a child's eye peered through a crack in the coop. Adolfo reacted with a sharp peck. The child's cry echoed, and the turkey, aware of the vengeance and punishment that would follow, made the boldest decision of his life: he ran toward a mud pit and plunged his head in to suffocate himself.

His action was correct; the violent primates were already preparing to collect their due for the aggression. That boy would later be known as One-Eyed Ignacio.

Since then, the footsteps of a large bird can be heard at night on the tin roofs of the neighborhoods. Mothers who know the story keep their children safe and sometimes cover their eyes with a bandana. It is said that the only way to protect the houses from this winged specter is to place altars to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Some compassionate neighbors leave a handful of corn as an offering.

In the seventies, the peasant past was still present in every corner: in the shawls with which mothers wrapped their babies, in the straw hats, in the rustic wooden furniture, in the sarapes and in foods that have now disappeared from our tables: jinicuil, guama, guamúchil, garambullos, maguey worms, ahuautle, chito or goat's milk that, according to grandmothers, cured childhood malnutrition.

Adolfo, for his part, was fond of stealing the pumpkin seeds that old Eusebio left to dry in the sun on a cotton blanket. The old man jealously guarded his merchandise, seated in a Michoacán chair with a woven mat back and leaning on a three-pronged cane. But sleep would overcome him, and then the feathered thief and some children would collect their loot.

Santa Julia and other neighborhoods show how the first rural diaspora transformed into urban life with fading memories. The second, that of Palo Solo, reflects the precariousness of informal settlements, where rural memory still coexists with marginalization.

"The city is a body clothed in abandonment."

Miracles and faith.

Just as in the Middle Ages, and as also happens in Palo Solo, the community lived alongside all kinds of saints and ethereal beings. They no longer inhabited the bushes or dens of the earth from which their parents and grandparents came, but rather the garbage dumps near the neighborhood, the sewers, or the homes of some lonely old woman.

It was easy to choose who to pray to for a miracle: to ask that a child stop smoking marijuana, that a husband get out of jail, or that a responsible boyfriend appear so they could start a family. Each saint had their specialty. The Catholic faith was practically obligatory; declaring oneself an atheist or doubting its dogmas could mean collective rejection.

In Santa Julia, it wasn't uncommon for a priest from the Church of Mary Help of Christians to hold liturgical services in the streets, courtyards, or neighborhoods, which provided additional income for him and his institution. On one occasion, the young priest Melgosa came up with the idea of ringing a loud bell to summon his parishioners early in the morning. The unexpected call prompted dozens of parishioners to come out in rags and even barefoot, carrying garbage cans. In Mexico, that sound is characteristic of a garbage truck.

The incident led to angry complaints. To rectify his mistake, the priest replaced the bell with the metallic sound of a triangle struck with a pipe. The result was just as confusing: many mothers came out with pots in hand, believing it was the milkman.

Anyone who lives in Mexico should learn to distinguish every sound and shout in the street: the jingle of the gelatin truck, the mailman's whistle, the scrap metal dealer's chant, the bread vendor's song, the pork rind vendor's horn, or the trumpet call to salute the flag at the nearby school. In short, it's best to forget the habit of waking up after eight in the morning: the whole city is already buzzing with sound.

The soul of Pedro Infante and the moral duality of the working-class neighborhood.

Santa Julia, like other urban settlements that emerged before the 1960s and after World War II, possessed a sentimental warmth that enveloped poverty in an aura of dignity and virtue. The children of that first generation of migrants—children in the 1950s, young adults in the 1960s—grew up with an inner pain, a mixture of remorse for their parents' efforts and for the hardships of their home.

At the other extreme, evil, fueled by greed and despotism, thrived under the rooftops of Polanco and Lomas de Chapultepec. There, the wealthy, with haughty demeanor, cruised

around in luxury cars, their gaze glaring down upon the poor, who possessed only kindness, generosity, and innocence.

Film and television exploited this image to the fullest: the myth of the poor but good man who, despite adversity, maintained values of sacrifice and joy. Carlos Monsiváis pointed out that this myth neutralized social protest by portraying poverty as a noble destiny rather than a structural problem. Octavio Paz criticized this popular culture, which idealizes the poor as a "poetics of resignation," where misery becomes a symbol of national authenticity. Some journalists point to the myth of Pedro Infante as a form of infantilism that exalts the innocence and goodness of the poor, but keeps them in a state of dependency.

For my part, I would add how dangerous it is to exploit this deep-seated sentiment in paternalistic policy schemes, which disguise their true contempt for poverty with rhetoric. In doing so, they seek docile human shields to sustain their social fraud, a machine that crushes freedoms and determines the nation's destiny.

The true heroes of that story were, of course, the parents of the rock generation, the miniskirts, and the bell-bottoms. But even more so, the mothers: they bravely endured the end of their days in sacrifice, while many husbands embarked on new paths in life.

Pedro Infante, with his character *Pepe el Toro* , was the idol who dominated the home altars with votive candles. This wasn't a metaphor: in the bedrooms of working-class neighborhoods, he shared space with the large double bed, the children's bunk bed, the wardrobe with a mirror, a ceramic dog that bobbed its head, the picture of the Virgin of Guadalupe above the headboard, and, next to the nightstand, a bottle of Sidral Mundet soda and Santa Clara eggnog. That altar was as real as a cell phone today.

The life depicted in films rarely reflected reality. In urban poverty, solidarity was a rare and fortunate occurrence. The father, though hardworking, was often a figure of overt violence; the mother, her violence disguised as blackmail. Alcohol was a pastime for adult men, and slander for women. From this underworld of struggle emerged professionals from public universities, but also resentful politicians who used the plight of their childhood as a rallying cry. At the same time, misery was perpetuated from generation to generation and, in some cases, led to the violence of organized crime.

The myth of Pedro Infante was a sentimental refuge, but also a double-edged sword: it exalted the goodness of the poor, while keeping alive dependence and resignation.

“Poverty invents myths to survive.”

Nests of new legends.

Not all legends originated in the fields. In Santa Julia, several were born from its own unique surroundings: *The Castle of Blackouts* , *Marble, Gloves and the Brown Cat* , *The Killer Pepper Tree* , and *The Loves of the Pericocha* . Today they barely survive in the memories of the elderly, but soon, I will have the pleasure of reviving them for posterity, along with those from other neighborhoods and towns across our nation.

One of my favorites is ***The Devil's Spite*** .

Beside the cavernous knots of a pepper tree, in the vicinity of legendary Santa Julia, the Devil rolled tobacco in rice paper. He was an ungovernable scoundrel, an enormous lion with a thick mane whose roar sent hyenas, jackals, and stray dogs fleeing. He never needed to steal what wasn't his with threats: his mere presence was enough to make any pocket surrender its treasures.

Those who survived this encounter might hear a friendly voice after their escape:

—Thank you for your help, shorty!

The Devil detested razors and knives; he preferred to carry a shiny Sayula machete with a horn-shaped handle at his waist.

He liked young women with plump calves and round cheeks. Tacha was the love of his life: petite, with tiny eyes and a fragile body. Before her, the thief crumbled like a poorly played musical score by the monumental band of Ayoquezco the Great.

He used to lean against the wall of the tortilla shop where she worked, waiting to see her. God knows how many times the Devil begged him to bless him with strength and patience.

Everything comes in its own time, and sometimes at the worst possible moment. One afternoon, lost in dreams of rivers of milk, a chill left him paralyzed against the wall. Tacha's hand appeared before him, offering him a rolled-up tortilla sprinkled with salt.

—Come on Pancracio, put flour in the sack.

All the furrows on the demon's face slid down to the ground, and his fingers scratched the wall, leaving their permanent imprint on the bricks. Later, some devout women in the neighborhood transformed that mark into a sacred symbol, for it was there that Saint Joan of Arc had left her seal.

The giant's thoughts vanished, as did the rest of the world, enveloped in a heavy nothingness. He simply reached out to claim the unexpected morsel. Anastasia, satisfied, let out a sing-song laugh and returned to her work, while the thief squatted down.

All human behavior stems from fear, love, and hate. Sometimes it's impossible to distinguish one from the other. All beings in this creation plead, compete, and even die for a little affection. Many try to seize it, but that's the only commodity that's never given away for free.

Love transformed him: he dressed in his only white satin shirt and cashmere trousers, his hair styled like Gardel's, a felt hat, and patent leather shoes. As he walked through the streets, some exaggerators claimed to see in him a symbol of masculine beauty.

Pancracio mentally tallied the bills he kept hidden away. He dreamed of taking her to the Alameda, buying her flowers and lace, building a house adorned with calla lilies, forget-me-nots, and clay pots.

Hours before that walk, standing in front of the mirror, he had discovered certain signs of beauty in his face, which others denied him. As a child, his mother had been the first to point out his flaws and make him aware of them, a misfortune that led her to hasten the birth so as not to carry him inside her for so long.

—Oh, you little brat! You really are quite ugly.

—Shut up, Mom, don't tell me that.

—It's so you know.

—I already know.

—So you don't forget, who's going to love you like this?

—One that isn't like you.

—What did you say?

—You're bad, I'm going to look for a woman who is good.

—Well then, find one worse than me, because if she's good, she'll love him even less.

—You'll see.

—Can't you see you're uglier than a prickly pear cactus?

—Where did I get that idea? I'm his son, aren't I?

—You're a son, but of the Devil. That was my punishment for being a fool.

With sweet thoughts, he quickened his pace toward his destination. But life isn't built on the mud of dreams; more often it floats in the salty, lumpy puddles of our sorrows. Thus, as he took to the street toward his beloved's arms, his soul was assailed by a cruel vision.

A few feet away, Tacha was offering her full lips to another tiny man who was holding her by the waist. The Devil, struck by a storm of disordered thoughts, transformed the scene in his mind: instead of the maiden, he imagined a small pig being devoured by a stray dog.

The love that had made him soar above the sidewalks shed its hypocritical disguise and spilled the bitterness of spite. Then, he reached for his belt and unsheathed the Sayula machete, intent on attacking the Cerberus who had dared to turn his flower into withered corn husks.

Adam, the barber who was stealing the love of his life, sensed the threat and dodged the blow with a leap. The neighborhood community formed a circle around the combatants. As is customary in these situations, the children took the front row.

The ladies occupied the second row, ready to save the children in case of any unfortunate incident and to exclaim loud expressions of Santería. The confrontation was unequal: a rabid fighting bull against a meek lamb fattened for sacrifice. No one bet on the barber's fate, although everyone cheered him on to victory.

Mexican society has a marked sympathy for the weak, always hoping that some supreme fortune will deliver them from misfortune. That seed is sown in the hearts of the conquered, and one doesn't have to look far back in time: this remains a land of the downtrodden and dispossessed.

Faced with the threat, Adam reached into his pocket and drew his razor, the same one he had used to shave so many necks. The sharp blade whistled through the air with each attack, like

a howl. Once it passed by his rival's ear, another time it ruffled the hairs on his cheek, and yet another time it blew near the back of his neck.

The barber, terrified, rolled around on the ground again and again, like a rubber ball kicked by the neighborhood thugs. Several times he managed to dodge the metal blade, while the crowd cheered each time he missed.

— "Go hard on him, Adam, finish him off!" they shouted.

Although the crowd was on his side, everyone knew his end was only a matter of a well-calculated attack. After a move in which the barber's head struck the giant's knee, the giant fell to his knees, face down on the floor. At that moment, Adam made a swift spin with the razor and opened a gash in his opponent's backside.

A stream of blood flooded the ground, while a heart-rending scream from the giant signaled the end of the battle. The incredulous barber stood watching, his heart pounding, his victory undeniable. Many workers and women rushed to the unfortunate man's aid, trying to soothe his pain with kind words.

This, according to the legend passed down from parents to children, is how the Devil's tail was cut off.

“Dreams are almost always mud and tears.”

The years of light and darkness.

In the early 1970s, a decisive change occurred in many working-class neighborhoods: electricity arrived, but the night disappeared. The installation of streetlights transformed daily life. Before, faces could only be distinguished by the glow of the moon or the stars, which, although small, were so numerous that they filled the darkness with shadows and playful patterns.

For children, identifying constellations was a challenge. Our teacher, Teresita, who taught the early grades, showed us how to recognize them on a map, and the best place in the universe was, without a doubt, Orion's Belt, from where the Three Wise Men set off riding their beasts.

The arrival of electricity changed the rhythm of life. The dim lights of the soup stands by the doors went out, as did the flickering charcoal braziers that illuminated the silhouettes of shoppers, and the magic of the twilight that was never a threat, but rather a stage for games and confidences.

In our childhood, playing hide-and-seek under the cover of night was as natural to us as drinking water from the tap. I remember sitting on my doorstep in the early hours of the morning, watching the line of workers disappear into the darkness on their way to the factory, like souls sucked into a black hole. Once, a huge worker with a childlike face sat down next to me. Seeing him, I remembered my grandmother's warnings: "Eat well so you grow tall." This was undoubtedly an obedient child. He broke his sope and shared it with me before continuing on his way, until the night swallowed him whole.

At that time, we also discovered that our street had a name. We learned this from the blue metal plaques that the government had installed on the corners. With them, we residents acquired a collective identity: we were now the children of Lago Mayor Street or Azcapotzalco Avenue. We ceased to be men and women from nowhere.

Our neighborhoods were full of contrasts: ignorance and wisdom, plunder and generosity, black and white. Today it pains me to see the stars fleeing like birds pelted with stones, that Mexico is becoming more of a meme than a magical and poetic world. That the image we share with the world is merely a cliché of pyramids, beaches, and volcanoes. A magnificent home needs magnificent inhabitants.

Every year a poet, a painter, a photographer dies, and with them hundreds of men and women with profound gazes. They were the soul of a world apart. A horizon beneath the ozone layer of planet Earth.

The city is not just bricks and rebar; it's a sigh left behind by empty villages. Every street holds a shawl still wrapped around a child, the shadow of a turkey pecking at the moon, or the brazier dying out in a tenement. Palosolo and Santa Julia are wounds that bleed memory, places where the city recognizes itself. There, the ghosts of the countryside and the factory fumes intertwine. The city is a body filled with absences, miracles, and profound longings.