

THE ELEVATOR ACROSS THE COURTYARD

ALEJANDRA URRESTI



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*To my mother, Mónica, and my father, Esteban.*

We begin building in concrete,  
but we continue to think in stone.  
M. Tournon

The Vietnamese woman on the second floor doesn't use the elevator.

She carries a cardboard egg tray with thirty eggs.

Sometimes two.

Her gaze lifts in greeting and then returns to the eggs.

She walks hurriedly, scuffing her feet.

The people in the building don't like her.

I do.

---

Men.

Young university students. Tenants.

The Colombians don't last long in the building.

Barrientos is an architect. He doesn't practice.

He has two apartments.

He rents the one on the third floor to Colombians and lives with Annette on the fourth.

Barrientos' entire body aches. Back, ears. Conjunctivitis.

He complains about the condition of the elevators, the new leaks and bags of garbage out of place.

He doesn't like the plants in the courtyard.

He hates ferns.

His greatest concern is the building's instability.

Nine columns, located in the basement below the market, hang rather than supporting the weight of the building.

The building could collapse.

We could fall.

---

Dear homeowner,  
A structural specialist will be hired to make a foundation inspection following which estimates will be requested in order to execute the most adequate technical repairs.

---

Black sky.  
The storm of Santa Rosa unleashes her usual fury.

I hurry home and up the stairs.  
I cross the courtyard, out of breath.  
The elevator is out of service.

All the windows are open.  
I dry floors and walls.  
I turn on the lights in the kitchen hallway.  
They flicker.  
They gradually go out.  
A few seconds in the dark and four colors suddenly turn on.  
The sequence repeats.  
They flicker.  
They gradually go out.  
A shower of shooting stars lights up the kitchen hallway.  
I'm home.

---

I take the elevator, cross the courtyard and go down the stairs to reach the street.

Vilko Pirš, Slovenian, tenor and taxi driver, is my favorite neighbor.

We live on the same floor. One next door to the other.

Two labels with his name indicate which apartment is his. The ceramic one has the name written in Spanish above a hand-painted pentagram. The other one is green with white letters. His name in Slovenian, and above that and larger, the number one.

One next door to the other.

On my door, the letter D.

—

Teresa, Eduardo, Vilko and I live on the fifth floor by the elevator across the courtyard.

—

Antonia and Oscar are in charge of the building maintenance.

Oscar washes down the sidewalk, takes care of cleaning the roof terrace and the back elevator.

Antonia cleans the courtyard and the front elevator wearing a grey uniform, and also delivers the mail.

Every morning, standing legs akimbo, she waits in the patio for the bucket to fill up with water.

She waves her hands and looks at the sky.

Antonia preaches God's word.

The bucket overflows.

Fury.

---

Dear homeowner,

Communication has arrived from the engineer, Mr. Verón.

I would like to say that, according to the ground studies, the perimeter terrain is very unstable. A demolition project of the floor and sub-floor should be carried out, removal of loose dirt and refill, compacting, and a new subfloor and floor put in. But I believe this would be for a later phase. Nevertheless, I make mention of it because it is work that will have to be done at some point due to the risk that some sector may collapse and someone may fall, as happened to Manuel Lorenzo in the market basement.

---

Manuel Lorenzo was the bowling champion two years running.  
He lives with his mother and his brother.  
He works restoring the floor of the lanes of the club where his trophies are on display.  
He turns the wood strips over one by one and sands the new surface.  
He repairs the lanes.

Antonia's children are Manuel's.

---

Vilko stands on the second floor landing.  
Seven steps down, Ana María Castro's son is walking up.  
Silent, skinny, black hair.

--I was inside—Vilko says—Inside.

Ana María Castro's son doesn't live here. His mother, his father and his dog do.  
He doesn't have a key. He has to wait until someone opens the door for him.

He talks through closed teeth.  
He walks up the stairs.

I don't speak.  
I open or close.

---

Villegas is an illustrator.  
Tall and stooped over, he is the oldest one in the building.  
It takes him a while to go up the stairs.  
He gets agitated, stops, breathes, waits and continues.  
He clambers.

We cross the courtyard.  
Villegas grabs hold of my arm and stops.  
He breathes and stares at a fixed spot.  
Something that doesn't exist.

At the door to his apartment, he gives me a drawing.  
A continuous line.  
A group of friends around a table, glasses raised.  
Ink on paper.

Villegas is tired.  
He doesn't let go of me.

---

It's raining.

Water from the leak runs, crosses the living room to the apartment below and reaches the third floor, where the Russians live.

Olga is a redhead.

She wears shorts and walks with her hands in her pockets.

The water drips off the ceiling lamp.

The electricity is out.

Vitaliy, Olga's son, knocks on my door.

Nervous and angry, he shouts in Russian.

I don't understand a single word. He keeps on shouting.

I turn my back on him.

I walk. He walks. He follows me.

I shine a light on the dining room ceiling.

I squeeze my hands, keys and flashlight.

Standing on the shore of the lagoon, Vitaliy shouts.

It's raining.

---

There's some smell in the elevator.

Sweet. Dense.

The woman from the fourth floor fell in her apartment.  
She hit her head on the edge of the step to the bathroom  
and bled to death.

An elderly lady. With no close friends or family.

Five days went by before the police went into her house.  
Smell.

The building smells like incense.

The officers breathe in the courtyard.

---

Teresa moves into a new apartment, brand new.

The building is in a good location. It has a parking garage,  
gym and multi-purpose room.

She's happy.

Teresa insists that sooner or later our building will collapse.

She leaves.

I stay.

---

I go up the stairs and cross the courtyard.  
The elevator doors are open.  
Eduardo, standing to one side, waits for me.  
He smiles.

---

Horacio, the superintendent, knocks on my door.  
He's hoarse.  
He speaks little, in broken phrases.  
He comes in with Lucero, who does construction and  
paints.  
The superintendent walks. He looks at the ceilings and  
walls.  
He circles.  
He comes to a halt under the leak.  
His head hangs down, and his briefcase.

Lucero's face is wrinkled and his voice is sharp.  
The leak is perfect—he says—perfect.  
He climbs up and patches.

It rains and it's worse.  
The leak branches out.  
Buckets, pots and pans.

---

The sisters fight.

They fight at the top of their lungs.

Vilko, the dressmaker, Medina's twins and the Vietnamese woman all poke their heads out.

–Take the dog out. –You clean. I have to study. –You went out. –I'm not listening to you, I'm not listening to you. –Filthy. –Mind your own business. –When Mom gets home.

The building, the coliseum.

The courtyard, the arena.

The beasts, at the top of their lungs.

---

In the apartment where Teresa used to live, Agustín, her only son, now lives.

We took the elevator together twice.

We went up.

Agustín plays the guitar, he has curly hair and uses cologne.

Teresa's son, Eduardo, Vilko and I live on the fifth floor by the elevator across the courtyard.

Eduardo is a painter, he makes paintings.

---

Vilko is standing on the stair landing, alongside the planter.

–Do you know what’s up with Eduardo? His door is open.  
He doesn’t answer. I holler and he doesn’t answer.  
What should we do?

We go in.  
Vilko claps. He yells.  
Eduardo doesn’t appear.

I look at the studio. The light, the plants, brushes and  
acrylics.  
Vilko walks, yells, claps.  
The window in Eduardo’s office is open.  
Down below, a huge rubber tree. Against the sky, a cupola  
with a Catalonian air.

Vilko moves away.  
He yells.  
He comes back.  
–He’s not here. Eduardo isn’t here.

We leave.  
Vilko closes the door and cleans the doorknob using his  
handkerchief.

---

Mr. García, the professor of Tai Chi Chuan, Medina, Villegas and his second wife live in the apartments surrounding the courtyard.

The professor of Tai Chi Chuan dresses in blue.  
He is quiet, does not greet.  
They call him the Maestro.  
He gives classes outside at the square and in his studio.  
He doesn't go to the board meetings.  
The maestro doesn't cross the courtyard.

---

Dear homeowner,  
Participate in meetings. Share your opinion. Suggest solutions in a constructive spirit. Collaborate with fellow homeowners, the building administration and the superintendent.

---

Eduardo goes in and comes out of the studio at the same time every day.

He uses an apron of non-defined color, brownish grayish with a bit of green. Like the wall, the back side of the paintings, easels and planters.

I go up the stairs and cross the courtyard.

The elevator doors are open.

Eduardo, standing to one side, waits for me.

He smiles.

—You're late—he says. One minute.

I step into the elevator.

Eduardo closes the doors from outside.

—

Saturday morning.

The Vietnamese woman doesn't scuff her feet.  
Manuel's children don't play in the courtyard.  
Antonia doesn't preach the word of God.  
Medina's dog doesn't bark, the one that howls doesn't  
howl.  
Joaquín's grandmother doesn't shout out his name.  
The sisters don't fight.

There are no clouds.  
My gaze runs down along the gas pipes.  
Like so many ducks with necks stretched out, the  
ventilation ducts breathe the courtyard air.

A cement cross divides the floor into four parts.  
All the rest, glass blocks.  
One thousand six hundred and twelve.

Vilko listens to music.  
Wagner escapes out his window.

—

Horacio, Verón the engineer and I tour the roof terrace.  
The engineer follows marks and cracks in the tar paper.  
He whispers.  
He steps on patched patches.  
With one foot, with the other. With both.  
He sways as if he were walking on the moon.

Horacio climbs up and, standing alongside the water tank,  
he looks at me.  
From above and with scorn, he looks at me.

Leaning back against the low wall that leads to the  
courtyard, I close my eyes to the sun.  
Music in my head.  
Precipice at my back.  
A pit sixty feet deep between the roof terrace and the  
courtyard.

I open my eyes.

At my side, Horacio rests his belly against the wall.  
His arms are tense and flexed.  
The leg against the wall is a brace.  
I see his fear of heights.  
I smile.

I close my eyes to the sun.

---

The stairs are a mountain, the highest one.

Villegas is tired.

He goes up four stairs and is out of breath.

He waits.

He breathes and greets.

–Good afternoon. Good day.

Never good night.

---

Lucero arrives by motorcycle to study a leak. A new one.  
That isn't a leak. It's water that runs down my bedroom  
wall.

Water that runs inside even though it isn't raining outside.

Lucero puts the helmet down on the bed and chisels into  
the wall.

He opens up a hole.

A vertical shaft follows along the party wall from basement  
to terrace.

Lucero leaves a loose brick wrapped in plastic in the ho-  
llow in the bedroom wall so I can look every time I hear  
water running inside even though it isn't raining outside.

Lucero leaves.

---

Outside it's raining.  
I take out the loose brick.  
The water doesn't run.  
Inside it isn't raining.

---

A white mantle fogs over my eyes.  
On the roof terrace of the building next door, the wind  
drags a rocking chair.

I look at the sky.  
And the cable that cuts across it. Two skies.  
Over the cable hang other cables that go nowhere on either  
end.  
Whips.

The Congress building cupola cannot be seen.  
In the courtyard, glass blocks, gas pipes, ferns and jasmines  
are covered in white.  
It's snowing.

---

Teresa came back to the building.

As soon as she opened her apartment door she started to scream.

–Not here, Agustín. Don't even think about it. Not here.

Seconds later, her son left with a bag and the guitar.

Barefoot, he didn't even wait for the elevator.

—

Teresa, Eduardo, Vilko and I live on the fifth floor by the elevator across the courtyard.

—

An envelope, battered and empty, under my door.

Two words written by hand.

Villegas died.

Villegas is underlined.

—

From my house I can obliquely see Vilko's window.  
Petra, his girlfriend, smokes and laughs.  
She looks at the courtyard.  
Her voice is deep and husky.  
The ashes fall.

Vilko has friends over to his house.  
He pushes the table against the wall and sets up a circle  
with the dining room chairs.  
Poets, students and musicians sit in the circle.  
All Slovenians.

A woman reads a poem and cries.  
The musicians play.  
A couple argues.  
Vilko takes pictures.  
A wineglass breaks.

Petra's arm gropes for the window.  
The ashes fall.

---

The superintendent trips on the stairs.  
He doesn't actually fall, not completely.  
He goes up.  
I go down.  
I look him in the eye and he falls.

Horacio is father to two children.  
Horacio is a father who falls.

---

Rain, already!

---

Eduardo relaxes his back while waiting for the elevator.  
He raises and lowers his shoulders. He moves them as if  
drawing circles.  
As if the head of the humerus were a brush.  
Over and over.  
Lots of circles.

The elevator comes.  
He raises and lowers his shoulders.  
He looks at himself in the mirror.  
His neck disappears.  
Over and over.

---

Lucero comes back.  
It isn't raining and he brings bad news.  
He puts the helmet on the bed, his ear to the wall and  
confesses to having hearing problems since the last spike of  
high blood pressure.  
He takes out the brick and shines a flashlight into the shaft.  
On our knees, we look inside the wall.  
Not a sound, not a drop.  
He puts his hand into the hollow and waits.  
Let him be patient. Let a drop fall. Let him be patient.

Lucero puts his hands into the shaft. He moves them.  
He tries to align the flashlight, the mirror and his gaze.  
He indicates the ventilation pipes with the flashlight beam.  
The caps gleam from down below.

—Eureka—shouts Lucero.

A drop of water strikes the mirror.

—

Before moving to the building, Vilko lived at Solis and Moreno.

He bought a loading cart and by himself, piled up books and records and made the move on foot.

He moved his house in forty trips.

In Vilko's new apartment there used to be a lawyer's office. According to him, they had to move because the clients would mix up the elevators and get lost inside the building.

When Vilko entered the new house there was no need to paint. He didn't so much as put a nail in the wall. He used the ones that were there for diplomas to hang up his photographs.

A young Vilko with a couple and their little boy alongside a Canadian canoe at a lake in Bariloche. A group of nine men sitting at the foot of a cross on a hilltop. A couple hugging with a snowy mountain in the background. A group of friends where only the woman looks at the camera. Vilko naked sitting on a tree trunk. The canoe in the middle of the lake. Six horses in a forest. A man dressed in black standing in the snow. The shelf of a piece of furniture that Vilko put against that wall cuts across the middle of a photograph. Two pairs of legs on skis and four poles step in deep snow.

---

Ambulances sound in the distance.

---

Mr. Superintendent,  
I hereby require that the problems involving water entry and humidity in the apartment of which I am the owner be resolved within a peremptory time period of fifteen days. Said problems originate in common areas of the building. I reserve any legal action that may allow me to redress the damages caused by said situation and the right to take penal action in the eventual case that you be found to be involved in the commission of criminal damages.

---

Eduardo goes down the stairs.  
We greet one another on the first landing and not at the elevator door.  
He excuses himself.  
We have lost precision.

---

—You broke the spell! —Oscar shouts.  
I take an umbrella with me for the first time.

Oscar washes down the sidewalk with buckets of water.  
He has the broom in hand.  
A cigarette in his mouth.  
At his back there are seven bus lines.

—You broke the spell!

Oscar rests against the large power distribution box  
installed on the sidewalk.  
The box is a counter, a bar.  
He leans on his elbows on one side, and on the other, the  
designated policeman.  
The policeman, the box and Oscar.

—It's magic! —Oscar shouts.  
He lifts his elbows off the box and applauds.

I open the umbrella.

—

Restless, Vilko carries a black leather bag.  
His hair tied back pulls his forehead taut.  
He waits for the elevator.

A few days at Petra's place, I imagine.  
His mother is ill.  
A trip to the airport.

Petra appears in the photographs hanging in Vilko's house.  
Bariloche, the lake, the canoe and the friends.  
Petra was hugging a different man then.

Today I watch Vilko cross the courtyard.  
He doesn't sing.

---

The designated policeman is hot.  
He scratches himself.  
The officer sticks his fingers between his hat and his head.  
He takes off the hat.  
Inside, it has a transparent pocket.  
The policeman carries saints' cards with him.  
St. George. St. Benedict. St. Expeditus.  
Mystic Rose Mary.

---

Lucero, the superintendent, Verón the engineer and I are standing alongside my bed.

We look at the hole in the wall as if it were a camp fire.

Lucero doesn't let go of the helmet.

Horacio doesn't let go of the briefcase.

I don't speak. I have a lawyer.

I reject the options that the engineer proposes.

That Lucero install a metal plate to the effect of deflecting the leak, which, in free fall, runs the entire length of the shaft until reaching the market's sub-basement.

That I spend the summer close to the hollow taking note of the elapsed time between rains and leaks.

The tempo.

I accompany them to the door.

I grab a hose.

I turn the faucet on and let the water run down through the hole.

The water reaches the apartment below, crosses through the Russians' living room on the third floor, the Vietnamese woman's bedroom on the second, Medina's dining room and reaches the market's sub-basement.

I have a lawyer.

---

Vilko plants a poinsettia in the planter on the stair landing.  
It's the fourth attempt.  
He accommodates its leaves among the skeletons of  
previous plants.

At night he sings it the same song.

*Little bear isn't sick  
Little bear is sleepy  
When the dark night falls  
Good night Little bear!*

---

Two policemen go down the stairs.  
I go up.  
I look at the walls and calculate the mid-point.  
I let one officer pass by on one side and the other on the  
other. Wind in my face.  
If anyone swerves, we collide.

I close my eyes.  
Ana Maria Castro's son is killing her. Manuel is killing  
Antonia. Barrientos is killing himself. One sister kills the  
other. Ana María Castro's husband is killing her. The  
Maestro's students commit suicide en masse.  
I open my eyes.

---

The building makes noise.  
It isn't the neighbors, it's the structure.  
The building readies itself, settles in.  
It rumbles.

---

Oscar is a retired boxer. Maintains his weight.  
A member of the Federation in the middleweight category,  
he talks about his trainer, La Pantera Saldaño, and his eyes  
well up.  
From Tucumán just like Oscar, Saldaño was Monzón's  
sparring partner.

—I used to fight like Monzón—Oscar says. No punches to  
the face, hitting down lower, one-two-three, one-two-three  
and that way we would take them apart in a million pieces.  
I took Pajarito Fernández down twice! One-two-three, one-  
two-three.

---

Vilko crosses the courtyard.  
He sings an aria.

---

I come back from Nicolás' house.  
Four days after the death of his mother, África, Nicolás  
started vomiting again.

–It's a sign—he says.  
–Death takes three at a time—she said.

He has no idea what's wrong with him.  
–There's something inside. There's something inside.  
And he points to his stomach, to his chest.

África was an opera singer and a pianist.

Her piano was a gift from Juan Duarte to the actress María  
Antinea.

Antinea, an actress, showgirl and dancer, arrived in Buenos  
Aires fleeing the Spanish Civil War.

Before traveling to Mexico, Antinea left the piano in  
consignment in a music store.

Nicolás' father saw it in the shop window and gave it to  
África for their diamond wedding anniversary.

*Il Trovatore, Rigoletto, Carmen, Giulio Cesare, La Sonnambula.*

Before dying, África gave Nicolás autographed sheet music  
from the operas she had been in.

She also left him a letter.

*Don't sell the piano. Ever.  
Rest easy, my son,  
I'm not going to visit you once I'm dead.*

I go back home.

I go up the stairs alone.  
I set foot on the courtyard and look at the sky. My sky.

There is no one.

My foot in the courtyard, the Maestro of Tai Chi Chuan in his studio, the jasmine on the right, the jasmine on the left and the elevator, lit up, across the courtyard.

Verdi, Mozart, Wagner, Debussy.

Vilko says that Wagner is the most written-about person in history.  
Even more than Christ.

---

Dear homeowner,

Today, the engineer, Mr. Verón, delivered the report from the analysis carried out, the construction solution and a sheet of specifications to be used to make estimates of the work to be done.

If you are in contact with any company with the capability of executing the work, I request that you please ask for an estimate of an urgent nature.

The estimates will be reviewed by the committee and subsequently a meeting will be convened in order to resolve the issue.

---

Eduardo rushes to enter the studio.  
Over one hundred paintings facing the walls. Only the back  
sides of the works are showing.  
The painting he is looking for is called Laguna azul (Blue Lagoon).  
He thought he had finished it a year ago. But no.  
Eduardo believes in continuity.  
Something is missing and he keeps looking for it, painting.  
Facing Laguna azul, Eduardo holds a reproduction of the  
painting before it was modified in the left hand, and with  
the right hand, like an orchestra director, he points out the  
differences between the original and the reproduction.  
He speaks of movements and directions.  
New curves fall from the sky.

---

A drop of water hits the floor.  
It isn't raining.  
I look at the ceiling. The perfect leak is dry.

A drop of water hits the floor.  
The noise comes from the other side. Further away.  
Not from the hallway and not from the bedroom.  
I shut off the lights and walk.  
From the living room, I see the cupula of the Congress  
building lit up.  
Fifty-eight points of light.

I leave the apartment and go upstairs.  
I ring the doorbell and wait.  
I knock on the door of the apartment above.  
I wait.

The neighbor appears.  
A tall redhead, he has a towel tied around his waist.  
He has freckles and moles.

His apartment is small.  
Standing in the doorway I see everything. The refrigerator,  
the sofa-bed, the bathroom and the closet.  
Water flows out of his kitchen sink like a waterfall.  
On his floor, a lagoon.

He turns off the faucet.  
I slam the door.

My hand, his hair, his freckles, his skin, so red.  
I go back home.  
I move the furniture out of place.  
The living room to the dining room. The table into the living room.  
I take down pictures and unplug artifacts.  
I go to sleep.

—

The courtyard, rimmed with planters, ends where the  
inopportunistically installed enclosures rise up.  
Large window panes in iron and aluminum contain the empty  
space.  
The apartments closed themselves off from the courtyard.  
From the rain.

My window is on the boundary.  
Where the courtyard turns pit and the sky plummets  
straight down.

—

Elba, Villegas' widow, is hot.  
The windows are open.

I wait for the elevator, and look at her house.  
I'm lucky.  
The elevator is on the top floor.  
I have time.

I approach the window.  
No one's there.  
The hallway, the living room, a wicker stand, two short  
tables, three lamps and eight photographs in silver frames.  
In all of the pictures, Villegas is dancing.  
The wedding, a waltz, his daughter.  
A birthday, a party, Elba.  
Villegas dances.

---

A drop of water hits the floor.  
I go up to the roof terrace. I look at the sky.  
It isn't raining.  
I greet Avelina and her two turtles.  
Avelina, Gaspar and Bartola.

I go down to the apartment.  
A dilluvio.

I go out and up the stairs. I ring the doorbell and wait.  
I knock on the door of the apartment above mine.

My hand, red. His hair, his freckles, his skin. Red.  
I knock.  
Too much noise for such a small apartment.

I go back home.  
The table, the chairs, the lamps.  
Not even with three buckets and a lot of pots and pans.  
I go up and knock.  
I go down.  
I wait.  
Come back, come back.

I want to see you.

I grab the red grease pencil. His hair, his freckles, his  
pimples.  
I go up.  
The door is white. The pencil.  
I raise my hand.  
I write.  
The writing is tidy and the phrases are lengthy.  
Red lines say *neighbor, below, dilluvio, buckets, pots, your  
faucet.*  
*I hate you.*

Down below night falls.  
I look at the rain.  
I just sit. I just sit.

---

Oscar swipes the cobwebs away with a feather duster on a  
six foot long pole.  
He looks like a fisherman.  
Like his father.

He regrets not having gone fishing with his brother, his  
father and the guys from the Tucumán hunting and fishing  
club in ninety-four.  
The group made the trip in a school bus.  
That year Oscar's mother fell ill and he offered to take care  
of her.  
He didn't go.

Tucumán, Santiago del Estero, Santa Fe.  
They chose the route for its proximity to the rivers.  
From Tucumán to the Paraná River.

On the way to Entre Ríos, Oscar's father stopped the bus at  
a corner.  
Twenty men encircled around one man.  
Carlos Monzón.  
On leave with permission, he would give boxing classes to  
beginners, sign autographs, smoke in the street and then go  
back to prison.

Oscar still has the photograph.  
His father, his brother and Carlos Monzón.  
His father in the middle.

---

I leave the house.  
On the door, a note from Vilko.  
*You're never home.*

---

They cut off the building's gas supply.  
Isabel reported the absence of gas meters.  
She cheated on her husband with his brother; Medina saw  
them and threw her out.  
She packed her bags, reported the meters and left.  
The dog and the twins stayed with Medina.

It's winter and the board meetings repeat frequently.  
The building has no gas.  
No one misses the meetings and assemblies.  
We seek heat.  
We need to talk about the cold.

The columns hang.  
The building could fall.  
We're cold.

Seven days without gas. And eight, and nine and at the  
count of ten Vilko buys an electric hot water heater.  
I hear him leave the house and take the elevator.  
From my window I see him cross the courtyard.  
He sings.

I have his keys.  
The house is yellow, the moldings are red and the bar, mirrored.  
Vilko accumulates.  
Ornaments, photos, souvenirs, books and records.  
A piano, a sax, a clarinet, a flute, one electric guitar and  
one Spanish.  
On his bed, bags, clothes, tools and three piles of magazines.  
National, Slovenian and from the rest of the world.  
The closet doors are open, the drawers pulled out.  
The sheets are on a chair.  
On the table, the computer. On the floor, papers, folders  
and sheet music delineate a semicircle.

Vilko accumulates.  
Jars, combs, towels, containers.

I bathe and leave.  
I'm home.  
I stay.

---

On the roof terrace of the building next door, a girl plays  
jump-rope.  
The brother holds one end. The grandmother the other.  
He twirls to the right. So does the grandmother.  
The wind blows the girl's hair into a mess.  
A battle in mid-air.

The grandmother looks up.  
The little boy curses.  
The sister doesn't dare to jump the waves.

Headstrong wind.

---

The elevator doors are open.  
Eduardo, standing to one side, waits for me.  
He smiles.

---

Vilko looks for a drawing to hang on the stair landing wall.  
One drawing he picks, the other one, I do.  
Sitting on his couch, we leaf through a book on Slovenian  
artist Bara Remec.  
A populous town, a bell tower, larch trees, cypresses and  
sequoias, her favorite.  
A house, practically floating, a rock and a river, on my side.  
The planter in the middle.

*Little bear isn't sick  
Little bear is sleepy  
When the dark night falls  
Good night Little bear!*

---

Dear homeowner,  
We are pleased to invite you to a talk to discuss evacuation  
plans to be held Tuesday at eleven o'clock in the courtyard.

---

Antonia whistles.  
She washes the courtyard floor.

On the stairs, Manuel scolds his son. They shout.  
The son sits on a step and cries.  
The daughter, further down the stairs, dances.  
Manuel waits.

I close the door and go out into the street.  
I'm outside.

---

Manuel Lorenzo was born in the building.  
He knows it better than anybody. From the market's  
sub-basement to the storage rooms on the roof.  
Distribution boards and cisterns.  
Like the palm of his hand.

He doesn't trust architects or engineers. Nothing that he  
doesn't see with his own eyes.  
Manuel goes into the market sub-basement without permission  
to examine the state of the deteriorated columns.  
He brings along a bag of sand and a broomstick.  
He uses rubber boots.  
He studies each column one by one.  
Manuel inclines his torso forward. He extends the arm  
holding the broomstick.  
The foot behind moves away from the body, suspended in  
mid-air, at hip level.  
A zeppelin.  
He strikes the floor around each of the columns with the  
end of the broomstick.  
At the fifth column, he sees how the stick sinks into the  
floor.

---

Mr. García would go out to the courtyard every morning.  
He would pick up the cigarette butts in pyjamas, bourdeaux.  
Forty minutes every day. Three laps around the courtyard  
and he would go back home.  
He wouldn't open windows or turn lights on.

Mr. García died months ago.  
The bills and the notes advising when the fumigator is  
scheduled accumulate at his door.  
Cigarette butts fill the courtyard.

---

In the answering machine at home there is a message from Vilko.  
Remember the assembly.  
A note from Vilko on my front door.  
Remember the assembly tomorrow. It's important. I can't go.

---

The apartment front doors are white. Wood.  
They have an elongated window that can be opened to see  
who is knocking.  
So there is a breeze.  
The door from the apartment to the courtyard is different. Metal.  
It has a round window and a heart-shaped grille.  
Two swans face to face.  
The metal door is where Medina, his twins and the dog live.  
Black.

---

There's a board meeting.  
I let the elevator pass.  
Once. One more time. Again.

---

The extraordinary general assembly is convoked to discuss one single issue, reinforcing the building's foundation. Elba opens the doors to her house. Residents and superintendent are all gathered together in the apartment where Villegas died.

The floor is wood with two levels.  
The dining room is raised.  
A painting hangs on the far wall, a wave.  
Immense.  
A ship below to the right, wrecked.  
Eleven drowned people float.  
The water in flames, the sky, black fury.  
A wave.

Straight across from it, the bookcase.  
On the last shelf, Elba puts the books not yet read backwards. The spines against the wall.

The superintendent talks about the building. Structural experts, work permits, administrator, lawsuit, amparo application, professional recommendation and a million-peso loss if the market doesn't grant technicians and engineers access to the premises.

Instead of supporting the weight of the structure, nine columns located in the market sub-basement hang.

The assembly isn't valid without a minimum percentage of attendance.

We need signatures.

Ana María Castro shouts out the names of absent residents.  
–The Vietnamese woman, Vilko, the one who was fat, then really thin and now is fat again, the Maestro, Medina, the dressmaker.

Elba speaks in plural.

She speaks of Villegas as if he were still alive.

The assembly is officially over.

---

Manuel's son plays with a ball.

Manuel's daughter dances on the rooftop.

Medina's dog barks, the other one howls.

Ana María Castro chides ey-ey-ey.

Joaquín, the Chilean woman's grandson has his birthday.

For the fourth time they sing him *Happy Birthday*.

Sounds reverberate in the courtyard.

---

Dear homeowner,

This past Wednesday the City government emitted the work order and the task of reinforcing the structure will begin shortly.

Mr. Ortiz allowed access to the market but clarified that it is Mrs. Carmen Santoro, owner of the condominium unit, who is in possession of the keys and she has not yet facilitated same.

---

A note from Vilko on my front door.  
Don't look for me and don't be scared.  
I'm coming back in five days.

---

Angélica is in trouble.  
She needs a place to sleep, no more than a month.  
She arrives at the apartment with a bag, a suitcase and a present wrapped in panic.  
A cactus brought from the Victoria Ocampo house.  
Angélica settles into the mezzanine, the cactus below.  
We barely see one another.

---

Dear homeowner,

The rear elevator broke down with a person trapped inside in two instances.

On both occasions, the defect took place during the superintendent's shift and yet someone called the Federal Police Fire Department instead of calling for technical service.

The person apparently made their way out using their own means given that the Firemen found the car askew, empty.

Due to this situation the elevator remained out of service.

In order to reauthorize its use the Police force must first remit the certificate to the City government, who will in turn cite the residents' organization.

---

Insomnia. I count how many times I turn over in bed.

I look at the hole in the wall. Cockroaches.

Shiny cockroaches, red and black, come into my bedroom through the space left between the loose brick and the wall.

I close my eyes and turn over again.

The vertical shaft to my back is covered with a cockroach colony.

They never stop moving. I can't count them all.

I'm not going to sleep.

I get out of bed and go up to the roof.

I look at my house from above.

The mezzanine light is bright. Yellow.

Light crosses the courtyard and reaches Vilko's apartment.

It barely grazes the dressmaker's.

---

The badly washed plates drip dy. Angélica is in the  
apartment.  
She sleeps.  
The cactus grows.

---

I draw seated at the table.  
I hear a metallic sound.  
The double door that divides the kitchen and hallway  
barely moves.  
A metronome.

The windows are closed. There are no cross-currents.  
No wind, no motive.  
The door moves.  
The projected shadow extends, tries to move away from  
the glass, circles it and returns to its place.  
The shadow oscillates.

The foundation is giving way, I think.  
The building is going to collapse, now.  
I'm going to fall.

They knock on the door.  
Vilko shouts.  
That I should stand in a doorway, under a table, that there  
are aftershocks, that there's an earthquake in Chile.

I draw seated at the table.  
The shadow oscillates.

---

The brides are angry.

The dressmaker is angry.

A crack in the cistern damaged the cloth brought from Syria and Egypt.

The dressmaker and the brides are angry. With the residents' organization, with the superintendent and with Lucero.

The Union of Educational Workers bricked up the window that the dressmaker put into the party wall without permission.

The dressmaker is angry.

She shouts Chinawoman at the Vietnamese woman when she crosses the courtyard, widow at Elba, communist at Olga, cuckold at Medina and Satan at Antonia.

---

Sunday. Mother's Day.  
I'm in the elevator with Manuel Lorenzo.  
We go down.

The car comes to a sudden stop between the third floor and  
the second.  
It doesn't move. Broken.  
The elevator is broken. Like the alarm.  
It doesn't go off.

Manuel hollers.  
No one responds.  
The dogs bark.

Exhausted, Manuel sits on the floor and talks about his  
mother.  
She doesn't accept gifts for Christmas. Or her birthday.  
-She has everything she needs.

Manuel stands up and hollers.  
The dressmaker takes the stairs down. She looks at us,  
laughs and keeps going.  
The dogs bark.

Manuel cries and talks about his mother again.  
-It's impossible not to love her.

---

At night, the light from the balcony of the building next  
door stays on.  
The lamp projects shadows on my bedroom floor.  
Black crosses.

Eighteen feet separate one building from the other.  
At dusk, a corridor of bats between one wall and the other.

—

Angélica sets up the Christmas tree on the mezzanine.  
The tree has four red balls, five green ones and three gold  
ones.  
It doesn't have lights or garlands.  
It hangs from the ceiling, upside down.  
The star is within reach.

—

I go up the stairs.

The Vietnamese woman from the second floor comes down shouting with an envelope in her hand.

She looks like a little girl.

The little girl from the napalm photograph who is running because the bomb has just exploded.

The Vietnamese woman goes down the stairs and out onto the street.

I reach the courtyard, without crossing.

I stay in the middle where the lines in the floor that make a cross meet, and look at the plants.

The jasmines are improving. New leaves emerge high up.

The Vietnamese woman returns.

She practically touches the floor with her empty hands.

She scuffs her feet.

---

Dear homeowner,

We wish you all the very best and hope that the New Year finds us full of aspirations for a better world!

---

Angélica leaves the apartment.  
I move the cactus up to the mezzanine.  
It grows.  
It reaches my knees, hips and shoulders.  
It almost touches the ceiling.

---

On the rooftop of the building next door, nothing can be seen.  
The streetlamp light doesn't shine light any further than the post, in the middle.  
A circle of light on a black Christmas Eve.

On the big table, candles.  
The elders pile up plates. They argue.  
The kids play on the rooftop.

The little boy lights a sparkler.  
He keeps his body as far away as possible from his fingers.  
He twirls his arm like a mummy, he gets burned.  
He freezes like a statue. He screams.

His younger sister passes close by on a pink bicycle.  
She turns.  
She circles one more time on the bicycle and disappears.  
I don't see her anymore.  
Black Christmas Eve.

---

Carmen Santoro grants the engineers and professionals access to the market to begin work on buttressing the foundation.

The discharge chute of the cement mixer truck penetrates the sidewalk and goes into the market.

They reinforce the columns.

The building doesn't fall.

I stay.

---

*Little bear isn't sick  
Little bear is sleepy  
When the dark night falls  
Good night Little bear!*

---

Last business day of the year, first mediation hearing.  
The superintendent and me.  
His lawyer and mine.

The mediator sits at the head of the table.  
On the table, a sheet of glass flattens news clippings and  
calendars from previous years. Ten at least.  
Horacio crosses his arms on top of his belly. He talks. He  
lies.  
I look him in the eye. I don't let him go.  
Horacio sweats.

The hole in my bedroom wall, water leaking through the  
ceiling in the living room, mezzanine and kitchen.  
My lawyer lays out photographs on the table.  
He arranges the images symmetrically.  
Horacio talks.

I think about the torso found in a garbage container two  
blocks from home.  
A chunk of a man.  
Flesh without arms, legs or head.

We set the date for the second mediation hearing.

---

Sharp cries rise up from the courtyard.  
I open the window and look out.  
The Vietnamese woman, the Russian woman, Medina's  
twins and Vilko all poke out their heads.  
Ana María Castro shouts.

Vilko looks at me and winks.  
He talks about the plant on the landing and a concert.  
-There aren't many tickets left. You'd better hurry.

Ana María Castro shouts.

---

The sun comes into the apartment in the morning.  
And the sun comes in when it reflects off the mirror faced  
building on the next block in the afternoon.  
The sun comes in through the living room window twice a  
day.  
The wood floor turns white, burns.  
A square, a trapezoid and then a rectangle.  
Without edges.  
White.  
The sun comes in through the window.

---

Angélica sends a postcard from the Andes.  
The crop is vertical. A window in perspective takes up the  
entire image. Black and white.  
The window on the right hand side is open.  
Outside, mountains covered with snow.  
Below, a dog that at first glance resembles a rock.  
A dot.

I've found the calm I was looking for. It's either the snow or  
the infinite mountain chain. The sky. All the best.

—

I summon the elevator.  
I go down repeating,  
murmuring.  
Let no one be there.  
Let no one be there.

—

Thursday.  
The mediator, my lawyer and I wait in the hearing room.  
An hour.  
There are colored candies on a plate.  
I take one green and two blue.

The superintendent arrives.  
I take two red candies and a green one.  
His lawyer is the last one to sit at the table with flattened  
calendars.

Horacio crosses his arms on top of his belly.  
He talks.  
I look him in the eye. I don't let him go.  
He lies.

A painting hangs behind his head.  
A white wooden dock stretches toward the horizon.  
Silvery roses, red irises, and sunflowers grow along each  
side.  
The water is river.  
The day is sunny.

We sign the agreement.

---

The cactus grows and touches the ceiling.  
Seven feet and almost an inch.  
I bring the cactus down to the kitchen hallway. A higher  
ceiling.  
It moves. It arches.  
It grows. It searches for light.  
It is a viper.

---

Vilko isn't there.  
I don't hear him enter or leave.  
He doesn't turn the lights on either very late or all that  
early.  
He neither calls on the phone nor rings the doorbell.  
Nobody sings.

---

Uproar.  
I grab onto the bed like a liferaft in the midst of a  
shipwreck.  
Explosions can be heard on the street.  
A man speaks using a megaphone. Others massacre a song  
off-key, a march.  
Bass drums, horns and a piercing pitch all sound at the  
same time at full blast.  
The sound cloud presages catastrophe.

---

A butterfly, orange in the distance, flies over the courtyard.  
It alights on Barrientos' window.  
It moves its wings.  
It waits.

In Barrientos' house, a technician is installing a radio  
frequency antenna.  
The technician, the butterfly and me.

---

It's hot.  
I either move the bed or sleep in the living room.

I turn on the lamp. A spider.  
Five little lightbulbs, a neon garden.  
Inside each lightbulb, a miniature in green and blue. A  
flower.  
Five blue flowers, five too blue forget-me-nots hang from  
the ceiling.

I sleep in the living room.

---

The courtyard is a pit, a lake, a swimming pool.  
It rains without stopping.  
There is no thunder, no lightning.  
The water doesn't run off.  
In the courtyard, Antonia divides the waters like Moses  
with a floor squeegee.  
The waves break against ferns and jasmines.

---

It's night.  
The moon is reflected in the mirror faced building on the  
next block.  
In the glass the moon is green.  
Split, it hides behind the bat corridor and appears later  
above the rooftop where Manuel's daughter dances.  
For brief lapses the moon is mine.

---

*Dear neighbors,  
My Persian cat, with long grey hair, is lost.  
Has anyone seen him?*

---

I find the cactus lying down in the kitchen hallway.  
Dead.  
A twisted viper.  
Two sprouts emerge from its spine.  
They grow.

—

The building readies itself, settles in.

—

Ana María Castro chides ey-ey-ey.

Medina's twins and their dog run around in the courtyard.  
From my window, they are vultures circling over the pit.  
A black swirl.

The dog and the twins run around in circles in the courtyard.  
The twins facing each other, their legs akimbo and their  
arms spread out to each side.  
They embrace the void that separates them.  
They try to touch hands.

A ring. Two people and a dog.  
The dog stays still. It looks at them. Nobody moves.  
The dog runs, they all run, the brothers stretch and in one  
leap barely touch its back.  
The dog stays still. Nobody moves.  
The dog runs, they all run, the dogs in the building bark,  
Ana María Castro chides ey-ey-ey.  
Nobody moves.

---

The dressmaker left.  
She rented her studio to a woman who spends hours  
looking out the mezzanine window.  
Her head doesn't pass through.  
She sticks out one arm and stretches it.  
She agitates a ball tied to a cord.  
She moves her arm, the ball moves.  
-Kitty kitty kitty.  
All day long.  
-Kitty kitty kitty.  
Every night.

---

The kitchen window is small.  
Through the window I see the sky, the Congress building to  
the right.  
Straight ahead, the bat corridor.

Dusk falls.  
The Congress cupola is green.  
The blue sky turns pink.  
From the kitchen I see the sky go pink.

---

Dear homeowner,

I write to you in order to present my company's  
indeclinable resignation as the administrator of the  
residents' organization. The reiterated unfounded,  
defamatory and slanderous statements issued by Mr.  
Barrientos are the motive for same.

I hereby reserve the right to initiate legal action against  
said person for libel and slander and for the loss of earning  
potential that may have resulted from it.

I will hand over all the organization documentation to the  
duly authorized individual.

---

Antonia finishes the count.

The number is approximate.

Sixty-eight people live facing the courtyard.

---

The tension rises.

A flash occurs.

A mono-syllable rises from the courtyard dragging the voices of Medina, Barrientos and Ana María Castro along with it.

The electricity is out.

I lay down alongside the window and look at the sky.

And the cable that cuts across it. Two skies.

Over the cable hang other cables that go nowhere on either end.

The sky is white. Clouds. Sun. Below, orange, blue on the edges.

The sky is white, there are clouds.

The clouds are pink. The sky behind, dark blue.

There are more clouds than sky. The sky is white.

I see a star.

The big cloud leaves.

The sky is blue.

The little cloud covers up the star.

There is wind.

The ceiling lamp moves, the prisms clink against one another.

The pink and grey clouds pass quickly.

I don't see the star. It isn't there.

The sky is covered with clouds.

It cools off.

The electricity is out.

I take the stairs down to the courtyard.

Every floor has an emergency light.

The courtyard is pitch black.

I go out into the street.  
Across the street at the hospital there is light, only there.  
The Sagrado Corazón has electricity.  
Beyond that, a dark night.  
No cars go by.

I come back.  
I go up to the first landing.  
Someone is coming down.  
A specter.  
Villegas?  
The body comes between me and the emergency light.  
It's a shadow, descending, the Maestro sways.  
No greeting.  
He closes the door and leaves.

---

The February light draws me to the window, to the  
emptiness of the courtyard.  
The wind buffets the jasmines, the clouds.  
A storm is coming.  
All the windows are open.  
No one pokes their head out.  
No one crosses the courtyard.

---

A photograph of a grey cat replaces the lost cat signs.  
The cat's body is muscular and rounded.  
Underneath the image there is a hand-written note.

*I'm home. Thank you!*

---

I circle the planter on the landing.  
Three narcissus, two hortensias and six chrysanthemums  
made of dirty plastic.

Eduardo opens the studio door.  
He has me come in.  
From his office window he indicates the shadows cast by  
the rubber tree.  
The dark green tree takes up the block's entire inner court-  
yard.

Eduardo is obsessed with shadows.  
When they don't echo the shape of the original.  
When it's about something else.

Three narcissus, two hortensias and six chrysanthemums  
made of plastic on top of the skeleton of the poinsettia.

---

They clean out the market.

They take the rotten wood out onto the street. Bent, rusty pipes.

Boxes, bags and drawers.

Cables.

A grey circuit board with red buttons, dials and ceramic fuses.

Scales, signs and posters.

Springs, levers, blades.

Tiles.

The market reeks.

—

Squeaking.

From the foundations of the building black rats go up through the elevator shaft.

The glass blocks go opaque. The mass begins to cover everything.

Gas pipes, Antonia, jasmines and ferns.

Rats.

Petra smokes and laughs. The Maestro crosses the courtyard. Manuel's daughter dances. Elba hugs the photos of Villegas. She kisses them. The twins run. The Vietnamese woman throws eggs. The dogs bark. Eduardo turns his paintings around. Barrientos throws himself into the courtyard head first. The sisters fight. The Russians shout. Ana María Castro chides ey, ey, ey.

The rats climb the walls.

Vilko turns up the volume on his music system.

The *Messa da Requiem* by Verdi combats screams, squeaks and shrieks.

Full blast.

—*Dies irae*—shouts Vilko—*Dies irae*.

The mass expands.

Black quicksand.

I open doors and windows.

I look at the sky.

I smile.

I close my eyes against the sun.

—

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What force is it that unites us, haphazardly piled in a random mountain to inhabit the same building? If we were Buddhists, we would say that it is lives' multiple nature that brings us together, transmigration time and again in a stubborn fail and repeat cycle for all the human condition's variants of mutual relationships. But we will not maintain the idea of past lives; we barely believe in present developments and we are not Buddhists, or at least no more than any of the other devotions available.

What it does seem possible to glimpse from this reading is an ordinary destiny, lives superimposed over lives inhabiting a present that integrates and disintegrates with as much wonder as desperation. It is a continuum of existences tied together by the leaks that take over ceilings, the danger of collapse, the humid footprint of ivy advancing like some voracious galaxy, the mystery in every apartment, shouting in togues, deaths in confinement and pets howling out loneliness on the weekend. It is a prism with levels worthy of Dante, linked by the overlooked vector delineated in every apartment window.

The Elevator Across the Courtyard is the synopsis of an approach, the periodic table of chemical elements of a world summed up in expenses, the materials of community obliged to live together; a modest view of intricate living in the face of concrete, profound wanderings through the shared courtyard, up and down the stairs and out on the roof terrace.

Here the poem tells a story and the story waxes lyrical; in this book by Alejandra Urresti, narrative and poetry intermingle in a different space, far from the desire to write's awkward efforts, in words threaded together that bring you to lift your gaze for a peek at the construction going up just beyond the page.

The hand that draws, the hand that shoots, the hand that writes: they are all the protheses for a precise and charming vision, detached and loving, resigned in the knowledge that all is fleeting, the final touch of fading daylight on the backs of the herd as observed in the eyes of one.

JULIÁN LÓPEZ