THE LACUNA

Also by Barbara Kingsolver

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THE LACUNA

A Novel

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First published in the USA in 2009
by HarperCollins Inc.

First published in Great Britain in 2009
by Faber and Faber Ltd
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

Printed in England by
CPI Mackays, Chatham, Kent ME5 8TD

A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–25263–3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A Note on Historical References

All articles and excerpts from the *New York Times* used in this text appear as originally published, reprinted with permission.

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The following article excerpts are also used with permission.

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All other newspaper articles in the novel are fictional. Historical persons are portrayed and quoted from the historical record, but their conversations with the character Harrison Shepherd are entirely invented. This is a work of fiction.

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The author gratefully acknowledges the usefulness of Alain Dugrand, *Trotsky in Mexico, 1937–1940* (Manchester, England: Carcanet, 1992); Leon Trotsky, *My Life: An Attempt at an Autobiography* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970); *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005); Malka Drucker, *Frida Kahlo: Torment and Triumph* (Albuquerque: University of New

Mexico Press, 1995); Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); Walter Bernstein, *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (Da Capo, 2000); William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973); Martha Norburn Mead, *Asheville: In Land of the Sky* (Richmond, Va.: Dietz Press, 1942); and Hernando Cortés, *Five Letters of Cortés to the Emperor*, trans. J. Bayard Morris (New York: Norton, 1969), as well as the estates of Lev Trotsky, Dolores Olmedo, Frida Kahlo, and Diego Rivera for opening these persons' homes and archives. *Gracias* to the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) for its meticulous care of Mexico's historical treasures (notably the Rivera murals) and enduring dedication to public access. Finally, special thanks to Maria Cristina Fontes, Judy Carmichael, Terry Karten, Montserrat Fontes, Sam Stoloff, Ellen Geiger, Frances Goldin, Matt McGowan, Sonya Norman, Jim Malusa, Fenton Johnson, Steven Hopp, Lily Kingsolver, and Camille Kingsolver.

THE LACUNA

PART I

Mexico, 1929–1931

(VB)

Isla Pixol, Mexico, 1929

In the beginning were the howlers. They always commenced their bellowing in the first hour of dawn, just as the hem of the sky began to whiten. It would start with just one: his forced, rhythmic groaning, like a saw blade. That aroused others near him, nudging them to bawl along with his monstrous tune. Soon the maroon-throated howls would echo back from other trees, farther down the beach, until the whole jungle filled with roaring trees. As it was in the beginning, so it is every morning of the world.

The boy and his mother believed it was saucer-eyed devils screaming in those trees, fighting over the territorial right to consume human flesh. The first year after moving to Mexico to stay at Enrique's house, they woke up terrified at every day's dawn to the howling. Sometimes she ran down the tiled hallway to her son's bedroom, appearing in the doorway with her hair loose, her feet like iced fish in the bed, pulling the crocheted bedspread tight as a web around the two of them, listening.

It should have been like a storybook here. That is what she'd promised him, back in the cold little bedroom in Virginia North America: if they ran away to Mexico with Enrique she could be the bride of a wealthy man and her son would be the young squire, in a hacienda surrounded by pineapple fields. The island would be encircled with a shiny band of sea like a wedding ring, and somewhere on the mainland was its gem, the oil fields where Enrique made his fortune.

But the storybook was *The Prisoner of Zenda*. He was not a young

squire, and his mother after many months was still no bride. Enrique was their captor, surveying their terror with a cool eye while eating his breakfast. "That howling is the *aullaros*," he would say, as he pulled the white napkin out of its silver ring into his silver-ringed fingers, placing it on his lap and slicing into his breakfast with a fork and knife. "They howl at one another to settle out their territories, before they begin a day of hunting for food."

Their food might be us, mother and son agreed, when they huddled together inside the spiderweb of bedspread, listening to a rising tide of toothsome roars. *You had better write all this in your notebook*, she said, *the story of what happened to us in Mexico. So when nothing is left of us but bones, someone will know where we went.* She said to start this way: In the beginning were the *aullaros*, crying for our blood.

Enrique had lived his whole life in that hacienda, ever since his father built it and flogged the *indios* into planting his pineapple fields. He had been raised to understand the usefulness of fear. So it was nearly a year before he told them the truth: the howling is only monkeys. He didn't even look across the table when he said it, only at the important eggs on his plate. He hid a scornful smile under his moustache, which is not a good hiding place. "Every ignorant Indian in the village knows what they are. You would too, if you went out in the morning instead of hiding in bed like a pair of sloths."

It was true: the creatures were long-tailed monkeys, eating leaves. How could such a howling come from a thing so honestly ordinary? But it did. The boy crept outdoors early and learned to spot them, high in the veil of branches against white sky. Hunched, woolly bodies balanced on swaying limbs, their tails reaching out to stroke the branches like guitar strings. Sometimes the mother monkeys cradled little babes, born to precarious altitudes, clinging for their lives.

So there weren't any tree demons. And Enrique was not really a wicked king, he was only a man. He looked like the tiny man on top

of a wedding cake: the same round head with parted, shiny hair, the same small moustache. But the boy's mother was not the tiny bride, and of course there is no place on that cake for a child.

When Enrique wanted to ridicule him after that, he didn't even need to mention devils, he only rolled his eyes up at the trees. "The devil here is a boy with too much imagination," he usually said. That was like a mathematics problem, it gave the boy a headache because he couldn't work out which was the wrong part of the equation: being a Boy, or being Imaginative. Enrique felt a successful man needed no imagination at all.

Here is another way to begin the story, and this one is also true.

The rule of fishes is the same as the rule of people: if the shark comes, they will all escape, and leave you to be eaten. They share a single jumpy heart that drives them to move all together, running away from danger just before it arrives. Somehow they know.

Underneath the ocean is a world without people. The sea-roof rocks overhead as you drift among the purple trees of the coral forest, surrounded by a heavenly body of light made of shining fishes. The sun comes down through the water like flaming arrows, touching the scaly bodies and setting every fin to flame. A thousand fishes make the school, but they always move together: one great, bright, brittle altogetherness.

It's a perfect world down there, except for the one of them who can't breathe water. He holds his nose, dangling from the silver ceiling like a great ugly puppet. Little hairs cover his arms like grass. He is pale, lit up by watery light on prickled boy skin, not the scaled slick silver merman he wants to be. The fish dart all around him and he feels lonely. He knows it is stupid to feel lonely because he isn't a fish, but he does. And yet he stays there anyway, trapped in the below-life, wishing he could dwell in their city with that bright, liquid life flowing all around him. The glittering school pulls in at one side

and pushes out the other, a crowd of specks moving in and out like one great breathing creature. When a shadow comes along, the mass of fish darts instantly to its own center, imploding into a dense, safe core, and leaving the boy outside.

How can they know to save themselves, and leave him to be eaten? They have their own God, a puppet master who rules their one-fish mind, holding a thread attached to every heart in their crowded world. All the hearts but one.

The boy discovered the world of the fishes after Leandro gave him a diving goggle. Leandro, the cook, took pity on the flutie boy from America who had nothing to do all day but poke around in the cliffs along the beach, pretending to hunt for something. The goggle had glass lenses, and was made with gum rubber and most of the parts of an airman's goggle. Leandro said his brother used it when he was alive. He showed how to spit in it before putting it on, so it wouldn't go foggy.

"*Andele*. Go on now, get in the water," he said. "You will be surprised."

The pale-skinned boy stood shivering in water up to his waist, thinking these were the most awful words in any language: *You will be surprised*. The moment when everything is about to change. When Mother was leaving Father (loudly, glasses crashing against the wall), taking the child to Mexico, and nothing to do but stand in the corridor of the cold little house, waiting to be told. The exchanges were never good: taking a train, a father and then no father. Don Enrique from the consulate in Washington, then Enrique in Mother's bedroom. Everything changes *now*, while you stand shivering in the corridor waiting to slip through one world into the next.

And now, at the end of everything, this: standing waist-deep in the ocean wearing the diving goggle, with Leandro watching. A pack of village boys had come along too, their dark arms swinging, carrying the long knives they used for collecting oysters. White sand caked the sides of their feet like pale moccasins. They stopped to watch, all the

swinging arms stopped, frozen in place, waiting. There was nothing left for him to do but take a breath and dive into that blue place.

And *oh God* there it was, the promise delivered, a world. Fishes mad with color, striped and dotted, golden bodies, blue heads. Societies of fish, a public, suspended in its watery world, poking pointed noses into coral. They pecked at the pair of hairy tree trunks, his legs, these edifices that were nothing to them but more landscape. The boy got a bit of a stiffy, he was that afraid, and that happy. No more empty-headed bobbing in the sea, after this. No more believing in an ocean with nothing inside but blue water.

He refused to come out of the sea all day, until the colors began to go dark. Luckily his mother and Enrique had enough to drink, sitting on the terrace with the men from America turning the air blue with their cigars, discussing the assassination of Obregón, wondering who would now stop the land reforms before the *indios* took everything. If not for so much mezcal and lime, his mother might have grown bored with the man-talk, and thought to wonder whether her son had drowned.

It was only Leandro who wondered. The next morning when the boy walked out to the kitchen pavilion to watch breakfast cooking, Leandro said, "*Pícaro*, you'll pay. A man has to pay for every crime." Leandro had worried all afternoon that the goggle he brought to this house had become an instrument of death. The punishment was waking up with a sun-broilt spot the size of a tortilla, hot as fire. When the criminal pulled up his nightshirt to show the seared skin on his back, Leandro laughed. He was brown as coconuts, and hadn't thought of sun burn. But for once he didn't say *usted pagará*, in the formal language of servants to masters. He said *tú pagarás*, you will pay, in the language of friends.

The criminal was unrepentant: "You gave me the goggle, so it's your fault." And went back into the sea again for most of that day, and burnt his back as crisp as fat rinds in a kettle. Leandro had to rub lard on it that night, saying "*Pícaro*, rascal boy, why do you do such

stupid things?" *No seas malo*, he said, the familiar "you," language of friends, or lovers, or adults to children. There is no knowing which.

On Saturday night before Holy Week, Salomé wanted to go into town to hear the music. Her son would have to go too, as she needed an elbow to hang upon while walking around the square. She preferred to call him by his middle name, William or just Will, conditioned as that is on future events: You *will*. Though on her tongue of course it sounded like *wheel*, a thing that serves, but only when in motion. Salomé Huerta was her name. She had run away at a young age to become an American Sally, and then Sally Shepherd for a while, but nothing ever lasted long. American Sally was finished.

This was the year of Salomé pouting, her last one in the hacienda on Isla Pixol, though no one knew it yet. That day she had pouted because Enrique had no intention of walking around with her on the zocalo, just to show off a frock. He had too much work to do. Work meant sitting in his library running both hands through his slick hair, drinking mezcal, and sweating through his collar while working out colonnades of numbers. By this means he learned whether he had money up to his moustache this week, or only up to his bollocks.

Salomé put on the new frock, painted a bow on her mouth, took her son by the arm and walked to town. They smelled the zocalo first: roasted vanilla beans, coconut milk candies, boiled coffee. The square was packed with couples walking entwined, their arms snaking around one another like the vines that strangle tree trunks. The girls wore striped wool skirts, lace blouses, and their narrow-waisted boyfriends. The mood of the fiesta was enclosed in a perfect square: four long lines of electric bulbs strung from posts at the corners, fencing out a bright piece of night just above everyone's heads.

Lit from below, the hotel and other buildings around the square had eyebrow-shaped shadows above their iron balconies. The little cathedral looked taller than it was, and menacing, like a person who

comes into the bedroom carrying a candle. The musicians stood in the little round belvedere whose pointed roof and wrought-iron railings were all freshly painted white along with everything else, including the giant old fig trees around the square. Their trunks blazed in the darkness, but only up to a certain point, as if a recent flood of whitewash through town had left a high-water mark.

Salomé seemed happy to float with the moving river of people around the square, even though in her elegant lizard-skin shoes and flapper crepe that showed her legs, she looked like no other person there. The crowd parted for her. Probably it pleased her to be the green-eyed Spaniard among the Indians, or rather, the *Criolla*: Mexican-born but pure nonetheless, with no Indian blood mixed in. Her blue-eyed, half-American son was less pleased with his position, a tall weed growing among the broad-faced townspeople. They would have made a good illustration for a book showing the Castes of the Nation, as the schoolbooks did in those days.

"Next year," Salomé said in English, pinching his elbow with her fierce crab claws of love, "you'll be here with your own girl. This is the last *Noche Palmas* you'll want to walk around here with your old wrinkle." She liked using American slang, especially in crowds. "This is posalutely the berries," she would announce, putting the two of them inside an invisible room with her words, and closing the door.

"I won't have a girlfriend."

"You'll turn fourteen next year. You're already taller than President Portes Gil. Why wouldn't you have a girlfriend?"

"Portes Gil isn't even a real president. He only got in because Obregón was iced."

"And maybe you will likewise ascend to power, after some girl's first *novio* gets the sack. Doesn't matter how you get the job, ducky. She'll still be yours."

"Next year you could have this whole town, if you want it."

"But you'll have a girl. This is all I'm saying. You'll go off and leave me alone." It was a game she played. Very hard to win.

"Or if you don't like it here, Mother, you could go somewhere else. Some smart city where people have better entertainments than walking in circles around the *zocalo*."

"And," she persisted, "you'd still have the girl." Not just a girl but *the* girl, already an enemy.

"What do you care? You have Enrique."

"You make him sound like a case of the pox."

In front of the wrought-iron bandstand, the crowd had cleared a space for dancing. Old men in sandals held stiff arms around their barrel-shaped wives.

"Next year, Mother, no matter what, you won't be old."

She rested her head against his shoulder as they walked. He had won.

Salomé hated that her son was now taller than she was: the first time she noticed, she was furious, then morose. In her formula of life, this meant she was two-thirds dead. "The first part of life is childhood. The second is your child's childhood. And then the third, old age." Another mathematics problem with no practical solution, especially for the child. Growing backward, becoming unborn: that would have been just the thing.

They stopped to watch the mariachis on the platform, handsome men with puckered lips giving long kisses to their brass horns. Trails of silver buttons led down the sides of their tight black trousers. The *zocalo* was jammed now; men and women kept arriving from the pineapple fields with the day's dust still on their feet, shuffling out of the darkness into the square of electric light. In front of the flat stone breast of the church, some of them settled in little encampments on the bare earth, spreading blankets where a mother and father could sit with their backs against the cool stones while babies slept rolled in a pile. These were the vendors who walked here for Holy Week, each

woman wearing the particular dress of her village. The ones from the south wore strange skirts like heavy blankets wrapped in pleats, and delicate blouses of ribbon and embroidery. They wore these tonight and on Easter and every other day, whether attending a marriage or feeding pigs.

They had come here carrying bundles of palm leaves and now sat untying them, pulling apart the fronds. All night their hands would move in darkness to weave the straps of leaf into unexpected shapes of resurrection: crosses, garlands of lilies, doves of the Holy Spirit, even Christ himself. These things had to be made by hand in one night, for the forbidden Palm Sunday mass, and burned afterward, because icons were illegal. Priests were illegal, saying the mass was illegal, all banned by the Revolution.

Earlier in the year the *Cristeros* had ridden into town wearing bullets strapped in rows like jewelry across their chests, galloping around the square to protest the law banning priests. The girls cheered and threw flowers as if Pancho Villa himself had risen from the grave and located his horse. Old women rocked on their knees, eyes closed, hugging their crosses and kissing them like babies. Tomorrow these villagers would carry their secret icons into the church without any priest and light the candles themselves, moving together in single-minded grace. Like the school of the fish, so driven to righteousness they could flout the law, declare the safety of their souls, then go home and destroy the evidence.

It was late now, the married couples had begun to surrender dancing space to a younger group: girls with red yarn braided into their hair and wound around their heads into thick crowns. Their white dresses swirled like froth, with skirts so wide they could take the hems in their fingertips and raise them up to make sudden wings, like butterflies, fluttering as they turned. The men's high-heeled boots cut hard at the ground, drumming like penned stallions. When the music paused, they leaned across their partners in the manner of

animals preparing to mate. Move away, come back, the girls waggled their shoulders. The men put handkerchiefs under their arms, then waved them beneath the girls' chins.

Salomé decided she wanted to go home immediately.

"We would have to walk, Mother. Natividad won't come for us until eleven, because that's what you told him."

"Then we'll walk," she said.

"Just wait another half hour. Otherwise we'll be walking in the dark. Bandits might murder us."

"Nobody will murder us. The bandits are all in the *zocalo* trying to steal purses." Salomé was practical, even as a hysteric.

"You hate to walk."

"What I hate is watching these primitives showing off. A she-goat in a dress is still a she-goat."

Darkness fell down on everything then, like a curtain. Someone must have shut off the lights. The crowd breathed out. The butterfly girls had set glasses with lighted candles onto their braid-crowned heads. As they danced, their candles floated across an invisible surface like reflections of the moon across a lake.

Salomé was so determined to walk home, she had already started in the wrong direction. It wasn't easy to overtake her. "Indian girls," she spat. "What kind of man would chase after that? A corn-eater will never be any more than she is."

The dancers were butterflies. From a hundred paces Salomé could see the dirt under these girls' fingernails, but not their wings.

Enrique was confident the oil men would come to an agreement. But it could take some time. The oil men had come to Isla Pixol with their wives; they all took rooms in town. Enrique tried to persuade them to stay at the hacienda, since the advantages of his hospitality might work in his favor in the negotiations. "That hotel was built before the flood of Noah. Have you seen the elevator? A birdcage hanging from a watch chain. And the rooms are smaller than a cigar tin."

Salomé shot her eyes at him: How would he know that?

The wives wore bobbed hair and smart frocks, but all had entered the third of what Salomé called the Three Portions of Life. Possibly, they'd entered the fourth. After dinner, while the men smoked Tuxtlan cigars in the library, the women stood outside in point-heeled shoes on the tiled terrace with their little hats pinned against the wind and cheek-curls plastered down. Holding glasses of *vino tinto*, they gazed across the bay, speculating about the silence under the sea. "Seaweeds swaying like palm trees," they all agreed, "quiet as the grave."

The boy who sat on the low wall at the edge of the *terraza* thought: These budgies would be disappointed to know, it's noisy as anything down there. Strange, but not quiet. Like one of the mysterious worlds in Jules Verne's books, filled with its own kinds of things, paying no attention to ours. Often he shook the bubbles from his ears and just listened, drifting along, attending the infinite chorus of tiny clicks and squeaks. Watching one fish at a time as it poked its own way around the coral, he could see it was talking to the others. Or at any rate, making noises at them.

"What is the difference," he asked Leandro the next day, "between talking and making a noise?"

Salomé hadn't yet learned Leandro's name, she called him "the new kitchen boy." The last *galopina* was a pretty girl, Ofelia, too much admired by Enrique, given the sack by Salomé. Leandro took up more space, standing with bare feet set apart, steady as the stuccoed pillars supporting the tile roofs above the walkways of this yellow-ochre house. A row of lime trees in large terra-cotta pots lined the breezeway between the house and kitchen pavilion. And like a tree, Leandro was planted there for most of each day, cutting up chayotes with his machete on the big work table. Or peeling shrimps, or making *sopa de milpa*: corn kernel soup with diced squash blossom and avocado. *Xochitl* soup, with chicken and vegetables in broth. Salads of cactus nopales with avocado and cilantro. The rice he made with a hint of something sweet in it.