

1. THE GUN

*Brazil – a murder in São Paulo – a child's sorrow and a dead mother
– the descent into a police arms cache – a revelation – a journey conceived
– Leeds, UK – a secret museum and a meeting with an expert – to a
Swiss canton to visit an oracle*

It began with a death.

The five-year-old had lain alone with his lifeless mother all night long, curled up at her cold feet. It was only when the thin light of dawn lifted some of the darkness from the bedroom that the neighbours had heard the boy's cries. And only then did people realise what had happened in those sunless hours before.

The bullet had entered the left side of the young woman's temple and exited at the back of her head, splattering flecks on the leprous wall. There had often been wild-voiced arguments in that cramped house, but no one ever thought it would come to this.

After the boy was found the police arrived quickly, but the murderous lover had already fled that Brazilian city and, like the gun he had used, he was nowhere to be found.

By the time we reached the quiet roadside home the child had also been spirited away, covered in a blanket – lifted from his dark *pietà* and carried out into the light. His mother was still inside.

Cars passed, leaving São Paulo for the north, and we stood awkwardly and watched them go. They slowed down and watched us too, a huddle of cops and a documentary crew crowded beside a

white ambulance that was never really needed. A dog barked in the distance, and I took out my video camera and walked inside.

The dead woman had run a small shop out the front, and it was filled with packets of coloured sweets and warm bottles of luminescent drinks. On the counter was a tray of Catholic pendants, which she had sold to the weary lorry drivers who would stop here. But these plastic icons had not helped her last night, and now she lay beyond, past a dusty glass counter, down a narrow corridor, there in a pool of silence.

They say death smells sweet. That's what I thought as I walked into her bedroom. A taste touched my mouth and reminded me of the orange-tinted bottles that lined the shop's walls or the citrus chocolate puffs that lay neatly arranged in their shiny little packages. The air was thick with this smell. It had been over twelve hours since she had died, and this was the start of summer.

Her name was Lucicleide, and she was naked. I was not expecting that, but death rarely grants us dignity, so her breasts hung to the side and the rest was uncovered. There was not much blood, save for a smear above her pinched, sallow face. Finding a corner, I set up my tripod and got to work; the police did not tell me to stop filming, but by now I was not even sure why I was doing this. My footage would never end up on the evening bulletins. The film I was making with Ramita Navai – an Anglo-Iranian journalist who was used to witnessing such things – was about the toll of violence in one of Brazil's deadliest cities, but Britain's *Channel 4 News* could never show such intimate and murderous detail.

I felt I had to do something, though.

So I focused on her unfurled hands and on the trinkets that lined the top of her chipped cabinet and shifted the lens onto the face of a purple bear I imagined her lover had once bought her. And the whirr of the tape in the camera took the edge off the awkward quiet of the room. I carried on filming until the forensic examiners wrapped her in a heavy blanket, and all I could think of as she was lifted heavily up, covered like her son had been, was how hot it was to have such a blanket to sleep under.

We followed the body out into the light and slipped back into

our car. Then, after waiting for the coroner's van to slide away, we too pulled out and drove south, following an unhurried squad car back to the city's police headquarters. And none of us spoke.

The building was low-slung and squat, built in the way Brazilian architects love: concrete, slats and shutters. Municipal chic that was made markedly less chic and more threatening by the armed police stood behind its long glass front. The steps leading up to it were broad and shallow; they twisted in an arc and made the walk to the doors of justice a slow one.

An image of São Paulo as a dystopian city, something out of a *Judge Dredd* comic, came to mind. This was its rigid heart of order and legal retribution, but policemen stood, their arms cradling dull metallic weapons. The reason for this was clear. In one year alone there were over a thousand gun murders in this city, in waves of crime so violent they had caused schools to close and municipal bus routes to change.¹

It was small wonder that this governmental building was so forboding. Dozens of police officers had been killed, caught up in the endless drug wars that blighted this land. The guards at the entrance were taking no chances. They were heavily armed – police assault rifles slung across their riot shoulder pads and bulletproof vests lying underneath.

Passing through scanners and scrutiny, we emerged on the other side. There we were met by Colonel Luiz de Castro. A short man with dark, tightly cut hair, a firm jaw and a precisely ironed shirt, he looked like someone born to be in the service of the state. Greeting us with an iron handshake, he was quick to address why we had come here: to see São Paulo's seized-gun repository.

'A few years ago we had a gun amnesty,' he said as if delivering an order, his voice a staccato drumbeat. 'Here we have about 20,000 weapons confiscated or handed in. We offer between \$50 and \$100 for each one.'

The colonel spun on a heel and led us at pace down a long corridor, lit by naked and glaring fluorescent strips. The sandpaper walls here were bare and the floor scuffed, and as we descended slowly into the sodium-coloured belly of this bureaucratic beast, the

colonel walked ahead, his boots sounding the mark of his passage. Then he stopped at a grey door and motioned us inside. Beyond lay a small room with a few computer terminals, in front of which sat uniformed officers. They were inputting data and looked up at us with the eyes of people whose lives were spent in rooms without sunlight. Across from them lay a caged door.

The colonel called out, and a shadowed face appeared; keys were turned, and the door swung outwards. We walked into the semi-darkness.

Beyond lay thousands of guns. Every surface was filled with them – the walls lined with wooden, narrow boxes, like a mail-sorting office, each pigeonhole containing a gun with a small paper label attached. Space here had run out long ago, and the guns spilled out onto the counters and the wooden chairs that spread across the floor. A door led on to another room and then another, and the scene was the same in each.

There were semi-automatics from North America; hunting rifles from China; a 9mm pistol from Germany; an old blunderbuss from England. There were home-made handguns and high-tech machine-guns. Black guns so corroded with time you imagined them wielded by slave owners in long-shut-down plantations. There were even some with *Polícia* stamped on them, because when Brazilian gangs kill a policeman the prize is that downed cop's sidearm as well as his life.²

Then it struck me how, like the clichéd six degrees of separation, this graveyard of guns was somehow more significant than just what was visible in this narrow space. Each gun here, either through maker or victim, shooter or seller, was somehow linked to a bigger story – each connected to the outside world in a deeper, more nebulous way.

Here were revolvers bought with taxpayers' money and ordnance left over from long-forgotten wars. Police pistols and army handguns, sports rifles and hunting shotguns from all over the world, many of them tainted with the stain of murderous deeds. The microcosm of life – of law and protection, violence and vengeance, leisure and provision – was laid out in these shadows.

In a sense this lair of guns was a symbolic image for all of the human rights tragedies I had ever been trying to explain as an investigative journalist and a human rights researcher. And the idea for this book was conceived in that moment – a desire to trace the gun’s pathway from its metallic cradle to its blood-tinged grave. A journey to discover the lifecycle of the gun and, in so doing, to understand a little bit more about death and maybe, even, a little about life.



There are almost a billion guns in the world – more than ever before. An estimated twelve billion bullets are produced every year. Over a hundred countries have their own gun industries, and twenty nations recently saw children carrying guns into conflicts. In this new millennium, AK47 rifles have even been sold for as little as \$50.³

These are hard facts that have harder consequences. And yet, despite how shocking these numbers are to hear, before I began to research the world of the gun, these were facts I did not know. Perhaps this is because the gun remains all too often forgotten in our media and news. Throughout my career I had frequently reported on the harm wrought by firearms, but I had never actually done a report on the gun itself. It was a bit like the face of evil: you knew it was there, but you felt a little foolish mentioning it. With other weapons, it was different. ‘A kitchen knife? He was beheaded? My God, that’s terrible.’ But with a gun it was more like: ‘Of course there’s a gun.’ Guns were just there, remarkable but unremarked upon.

In Lucicleide’s shaded bedroom, I had seen one face of the gun: the way it can take a life. In São Paulo’s police headquarters, I had seen another: the way the police seek to contain and control guns. But these were isolated images, scattered pieces. Seeing them on their own did not answer questions such as: Who made those guns? How did those police pistols end up being used in a killing? Who profited from the sales of those Uzis?

I knew some of the answers. The assignments and campaigns

I had worked on had been diverse enough to allow this. War correspondents usually just witness the harm that guns cause. Arms-trade campaigners often focus on the world of immoral governments. Investigative journalists seek to expose corrupt gun sellers. I had earned a living carrying out all of these roles, and so had seen glimpses of such things and more. Reporting on trafficked women in eastern India or filming the slums of Buenos Aires, seeing the impact of violence in the borderlands of Mexico or recording the tense diplomatic stand-offs between China and Taiwan, I'd seen the gun in many of its varied colours. But there were gaps. I knew little about the world of hunters. I had never met a sniper. Never been inside a gun factory. What I wanted was to bring these parts together – to see the whole, the gun as a sum of its many parts.

Of course, such an undertaking was ambitious. People would suck in their breath when I told them what I wanted to do. Certainly it was global. Too much of the media has fixated on the US's relationship with guns and that alone, but I wanted to take in the wider view. Guns in the US showed, to me, just the tip of a bloody iceberg.

This was, then, a journey born from both memory and new experiences, one where I had to revisit worn notebooks as well as tread the carpets of soul-sucking airports on my way to yet another killing. And through doing so I sought to weave a complete tapestry of the impact of guns on our world – where the thread of a moment lived in one city might unexpectedly find itself tied to a visit planned in another, far away.

The view I sought was certainly too big to take in without some sort of plan, so I decided to divide my research into the communities the gun impacted. There were those directly harmed by firearms – the dead, the wounded, the suicidal; those who used guns to exert a form of power – murderers and criminals, police and armed forces; the people who used these weapons for pleasure – hobbyists and hunters; and those who sought to profit from their sale – traders, smugglers, lobbyists and, ultimately, the manufacturers. I planned to approach each community in turn, merging memories and interviews, new trips and research, to grasp fully what it was like to live, and die, under the gun's shadow.

To begin, though, I wanted to understand a little bit more about firearms themselves – to see their historic place in the world, how they evolved and how they have influenced the unfolding of history. So I arranged to travel northwards from my home in London, to the largest museum collection of guns in the world – to the Royal Armouries in the English town of Leeds.



The gun collection at the British National Firearms Centre started almost four hundred years ago. It was originally dreamed up by King Charles I, a hapless monarch who wanted to give some uniformity to his kingdom's procurement of arms. Since then, the centuries have added to the collection; today the armoury boasts the largest number of unique rifles and handguns kept anywhere under one roof. If there was one place to begin a deeper understanding of the world of the gun, this was surely it.

So, on a blustery day in spring, the senior curator there, Mark Murray-Flutter, agreed to meet me at the entrance of the public museum. A large and effusive man, he greeted me in a flurry of great strides and smiles. He held out his left hand to shake me by my right and it confused me; I looked down. Instead of flesh I saw a prosthetic limb. Ex-military, I thought: the price a man pays for being too close to guns. He ignored the look on my face.

Without explaining where we were going, Mark turned and led me away from the municipal grey building at a brisk pace, his tie fluttering. We walked down a wind-filled road under heavy, tea-coloured clouds and there, through an unnamed and unmarked door, we crossed into a windowless space lined with steel and concrete. Beyond was a metal detector and an armed guard asking, through a bulletproof window, if he could see my passport. Then there was a body search. Finally, we entered a cavernous space where the public rarely goes.

'Here you are,' Mark said, a smile widening on his face. 'Where it all is.'

Guns. Thousands of them. They filled the cavernous room like squat metal insects, sleeping before an ugly dawn – hunched, silent and demonic. Under the chrome light you could see row after row of every type of firearm imaginable. There they were, oiled and fierce on the floor. There, neat and polished on racks. Hung on wall brackets, put away on shelves, slid deep into recessed drawers. It was like Borges's infamous library, but here were guns not books – over 14,000 in steel and wood and brass.⁴ And here, unlike the police repository in Brazil, the guns were ordered and neat – their potential anarchy contained.

It smelled like history: gun oil and the ghosts of cordite. These weapons spoke of past wars and long-forgotten conflicts, because the curators had tried to get their hands on every type of gun ever produced, within reason. When the British used to mass-produce rifles they would dispatch the prototype – the first edition – to the armouries. There they were stamped with a thick layer of copyright sealing wax and stored away. Elsewhere machines got to work and churned out copies in their millions, and the prototype's offspring wound their way to the foothills of the Himalayas and the steaming jungles of Africa, as this little nation of shopkeepers traded and slaughtered its way into Empire.

The origins of all of that violent shame and bloodied history could be seen here; and this was just the collection of Britain's guns. There were others, too. Here was the United Nations of firearms – it was almost a case of naming a country and a gun from there could be conjured up.

'The best way to think about this place is as a library, but instead of having books you have guns,' Mark said, offering me a cup of tea. A reasonable, softly spoken man, he was not into weapons, he explained. At least not for what they were per se; rather this wounded scholar liked what they represented. He was a social historian, fascinated by how firearms fitted into society. If he had one interest, it was their ornamentation, their decorative appeal. In this way he saw himself as a benign curator – not a man who would view this room in terms of gun control, how many lives taken, how many liberties defended. Rather, he was interested in their meaning.

‘I’m fascinated by the use of firearms as a status symbol, as diplomatic gifts, as love tokens,’ he said, education in his voice. ‘How they can show people you have arrived. Certainly this is true in the world of those who own shotguns – the higher you go up that economic ladder, the less it’s about the cost, the more it’s about the ostentatiousness of the design. The Russian oligarchs, the Mexican drug gangs who gold-plate their guns, they are trying to show that they are all-powerful.’

We spoke about facts. But, in a way, when it came to Mark giving a broad introduction to guns, there was not that much to say. In this world the devil was in the detail. What calibre, what model, these were finer points that many gun enthusiasts fixate on – but not ones that captured my attention. I couldn’t get excited about the small tweaks made to a handgun to sell a newer, deadlier version. I was more interested in what these guns did.

Just as well, really, because when it came to the basic physics of the firearm, Mark said things hadn’t really changed since the fourteenth century. All a gun needs, he explained, is a barrel, a missile, a means of projection, a form of ignition and a way to point it. All the developments since these principles were first conceived were pretty much just perfecting this process.

‘They may be lighter, more compact, but they are fundamentally the same,’ he said, leaning forward over his mug. ‘There have been two major step changes in the development of firearms. The development of the self-contained cartridge in the early nineteenth century and the gun that can fire automatically – developed by the British – by Maxim.’ Perhaps this is what lies beneath the enduring popularity of guns, I thought. The fact that there’s an alluring simplicity to how they work.⁵

Finishing his tea, Mark rose from the table and told me to follow. He handed over a pair of white gloves, and then, like vicious mime artists, we entered the stacks. There he began to pass me rifle after rifle, with a disconcerting casualness.

Closest to us was a Gardner gun – a five-barrelled, hand-operated machine-gun, fed from a vertical magazine. As the crank turned, he explained, a bullet was loaded into the breech, the bolt closed, and

the gun fired.⁶ It was part of a major landmark in the development of the gun. There were even men who saw civilisation's face in this mechanised operation purely because the Gardner gun worked on the principle of serialisation. As such the machine-gun was seen, by some, as a product of a rational culture. By default, cultures that could not create such a killing weapon were deemed less civilised, and so open to imperial rule.

Such men would have been impressed here, because in this fortified chamber the walls were lined with sub-machine-guns. Anti-aircraft guns, first designed to combat the use of observation balloons in the American Civil War, also stood to the far left. To the right there were Chinese DShKs; a gun mounted on wheels, called, affectionately, 'Sweetie'. These stood beside a low line of recoilless rifles once used as tank busters. And there, on the end, were Russian rifles that fired underwater. Civilisation's progress laid out in deadly metal.

These guns all told a story in their own way. They spoke of how rifles and pistols had turned the course of history. How the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo unleashed the First World War. How the killing of Martin Luther King pushed the US closer to equal race rights. They spoke of how the gun has helped bring advances in industrial production methods and advanced modern medicine. And they all spoke of death.

There, on the far wall, one rack held a familiar shape: the long, curved magazine, the wooden stock, the iron sights. A gun that could fire automatically like a machine-gun, or could let loose single shots, like a sniper rifle; that could be chucked in a river and dragged in the mud and still not jam; a weapon so popular that tens of millions of them have been made. It was the Kalashnikov or AK47, the most famous and the deadliest gun in the world. So practical and lethal has it proved in modern conflict that it has featured on the coats of arms of Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso and East Timor. There are statues to it in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt and on the dusty plains outside Baghdad in Iraq. It's had a cocktail named after it and is a drinks brand in its own right, sold in bottles moulded in its iconic shape. Some parents have even named their babies 'Kalash', so deep has been its global allure.

Mark extended a white-gloved hand and pulled down one from China.

‘That’s a type 56,’ he said, putting the barrel close to his face. ‘Yes, it’s from a northern province. This folding stock was new.’ It came from State Factory 66, just one of 15 million of its type produced there since the 1950s. He pulled out another; from 1981, he told me, Chinese as well. His finger traced the first two digits of the serial number. There are about ninety variants of this type, he said, and pointed at a vicious black derivative – one with a hard metal folding stock. ‘East German.’ He needn’t have said any more. It looked East German. There was nothing funny about it.

You could see national traits in many of these guns, however subtle. The Finnish version had a certain chic to it – a tubular stock that evoked northern European woods and candles. The Egyptian one came with a small tree stamped on it, made especially by the Maadi company there on old imported Russian machines. The North Korean one looked cheap and sorry for itself – a small communist star on its base. The Red Young Guard, a force made of up fifteen-year-old Korean students, used this model; it was certainly light enough for their malnourished bodies. Then there were AKs from Pakistan, from Russia, from China – sometimes a dozen from one country alone. There was even an old Viet Cong one – the rifle that proved the ultimate battlefield leveller against the might of the American army.

The one that caught my eye, though, was the gold one: a glittering metal-plated AK designed to commemorate the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988. Saddam Hussein handed them out as gifts – a sort of oil-bling chic in limited edition.

‘I’ve got to hold that one,’ I said. Something in me was feeling the pull of history, the uniqueness of this whole situation. I wanted to get my picture taken with it, wearing too-large shades and an open-necked shirt.

‘Very Arab,’ Mark said, and eased it from me back onto the shelf.

He took me to another rack. Here was a Lebanese M16 semi-automatic – this one made by Colt USA. Beside it was an M16 seized from the IRA – complete with a filed-down serial number. Next to it was a line of futuristic and squat black Belgian FN F2000s

– a weapon so beloved of Colonel Gaddafi’s murderous forces. There was ingenuity to all of these; as you moved along the line many had small modifications that improved on the design of its neighbour.

‘If I find a new way of protecting myself, you will find a new way of preventing that,’ Mark said.

Then, with a certain reverence, he pulled out an 1805 model of the Baker Rifle – a rifle used on the fields of battle at Waterloo in 1815. It weighed about the same, he said, as the British army’s SA80 rifle today: ten pounds. I held it and imagined a scared seventeen-year-old in rank and file clutching its wooden stock with child’s hands, fearing all that lay ahead.

We moved away from the military weapons and on to a rack of sporting guns, notable for their provenance and their price. Mark pulled out a hunting rifle – a .375 H & H Magnum – carried by a companion of President Roosevelt on an African hunting trip in 1909. A similar one to this fetched almost \$32,000 at auction. Next to it was an M30 Luftwaffe Sauer & Sohn Drilling, the world’s most expensive survival firearm. A three-barrelled shotgun complete with a Nazi swastika, it was designed to help Germany’s Luftwaffe pilots avoid capture. You could see Hermann Goering’s obsession with beauty and craftsmanship in this elegant and totally impractical weapon. And just as I thought that you couldn’t get more expensive than that, Mark showed me the most pricey gun in his collection: a bespoke Arab commission of a Smith & Wesson Model 60, made in powder blue and coated in 984 diamonds. It costs over £120,000.

But this opulence was not the thing to catch my eye. Rather, there, nestled in a rack among some ageing rifles, was the prototype for the late nineteenth-century Magazine Lee Enfield Rifle. In army terminology it was the MLE, or ‘Emily’, the rifle clutched by thousands and thousands of British soldiers as they marched to their deaths in the First World War, and one of the first of millions made. It was also the rifle that had introduced me to the world of the gun – the one I learned to shoot with in the Army Cadets.

Before I could get too distracted, Mark moved us on to a small and nondescript chest of drawers – a cabinet of curiosities. Drawer after drawer of discreet guns used by the secret service were opened.

There was the famous James Bond Walter PPK, 9mm;⁷ a Parker Pen gun; a 'sleeve' gun designed to be tucked up a jacket; guns disguised as lighters, rings, pagers, belt buckles and penknives. All of them innocuous and all capable of killing.

'Squirrely,' Mark described them. They certainly captured the imagination – secret agents and honey-traps and the whiff of soupy rendezvous in the fog of East Berlin. We carried on, each rifle catching Mark's eye taken out, examined and admired. So time passed in this space without sun or guiding light. It felt as if we were in a huge mausoleum – a tomb of arms. A feeling of claustrophobia started to form, and the buzzing overhead lights began to hurt my eyes. Then, suddenly, it was time to say goodbye.

I had one final question. I asked Mark about his hand. 'Did you lose it in a shooting accident?'

'No,' he replied. 'I was a Thalidomide baby.' In the late 1950s the prescribing of a pill to combat morning sickness caused hundreds of babies to be born with defects. His false hand had nothing to do with a gun wound. He smiled and bade me farewell and, after another body search to make sure no secret-service pen guns had ended up in my pocket, I left.

Night was falling, and I walked away from this secret vault with its murderous contents, out into a drizzling, darkening northern city. A Thalidomide baby, I thought, turning up my collar. So much for assumptions.



I woke to the sound of an argument. The whores had been up all night, and the dawn was just hitting the sidewalks of Geneva; they were still short of a good night's takings. Such things test the patience of anyone.

I pushed open the window and looked down. The pink neon strips of Le Player's sex lounge shimmered in the lessening dark; the transsexuals, who had pushed their long legs out at the passing men, had left the kerb outside World's Elite hours before, but the

women from the Congo were still there. They knew what work really was and they whistled and plucked at the sleeves of men seeking comfort in the early morning. They were sweet-perfumed and hard-faced.

After Leeds I had come here, to Switzerland, to get my facts straight about how many guns there were in the world. The night before I had read that in 2007 it was estimated that there was about one gun for every seven people in the world; that police forces had about 26 million firearms; armies 200 million;⁸ and that civilians owned the rest: 650 million.⁹ These figures came from the Small Arms Survey – a Swiss-based organisation that lay about a mile away from where I was staying and which was my next port of call.

I had a meeting that morning with their chief, Eric Berman. With almost a billion guns out there, his job was to give some semblance of statistical order to them. He was, in a sense, a worldwide oracle on gun facts and figures. Definitely a man to meet. So I dressed and left the hotel, passed the cat-calling women and headed out to Geneva's waking streets.

The Small Arms Survey was on Avenue Blanc, and the area could not have been more Swiss. The Survey's office was tucked away in the same building as the Myanmar, Cape Verde and Tanzanian missions. Next door to them was a chocolate shop with an oversized cacao bunny in the window. Beside that stood a business school, a medical centre and the Swiss Audit & Fiduciary Services Company. It all had a sterility and orderliness to it that was a world away from the gore and blood that gun violence brings.

I rang the bell. Eric was called for. As I waited, I browsed the magazines on the waiting-room table: *Defence News International*, *Security Community*, *Asian Military Review* – bitter-edged titles. The same could be said of the photography on the walls. One showed bullet holes in a window overlooking a grimy industrial sprawl in La Vela Gialla, an Italian neighbourhood run by the Camorra mafia family. There was a photo of a drug dealer's hand in Brooklyn, clutching a Colt Python .357 Magnum along with fifty bucks' worth of five-dollar crack cocaine wraps. Then an image, black and white like the others, of Liberian youths clutching Kalashnikov-style assault

rifles, wearing bandanas. They stared fiercely at the unflinching lens. Guns and their many faces around the world.

Eric appeared, shook my hand and led me to his office. We sat down, and I began to explain that I was writing this book about the world of guns and that . . .

‘You don’t have to butter me up,’ he said, and I was surprised. I thought this was going to be a nice conversation; he looked nice – slim, middle-aged, neat. He reminded me of one of those cautious editors you meet on British papers: clever without eccentricity, focused without shifting into obsessional.

‘The Small Arms Survey has many views on guns,’ he carried on, answering a question I hadn’t asked. ‘We don’t have a single view. My personal reason for doing this is very different from that of my colleagues . . .’ and he began to explain how the Survey is neither pro-armament or anti-gun. Then he stopped, looked at me and said, ‘Ask me a specific question.’

So I did. ‘How many guns are there in the world?’

But you can’t just give a number, he said. Eventually, after telling me how the Survey reviews 193 United Nation member states, and with all the caveats that go with not having access to decent data, he handed me three reports: ‘875 million was the global estimate.’ He then said that number could be higher – this figure was seven years old. He spoke of how secrecy surrounds military and law-enforcement figures, how the Survey has to estimate the number of guns some militaries have by looking at the numbers of soldiers at the height of a nation’s power, because when armies downsize their guns are often just put into storage. Such are the challenges of getting a bigger picture. But he did say one thing was certain: more weapons are produced globally each year than are destroyed.

I asked him if counting the number of guns owned by various militaries could help fuel an arms race between countries.

‘That’s a facile argument,’ he said, a spark of irritation deep in his eyes. I was intrigued by how defensive he was being. I told him so.

‘It’s hard to give you concrete answers,’ he said, crossing his arms.

‘There’s no intrinsic relationship between the quantities of

firearms in a given place and the levels of violence,' he said. 'One can really skew one's argument in favour or against gun control. You can pick and choose. You have to be very careful on this topic, as it is so easily manipulated and used. Some people just don't appreciate the complexity of it.'

He saw me glaring back at him over my notebook, and he breathed out. You just have to be cautious, he told me. 'Journalists can take a snippet of something you've said and use it to move an agenda forward, and I don't want to get caught up in that.'

As he spoke, I realised this New Yorker, who had a map on the wall of a hitchhiking trail that he'd trodden years before through the Congo and who had lived in Israel and Kenya, Mexico and Cambodia, was not that dissimilar to me. Guns had propelled him around the world, and his view on them was as shifting as the sandy ground of facts he walked upon.

I had hoped to meet a guide – someone who could have showed me an intellectual and factual path in my journey into the world of the gun. But I'd met someone who refused to be rooted in one opinion, choosing instead ever-changing interpretations offered by ever-changing hard numbers. He told me the world of guns had changed him, that he now looks at data differently and he has to be more cautious in the words he uses to describe his Survey's conclusions. Guns are inherently political, it was clear, and he strived for a consciously impartial voice.

He gradually relaxed and showed me his office. It was filled with softer things: humanity in baubles that had little to do with guns. A paperweight from the Central African Republic, a grave marker from Gabon, a stamp from the Republic of Guinea showing, sur-really, Carrot Man from *Lost in Space*. An unopened bottle of Kazakh vodka rested on the shelf.

'Make sure you write down that it was unopened.' And I did, because in the world of guns you have to be careful with the facts, clearly.

After all, it's a matter of life and death.

II. Pain

2. THE DEAD

Solomon Islands – a death in the South Pacific in the summer of 2000 – a civil war recalled – the gun’s mountain of dead in hard numbers – Honduras – the most dangerous place on earth – the tragedy of three murdered women in a jaundiced street – a visit to the fire-marked morgue of San Pedro Sula – witnessing a journalist’s trade and a night-time shooting – the secrets of the embalmers’ art

So this is how it will end, I thought, as his eyes glazed over. I’ll get hit like him. A bullet in the neck – hopefully not the face.

I stared at the point where the bullet went in. There wasn’t much blood. No exit wound that I could make out, just a small hole on the right-hand side of his Adam’s apple and a trickle that crept down and onto the deck of the ship. But his death wasn’t like in the movies. There was no spread of a darkening pool, no last cry for mother. Just a soft gasp of air and a slumped body.

I was going to be next.

The bullets were spinning hard across the deck. The wooden walls of the cabins were splintering and the Solomon Islanders I was travelling with were screaming, flattening themselves against the boat, hugging the wood.

Three more rounds hit above my head. Thud. Thud. Fuck. Thud.

It wasn’t meant to be like this. I wasn’t a bloody war correspondent, I wasn’t being paid for this and I certainly wasn’t meant to be getting shot at. But all I could do was turn my head from the dead man’s

face and look at the worn planks of the upper deck and hug the floor. The sound of gunfire filled the air.

Perhaps I should not have got off the plane.

It's easy to look back and say such things. But at that time, in the summer of 2000, I had it in my head that I wanted to become a shark caller. Shark calling was the South Pacific tradition of catching sharks using ancient hunting methods. It was a skill I had been seeking to capture for a radio documentary about the isolated communities off the northern coast of Papua New Guinea. But what I did not realise, away from news, was that my next destination, the Solomon Islands, had seen a sharp flaring up of violence.

The long-standing and bitter rivalry in the Solomon Islands' capital of Honiara, between the Isatabus tribe from Guadalcanal, the largest island in this Pacific nation, and the migrant curly haired Malaitans, who had come over years before from a neighbouring province, had escalated into a bloody shooting match. A severe economic downturn and a rise in unemployment had fuelled resentment and tribalism. The Isatabus wanted the Malaitans out.

So, while I was busy learning about sharks, around 20,000 people were being forced at gunpoint from their homes. And when I arrived, the sole foreigner on that plane, I was greeted by a ghost town. Everything was closed; the streets of Honiara, tucked beneath the rising green slopes of its lush hills, shops shuttered with wood, were empty but for the angry groups of youths wandering through that emptiness with menace. Many had adopted the Rambo look of scrub bandana and sleeveless combat jackets, taut arm muscles on display. All were heavily armed.

Some Malaitans had decided to fight back. Over 500 assault rifles and machine-guns had been stolen from a police armory, and that morning an Isatabu rebel had been beheaded by the Malaitan Eagle Force, the MEF. Two hours later the same MEF troops had wandered into the national hospital and shot a recovering soldier in his hospital bed.

Things were definitely getting worse, so I decided to leave the capital. And that night, about ten kilometres from shore on this, to me, uncharted sea, I sailed into danger. Tense whispers rolled down

the decks of the ferry, and a silhouetted line of arms pointed out to sea. Whispers in broken English told how two outboard motorboats had followed our vessel from the Guadalcanal shore. Both were filled with Isatabus militia.

Then suddenly, unbidden, the night air was filled with the rushing sound of gunfire. Tracer bullets whirled overhead, and the upper decks were saturated with the thump of striking metal. The Eagle Force guards on board rushed to the side to return fire. I pulled myself behind a metal container that housed the lifeboats.

The mind begins to rationalise in moments like this. Were the containers thick enough to stop a bullet? If I made a dash for the cabins, would I get hit? I thought this, and more, as the bullets spat past. Then he fell.

I had been speaking to him a few minutes before. He was a young man, about twenty-two, and wore a red T-shirt with a faded white picture of a beach hut on it; his hair was tightly cut, and he had a small white scar on his dark face. I never asked his name, but he showed me his automatic rifle and laughed an easy laugh when I asked how heavy it was.

Then the firing stopped. The boats swerved and headed back into the night. It was a hit and run – a drive-by shooting on the seas. Then nothing; like someone flicking the switch to mute. Mothers stared in fear and clasped children under their arms, and then, slowly, voices were found and murmurs began to seep back into the shocked night.

The dead man lay in front of me.

It was the first violent death I had seen and, in this, it was transformative. It's hard to turn back once you've crossed that rubicon, once you've seen such sudden death close up. It was a killing that led me away from a life making documentaries about things like sharks to one spent covering current affairs – infused with war zones and trips to catalogue man's darkest nature. It was a death that, in a way, was the beginning of what is now to me a seemingly endless sighting of twisted bodies and pain-etched faces. The start of a passage that, ultimately, led to my walking upon the bleached bones of children who had died with a 7.62mm in the back of their heads.

One that caused me to witness the bloated, thick bodies of militants laid out on fire-touched earth after a machine-gun had unleashed its own little hell.

It was even a death that paved the way for this book.

Certainly things have never really been the same since.

In the end, the Solomon Islands conflict claimed about 200 lives, most killed by gunfire. As many as 460 more were injured.¹ In the great scheme of things, this is nothing: a little-remembered war in a little-known part of the world. But each death is still a death, always held in the quiet of someone's lacerated heart, for whom time will never erase what has been lost.

Blood was let and peace restored. A few months after the war ended I was offered work by the European Union to return there to manage a gun hand-back project. I did not accept the offer, but someone did, and they did a good job too, because today guns are a rarity in those palm-fringed isles. There are virtually no deaths by firearm.

Outside the Solomon Islands, though, guns kill, and in vast numbers, because even though we live in a world of nukes and ground-to-air missiles, chemical warfare and mortar rounds, it's the gun that does the low-level, high-cost damage. The gun is the Top Trump of killers, and the numbers killed by gunfire are bloodily incontestable. While dead men might not talk, they do offer some statistical truths.

Global numbers are hard to come by, but estimates from international studies suggest that between 526,000² and 600,000³ violent deaths happen annually. UN data on homicides show that in areas of high levels of murders, the vast majority of these are with guns – often over 80 per cent of them.⁴ An assault with a firearm is about twelve times more likely to kill you than being attacked in other intimate ways, like with a knife,⁵ so taking into account that as many as 90 per cent of deaths in conflicts are from being shot,⁶ an estimated level of 300,000 homicides with guns every year seems reasonable. Then there are the suicides. The World Health Organization has estimated that 800,000 people kill themselves each year. As one of the leading ways to end it is with a firearm, a

figure of 200,000 suicides by firearm a year also seems a reasonable estimate to make.⁷

This all adds up to about half a million people dying every year from gunfire.

The type of deaths from guns, clearly, differs from country to country. If you live in the US or Canada, suicides account for the majority of gun deaths. In countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Colombia or Albania the majority of gun deaths are homicide. Eastern Europe and southern Africa have lots of murder, but not many by firearm. Southern Europe and northern Africa don't have many murders, but when they do, it's much more likely to be with a gun.

The US stands out. Americans suffer about 80,000 non-fatal injuries and 30,000 deaths every year involving guns.⁸ It works out at just over eighty deaths a day. Things get even worse when you travel south. Although home to just 14 per cent of the world's population, Latin America accounts for 42 per cent of all firearm-homicides worldwide.⁹

These figures, though, conceal one problem. As Eric Berman told me, there is a fundamental difficulty getting any figures worth a damn. Many countries don't have proper ways to establish who has died violently, let alone how. Even in relatively developed South Africa, where gun deaths overshadow all other 'external' causes of death, only a third of death records are available for analysis.¹⁰ The World Health Organization's mortality database provides figures for just seven sub-Saharan African countries.

From the data that are available, though, we know that, if you look at the rankings of how people are murdered, Puerto Rico tops the table with 95 per cent of homicides there being with a firearm.¹¹ We also know Brazil has the most gun homicides in the world outside a war zone in terms of sheer numbers.¹² And, perhaps of surprise to some, the worst place in the world for gun violence per capita is not the US, but the Central American country of Honduras. And there's one city there that stands out as the world's epicentre of gun violence: San Pedro Sula – the most violent city on earth not at war.

This fact was new to me. I had been to Latin America before – the story about gun violence in Brazil was just one of a number of

things I had reported on in the previous fifteen years. From drug addiction involving the powerful cocaine residue paco to the rise of the left in Latin politics, I'd travelled to many counties there, camera in hand. But I had never been to Honduras as anything but a tourist, and even then the violence that gripped that land was hidden from me.

This time, though, I felt I had to travel straight to that heart of darkness of San Pedro Sula, to record what happened to the dead in this city of corroded wet streets and ivy-curved trees and to see how people coped under the constant presence of gunfire.



The body was out in the cane sugar field, in the shadows. We stumbled through the night and the plantation mud, the shifting light coming from the mobile phones the police officers were using to guide their way. There was only a weak moon in the Central American sky, and there was no budget for flashlights, so the officials had backed up the mortuary truck and let its headlights cast a low glow across the stubble-rich field. Their phones would have to do the rest.

The call had come over the radio as if it was an urgent murder scene, but the body had decomposed long ago. The sugar cane had since grown and pushed up and out, through the man's jeans. It had pierced his mottled flesh and was now sprouting through his body as if the bones themselves had grown. They looked like lilies in the half-light; you couldn't tell the difference between the bones and the cane.

'See, his hands have been tied,' said one of the forensic examiners in Spanish. He was dressed in a clinical over-suit, but as he was using a garbage bin to put the bones in, it was clear any concern for evidence contamination had long been lost somewhere in the dark corners of countless other crime scenes.

'Is that a rib bone?' The mobile phones were held close to the ground.

'No. That's a twig,' a voice in the pitch-black said.

'I've found his skull,' said another. An animal must have dragged it away, I thought.

'Looks like they cut it off,' the first voice said. I was wrong. You could make out in the shifting light the ragged hole where a bullet had struck and you hoped they had shot him before they had cut him. Either way, the bound hands and lonely death in a field made it clear this was a gang murder.

This was what I had come to witness, and it had not taken long. I had only been here for a short while, and this was the eighth body I had seen. Honduras, without a doubt, was a very violent place. In 2012, twenty people were murdered every day on average in this country of 8 million – a murder rate of 90.4 per 100,000 residents.¹³ In the US it is about 4.7.¹⁴ The city of San Pedro Sula, on whose darkened outskirts I was now, was even worse. The murder rate here was 173 per 100,000.¹⁵ There were, in 2013, just under six homicides a day in this municipal region alone.

The violence was partly down to San Pedro Sula being where it was. Stuck between the drug lords of Colombia and Bolivia to the south and the buyers from the US to the north, it had become a habitat of casual murder and cold pain. Some 80 per cent of the cocaine that reaches US soil was thought to be trafficked via here. And as drugs flowed up, guns came down – from south to north, down from the largest gun-producing country in the world.¹⁶

These realities, combined with poverty, corruption and impunity, had turned San Pedro Sula into a city where gangs fought gangs and cartels fought cartels over the immense profits that drugs could bring. The feared Mexican syndicates of the Zetas and Sinaloas had even been lured here, aligning themselves with local gangs such as the MS-13 gang or Calle 18. And death had come in their wake.



A few days before, as my plane banked over San Pedro, the lush hills of El Merendon National Park framing the city to the east, and the sprawl of the district of Choloma drifting far up to the north, I

looked at my watch. A scattered cemetery speckled the earth in the rushing green below. It was 3.30 p.m. We dipped down to the surging runway. I write this because a skinny policeman was also to note that time – half past three – with a worn ballpoint pen in a crumbling police hill station close to the cemetery I'd just seen. The time was inscribed next to the names of three women who had been gunned down at that precise moment.

The first was Lesley Lopez-Pena. She was twenty-two, single, unemployed. When she died, the policeman noted, she was wearing blue jeans and grey sandals. On the small of her back she had a tattoo of the sun. The second victim was Miriam Portillo. She died with two bullets in her back and one in her chest. The third was Karen Contreros. The report noted that her underwear was pink and that she had five gun wounds in her chest, one in her stomach, one in her shoulder and one in her forehead.

These three women had been travelling back home from a visit out of town. One of them had a boyfriend, a gang member, in prison, and they had been to see him. They had probably given the young man some weed or pills to help pass the dragging hours and then returned. They were caught laughing as they got down from a converted school bus and fell as one from the assassins' bullets. Dying, one dropped a child's Spiderman bike she had bought in the market an hour before.

The policeman did not write down a motive. Murders such as these were just another thread in the endless sorrow of the drug wars.

On the way to the spot where the women had been gunned down, my driver, Frank, had pulled to the edge of the road and put black tape over the telephone number on the side of his taxi. With a deliberate show, he folded a piece of white paper and fixed this over his number plates. He knew the gangs would take these details and he did not want them to visit his home and see that he had a wife and child.

Getting back in, he insisted I lower my window. 'If they can't see in, then they will think we are the other gang,' he said. 'Then they'll open fire.' He was taking no chances.

By the time we reached the crime scene, the light was fast

departing, and the coroner's wagon had taken the bodies away. The blood still stained that sandy road, and there was a small piece of intestine, blown out of one of the girl's backs, lying obscenely in the middle of the track. I pushed it with my foot and watched it tremble in the electric light. Perhaps the coroner was too busy to clean up. After all, in the last three years there had been over 6,000 homicide autopsies carried out here in San Pedro, compared to just sixty-two natural death autopsies.¹⁷

I walked over to a huddle of people sitting back from the road. The mild drama of a Brazilian soap opera was playing out on a square television hanging outside a Portakabin. A fire blazed in an oil drum; the shifting of car headlights illuminated the area and cast dancing shadows. A man in a white England football shirt turned to me.

'Three women?' he said. 'Yes – I heard fifteen gunshots and saw them fall. They lay there for about fifteen minutes before the police arrived, but by then they had been dead for fifteen minutes.'

His Spanish was fast, and because he repeated the word fifteen I was confused.

'The journalists were here before the forensics arrived,' he said, as if that made it clearer, and a fat woman beside him started to scream. I had no idea why.

'The gangs do this as a sort of theatre,' the man in the football shirt was saying. 'They pick where they want the bodies to lie, they leave the gun-shells. They don't care. We have piles of dead bodies here, and the police say they investigate them, but no one gets caught. No one goes to jail.'

The bullets were 9mm. 'Claro'. *Of course*. It's the gun of choice for the feared Calle 18 gang, who run these streets. And with that, he had nothing more to say and walked back into the shadows by his hut. When I approached others they too edged into the dark. The gangs were always here watching. This was just how it was. The killings had brought powerlessness, despair and, ultimately, silence.

Beside us, up a slope, stood a raised breezeblock hut. The lights spilling from the windows captured those inside in silhouette, and then, suddenly, their voices began to lift. They were evangelical Christians. In all of this, perhaps, God was the only one worth

speaking to. Below, a line of tied, tired horses snorted in the night, startled at the noise. The cries of those few believers drifted upwards to the speckled sky. And out there, out in the darkness and in an even greater silence, lay three more bodies in a San Pedro municipal refrigeration unit.



Outside the morgue a man in short sleeves and a pair of stained trousers sat and waited and sucked on a bag of fizzy drink through a bent straw. At this time, the sun was already hard on your face, and it would be hours before the heat lessened. The passing cars kicked up small whirls of dust. No one spoke.

Beside him a coffin was propped open with a stick. It lay empty, but he remained hopeful. A quick burial cost about 2,500 lempiras – \$120 – and he looked at the hunched relatives leaving the morgue, with their sallow faces and hurting eyes, and sucked on his straw.

He was from Funeraria San Jose, and was just one of the many morticians who came daily to this, the busiest morgue in the world. It would not be long before he got a customer. His name was Marco Antonio Ramos. At fifty-three, he hadn't thought he would be doing this, but work is work, and this was good work. He had sold six coffins last month alone.

I asked him why he did it.

'Money. I found a way through life with these coffins,' he said, his voice light.

'Do you prepare the bodies for burial?'

'So the relatives can open up the lids and say goodbye to their loved ones – those whose faces are still there.' There are at least ten funeral homes here in San Pedro, and yet business is still good. Just as the lure of death had brought Marco to these gates, so it had brought me – I had come to see how the municipal morgue could cope with so many gun murders.

There was shouting for people from the gate.

'Is there anyone from Baracoa here?' the call went out.

A hunched, fat woman went in, her back contorted, the knowledge of what lay on the other side heavy upon her. Here they got as many as thirty bodies a day; most had died violently. I turned and walked towards the visitor's entrance, the only person to go through those gates that morning with neither tearful nor lifeless eyes.

Inside, Dr Hector Hernandez greeted me. He was the director of this morgue, a tidy man with grey hair and a patient calm, exact and professional. He led me into a large and empty lecture theatre. The walls were peeling, and the place felt like no one had taught here for years. He pointed towards a Formica table and pulled over a decaying chair. Hector's face seemed melted with tiredness. He has a team of 146, he began. Among them are sixty-eight medics, two dental analysts, four toxicologists, two microbiologists and one psychiatrist.

A psychiatrist? I stopped him.

'The morgue is not just for the dead,' he explained. 'What the gangs do to their victims is sometimes so vicious that their markings on the bodies leave much deeper markings on the minds of those who are left behind. After all, the killers have a method. They almost always end it with a shot to the head – they prefer a 9mm to do this – but they torture their victims first. 'Violence here is intimate, but the gun sends them to the other side,' he said.

Hector sighed when I asked him if this daily arrival of bodies had affected his morale. He was resigned to it.

'In ten years, between 2003 and 2013, we had over 10,000 autopsies; 9,400 of them did not result in an investigation. For me, this is the hardest: this impunity. Nothing has been investigated.'

Right now he had 68 bodies in storage; 48 of them being matched for DNA, the other 20 were unknown. Most had died prematurely and violently.

'After thirty days if no one claims a body, we bury them anonymously,' he said. Last year, 120 people were interred in this way, the majority of them men between eighteen and thirty. Then I asked, in the sixteen years he had worked there, what had stayed with him, what memory of all of this violence had struck him the most.

He sucked in a breath. The murder of an entire family is hard, he said, his voice measured and exact. Like the time he saw a dead

mother still holding her three children tight in her arms. The gangs had kicked down the bathroom door and killed them as one. Then there are the others. In this city these are the bodies that come packaged – trussed up in grey sacks. They die painfully, he told me, their legs tied up against their backs, their faces bruised, their teeth missing. They once found twenty-six bodies in sacks like this in a field: a grim harvest.

Suddenly, as if this was too painful a memory to dwell on, he rose, straightened his tie and beckoned me to follow. We walked through swinging double doors and out into the dissecting room. It was a sudden shift from talking about death to seeing it.

The tiles on the floor were loose and covered in water. The neon lights gave off a sickly glow and buzzed; the walls were smeared and wet. And there, on the left, lay a body placed on its side. It – he – was naked, and his legs were crooked and twisted. He had been shot in the jaw, and flies flickered above him.

The director leaned towards me in the molasses air and said there was no real danger of infection. ‘The dead are healthy. They didn’t die from diseases.’ Later, I walked outside and saw bags of seeping waste left against a wall, frenzied flies thick above the trailing lines of blackened ooze, and was not so sure.

We left and I followed Hector upstairs. A fire had ripped through half of the morgue on a summer’s night a year before and now the upper floor lay derelict: tortured iron railings and marked walls. Such is the state of Honduras’s morgues. As if death had seeped into the very structure of this place and left it rotten and mould-tainted.

Later, he introduced me to his medical colleagues. They shifted in their blue shirts when I shook their hands – they were embarrassed to be asked questions about what they did. Their work was difficult, Hector explained, and I asked what sort of people were drawn to this type of task. He repeated the words of the funeral worker outside: there is not much other employment around. Death creates its own labour.

I offered the coroner team something to eat, and we sat down together. Around the table were Sanchez, Garcia and Rodriguez, two doctors and a forensic photographer. I had bought fried chicken and, despite the sugar stench of death coming from just beyond the door,

they ate their lunch. I did not; I had gone to the toilet to wash my hands and found neither soap nor towels.

I asked about the smell. There was a smirk. 'What smell?' These men had been busy and were hungry. On the day before they had nine bodies brought in: six homicides. Outside lay two more bodies. I looked at the white chicken meat and fried strips of skin in their hands and focused on writing notes.

'Look at this. This one has been shot in the head,' said the forensic photographer, glancing at the laptop before him, his mouth full. I shifted across to his screen: it was one of the women who had been killed the day before. There was the child's Spiderman bike. The doctors looked too but were unmoved. The only thing shocking, they told me, is working with children who'd been tortured. One of them let out a low whistle. 'It's really common.'

They described how victims' hands and feet were often tied together and the rope wrapped around the neck, then lashed to the feet. 'So, when they tire from struggling, they let themselves go. Their feet drop, and they end up choking to death. The rope just tightens around their throat. If they are lucky, someone shoots them before it gets to this.'

Luck, fate. These were the things they talked about – as if that's all you could pin your hopes on. 'Some people are shot twenty times and end up in hospital, still living,' said Sanchez, a heavy-set man with eyes dark rimmed and deep. 'Then there are people who are only shot just the once – a small wound – and they end up here.'

'The beautiful thing about this job,' said Garcia, wiping his fingers with a napkin to clean off the chicken grease, 'is seeing up close what a bullet can really do to you.' And then he picked up another chicken leg.



That night I met Orlin Armando Castro – a local TV journalist with a fixed gaze and an impish laugh. He had a fizzing energy that meant he never stopped moving. Beside him was his cameraman, Osman

Castillo, a solid man in ripped jeans and a white shirt. Osman hardly spoke; Orlin was his voice.

On Orlin's belt was a police radio that buzzed from time to time, and in his hand, always, was a Blackberry phone. He constantly scanned both and replied to his messages with a focus that could have been mistaken for something else. He was constantly awaiting that call – to a murder scene, to another death. On hearing of one, he and Osman would jump into their scraped blue Hyundai Tucson, whose passenger door did not open from the outside, and drive fast to where a body was sure to be lying. There they did what they were paid to do: they filmed murder.

I had arranged to meet Orlin because he was a local journalist here and I had been told – out of everyone – he was the first to get to San Pedro's murder scenes. The one reporter the police would call whenever there was a shooting, his life was defined by gun killings. And I wanted to know what that could do to a man – to be a constant witness to the tortured secrets of this city, to have a career marked so powerfully by the gun's ultimate legacy.

It was late when we met outside the chipped and long-shut-down hairdresser on a darkened corner of a crossroads. We shook hands, and then, casually, Orlin pulled open his car door and showed me his guns: a 12mm shotgun and a 9mm Beretta pistol.

'Have you used them?' I asked him in the half-light.

'Yes,' Orlin said. I wasn't used to journalists packing heat, less so firing them. One time, he said, he drove into a gunfight by accident. He had to put down his microphone and pull out his pistol and start shooting, because the gangs, in the confusion, had begun to shoot at him. Even so, he refuses to wear a bulletproof vest because the gangs might think he's a cop and then they'd be sure to kill him.

He had worked for the past eleven years for a national Honduran news channel, Canal 6, and had seen things on these eternal, yellow-lit night streets that you should not see. A six-month-old killed in the middle of a gunfight; whole families executed in their homes. He looked at me, his head tilted slightly, and flipped around the screen of his white Blackberry phone. On it was the decapitated body of a woman, her vagina on display. His thumb flicked, and

another image appeared. Three day-old dead men lay in cornfields, the heat causing their eyes to pop out of their heads. He laughed, his eyes twinkling, and he showed me another woman, semi-naked in death. His phone was filled with corpses. Young men from the 18 gang slumped in awkward positions, as if asleep. Before and after shots of the living and the dead, from smiling to something else.

When he does not work, he gets bored, he said. There's so much drama in what he does. The closer he gets to death, the more alive he feels. This, he told me, was real journalism. I began to fear this little man's love for the tenebrous corners of this city.

There's much that he cannot report – if he did he'd be killed. Some murder scenes he just has to stay away from: he knows things would get too complicated with the gangs if he reported on certain killings. He feels he's walking on an edge. 'On the one side there is deep, dark water, on the other side there is fire. Here you don't know who is who. In a war you take sides. You know who an army is – they are in green. But here . . . you have no idea,' he said.

A call came in. There had been a shooting in the Barrio Rivera Hernandez, and Orlin's face changed. We jumped into his car and we were off, pushing through the down-lit streets to the murder scene. In this light the street took on the colour of jaundice, the plaster on the low-slung houses hanging like pockmarked skin, the grill-lined windows the shade of mustard gas.

The body lay still under the ash-blond glare. The policemen were placing small fluorescent triangle markers out under the shadowed light, tracing where the spent rounds had fallen. The body lay awkwardly, his legs twisted, the shoulders tucked underneath. The dead man was wearing an orange polo shirt, which looked almost white now, and you could glimpse tartan boxer shorts poking above his stained blue jeans. When the cameraman turned on his light, you could see the blood still seeping gently from the man's back.

The police took out a tape measure and began to measure the ballistic range, but you felt they were doing this because the television crew was nearby. The police spoke to no one, and the street's occupants stood back in the shadows. All the neighbours had come out to look and to talk in quiet voices. A fat baby sat on the sidewalk,

gurgling; a girl, about three years old, in a pink frilly dress with small pierced ears, asked her mother for a hug; to her side a man laughed and swung his son between his legs. And in front of these children, the police flipped the body, and the man's destroyed face stared up into the deep black sky.

Orlin, his face caught in the camera's brightness, stood before the body and delivered his lines, repeated a thousand times before. And the image on the video screen showed him, the whiteness of the light hard contrasting with the sulphur-tinted streets, like a broken angel. Luminescent. Then the camera's light went out, and Orlin turned and took one more photo with his phone, and another crumpled face of death was captured.

When they finally put the dead man into a long, rustling black bag, the crowd grew bored and drifted away: the show was over. And the police tipped the body into the back of the forensic truck and then they too left; and all that remained were patches of sticky, coagulating blood, thick on the ground.

Orlin walked back to his vehicle. I caught a glimpse of his face lit in the reflection of his phone. He was looking to see if any more murders had been called in that night. And so it goes, I thought. The endless hunger for death in these streets never sated – one that totally consumed this slight, sad-faced man. I climbed back into the car and we drove away.

The low barbed-wire-rimmed walls of the district flickered beyond the window. And the silent homes of the people of San Pedro, with their contained patches of blue electricity, began to thin out, until all that was left were the spotlights of the car and the silence, and the yellow streets in the rear window diminished into the night.



The coffins attached to the wall are the pricier ones, Daisy Quinteros explained to me the next day, pointing to the far end of the funeral parlour shop.

‘The most expensive is 54,000 lempiras,’ she said, smiling – just