

The Sin Eater: The Radio Play

by

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DESCRIPTION

Margaret Pasqualini, a professional photographer, is arrested at a photo lab for taking nude pictures of her son, pictures she said were part of an exhibit she was putting together as a final project for her class in advanced photographic techniques. Police had been notified by the lab owner about the pictures and were forced to arrest Pasqualini when she refused to accompany them to the station. Rather than agree to a plea bargain in her subsequent conviction for malicious destruction of property and disorderly conduct, she instead chooses to go to jail for 30 days. There she meets Vera Cortez, serving 25 years for being an accomplice in the murder of her own child.

Cortez, as she prefers to be called, is from East Harlem, but she originally grew up in Puerto Rico, from a family which provided her a good education and a comfortable home. At 17 or 18 she became involved in the independence movement, specifically in working for the release of Los Quince (fifteen Puerto Rican men and women in American jails, accused of being members of either FALN or Los Macheteros). She narrowly escaped the FBI crackdown that resulted in the arrest of scores of Puerto Ricans, and her family shipped her off to live with relatives in New York City.

There, she struck out on her own. Unfortunately, life did not treat her well: she had two children with two different men and eventually ended up in an abusive relationship (with whom she has a third child). This man killed her daughter by beating her to death; Cortez is arrested and convicted as an accomplice to the murder and agrees to serve 25 years in prison.

Their monthlong relationship opens up the possibility for a real and vital connection between people who, though from completely different classes and experiences, can find common ground. The Sin Eater also raises questions about the thin line between art and exploitation.

CHARACTERS

- MARGARET PASQUALINI, photographer, mid-30s
- VERA CORTEZ, prisoner, mid-30s, originally from Puerto Rico
- GUARD, African American female, mid-30s.

TIME

- Before the advent of digital photography

SETTING

- Women's prison

The Sin Eater

Scene 1

SOUND: Lou Reed's "Busload of Faith" from "New York."

SOUND: Music morphs into the background sounds of a prison.

GUARD

You okay?

MARGARET

Yeah—yes—

GUARD

Hold on to your stuff. You've got thirty days, not thirty years, so head down but head up, too.

MARGARET

All right—

GUARD

Now I'm going to call for the door to open. Whatever happens, don't forget to remember it's all good even when it isn't and that the world you have outside never disappears.

(into her shoulder mike)

5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

SOUND: Squawk/static from the shoulder mike.

SOUND: Metal door pounds open.

CORTEZ

(jerking awake)

Aaaahhhh—Tamara—Tamara—

GUARD

It's not Tamara.

CORTEZ

Tamara—

GUARD

It's not Tamara—

1 MARGARET
2 What—

3 GUARD
4 It's the dream again. Need aspirin?

5 CORTEZ
6 I can take care of it myself—

7 GUARD
8 Always tough for you coming out of the dream.

9 CORTEZ
10 You done with your analysis?

11 GUARD
12 If you're ready to play nice.

13 CORTEZ
14 So this is she.

15 GUARD
16 This is her.

17 CORTEZ
18 The new beef.

19 GUARD
20 Don't be nasty.
21 (to MARGARET)
22 Clock is now ticking officially. She doesn't bite. I've had her tested.
23 (into shoulder mike)
24 5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

25 SOUND: Door slams closed.

26 CORTEZ
27 That footlocker is yours—that bed—that bed is yours—as she
28 says, I am not known to bite. House rules, so that things start right
29 right off. I am going to get some sleep, so I do not want to be
30 disturbed. You are only here for a month—I live here, Boricua
31 prisoner of war—you are just a radar blip—

32 MARGARET
33 You say you want to sleep, so you should sleep.

1 CORTEZ
2 The rules of the house are what I say they are.

3 MARGARET
4 Goes without saying.

5 CORTEZ
6 I will say them anyways.

7 MARGARET
8 I'm just a blip of beef.

9 CORTEZ
10 Not even that.

11 MARGARET
12 Well, if you won't, I'm going to sleep.

13 CORTEZ
14 No one has slept away their whole thirty days.

15 MARGARET
16 Wanna bet?

17 CORTEZ
18 What are you willing to bet?

19 MARGARET
20 How about that you'll get quiet now?

21 CORTEZ
22 I will take that bet—but not for long.

23 SOUND: Background prison sounds come to the foreground.

24 SOUND: Foreground prison sounds morph into prison night sounds.

25 * * * * *

26 **Scene 2**

27 SOUND: MARGARET sitting up in bed.

1 MARGARET
2 (whispered)
3 Damn—

4 CORTEZ
5 (shouted)
6 Goddamn it! Goddamn it! Goddamn it!

7 SOUND: CORTEZ gets out of bed.

8 MARGARET
9 What? What is it?

10 CORTEZ
11 Leave me alone—Tamara—just leave me alone—Tamara—what?

12 MARGARET
13 You're shouting—

14 CORTEZ
15 What do you think you are looking at?

16 MARGARET
17 Nothing. I'm looking at nothing.

18 CORTEZ
19 That is exactly right: nothing. Turn around and go back to sleep.

20 SOUND: Both lay back down. Background sounds fade out.

21 * * * * *

22 **Scene 3**

23 SOUND: Transition with GUARD music clip.

24 SOUND: Opening and closing of a locker door.

25 GUARD
26 All right. I am looking good. Daughters of mine, you know I hate
27 doing this graveyard shift. Because these graves are always ready
28 to pop—and it ain't like it's Lazarus re-born if and when they do—

29 SOUND: GUARD snaps her fingers to the words.

1 GUARD
2 —pop pop pop open. But I do it because it lets you both sleep well
3 in your own beds in your own rooms in our own home.

4 SOUND: A wake-up call, prison sounds.

5 * * * * *

6 **Scene 4: The First Degree**

7 GUARD
8 Arise ye unwashed of the earth—the “a lá carte” food cart has
9 arrived. Take the bags please.

10 MARGARET
11 I’m not hungry.

12 GUARD
13 One day is fine—but after two days, upstairs, they get nervous—
14 three days makes trouble all the way down to me, and I am not
15 going to suffer for your suffering. Take the bag.

16 CORTEZ
17 Take the bag.

18 MARGARET
19 All right!

20 GUARD
21 Thank you both so kindly.

22 SOUND: Bags being opened.

23 CORTEZ
24 Eat more than that, rent check, or you are not going to make it.
25 “Rent check”? Goes out after a month.

26 MARGARET
27 Hilarious. Just—more sitting around—

28 CORTEZ
29 I explained “lockdown” yesterday. I explained the bag lunches.

1 MARGARET
2 Not used to sitting—drinking coffee and cracking jokes and
3 busting somebody's balls if they're not doing the job and this
4 sitting around just drives me nuts. What're you reading?

5 CORTEZ
6 Chill.

7 MARGARET
8 Sorry.

9 SOUND: MARGARET taps her fingers on the table.

10 CORTEZ
11 I said chill—

12 SOUND: Chair scrapes as MARGARET gets up.

13 CORTEZ
14 I told you, no parades. You do have your scorpions—

15 MARGARET
16 Just—thinking.

17 CORTEZ
18 Just control it.

19 MARGARET
20 Just can't turn it off—

21 CORTEZ
22 Just have to. It gets very close in here.

23 MARGARET
24 You seem to give a lot of advice.

25 CORTEZ
26 Your scorpions make you deaf to my advice—

27 MARGARET
28 Yeah?

29 CORTEZ
30 Because they force you to face without the chance to look away
31 that you are a loser—

1 MARGARET
2 Is that what your scorpions do to you at night? “Tamara,
3 Tamara”—shit! sorry, I’m sorry—

4 CORTEZ
5 You need some self-discipline.

6 MARGARET
7 Get your hand off my leg—

8 CORTEZ
9 Not until you stop it from jumping—you have it going like a sewing
10 machine.

11 MARGARET
12 All right—all right! Off!

13 CORTEZ
14 There, I told you you could do it. Now offload what you are
15 thinking.

16 MARGARET
17 Thinking? Not even thinking—all jumbled—

18 CORTEZ
19 Like smoke all up in your head—

20 MARGARET
21 My son—it’s my son all up in my head—

22 CORTEZ
23 Son’s name?

24 MARGARET
25 Alex.

26 CORTEZ
27 Age?

28 MARGARET
29 Four.

30 CORTEZ
31 Married?

1 MARGARET
2 Alex?

3 CORTEZ
4 You, tonta.

5 MARGARET
6 I am married.

7 CORTEZ
8 Name?

9 MARGARET
10 Matthew.

11 CORTEZ
12 He treats you well? Your husband, not Alex.

13 MARGARET
14 Yes.

15 CORTEZ
16 Cheat on you?

17 MARGARET
18 Not that I know about—

19 CORTEZ
20 Yell at you?

21 MARGARET
22 No.

23 CORTEZ
24 Hit you?

25 MARGARET
26 Never.

27 CORTEZ
28 Provide for you?

29 MARGARET
30 We've got—we run—a small construction company together.

1 CORTEZ
2 Equal down the middle?

3 MARGARET
4 I go out on the jobs—he makes sure the money goes into the
5 bank account.

6 CORTEZ
7 So, a “woman in the building trades.”

8 MARGARET
9 Apprenticed myself through a shit-storm of men to become that.

10 CORTEZ
11 Which makes you proud.

12 MARGARET
13 Because I’ve earned all my certificates, all my chops, and though
14 the word is “foreman,” I get to be the boss—and that is sweet.

15 CORTEZ
16 Sweet revenge, it sounds like.

17 MARGARET
18 For having had “Property of the Cunt” sprayed across my locker?
19 Yeah—but that seems—stupid now—

20 CORTEZ
21 Who can tell, forewoman? So, a review: Nice son. Husband who
22 treats you human. Entrepreneur. A life composed.

23 MARGARET
24 Not that it’s all—

25 CORTEZ
26 It is never all that, is it?—but it does not sound bad.

27 MARGARET
28 No.

29 CORTEZ
30 So what would make you leave what is “not bad” and bury yourself
31 here with me? I can see the smoke, the jumbled—this is not about
32 me wanting to know—it is about you wanting to tell. Unless I have
33 read you wrong. Notice your leg.

1 MARGARET
2 My leg.

3 CORTEZ
4 The world is full of signs.

5 MARGARET
6 Huh. It's just—all so stupid—

7 CORTEZ
8 "Stupid" is trying to sleep through it all—look, just start.

9 MARGARET
10 What would make me leave. What would make me be charged
11 with disorderly conduct plus malicious destruction of property. I
12 damaged a color photo lab. I fought a police officer—two—
13 forewoman resisted arrest—

14 CORTEZ
15 Did it take them more than an hour to print your pictures?

16 MARGARET
17 No—

18 CORTEZ
19 Then they did a bad job.

20 MARGARET
21 No! They wouldn't give me back what was mine when I asked for
22 it. And they called the police.

23 CORTEZ
24 So these pictures needed a police escort.

25 MARGARET
26 It was nothing.

27 CORTEZ
28 Will not wash. Pictures of whom?

29 MARGARET
30 Of Alex.

31 CORTEZ
32 Four-year-old Alex.

1 MARGARET
2 I didn't do anything wrong.

3 CORTEZ
4 You wrestled with police officers, damaged a photo lab—you are
5 the one in here.

6 MARGARET
7 They were just pictures of Alex.

8 CORTEZ
9 Not "just," obviously—

10 MARGARET
11 For a photography class, a project for a class—but people said
12 they saw—things—

13 CORTEZ
14 You gave them some reason.

15 MARGARET
16 No reason! There was no—

17 CORTEZ
18 So, just a mama lion defending her cub—

19 MARGARET
20 Against all their filth—

21 CORTEZ
22 They offer you a deal?

23 MARGARET
24 I could've taken a deal. Probation, community service, restitution,
25 an apology. I couldn't, I really [couldn't]—

26 CORTEZ
27 But you would be at home right now. Those pictures, amiga—
28 maybe in here is where you should be, a mother who abandons
29 her child—

30 MARGARET
31 I protected—

1 CORTEZ
2 You chose principle—

3 MARGARET
4 Yes!

5 CORTEZ
6 With your whole family hungering for you to stay.

7 MARGARET
8 Alex Alex Alex! My principle is Alex! How hard is it to understand
9 that.

10 CORTEZ
11 That question is not about me. Can he? And when. And how.

12 MARGARET
13 He'll understand because I'll tell him, that's how. When he grows
14 up.

15 CORTEZ
16 I am sure the anticipation keeps a smile on his four-year old face.
17 Come on, say it, this is really all about you, yes?

18 MARGARET
19 About me for him—so he'll know—so he'll know that nothing ever
20 happened.

21 CORTEZ
22 Except that you disappeared on him for a month.

23 MARGARET
24 He'll see that was a small price—

25 CORTEZ
26 Such faith.

27 MARGARET
28 I'm tired.

29 CORTEZ
30 Principles and selfishness combined—brava! I read about you.
31 When she told me you were coming. That is why I wanted you in
32 here. The prison librarian gave me articles.

1 MARGARET
2 My tax dollars at work—

3 CORTEZ
4 Yes.

5 MARGARET
6 If you know, then why jerk me [around]—

7 CORTEZ
8 Because the articles did not give me the information I want.

9 MARGARET
10 The dirt—

11 CORTEZ
12 "Dirt" is not what I want—but we will get to that later.

13 MARGARET
14 I want to get to it now.

15 CORTEZ
16 We will get to it later. For now, you get this about all this: lines,
17 Margarita Pasqualini. On a tiny island like ours, lines mean
18 everything. Keeping them clear, making them straight—

19 MARGARET
20 And what lines can I get that'll keep you off my back?

21 CORTEZ
22 I can give you my name. I know you have not read about me.

23 MARGARET
24 That's it?

25 CORTEZ
26 That is it.

27 MARGARET
28 So read me your name.

29 CORTEZ
30 Cortez. I have a first name—Vera—but do not use it. I go by
31 Cortez. You, I am calling Pasqualini.

1 MARGARET
2 No.

3 CORTEZ
4 Pascua, the feast—Pasqualini, the little feast—

5 MARGARET
6 No.

7 CORTEZ
8 So read your right name to me.

9 MARGARET
10 I go by Margaret. Not Pasqualini, not a little feast. Definitely not
11 Margarita.

12 CORTEZ
13 Say that again.

14 MARGARET
15 Which part?

16 CORTEZ
17 "I go by—"

18 MARGARET
19 I go by Margaret? I go by Margaret.

20 CORTEZ
21 Now we have some lines.

22 MARGARET
23 On our little island.

24 CORTEZ
25 For the turn of a moon.

26 MARGARET
27 You like this all the time?

28 CORTEZ
29 No—sometimes, Margaret, I talk a lot.

30 MARGARET
31 Even in your sleep.

1 CORTEZ
2 That—that is good—I can respect that.

3 MARGARET
4 Means you shut up now?

5 CORTEZ
6 My mantra: In for a dime, in for the dollar.

7 MARGARET
8 I didn't do anything wrong.

9 CORTEZ
10 I think you still come up ninety cents short.

11 MARGARET
12 Fuck off.

13 SOUND: Deck of cards shuffled, set out for solitaire.

14 * * * * *

15 **Scene 5**

16 SOUND: Transition with music clip.

17 SOUND: Opening and closing of a locker door.

18 GUARD
19 Daughters of mine, if there's a usual smell in this place—
20 something forever underneath the bleach and menstrual blood
21 and fumigator's poison—it is regret. It's something I'd love to keep
22 you from feeling—but you're gonna feel it anyway. That's why I
23 wear a fresh uniform every day, why I drive you crazy about doing
24 my wash. I want to wear the smell of life outside when I arrive
25 here on the inside and let it cover me as long as it can.

26 SOUND: GUARD snaps her fingers.

27 GUARD
28 Sleeping daughters of mine—you are why I have so little regret in
29 life.

30 * * * * *

31 **Scene 6: The Second Degree**

1 SOUND: Background prison noise.

2 GUARD
3 Here's your book. We have to cool doing this for a bit—los
4 gigantes upstairs are cracking down on any "fraternizing"—funny
5 word to use with women, isn't it.

6 CORTEZ
7 I am cracking up about it like the dawn.

8 GUARD
9 Lockdown always gives 'em a hard-on—

10 CORTEZ
11 That must be interesting.

12 GUARD
13 No. But by the end of business today it's going to be over. How
14 goes it?

15 MARGARET
16 We talk.

17 GUARD
18 Open university with this one.

19 SOUND: Mic squawk.

20 GUARD
21 Gotta go—hard-ons call.

22 CORTEZ
23 I wonder what the sound of that is like.

24 GUARD
25 One hand slapping?

26 CORTEZ
27 You better not let your daughters—

28 GUARD
29 You know I am the best of mothers to them.

30 SOUND: Mic squawk.

1 GUARD
2 Gotta go.

3 MARGARET
4 You give her books?

5 CORTEZ
6 The “best of mothers” asks for my books.

7 MARGARET
8 Can I?

9 CORTEZ
10 You may.

11 MARGARET
12 Houses of Healing.

13 CORTEZ
14 "A Prisoner’s Guide to Inner Power and Freedom.”

15 MARGARET
16 Why would she want to read [this]—

17 CORTEZ
18 Think about that for a moment. You thinking? Think this: you think
19 we are the only prisoners in here?

20 MARGARET
21 Is it okay—

22 CORTEZ
23 Read on.

24 SOUND: Cards laid out for solitaire.

25 CORTEZ
26 You ate today.

27 MARGARET
28 You mean I got it all down.

29 CORTEZ
30 Only took you a week.

1 MARGARET
2 The incarceration diet plan. When do we—

3 CORTEZ
4 Soon, from what we just heard—I suppose they finally found who
5 and what they wanted to find. And I can go back to my class.

6 MARGARET
7 A class?

8 CORTEZ
9 Not important. More important: I have a question for you: what is it
10 like, being famous?

11 MARGARET
12 Is that what you call it?

13 CORTEZ
14 You were a known person. Maybe you still are.

15 MARGARET
16 Crapped on is not “famous.”

17 CORTEZ
18 You had your picture in the papers—

19 MARGARET
20 Cat in a tree can get that—

21 CORTEZ
22 News at six, again at eleven—

23 MARGARET
24 Same with the cat—

25 CORTEZ
26 Reporters mucking in your garbage—

27 MARGARET
28 My bones and egg shells—

29 CORTEZ
30 You have another definition?

1 MARGARET
2 It felt like being raped.

3 CORTEZ
4 Ever been raped?

5 MARGARET
6 No.

7 CORTEZ
8 Then it did not feel like that. Try again.

9 MARGARET
10 You read what the librarian gave you—you tell me.

11 CORTEZ
12 And as I told you, the public record never gives me the right
13 details. You do have the right to remain silent.

14 MARGARET
15 No, no, it's just—nature specials, on the public television station—

16 CORTEZ
17 With the lions—

18 MARGARET
19 With the lions eating the antelope that isn't even dead yet. "Picked
20 up for child porn." The perp walk. The Demon Mother.

21 CORTEZ
22 Daughter of Satan, I heard.

23 MARGARET
24 The Bitch of Beelzebub. Everyone ripping out a hunk and carting it
25 off.

26 CORTEZ
27 The papers did draw you up as a real bitch—

28 MARGARET
29 Anything can and will be used against you—

1 CORTEZ
2 The way you refused the cops, the way you decided to come
3 here—burying yourself here for “artistic expression”—a radical
4 artist—did they get the bitch-part right?

5 MARGARET
6 What does all your detail-reading tell you?

7 CORTEZ
8 I have not seen it in you yet—but I do think closer to the lion than
9 the antelope.

10 MARGARET
11 You think I’m ready to kill something?

12 CORTEZ
13 Am I missing anything?

14 MARGARET
15 The six.

16 CORTEZ
17 I miss so much sometimes.

18 MARGARET
19 Yeah, sure.

20 CORTEZ
21 Would you like to make a living out of taking your pictures?

22 MARGARET
23 I’d like to do that. Look, I am not ready to kill somebody—

24 CORTEZ
25 Not a cheap dream to pursue—

26 MARGARET
27 I am not—

28 CORTEZ
29 I heard you, consider yourself heard—you are too malnourished—

30 MARGARET
31 Red queen to black king.

1 CORTEZ
2 Ah—

3 MARGARET
4 No, it's not cheap—the photography. Matthew made sure I had
5 the money to pay.

6 CORTEZ
7 You were taking a class—

8 MARGARET
9 Called “The Human Form.”

10 CORTEZ
11 I have one of those.

12 MARGARET
13 The class—

14 CORTEZ
15 You can laugh at my joke!

16 MARGARET
17 That was a joke?

18 CORTEZ
19 The words, man, not my human form!

20 MARGARET
21 I thought it was a proposition.

22 CORTEZ
23 To you?

24 MARGARET
25 I'm not worthy?

26 CORTEZ
27 No taste for leather belts with tools in them.

28 MARGARET
29 There're worse things to have around your waist.

30 CORTEZ
31 I agree with you about that. The class.

1 MARGARET
2 The class. The class.

3 SOUND: CORTEZ snaps her fingers.

4 CORTEZ
5 You're staring.

6 MARGARET
7 The class. Thought it was the best thing that ever happened to
8 me.

9 CORTEZ
10 You should see your face.

11 MARGARET
12 It was great! Made me, you know, really stretch. Re-think things.

13 CORTEZ
14 Measure twice, cut once.

15 MARGARET
16 We got the assignment to photograph an emotional state of being
17 using a person.

18 CORTEZ
19 The word was "using."

20 MARGARET
21 Yeah, using a person—see, I didn't start off as a photographer.

22 CORTEZ
23 Woman in the building trades.

24 MARGARET
25 Building, right, just slapping things up. But Matthew and me, we
26 needed a record, a portfolio, so I started carrying a camera. Then
27 one day—I gotta move around.

28 CORTEZ
29 Approved—

30 SOUND: Chair scrape as MARGARET gets up.

1 MARGARET
2 So, yeah, one day—the sunlight, laying across an old hammer
3 and screwdriver—I don't know, it struck me—solid—so, snap,
4 snap—really, just useless pictures—

5 CORTEZ
6 But doing that gave you pleasure.

7 MARGARET
8 Yeah. That something so—regular—became—unregular—with
9 just some light laid across it—I liked that I could take the picture,
10 you know, like smuggle it out, all mine. “Taking”—

11 CORTEZ
12 Power: a new feeling for you?

13 MARGARET
14 Maybe—it's—

15 CORTEZ
16 It is okay if it is.

17 MARGARET
18 When the knuckleheads sprayed “Property of the Cunt” across my
19 locker—fucking stencil letters—they had to plan that—that's
20 power, front and center, just like their dicks—but this was
21 different—

22 CORTEZ
23 From the side—

24 MARGARET
25 And underneath.

26 CORTEZ
27 For yourself—

28 MARGARET
29 And clean—clean—mine—

30 CORTEZ
31 So “click.”

1 MARGARET
2 And in the darkroom—with the negatives I developed myself, and
3 the prints in my developer tray—something I took—

4 CORTEZ
5 Smuggled out.

6 MARGARET
7 I was hooked. Closest thing to joy I'd felt since Alex! But not even
8 that. All by itself.

9 CORTEZ
10 All yours.

11 MARGARET
12 Yeah. So I started taking pictures of people on the site—just like
13 with that hammer and screwdriver—something in them that they
14 never saw they had but that I could see. The light could see.
15 (laughing)
16 Me and the light—we partnered.

17 CORTEZ
18 First real laugh that has come out of you.

19 MARGARET
20 I had my first “gallery show” in a diner!

21 CORTEZ
22 “Hold the arroz.”

23 MARGARET
24 “Adam and Eve on a raft!” When people saw themselves up there,
25 in a frame—special—and then they saw other people seeing them
26 and liking what they saw—even buying some of the pictures—that
27 changed something in them.

28 CORTEZ
29 Because you had changed.

30 MARGARET
31 The change in them changed me.

32 CORTEZ
33 Changes all around.

1 MARGARET
2 I could do—I could make—not just Alex’s Mom or Matthew’s
3 Maggie—

4 CORTEZ
5 You were becoming unregular yourself.

6 MARGARET
7 It’s always been best when—I don’t know—when all of me is just
8 like a lens, letting the light through. Just like that first time, with the
9 tools. No thoughts, just eye.

10 CORTEZ
11 Who can forget their first time, eh? Okay, Margaret, you got the
12 easy ten cents out—right?

13 MARGARET
14 I know—

15 CORTEZ
16 —but you still need to finish this dollar—

17 MARGARET
18 It’s hard to talk with ashes in your mouth.

19 CORTEZ
20 But it is not impossible.

21 MARGARET
22 It’s like I’m spraying across my own locker.

23 CORTEZ
24 Exactly.

25 MARGARET
26 So. Seeing things this way sucked me in—I got—greedy.
27 Equipment, more classes—I got ambitious.

28 CORTEZ
29 We come to The Human Form.

30 MARGARET
31 And that drained—it was so expensive—

1 CORTEZ
2 Matthew was okay with that?

3 MARGARET
4 I can't say that he was—but him being him—

5 CORTEZ
6 And then the pictures. "Using" a person—"taking" a person—those
7 were your chosen words.

8 MARGARET
9 I—looked at Alex, and I thought, Innocence.

10 CORTEZ
11 And so you wanted to take that—

12 MARGARET
13 I wanted to capture—

14 CORTEZ
15 No, you said "take" and "use."

16 MARGARET
17 Capture—what it felt like when I read his books to him, when he
18 says "I love you."

19 CORTEZ
20 You mean when he signs "I love you"—your little mute boy Alex.

21 MARGARET
22 That was in your articles?

23 CORTEZ
24 Margaret, they had everything except your tit size, and only
25 because they had no use for that.

26 MARGARET
27 Well, I know this wasn't in your articles, my "state of grace" with
28 Alex—my Alex in italics—when I gave him a bath and smelled his
29 skin—which is what gave me the idea—

30 CORTEZ
31 The genius of the "no clothes on"? Margaret—

1 MARGARET
2 There wasn't anything that some—master hadn't stuck up on a
3 museum wall—in one I even have him like a cherub—from this
4 guy Caravaggio, a naked Cupid—a master—so why would
5 anyone think—

6 CORTEZ
7 You say you saw Innocence—

8 MARGARET
9 That's what I saw—

10 CORTEZ
11 But you say that this ambition of yours is like a lion—

12 MARGARET
13 He wasn't naked in all the pictures!

14 CORTEZ
15 Most likely you should not have “done” Alex that way at all.

16 MARGARET
17 I didn't “do” Alex—

18 CORTEZ
19 A four-year old naked child up on the wall does not happen by
20 accident. He was put there by his mother for all the world to gawk
21 at. Yes? That is “doing” Alex. They gave you the trouble you were
22 asking for.

23 MARGARET
24 He liked it—

25 CORTEZ
26 You knew this how.

27 MARGARET
28 I'd done it before—I mean, taken pictures of him before, naked—

29 CORTEZ
30 In the bathtub, right—

31 MARGARET
32 And in his bed—

1 CORTEZ
2 Right there—click, click—

3 MARGARET
4 He got a kick out of it—

5 CORTEZ
6 Not important—what kind of mother would get a kick out of doing
7 that? Eh? You have fallen silent.

8 MARGARET
9 I'm—not—sure—what—

10 CORTEZ
11 In here, anything is possible.

12 MARGARET
13 Forget it—done, we're done.

14 CORTEZ
15 Are you that kind of mother? You are a figure of importance and I
16 want to know how a figure of importance thinks. What really
17 happened? Answer me, Margaret. What happened that day?

18 MARGARET
19 Nothing “happened.”

20 CORTEZ
21 You have Alex thinking this was going to be fun—yes? Come on,
22 answer me.

23 MARGARET
24 We set up the pic[tures]—

25 CORTEZ
26 We?

27 MARGARET
28 Matthew and I.

29 CORTEZ
30 Bathtub?

31 MARGARET
32 In my studio.

1 CORTEZ
2 Your studio, your place.

3 MARGARET
4 I took my son into the studio—

5 CORTEZ
6 Your studio—

7 MARGARET
8 Alex and I had a great—

9 CORTEZ
10 Into your studio, this child who cannot talk—

11 MARGARET
12 This is—

13 CORTEZ
14 Wait, Margaret—the two people he loves the most—who take his
15 clothes off—

16 MARGARET
17 This is foul—

18 CORTEZ
19 —doing this is fine—he is my child—spread him out for all these
20 stranger’s eyes—for my class, my ambition—

21 SOUND: CORTEZ makes the “ka-chick” sound of photos being taken.

22 CORTEZ
23 "Lindo, smile for me"—

24 MARGARET
25 You are twisting—

26 CORTEZ
27 "Look adorable, honey pie"—

28 MARGARET
29 —it—

30 CORTEZ
31 Alex as a little island in the sea of your studio.

1 MARGARET
2 That's not—

3 CORTEZ
4 "Oh, my sweet cheeks."

5 MARGARET
6 That is not—

7 CORTEZ
8 Invade the little island with love. "My little angel"—

9 MARGARET
10 You shit!

11 CORTEZ
12 Do this. Raise that. Extract the riches. Lift. Spread. Steal it, use it,
13 take it all away.

14 MARGARET
15 You fucker!

16 CORTEZ
17 Whoa! What sort of mother did the photo lab see?

18 MARGARET
19 Keep your filth away from him! How could you know, how could
20 you kn[ow]—

21 CORTEZ
22 Would you kill me?

23 MARGARET
24 —how could you know anything—

25 CORTEZ
26 Would you kill me—

27 MARGARET
28 —about what Alex and I had that day—

29 CORTEZ
30 Kill me—

1 MARGARET
2 How could you? If you were a mother, you'd know—

3 CORTEZ
4 Would you kill me right now—

5 MARGARET
6 —bottom feeder—

7 CORTEZ
8 —right now if you could?

9 MARGARET
10 You're just like them, just like them all—

11 CORTEZ
12 Would you kill me to protect Alex?

13 MARGARET
14 I did not let them take away anything anything and not you not you
15 either not any of the blood-suckers and bottom feeders and
16 dickheads with spray paint—

17 CORTEZ
18 That is a long line of people to kill—

19 GUARD
20 I am assuming this is a high-level intellectual discussion that's
21 echoing down the hallway here.

22 CORTEZ
23 Margaret was doing some explaining for me.

24 GUARD
25 Inside voices, you know—even my daughters understand that
26 much. You all right?

27 MARGARET
28 Fine. Fine.

29 GUARD
30 Cortez?

31 CORTEZ
32 I am very fine.

1 GUARD
2 Then fine it is all around.

3 SOUND: Mic squawk receding.

4 CORTEZ
5 So you would do it.

6 MARGARET
7 What?

8 CORTEZ
9 Kill me—kill me, kill me right now, if you could.

10 MARGARET
11 Kill you?

12 CORTEZ
13 To protect Alex.

14 MARGARET
15 Kill you?

16 CORTEZ
17 You are on fire.

18 MARGARET
19 You—stay—aw[ay]—

20 CORTEZ
21 You would do it—

22 MARGARET
23 Back off—

24 CORTEZ
25 The power you have—

26 MARGARET
27 Just back off!

1 CORTEZ
2 Something so loved it drags the beast up to the light—snap
3 snap—snap snap. If you do not make really, really, really clear
4 lines—you end up hurting the people you are supposed to
5 protect—all of us are islands, Margaret, all of us need the lines—
6 you have that power—

7 MARGARET
8 Always—always—the right lines with Alex—

9 CORTEZ
10 Always.

11 MARGARET
12 Always. Clean. Clear. Straight. Straight. Straight. Lines.

13 CORTEZ
14 Well, Margaret, he got lucky then with you. Because he was being
15 chased by someone with artistic ambition—the center of the
16 universe. Lines do not matter much to people like that—he got a
17 lucky cut of the cards.

18 MARGARET
19 A cut of the cards—look at me. Look at me.

20 SOUND: MARGARET snaps the “shutter.”

21 MARGARET
22 I just took a “mate” I know nothing about. Let’s see how this prints
23 up. Is this you?

24 CORTEZ
25 Your lighting is dim.

26 MARGARET
27 I’ll tell you what I see.

28 CORTEZ
29 Careful, shape-thief—do not steal my [soul]—

30 MARGARET
31 Right here—a face floating like an island—

32 CORTEZ
33 Isla is not hard—laced in my delicious accent. Anything else?

1 MARGARET
2 Words. “Shape-thief,” “turn of the moon”—poet, maybe. Poetry to
3 me, at least. Sounds good enough.

4 CORTEZ
5 Still looks dim.

6 MARGARET
7 So how about a little touch-up—bring up the shadows a notch.

8 CORTEZ
9 I can give you that notch.

10 SOUND: Music for CORTEZ.

11 CORTEZ
12 I was hot! Hot! Imagine the light of 19 years old—the age of
13 majority—this beautiful face in a very dangerous time. “Viva
14 Puerto Rico libre!” That is how it was, in my beautiful 19th year in
15 Ponce. “Viva Puerto Rico libre!” Filled with revolutionary ambition!
16 “It is time to wake up, Borinqueños! Remember El Grito de Lares!
17 Pedro Albizu Campos, and our mother, Lolita Lebrón! Free Los
18 Quince. Unchain yourself from the clown called Uncle Sam! Wake
19 up, boricuas, commit the sin of memory!” But then my family, for
20 my own good, they said—

21 SOUND: Shift in music.

22 CORTEZ
23 I don’t care, Mamá—let the fucking F.B.I. take me, I am not going
24 to go live in New York with—

25 SOUND: Clapped hands, like a slap - shift in music.

26 CORTEZ
27 Yes, Papá, I am sorry, I should not have spoken— No, Papa, I
28 can’t tell you who I know! I won’t—

29 SOUND: Clapped hands, like a slap - shift in music.

30 CORTEZ
31 (sarcastically)
32 But Pablo, my dearest brother, I know about your investments in
33 those companies that butcher—enough: I don’t want to waste—

1 SOUND: Clapped hands, like a slap - shift in music.

2 CORTEZ
3 "You do not know what my own good is." But—la guagua aérea—
4 and I am deposited in San Manhattan Juan, ahora Nuyorican,
5 Ame-Rícan. On the island of the enemy in the dead country. Mi
6 familia perdida. And I turn into the lost soul they thought I was
7 already. Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi visión.¹ Me busco.

8 MARGARET
9 Looking for what? What are you looking for?

10 CORTEZ
11 Estoy aún en el paisaje lejos de mi visión.

12 MARGARET
13 What vision, Cortez? You know me, I'm all about vision. What
14 vision are you looking for?

15 CORTEZ
16 And that is how I came to reside in the dead country.

17 MARGARET
18 What's your vision?

19 CORTEZ
20 Since then, so much blood has just—evaporated.

21 MARGARET
22 I don't understand.

23 CORTEZ
24 You would not. Could not.

25 MARGARET
26 You don't know that. I've earned all my certifications, don't forget.

27 CORTEZ
28 Enough.

29 MARGARET
30 Not yet.

1 Julia de Burgos, *Song of the Simple Truth*, "#2: Intimate," (pp. 6-7)

1 SOUND: Opening and closing of a locker door.

2 GUARD
3 I am going to write a book. This is for my daughters.

4 SOUND: Snap "on" of a cassette recorder.

5 GUARD
6 Okay, here goes. Over the Visitation Room should be this sign:
7 "Here you will find all the words that have not been said that
8 should have been said or need to be said or were said all wrong
9 or said right but too late—it will be no different for you."

10 SOUND: Snap "off" of a cassette recorder.

11 GUARD
12 That's a pretty good start.

13 SOUND: GUARD snaps her fingers.

14 GUARD
15 My daughters, may you continue to be well tonight. I will be home
16 soon.

17 * * * * *

18 **Scene 8: The Third Degree**

19 GUARD
20 5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - open.

21 SOUND: Metal door pounds open.

22 GUARD
23 Watch yourself. I mean it. 5 - 1 - 7 - 6 - closed.

24 SOUND: Metal door slams shut.

25 SOUND: CORTEZ slams a heavy book on the table.

26 MARGARET
27 Ah, your algebra class.

28 CORTEZ
29 Math—sucks.

1 MARGARET
2 Some women find math hard, Cortez—

3 CORTEZ
4 The numbers just jump around—

5 MARGARET
6 I know I did, on the job—

7 CORTEZ
8 Like a—goddamn knife stuck in my eye—

9 MARGARET
10 If you finish this—then your degree, right? Vera Cortez, B.A.

11 CORTEZ
12 Bullshit. Artist.

13 MARGARET
14 Bachelor of Arts. More than I've done.

15 CORTEZ
16 Not now. I cannot. Not now.

17 MARGARET
18 All right. Sure. Just trying to—

19 CORTEZ
20 I just—cannot—get it to stick!

21 MARGARET
22 It'll stick—

23 CORTEZ
24 You do not underst[and]—

25 MARGARET
26 —it'll stay—if you relax, it'll come—

27 CORTEZ
28 You—

29 MARGARET
30 What?

1 CORTEZ
2 Forget it.

3 MARGARET
4 You're pacing. Chill.

5 CORTEZ
6 Are you any good at this?

7 MARGARET
8 I used to hack my way through math.

9 CORTEZ
10 Yes?

11 MARGARET
12 Yeah.

13 CORTEZ
14 Well?

15 MARGARET
16 Well, I don't know, Vera—you keep me pretty busy here. Have to
17 finish the poems of Julia de Burgos which you gave me to read—

18 CORTEZ
19 Fuck you—

20 MARGARET
21 You know, me busco and all that—

22 CORTEZ
23 Fuck you. Fuck everyone like you.

24 MARGARET
25 —I was just kidding—

26 CORTEZ
27 Fuck you all.

28 MARGARET
29 Just kidding! Bad timing! Course I'll give you a hand. Let me get
30 the book. Aaahh! Get off me!

31 SOUND: *Sound of physical struggle.*

1 CORTEZ
2 I do not need irony—

3 MARGARET
4 You're hurting me—

5 CORTEZ
6 —from an Anglo kid-fucker bitch—

7 MARGARET
8 You're hurting—

9 CORTEZ
10 Get away from me! You're useless!

11 MARGARET
12 But in not very many days I get to leave.

13 CORTEZ
14 You are a fucking pervert.

15 MARGARET
16 And you're an idiot.

17 GUARD
18 What's the state of the state here?

19 CORTEZ
20 Could not be better.

21 GUARD
22 And nothing but the truth?

23 CORTEZ
24 So help me.

25 MARGARET
26 Yes.

27 GUARD
28 Keep it that way.

29 MARGARET
30 We are maintaining. Right?

1 MARGARET
2 I want to help you—

3 CORTEZ
4 Put the book down.

5 MARGARET
6 No—I'll hold it.

7 CORTEZ
8 Stop wanting to help. Give me the book—what are you doing?

9 MARGARET
10 Nothing.

11 CORTEZ
12 What?

13 MARGARET
14 Way back.

15 CORTEZ
16 Give me the book.

17 MARGARET
18 Dead country.

19 CORTEZ
20 Not where I want to go.

21 MARGARET
22 Tell me what keeps you waking me up at night. You owe me that.

23 CORTEZ
24 Owe you? Owe you? This bed—this bed you think is yours? This
25 is mine. This is mine. And this bed? This bed is mine, too. My
26 space. All mine, all the time. You get none.

27 MARGARET
28 Don't get stupid—

29 CORTEZ
30 Do not feel privileged.

1 MARGARET
2 Privi[leged]—

3 SOUND: Opening footlocker.

4 MARGARET
5 Hey—

6 CORTEZ
7 Eminent domain. Subtraction. Division. You own nothing that ain't
8 mine—call me Puerto Rico. Oooh, a picture of Alex—

9 MARGARET
10 Hey—

11 CORTEZ
12 Nope. Mine. All mine. Now what are you going to do, little island?

13 MARGARET
14 This is not about—

15 CORTEZ
16 Tú no sabes what this is about.

17 MARGARET
18 Give it back—

19 CORTEZ
20 Fuck you, “Property of the Cunt”—owe you? You are the dead
21 country I do not want to go back to.

22 MARGARET
23 This dead country is not me, it's you—give me back—let me go!
24 You fucking witch!

25 SOUND: Sounds of physical struggle, then a sharp cry of pain and a loud exhale.

26 MARGARET
27 Cortez? Cortez? Cortez?

28 CORTEZ
29 You taking roll call?

30 MARGARET
31 Cortez—never done that to anyone.

1 CORTEZ
2 Two cops, right?

3 MARGARET
4 Yeah—

5 CORTEZ
6 Should have—

7 MARGARET
8 Sorry.

9 CORTEZ
10 —remembered that.

11 MARGARET
12 Here—

13 CORTEZ
14 Hands to yourself. Man, that hurts! Back off! I will survive. Your
15 irony—fuck, that hurts!—

16 MARGARET
17 Irony?

18 CORTEZ
19 That irony act of yours—"oh, I'm so busy"—

20 MARGARET
21 Meant it to be, you know, friendly.

22 CORTEZ
23 You were feeding on Vera Cortez looking weak—

24 MARGARET
25 Oh, suck my—

26 CORTEZ
27 You took respect from me—

28 MARGARET
29 Suck me. I tried to make you laugh—can't someone just want to
30 make you laugh, dickhead?

1 CORTEZ
2 (genuine laugh)
3 Oh man. So, why didn't you?

4 MARGARET
5 What?

6 CORTEZ
7 You know—the—book—up in the air—ready to slam—

8 MARGARET
9 Maybe because you're not a cop. Or maybe because I don't
10 smack things down that I respect. Look, I'm not going to push, all
11 right—spring, why you come back from one math class and you're
12 okay, and then this one and you're not—me busco—"I seek
13 myself"—Julia [pronounced like "Julia Roberts"]—

14 CORTEZ
15 (correcting her)
16 Julia.

17 MARGARET
18 Julia de Burgos—see, I read everything you give me—

19 CORTEZ
20 The word is bruja.

21 MARGARET
22 For what?

23 CORTEZ
24 Witch. You said "witch."

25 MARGARET
26 I did say "witch." I guess I don't smack down witches, either.

27 CORTEZ
28 Yerba bruja is also a plant in Puerto Rico.

29 MARGARET
30 Yeah?

31 CORTEZ
32 Each leaf has its own seeds, so you can take a cutting and plant it
33 anywhere and it will grow.

1 MARGARET
2 And that's supposed to be you.

3 CORTEZ
4 It is a tough plant.

5 MARGARET
6 Yeah, well, maybe, but you have obviously never carried pipe with
7 fat-assed thugs who hate you and would just as soon chuck you
8 off the scaffolding as drink their coffee. Yerba bruja never had a
9 chance.

10 CORTEZ
11 Never thought getting algebra-tutored would be so hard on the
12 body.

13 MARGARET
14 A bruise is like a negative. So do this, then, yerba bruja: $x^2 + 5x +$
15 6. Factor it.

16 CORTEZ
17 x plus 2 times x plus 3.

18 MARGARET
19 Bueno, yerba. There is hope for you yet. Now, where do you want
20 us to start?

21 CORTEZ
22 This—this is what gave me the witch.

23 MARGARET
24 Ah.

25 * * * * *

26 **Scene 9**

27 SOUND: Transition with GUARD music clip.

28 SOUND: Opening and closing of a locker door.

29 GUARD
30 I am past "past my prime" and I still have a zit. Jesus in heaven.
31 Where is the justice in that?

1 SOUND: The “on” of the cassette recorder.

2 GUARD
3 Chapter 2: Prayer of the Prison Guard. Dear Lord. There are nine
4 separate cell blocks here, surrounded by dark woods, hyphenated
5 by razor wire. Here we house the fallen, the sullen, the
6 melancholic, the miserable, the angry, the violent, the victimized,
7 blasphemers, seducers, flatterers, grifters, hypocrites, traitors,
8 murderers—and we carry them chained across the river—they
9 come without their coins—they come with nothing—their sins on
10 their anguished backs—most stay lost and crush their hearts—but
11 some find ways. It’s the damnedest thing to see a lifer steal hope
12 from the garbage, to see the criminal steal peace from the
13 punishment. But let’s not forget—we all do this time together
14 because there but for the grace of God or the luck of the draw,
15 goes my motherfucking ass. Amen.

16 SOUND: The “off” of the cassette recorder.

17 GUARD
18 Daughters, I am trying to keep you safe. But the zit? Who says
19 God doesn’t have a sense of humor?

20 * * * * *

21 **Scene 10: The Final Border Crossing**

22 SOUND: Night sounds in the prison.

23 CORTEZ
24 Tamara—Tamara—Tamara—Tamara—Tamara!

25 MARGARET
26 Beat you. Hey—

27 CORTEZ
28 Fine—

29 MARGARET
30 Need aspirin?

31 CORTEZ
32 I am fine, I said—

33 MARGARET
34 Who’s Tamara?

1 CORTEZ
2 What do you care?

3 MARGARET
4 On fire, in your sleep—the name, over and over again—Tamara—

5 CORTEZ
6 And I ask you again: What do you care?

7 MARGARET
8 Because it's Cortez who's saying it.

9 CORTEZ
10 You are freed tomorrow—you do not have to, nothing making you,
11 so go back to sleep.

12 MARGARET
13 House rules have changed.

14 CORTEZ
15 You think your thirty days has made you ready?

16 MARGARET
17 I am ready.

18 CORTEZ
19 Yes?

20 MARGARET
21 Yes.

22 CORTEZ
23 You are sure?

24 MARGARET
25 I am ready.

26 CORTEZ
27 Then go ahead. Ask.

28 MARGARET
29 Vera Cortez, why are you here?

CORTEZ

1 I am here, Margaret Pasqualini—you find me here—because I
2 helped kill my daughter. I helped kill my daughter. You, my
3 Americanita, have been dancing with a murderer. You called for
4 it—time for our border-crossing. Spring is the cruelest time for me
5 because Tamara—my Tamara, my lost daughter—would be
6 fourteen this month.
7

8 I had a family. In the dead country. I had three children—now
9 there are only two. I cannot say “I have” any more.

10 He beat them. My daughter and son—Tamara and Michael—
11 Tamara three and Michael just a year old. They were not his. I had
12 had them with two other men—my rebellion in exile on the island
13 of strangers. Of course, my family rejected them completely—not
14 their blood—so I went with him because he said he would take me
15 in. My savior—but really my colonizer.

16 To show you how the fear had turned my mind to ice—I even had
17 a child with this man—Jawanza—calculating changes, hoping for
18 softness, figuring he would not beat one of his own. But I had just
19 given him fresh meat.

20 He had this “thing” about Tamara—it seemed to inspire him for
21 pain. One night, drugged, he started belting her. “Thirty nine
22 lashes” he kept yelling. Locked in the bedroom with Jawanza and
23 Michael, both of them trying to crawl inside my ribs, I—could not—
24 move.

25 Then it stopped. He dragged a chair. Tamara screamed—
26 screamed once, just once—then quiet. Waited. Waited. Then
27 opened the door—and I wanted to tear my eyes out. He had tied
28 Tamara to his chin-up bar—her arms slung over it so she hung
29 from her armpits—just like a little Christ rag-doll. I remember my
30 eyes—straight to her right hand—I watched a drop of blood bead
31 up and then fall. Then another. Then one more. By the fourth one I
32 had cut her down. El Señor Muerte had passed out on the table,
33 hissing like a dragon.

34 And what did I do? I took her into the bathroom and washed her
35 off and put her to bed—such a good mama! The dragon hissed. I
36 waited.

1 The next day, I went to wake them for day care—I had a job. No
2 breath. I held this hand just over her mouth, as I did sometimes at
3 night, to feel their breaths. Nothing. I screamed, just once, like
4 Tamara. The dragon came.

5 "You're gonna help me," it said—and I obeyed. And here is what
6 we did. We dropped Jawanza and Michael off at day care, like the
7 good parents we were, then we dumped her body in the rough
8 grass by the side of the highway—his decision, not mine, but mine
9 because I did nothing to stop it. I watched everything from the side
10 view mirror, numb as stone. Then we found a police officer and
11 told her that Tamara had disappeared—maybe even kidnapped!
12 Two days later, they found her, and he started playing the kidnap
13 for all his worthless self was worth. But I knew they would find the
14 truth. And even if they did not, how could my heart hold any
15 peace? I had held my dead daughter in my arms, helped trash her
16 body. Peace? What island could offer me that asylum?

17 So while the dragon steamed in his sleep, I called the detective
18 who had given me her card, from the corner phone, one dime to
19 my name. Dialed and hung up, dialed and hung up, and when I
20 finally did connect, I was ready to cut it off in half a breath. She
21 knew, she knew, because at one point, my mouth so thick with
22 shame I could not speak, she said to me, "In for a dime, in for the
23 dollar." I told her everything. I paid. She was kind.

24 And when the police came, and the social workers took Michael
25 and Jawanza for foster care, and they cauterized the dragon, and
26 I could feel the cuffs embrace my wrists—it was the first time in a
27 long, long time I felt safe. I was finally back on an island: lines
28 were drawn; the monster drowned; and I could begin my shame.

29 I took twenty-five on a plea bargain. He got sixty. Tamara would
30 be fourteen this month. Here—take this. This is from her funeral
31 dress. That's my dollar. So. Nothing to say? You always have
32 something to say.

33 MARGARET
34 Um—I can't—I think we—should—go back to sleep—

35 CORTEZ
36 You said you were ready.

37 MARGARET
38 (hissing)
39 You killed your own child.

1 CORTEZ
2 It comes to that.

3 MARGARET
4 All that—swill about protecting Alex—about “lines” and “keeping
5 people safe”—she was never safe with you—

6 CORTEZ
7 She’s gone, which makes her the only safe one around here. Did
8 not think it was going to end this way, did you?

9 MARGARET
10 No no no no—

11 CORTEZ
12 You thought, whatever I had done, we would be in solidarity, de
13 mujer a mujer, con un corazón grande y calido. But now you have
14 something much more complicated than that, much more—rich—
15 than that.

16 MARGARET
17 I am not under[standing]—

18 CORTEZ
19 Here is what comes before her name escapes from me each
20 night. Just when I may have slipped over the border into peace, or
21 at least emptiness, Tamara calls me—this bright light—this knife-
22 white light. I shape my hand—I circle it, un abrazo de mi niña
23 perdida—and for one breath—one breath—I feel pardoned. She
24 tells me I can now get rid of hope and shame: I do not need hope
25 and shame. She offers me a truce. Una tregua. And just when I
26 think, finally!, at last!, peace!, she leaves—and the truce—
27 dissolves. I wake up on the rough edge of the road—here—still
28 breathing, still caring, still shamed. And then the first bell rings.
29 And then the day breaks open.

30 MARGARET
31 And you expect me—

32 CORTEZ
33 Do not get ahead of yourself—you are in a strange country now,
34 Margaret—house rules have changed again—

35 MARGARET
36 It’s like you don’t have any remorse—

1 CORTEZ
2 What I do have, Margaret, is a vision of life—all my political about
3 the borders and lines and power—that has been my life. But it is
4 not just Puerto Rico, “libre, libre,” Lebrón, Lebrón—that is just one
5 step, just one step toward reaching the border that heals us.

6 MARGARET
7 But you killed—

8 CORTEZ
9 All I need—to cross that last border—into the peace the truce can
10 bring—is Tamara. But she will not guide me, be my coyote.

11 MARGARET
12 She denies you peace—good for her—

13 CORTEZ
14 You are doing such good work, Margaret—

15 MARGARET
16 What are you talking [about]—

17 CORTEZ
18 That cloth under my ear, the one you grip so hard, so righteously,
19 whispers, “Mami, how can you come in to this new day, this new
20 way, if you cannot trust some one person enough to tell them the
21 whole story?”

22 MARGARET
23 Come on. Never?

24 CORTEZ
25 Never the truth whole.

26 MARGARET
27 I don’t believe that.

28 CORTEZ
29 Bits, junk, lies—because those I have shaken awake in that bed
30 would either try to one-up me in pain or shut me out. And I have
31 come too far over this ocean to let anyone or anything deny me.
32 Do not bend—stay with me. You have gone this far. Keep looking.
33 Tell me what I have seen in you that lets me say all this. This is
34 your final test.

1 MARGARET
2 Final test?

3 CORTEZ
4 Tell me.

5 MARGARET
6 Test?

7 CORTEZ
8 Tell me. Come on.

9 MARGARET
10 You saw—

11 CORTEZ
12 Go on. Go.

13 MARGARET
14 You saw I would take Tamara's side.

15 CORTEZ
16 Defend the oppressed.

17 MARGARET
18 I would give you no shadows to hide in.

19 CORTEZ
20 Like Tamara's light in my dreamwalk.

21 MARGARET
22 And you saw—

23 CORTEZ
24 Go on—

25 MARGARET
26 You saw I would not feel sorry for you.

27 CORTEZ
28 You would bring me an eye bitter and acid. To see myself whole. I
29 knew I could count on you to be my coyote.

30 MARGARET
31 To forgive you—

1 CORTEZ
2 Forgiveness?

3 MARGARET
4 Isn't that what you want?

5 CORTEZ
6 Forgiveness is not required. Forgiveness is never required of the
7 sin eater.

8 MARGARET
9 The sin eater?

10 CORTEZ
11 You, my sin eater. That is you, what you are.

12 MARGARET
13 Sin. Eater.

14 CORTEZ
15 You do not know?

16 MARGARET
17 I know what a sin eater is—I'm Italian!

18 CORTEZ
19 So. What you have been tested for.

20 MARGARET
21 All those humiliations—

22 CORTEZ
23 I had to see if you could take it in. Take it on. From the day I
24 started reading about you, I wondered because you are no
25 common mother, you.

26 MARGARET
27 What do you feel right now?

28 CORTEZ
29 A soft peace.

30 MARGARET
31 I don't.

1 CORTEZ
2 The sin eater is not supposed to.

3 MARGARET
4 I carry these—images—this sin—

5 CORTEZ
6 You are doing what it is in your nature to do—

7 MARGARET
8 It's not enough for you to just tell me! You think the slate's clean
9 just because—to a stranger? If you don't keep faith with your child
10 every day—

11 CORTEZ
12 Chulita, we have gone all past judgment, past “paying my debt.” I
13 have paid. In full. Now it is on to the next: life with Tamara after
14 Tamara. Or, in another word—oh, the Italian is not going to like
15 this!—redemption.

16 MARGARET
17 For you.

18 CORTEZ
19 I have that—ache.

20 MARGARET
21 For you?

22 CORTEZ
23 Not the dead Tamara, the gone Tamara, that sin you squeeze so
24 preciously. Keep the cloth! Dance with the dead all you want! The
25 Tamara who redeems me will come when we all change the lines
26 that now turn us into our lowest devils. Listen to me—

27 MARGARET
28 I can't—

29 CORTEZ
30 Listen to me—women on every building site, huh? you can
31 understand that—all colors, all shapes, and not attacked! Can you
32 understand that?

33 MARGARET
34 Yes!

1 CORTEZ
2 That is Tamara.

3 MARGARET
4 That's bullshit.

5 CORTEZ
6 It is the better world you want.

7 MARGARET
8 Not this way—

9 CORTEZ
10 Who says you get to pick the way? Children born to parents who
11 want them, like Matthew and Margaret, with shelter, food, dignity.
12 That is Tamara.

13 MARGARET
14 It's just more [bullshit]—

15 CORTEZ
16 No more tribes about language or pigment or power or violence.
17 No more Puerto Rico—blinded by wanting a nation—what is a
18 nation except another way to keep the outsiders outside?—no
19 more “property of the cunt,” but citizen of a better world! All that in
20 the word “Tamara.” I give you the old so I can raise my new
21 daughter.

22 MARGARET
23 You leave me with knives in my eyes, this picture of you—

24 CORTEZ
25 It will take time—

26 MARGARET
27 They can hack out all my organs while I'm still alive if I have to
28 turn as cold and as acid as you to be this new kind of human
29 being—

30 CORTEZ
31 It will take time.

32 MARGARET
33 All this new world mouth music makes me sick to my stomach.
34 You make me sick to my stomach.

1 CORTEZ
2 Tamara—

3 MARGARET
4 Stop it—

5 CORTEZ
6 Listen! Listen!

7 SOUND: *Music underscoring.*

8 CORTEZ
9 Link:
10 the transnation of the airplane, la guagua aérea,
11 carries me from the montañas of the jíbaro
12 to the capital of the empire, Nueva York, city of Harlem
13 bantustans,
14 Gringolandia perforated by sub-dermal pop-rockéro frequencies,
15 where the world's oldest colony is a suburb of Brooklyn,
16 and San Manhattan Juan is a jazz riff of diaspora,
17 and our unwanted emperors hold their death grips.
18 Bam!
19 The plane touches down.
20 Bam!
21 Immediate Nuyorican.
22 Bam!
23 Instant Ame-Rícan,
24 Bam!
25 The new mestizo of the hyphen-nation.
26 Bam!
27 Born in the desires that fall between acá and allá.
28 In the plane we Puerto Ricans inhabit this smeared-edged
29 frontera,
30 we are the postmodern, we are Tamara,
31 the "land of all of us," pan-everything,
32 the new non-nation,
33 each of us double-helix'd
34 by DNA of fax and phone and email and
35 the universal declaration of the human right to human rights
36 and that we will be divided and conquered, fucked and fucked-
37 over,
38 extracted, redacted, burned, twisted, packaged, and forgotten
39 no more, no more, no more, nunca más.
40 We float confused, contradictory, ambiguous, ambivalent,
41 torqued, tidal, multi-tongued, lunar-mad—
42 But we are also large, we include multitudes,
43 and Tamara is the new world between acá and allá—

1 feel it in your nostrils, look for it under your feet,
2 hear the stars beat out ritmos de bomba y plena
3 in the very pulse of the universe,
4 all of us universal, all of us at home in the in-between.
5 Tamara.

6 * * * * *

7 **Scene 11**

8 SOUND: *Transition with GUARD music clip.*

9 SOUND: *The “on” of the cassette recorder.*

10 GUARD

11 "Written over the gate of this House of Correction: 'All ye who
12 enter here—if what you did wasn't wrong, something down the
13 road will be, or something back along the road was, and all this
14 will be for that. Sin is democratic.'"

15 SOUND: *The “off” of the cassette recorder.*

16 GUARD

17 Sleep well, my bright children.

18 * * * * *

19 **Scene 12**

20 SOUND: *Entering a room carrying stuff.*

21 GUARD

22 You know, Ms. Pasqualini, most sane people stay gone when they
23 leave this place.

24 MARGARET

25 That's why sane people never get anything done.

26 GUARD

27 Your husband and kid must really love you.

28 MARGARET

29 It's very Christian to be kind to crazy people. Your daughters?

30 GUARD

31 As of today, still mine.

1 MARGARET
2 Good.

3 GUARD
4 Glad you remembered to ask.

5 MARGARET
6 And the book?

7 GUARD
8 Each day is a page.

9 MARGARET
10 Maybe we can make it part of what I'm doing here.

11 GUARD
12 I won't say no and I won't say yes.

13 MARGARET
14 I can work with "maybe." I'm good with "maybe."

15 GUARD
16 Then maybe it is.

17 MARGARET
18 I guess I'll take it from here. Thanks.

19 GUARD
20 And I'll be right back.

21 MARGARET
22 The light—it still hasn't changed a bit.

23 SOUND: *Mic squawk.*

24 GUARD
25 Prisoner in the rec room.

26 SOUND: *Mic squawk.*

27 GUARD
28 Copy that. I'm just outside the door.

29 MARGARET
30 Good. Thanks.

1 CORTEZ
2 Well.

3 MARGARET
4 Hello.

5 CORTEZ
6 Hola.

7 MARGARET
8 You got my letter.

9 CORTEZ
10 Obviously.

11 MARGARET
12 So what do you think?

13 CORTEZ
14 A photography project. Is that not what nailed you the last time?

15 MARGARET
16 As I said in the letter—I received—

17 CORTEZ
18 For photographing women in prison.

19 MARGARET
20 Abused women—women who have killed their—

21 CORTEZ
22 I am so surprised.

23 MARGARET
24 I say a lot of things when people ask me why. And I really do
25 believe the reasons I give them. But those words are all in second
26 place as to why I'm here. You know why I'm here.

27 CORTEZ
28 I do not have to do this.

29 MARGARET
30 Didn't see you being dragged in here. Leave. But at least you owe
31 it to yourself to leave knowing why.

1 CORTEZ
2 I will hang—for the moment—it gets me out.

3 MARGARET
4 I didn't put this into the letter because it was too late—I've already
5 arranged to have a gallery show the pictures and auction them to
6 raise money. Book and CD to follow.

7 CORTEZ
8 Your cut?

9 MARGARET
10 Everything out of pocket. And the grant.

11 CORTEZ
12 And the goodness of your heart.

13 MARGARET
14 Actually, Señora Cortez, dead wrong about that. All this done out
15 of the coldness of your heart.

16 CORTEZ
17 You should be careful with your words.

18 MARGARET
19 As careful with you as you were with me.

20 CORTEZ
21 Revenge?

22 MARGARET
23 Don't flatter yourself.

24 CORTEZ
25 I guess I will say "ouch."

26 MARGARET
27 And it isn't greed. Or ambition—got rid of that one. Or lust, sloth,
28 gluttony, envy—c'mon, Vera—you know this, only one sin left:
29 straight and simple anger. At you being a coward. I was not going
30 to let you get away with it. Recognize this?

31 CORTEZ
32 I think I will leave.

1 MARGARET
2 Sit. Please. Por favor. This cloth just called you a coward. It just
3 named you. Where's your dollar now?

4 CORTEZ
5 I am fresh out. We are finished.

6 MARGARET
7 Right here—in my throat, it sticks. I can't get it past. This whole
8 little star called Tamara hangs right here and explodes, every day.
9 I try to smash the pieces back together and I can't do it! I am filled
10 with sadness and [defeat]—

11 CORTEZ
12 The condition of the sin eater.

13 MARGARET
14 So I am not going to do this "it" alone. You are going to help me.

15 CORTEZ
16 No. I am done. Use somebody else. Guard.

17 MARGARET
18 "Poema al hijo que no llega."² "Poema al hijo que no llega."

19 CORTEZ
20 Speaking Spanish now? Not well, I have to say.

21 MARGARET
22 I learned something. For you. Ammunition.

23 CORTEZ
24 So you have come as the warrior.

25 MARGARET
26 "Poem to the Child Who Doesn't Arrive." She came to me in a
27 dream and fed it to me.

28 CORTEZ
29 In a dream.

2 Julia de Burgos, *Song of the Simple Truth*, pages 490-491.

1 MARGARET
2 Why not? Things came to you in dreams all the time. "No sé
3 cuándo ni dónde / pero sé que vendrás." Come on! Say it!

4 CORTEZ
5 "I don't know when or where—"

6 MARGARET
7 "—but I know you will arrive." "Child of mine, bathed by sublime
8 tenderness / I have dreamt you a thousand times, / but where can
9 you be? / Why don't you rebel and burst into the world...?" Listen
10 to me, Vera! "You will arrive at my arms on a solemn day / when
11 everything at my side will dress in light. / There will be light in the
12 shadows..." That's why I'm back here: it's up to me to bring the
13 light to the shadows so that she is not abandoned. And not alone.
14 You are going to help me finish eating this sin. By being the first
15 voice out of the shadows. By being Tamara's voice.

16 CORTEZ
17 You are giving communion now.

18 MARGARET
19 Very simple equation, Vera: you killed your daughter with silence.
20 Like I said, a coward. And a fool, too, expecting some droopy-
21 assed middle-aged white chick sin-eater to shift the universe for
22 you. This camera is what I bring—this "eye"—but the shadows
23 need your voice—your pictures, your voice—their pictures, their
24 voices. You don't do this, you kill off Tamara, old and new, for
25 good. But if you speak out—do now what you should have done
26 then—then maybe no more Tamaras get fed to the dragons.
27 That's my new world. That's my half-assed attempt at
28 redemption—see, I remembered your word. Keeping our eyes
29 bigger, our hearts large—that's what brought me back, to you.

30 CORTEZ
31 To me.

32 MARGARET
33 So we could work together.

34 CORTEZ
35 So, a truce, then—

36 MARGARET
37 A truce is for combat.

1 CORTEZ
2 You brought the ammunition. If I agree, I come opposing
3 everything you think and feel is right. So it will be a truce.

4 MARGARET
5 Are we that divided?

6 CORTEZ
7 Your—sentimentality, your righteousness—so sweet, so weak, so
8 backward—

9 MARGARET
10 It has to come from the heart—

11 CORTEZ
12 Why do you find such endless breast-beating so inspiring,
13 Margaret? Always wanting the smell of burnt skin. Here is another
14 Julia for you: “But I was made of nows...” “Nows!” Hear that,
15 Margaret—I am not dragging any more corpses around! “And my
16 feet level...would not accept walking backwards...” Hear that—not
17 backwards! “...and I went forward, forward, / mocking the ashes to
18 reach the kiss / of the new paths.”³ New paths, querida—that is
19 where Tamara and I are going. Do you want to come?

20 MARGARET
21 You know I don’t want Tamara repeated—new paths, too.

22 CORTEZ
23 But none of us in here needs to be wept over. You need to
24 balance your liberal guilt thing, a frame for your picture—a bite of
25 the pepper with the sugar. The gallery, the benefit—

26 MARGARET
27 Yeah?

28 CORTEZ
29 Too clean. Put these pictures in the dead country, too—here, in a
30 church, a bodega, a school, even just hang them on a fence—in a
31 diner—you’re good at that—anywhere but just a gallery. And the
32 do-gooders have to go there.

33 MARGARET
34 I’m listening.

3 Julia de Burgos, *Song of the Simple Truth*, “I Was My Own Route,” #20 (pp. 56-57)

1 CORTEZ
2 You need context, you need charts of ownership and income and
3 health and education. If you want no more Tamaras in the
4 morgue, they need to know how much of the dead country they
5 own—they have to own up. They need to cross the borders.
6 Those are my terms. And if you do not accept them, I will make
7 sure no one sits for you. That is my ammunition.

8 MARGARET
9 I agree—bigger picture, bigger world.

10 CORTEZ
11 Bueno.

12 MARGARET
13 So we have our truce?

14 CORTEZ
15 That is up to your anger.

16 MARGARET
17 My anger—to one side. Partnership, then, for the moment.

18 CORTEZ
19 Peace along the fronteras.

20 MARGARET
21 We'll call the truce Alex and Tamara.

22 CORTEZ
23 Tamara and Alex.

24 MARGARET
25 Tamara and Alex, then. The name of the truce. Anything else?

26 CORTEZ
27 Ask me formally if I want to do this. You have asked everyone
28 else—now ask me.

29 MARGARET
30 Vera Cortez, would you like to participate in this project—in the
31 name of Tamara?

32 CORTEZ
33 In the name of Tamara, yes.

1 MARGARET
2 Now what?

3 CORTEZ
4 That camera have a timer on it?

5 MARGARET
6 Yes.

7 CORTEZ
8 Set it. A truce always gets an official record.

9 MARGARET
10 Tamara and Alex.

11 CORTEZ
12 Sit next to me. This is not going to be easy.

13 MARGARET
14 But, man, man, is it going to be great.

15 SOUND: Camera beeps.

16 SOUND: Shutter, flash.

17 SOUND: Music from Lou Reed's "New York."