

Carnál<sup>1</sup> –

There's a kid I talk to on my daily walk through the Diamond District<sup>2</sup>, who stands in front of Ali's Exchange<sup>3</sup> calling We buy! We buy! He tells me he comes from a long line of Veracruz musicians. His father marched out to the fields carrying a tiny guitar hacked with a machete<sup>4</sup>, calling out verses across the stalks of corn: Heart of melon for the women of St. Simón. Heart of Manteca for the mujer Chichimeca<sup>5</sup>. Now the kid uses those skills on this block stuffed with smuggled tusks & gold nuggets melted into screws & bolts<sup>6</sup>, Hasidic hats covered in plastic to keep the rain from stinking up the fine wool<sup>7</sup>, among Turks & Russians & Dominicans – Gold & diamonds! Gold & diamonds! – beckoning the gem stalkers of 47th St. I can hear him all the way up on the 6th floor of the Mercantile Library<sup>8</sup>. Maybe this A4 pulp, sucking in his voice with the rain, can transform it back into a distant greeting – Heart of almond! Heart of salt! – folded in thirds and fired into postal space.

Salud<sup>9</sup>

Brad Fox<sup>10</sup>

calling we buy! We buy! He tells me he comes from a long line of Veracruz musicians. His father ~~used to~~ marched out to the fields carrying a tiny guitar packed with a machete, calling out verses across the stalks of corn: Heart of melón for the woman of St. Simo Heart of manteca for the mujer Chichimeca. Now ~~because~~ the kid uses those skills on this block stuffed with

<sup>1</sup> Mexican Spanish, meaning *of the flesh*, as in comrade or brother. [Contextual notes to this letter have been kindly provided by the author, Brad Fox.]

<sup>2</sup> In New York, from where the author writes.

<sup>3</sup> Ali's Jewelry Exchange is one of over two thousand diamond wholesalers, cutters, jewellers, and pawn shops that line the stretch of 47th street between 5th and 6th Avenues in Manhattan.

<sup>4</sup> In the Mexican state of Veracruz, lauderos such as Don Lara of Jaltipan still use a simple machete to craft the 7-string jaranas used in traditional Son Jarocho music. Like a letter written with pen and ink, handmade jaranas have a richness of tone unmatched by machine-made instruments.

<sup>5</sup> The sones that Jarocho musicians play are not songs, exactly, but sets of chord changes with associated verses, sung out in any order, often intershot with newly improvised quatrains or ten-lined decimas. In Las Poblanas—dedicated to the women of Puebla, left alone while their men fought US forces around the port of Veracruz—the substance of the singer's heart must rhyme with his lover's home.

<sup>6</sup> The New York Department of Environmental Conservation reports that over a ton of illegal ivory has been seized in the Diamond District since 2012. In 2003, eleven dealers on the block were arrested for facilitating the drug trade. Traffickers had been found converting their payments to gold, which was melted down and formed into every day objects like belt buckles, wrenches, and screws that could be smuggled into Colombia to finance further shipments.

<sup>7</sup> The Lubavitcher Hasidim in New York favour the Borsolino, a felt hat that costs \$150-200 in Brooklyn. The Satram and Skver Hasidim prefer costlier "beaver hats" with a rabbit fur finish.

<sup>8</sup> A subscription library that opened on Fulton Street in 1821, the Merc has slowly moved uptown ever since. It now occupies a skinny eight-floor structure just east of the Diamond District, tucked between an abandoned building and the Ghanaian consulate.

<sup>9</sup> *To your health!*

<sup>10</sup> Brad Fox grew up in Kansas City and sent dispatches from the former Yugoslavia, Berlin, Mexico City, and Istanbul before settling in New York last year. He is finishing a novel and occasionally hoisting sails on the Clipper City, New York Harbour's only tall ship.