

Alone Among the Ghosts: Roberto Bolaño's *2666*

By [Marcela Valdes](#)

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Carla Rippey
The Gardens of Ciudad Juárez, 2006

[Marcela Valdes](#): Roberto Bolaño's last novel, *2666*, is his most profound exploration of art and infamy, craft and crime, the writer and the totalitarian state.

Shortly before he died of liver failure in July 2003, Roberto Bolaño remarked that he would have preferred to be a detective rather than a writer. Bolaño was 50 years old at the time, and by then he was widely considered to be the most important Latin American novelist since Gabriel García Márquez. But when Mexican *Playboy* interviewed him, Bolaño was unequivocal. "I would have liked to be a homicide detective, much more than a writer," he told the magazine. "Of that I'm absolutely sure. A string of homicides. Someone who could go back alone, at night, to the scene of the crime, and not be afraid of ghosts."

Detective stories, and provocative remarks, were always passions of Bolaño's--he once declared James Ellroy among the best living writers in English--but his interest in gumshoe tales went beyond matters of plot and style. In their essence, detective stories are investigations into the motives and mechanics of violence, and Bolaño--who moved to Mexico the year of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre and was imprisoned during the 1973 military coup in his native Chile--was also obsessed with such matters. The great subject of his *oeuvre* is the relationship between art and infamy, craft and crime, the writer and the totalitarian state.

In fact, all of Bolaño's mature novels scrutinize how writers react to repressive regimes. *Distant Star* (1996) grapples with Chile's history of death squads and *desaparecidos* by conjuring up a poet turned serial killer. *The Savage Detectives* (1998) exalts a gang of young poets who joust against state-funded writers during the years of Mexico's dirty wars. *Amulet* (1999) revolves around a middle-aged poet who survives the government's 1968 invasion of the Autonomous University of Mexico by hiding in a bathroom. *By Night in Chile* (2000) depicts a literary salon where writers party in the same house in which dissidents are tortured. And Bolaño's final, posthumous novel, *2666*, is also spun from ghastly news: the murder, since 1993, of more than 430 women and girls in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, particularly in Ciudad Juárez.

Often these victims disappear while on their way to school or returning home from work or while they're out dancing with friends. Days or months later, their bodies turn up--tossed in a ditch, the middle of the desert or a city dump. Most are strangled; some are knifed or burned or shot. One-third show signs of rape. Some show signs of torture. The oldest known victims are in their 30s; the youngest are elementary-school age. In January of this year at least four such girls and women were killed. Since 2002 these murders have been the subject of a Hollywood film (*Bordertown*, starring Jennifer Lopez), several nonfiction books, a number of documentaries and a flood of demonstrations in Mexico and abroad. According to Amnesty International, over half of the so-called "femicides" have not resulted in a conviction.

Bolaño was fascinated by these cold cases long before the murders became a cause célèbre. In 1995 he sent a letter from Spain to his old friend in Mexico City, the visual artist Carla Rippey (who is portrayed as the beautiful Catalina O'Hara in *The Savage Detectives*), mentioning that for years he'd been working on a novel called "The Woes of the True Policeman." Though he had other manuscripts on submission to publishers, this book, Bolaño wrote, "is MY NOVEL." Set in northern Mexico, in a town called Santa Teresa, it revolved around a literature professor who had a 14-year-old daughter. The manuscript had already topped "eight hundred thousand pages," he boasted; it was "a demented tangle that surely no one will understand."

Surely, it seemed so then. Bolaño was 43 when he sent this missive, and as near to failure as he'd ever been. Though he'd published two books of poetry, co-written a novel and spent five years entering short story contests all over Spain, he was so broke that he couldn't afford a telephone line, and his work was almost entirely unknown. Three years earlier, he and his wife had separated; around the same time he was diagnosed with the liver disease that would kill him eight years later. Though Bolaño won many of the short story contests he entered, his novels were routinely rejected by publishers. Yet late in 1995 he would begin an astonishing rise.

The turning point was a meeting with Jorge Herralde, the founder and director of the publishing house Editorial Anagrama. Though Herralde couldn't buy *Nazi Literature in the Americas*--it was snapped up by Seix Barral--he invited Bolaño to visit him in Barcelona. There Bolaño told him about his cash problems and the desperation he felt over the many rejections he'd received. "I told him that...I'd love to read his other manuscripts, and shortly afterward he brought me *Distant Star* (later I found out that it had also been rejected by other publishing houses, including Seix Barral)," the editor recalls in an essay. Herralde, however, found the book extraordinary. Thereafter, he published all of Bolaño's fiction: nine books in seven years.

During that time, as each volume found more readers than its predecessor, Bolaño toiled away on his demented tangle. The work involved writing, of course, but also investigating. By setting his novel in Santa Teresa, a fictional town in Sonora, rather than in Juárez, Bolaño was able to blur the lines between what he knew and what he imagined. But he was deeply concerned with understanding the circumstances facing Juárez and its inhabitants. Bolaño was already familiar with the region's bleak, arid landscape--he'd traveled to northern Mexico during the 1970s--but the femicides didn't begin until sixteen years after he had left for Europe, and he'd never visited Juárez. Since he didn't know anyone living in the city, his knowledge was limited to what he could find in newspapers and on the Internet. From these sources he would have learned that Juárez had become the perfect place to commit a crime.

Once a watering hole for Americans during Prohibition, Juárez grew rapidly after NAFTA was implemented in the 1990s. Hundreds of assembly plants sprang up, luring hundreds of thousands of destitute residents from all over Mexico to take jobs that often paid as little as 50 cents an hour. The same traits that made Juárez appealing to NAFTA manufacturers--good roads, proximity to a large consumer market, an abundance of unorganized labor--also made it an ideal hub for *narcotraficantes*. By 1996, some 42 million people and 17 million vehicles were traveling through the city every year, making it one of the busiest transit points on the US-Mexico border and a favorite for illegal crossings. The town transformed itself into a crossroads for cheap and illicit commerce; as it did, poor, hardworking women began turning up dead.

Juárez and its fictional counterpart bear little resemblance to the cultural centers where Bolaño set most of his novels--even *Distant Star* takes place in the most important university town in southern Chile. There are no writing workshops amid the shantytowns of Santa Teresa, nor gangs of rebellious poets. Like all of Bolaño's fiction, *2666* teems with writers, artists and intellectuals, but these characters come from elsewhere: from Europe, South America, the United States and Mexico City. Stuck in the badlands of northern Mexico, the same region where Cormac McCarthy's gang of merry killers rampage in *Blood Meridian*, Santa Teresa is literally and culturally parched.

The link between this industrial desert and the settings of Bolaño's previous novels lies, like a scarlet letter, on the book's front cover. The devilish date 2666--which appears nowhere in the pages of *2666*--sends us on a scavenger hunt to *Amulet*, where it crops up in the waking nightmares of a woman named Auxilio Lacouture. Visions of hell besiege Auxilio from the novel's earliest pages, when she peers into a flower vase and sees "everything that people have lost, everything that causes pain and that is better off forgotten."

Later, as she walks through the streets of Mexico City, she has another evil hallucination. It's the middle of the night. The streets she crosses are vacant and windy. At that hour, Auxilio says, Avenida Reforma "turns into a transparent tube, a cuneiform lung where you feel the city's imaginary breath," and Avenida Guerrero "looks like nothing more than a cemetery...a cemetery from the year 2666, a cemetery forgotten under a dead or unborn eyelid, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that, for wanting to forget something, has ended forgetting everything."

2666, like all of Bolaño's work, is a graveyard. In his 1998 acceptance speech for the Rómulo Gallego's Prize, Bolaño revealed that in some way everything he wrote was "a letter of love or of goodbye" to the young people who died in the dirty wars of Latin America. His previous novels memorialized the dead of the 1960s and '70s. His ambitions for *2666* were greater: to write a postmortem for the dead of the past, the present and the future.

The Part About the Crimes

Bolaño put off the possibility of a liver transplant so he could complete *2666*, but the illness grew more acute and he died before he reached the book's end. After the funeral, his friend and literary executor, the Spanish book critic Ignacio Echevarría, combed through the manuscripts in Bolaño's office to assemble the work that Anagrama published in 2004, and that Natasha Wimmer, the gifted translator of *The Savage Detectives*, has now brought into English.

Bolaño marked his manuscripts carefully. He may have been reckless, but he wasn't stupid, and he knew that he was dying. Yet Anagrama broke with his wishes on one point. For years Bolaño had talked about *2666* as one book, bragging that it would be "the fattest novel in the world," but in the final months of his life, he decided to break up the novel's five sections and publish them as separate books. The reasons behind this impulse were practical. Bolaño would leave behind two young children, to whom he dedicated *2666*, and he wanted to provide for them after his death. Five short novels, he figured, would earn more money than one backbreaking monster. Thankfully, his family and Anagrama did him the favor of following his original vision. As Echevarría notes in his epilogue, "although the five parts that comprise *2666* may be read independently, they not only share many elements (a subtle web of recurring themes), they also join unequivocally in a unified design." Meanwhile, here in the States, the book's publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, is hedging its bets: putting out both a 2.75-pound hardcover and a three-volume slipcased paperback edition.

Either way, *2666* isn't for the faint of heart. The book is nearly 900 pages long, and charting its locations would yield something like an airline flight map, red dots marking landings in Argentina, England, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Prussia, Romania, Russia, Spain and the United States. As if such globe-trotting wasn't enough, the novel also contains scores of characters and covers almost an entire century of history.

Bolaño once wrote that in the Americas, all modern fiction springs from two sources: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Moby-Dick*. *The Savage Detectives*, with its carousing characters, is Bolaño's novel of friendship and adventure. *2666* chases the

white whale. For Bolaño, Melville's novel held the key to writing about "the land of evil"; and like Melville's saga, *2666* can be stunning or soporific, depending on your taste for the slow burn. I've read it three times, and I find it to be dense, brilliant and horrifying, with scattered scenes of cleverness and fun.

Page one plunges us into the lives of four European academics who adore the books of a reclusive German author named Benno von Archimboldi almost as much as they enjoy luring each other to bed. Bolaño's approach to the murders in the first two parts of *2666*--"The Part About the Critics" and "The Part About Amalfitano"--is coy, elliptical. Not for him the rapid gore of Patricia Cornwell or Stephen King. The first, glancing mention of the crimes doesn't occur until forty-three pages into the book, and only two of the three professors who visit Santa Teresa in the first part even hear about the murders. They are visitors to Mexico, and though they dabble in sex tourism, their wealth and indifference insulate them from the realities of the city.

"The Part About Amalfitano"--which clearly derives from the book Bolaño described to Rippey in 1995--moves closer to the locals, while still keeping the murders at arm's length. If part one is a brainy romance, part two is an existential drama. A Chilean philosophy professor who has left Europe for the University of Santa Teresa founders in quiet desperation. He fears that he's going crazy--a voice speaks to him at night. He fears that the city's violence may reach out and grab his daughter--a black car keeps appearing just outside his house.

Careful readers will spy hints of what's to come, like so many red fingerprints, throughout these two sections, but it isn't until the third part, "The Part About Fate," that the violence of Santa Teresa spills into the foreground. Standing in a bar, a naïve American reporter sees a man across the room punch a woman: "The first blow made the woman's head snap violently and the second blow knocked her down." The reporter had driven to Mexico to see another kind of beating--a fight between an American boxer and his Mexican rival--but he soon learns that the real blows in Santa Teresa occur outside the ring. Befriended by some of the seedier elements of the city, he is shown what appears to be the video of a woman being raped. He meets the chief suspect in the city's murders, and he winds up peeling out of town afraid of the police.

This noir escapade is prelude to a dirge. "The Part About the Crimes" opens in January 1993 with the description of the corpse of a 13-year-old girl and ends 108 bodies later during Christmas 1997. Each one of these forensic discoveries is clinically detailed--at 284 pages, the section is the longest in the book--and the resulting chronicle of death is braided through with the narratives of four detectives, one reporter, the chief suspect in the crimes and various ancillary characters. In Bolaño's hands, this collage produces terrific fugue-like sequences and damning repetitions. ("The case was soon closed" becomes a haunting refrain.) Bolaño lightens these grim story lines with flashes of gallows humor and the occasional tender subplot. Overall, however, reading "The Part About the Crimes" feels like staring into the abyss. Strangling, shooting, stabbing, burning, rape, whipping, mutilation, bribery and treachery are all detailed in deadpan prose. "In the middle of November," a typical paragraph runs:

Andrea Pacheco Martínez, thirteen, was kidnapped on her way out of Vocational School 16.... When she was found, two days later, her body showed unmistakable signs of strangulation, with a fracture of the hyoid bone. She had been anally and vaginally

raped. There was tumefaction of the wrists, as if they had been bound. Both ankles presented lacerations, by which it was deduced that her feet had also been tied. A Salvadorean immigrant found the body behind the Francisco I School, on Madero, near Colonia Álamos. It was fully dressed, and the clothes, except for the shirt, which was missing several buttons, were intact.

Those who've sampled Bolaño's other fictions will recognize the cool detachment of this passage. But the level of grisly detail is like nothing in any of Bolaño's previous works--or in any of the newspaper accounts he could have read. His descriptions of the murder investigations, and of the incidents surrounding the trial of the chief suspect, are equally precise and uncanny.

How did Bolaño become so intimate with the details of these crimes, and the procedures of the local police, when he lived an ocean away? His other investigative novels were written after the fresh blood of history had dried; even then, Bolaño had always drawn from firsthand knowledge of the events or from that of his friends. Yet at the time he was writing "The Part About the Crimes," information about the murders in Juárez was quite restricted. To pull off this kind of hyperrealism, he must have had the help of someone on the inside, someone whose interest in autopsy was as relentless as his own.

The Part About the Journalist

In the summer of 1995, the year Bolaño wrote to Carla Rippey, the bodies of several young women were discovered semi-nude and strangled just south of Juárez, near the local airport. That September the city offered a \$1,000 reward for information about The Predator. A month later, police arrested Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif, an Arab-American with a history of sexual aggression, and charged him with the five murders, plus a few others committed in September. But two months later, while Sharif Sharif awaited trial in prison, fresh corpses began to appear. The police maintained that Sharif Sharif, a chemist, had directed these murders from his cell, paying \$1,200 for each woman killed. His accomplices, they said, were eight teenage boys they arrested in a sweep of nightclubs. They were called The Rebels.

Almost 1,000 miles away, in Mexico City, this news fascinated a reporter named Sergio González Rodríguez. A novelist and arts journalist, González Rodríguez had launched his career during the 1980s by doing reviews for Carlos Mosiváis, a leading cultural critic and a pioneer of the *nueva crónica*, or New Journalism, style in Mexico. By the time the newspaper *Reforma* came calling in 1993, González Rodríguez was well known as a centrist critic who wasn't afraid of riling the government: he'd been fired from the magazine *Nexos* for publishing an article in *Reforma* that questioned the ethics of intellectuals who allied themselves with then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who'd been elected in 1988 amid widespread allegations of voter fraud. This independent temperament made González Rodríguez a good match for *Reforma*--the paper had a history of serious investigative reporting--and he was hired to edit one of the paper's weekend cultural supplements, "El Ángel." (These days González Rodríguez still serves as the section's editorial consultant. He also writes three regular columns for the paper.)

The news from Juárez reminded González Rodríguez of the movie *Silence of the Lambs*, which he'd seen a few years earlier. Could it be, he wondered, that Ciudad Juárez held a real Hannibal Lecter? Answering that question wasn't part of his regular beat, but as he explained to me in a series of interviews last summer, he'd always been interested in literature about violence. His favorite books include Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* and Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Politics and Crime*. He already had plans to travel to the state of Chihuahua to teach a seminar. It wasn't hard to persuade *Reforma* to pay for a jumper flight from there to Juárez so he could report on a press conference that the chief suspect planned to hold, in prison, on April 19, 1996.

That day González Rodríguez watched a tall, middle-aged man with green eyes talk to some thirty reporters. Sharif Sharif barely spoke Spanish--he'd lived in Mexico for less than a year--so he gave his presentation in English while a bilingual reporter translated. What he said sounded like a soap opera. According to Sharif Sharif, the femicides were being committed by a pair of rich Mexican cousins, one who lived in Juárez and the other just over the border in El Paso. He told a love story involving one of the cousins and a poor, beautiful girl from Juárez. The press corps was annoyed--they exchanged glances, cracked jokes. González Rodríguez felt pretty skeptical himself, but the critic in him was intrigued by Sharif Sharif's style. Rather than pound his chest and declare his innocence, the suspect calmly recounted his ninety-minute tale. He seemed to believe that if he provided an alternate explanation for the murders, the charges against him would be dropped.

At the end of the session, González Rodríguez introduced himself to a local reporter. In a park near the prison, the two chatted about the strange presentation. A mother and her daughter approached them.

Are you journalists? the mother asked.

Yes, they answered.

Then we want to tell you something we think that you should know.

The 14-year-old girl beside her wore a T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. She told the reporters that the Juárez chief of police had forced her to accuse The Rebels. The chief, she said, had taken her by the hair and banged her against a wall until she agreed to say exactly what he told her.

For González Rodríguez, perspective suddenly shifted. Old facts (the nightclub sweep, the escalating charges against Sharif Sharif) glittered in a new light: the police were beating witnesses. "This," he thought, "is the undercurrent." Later, he learned that while Sharif Sharif had been holding forth in prison, the State Commission on Human Rights had announced that six of the eight witnesses against The Rebels had been detained illegally by the Juárez police.

González Rodríguez flew back to Mexico City and published an article about his findings and the suspicious treatment of the witnesses. Soon after, *Reforma* asked him to join a special investigations unit devoted to the situation in Juárez. The head of the unit, Rossana Fuentes Berain, sent a journalist undercover into the factories where many

of the murder victims had worked; she assigned other reporters to track the details of individual police investigations. González Rodríguez was given the task of studying the big picture for patterns and motivations. Though Berain edited González Rodríguez like any other reporter--sometimes demanding that he corroborate sources or provide additional proofs for his more damning assessments--she also allowed him considerable interpretive leeway.

For three years he traveled back and forth between Juárez and Mexico City, juggling book and film reviews with criminal investigation, until, in the summer of 1999, his reporting began to suggest that the policemen, government officials and drug traffickers of Juárez were all connected to one another, and to the femicides. An attack on the son of Sharif Sharif's lawyer earlier that year had hardened his suspicions. Why would someone attack a lawyer's son if the justice system was functioning properly? he wondered. Then, on June 12, together with a reporter from the *El Paso Times*, González Rodríguez interviewed a prisoner who implicated local police and a prominent senator in the femicides.

In his book *Huesos en el desierto*, González Rodríguez recounts that three days later he was kidnapped and assaulted by two men in Mexico City. He had hailed a taxi in the posh neighborhood of Condesa, heading home after a late night. The taxi drove for a while and then stopped. Two armed men jumped aboard. They ordered González Rodríguez to close his eyes and sit between them in the back seat. The taxi took off--the driver was complicit. Though González Rodríguez didn't resist his captors, the men cursed him, punched him, pistol-whipped him and pierced his legs with an ice pick. They would kill him in a deserted spot south of the capital, they said. The taxi stopped again. One of the men got out, and another, whom they called The Boss, sat down. The beatings and threats of rape and death resumed. A patrol car passed nearby with its flashers on. The men dumped González Rodríguez on the street. He filed a police report and went to see a doctor, who prescribed painkillers and bed rest. On June 18, his article "Police Are Fingered as Accomplices [in Juárez]" appeared in *Reforma*.

For the next two months, González Rodríguez lived like a zombie, writing reviews, editing his section and going out with friends even as his vision clouded, his speech slurred and his memory disintegrated. Finally, on August 11, when he couldn't even brew a cup of coffee in his own home, two friends from *Reforma* rushed him to a hospital, where he had emergency surgery to remove a life-threatening hematoma that was pressing on his brain.

Against all expectations, he made a complete recovery, but the beating marked a turning point in his life. Before the attack, González Rodríguez had had problems with his home and cellphones--strange noises, deficiencies in service. After, he was often followed. His friend Paola Tinoco recalls that whenever she and González Rodríguez ate in a restaurant in the months following his surgery, they were watched by people wearing earphones. Terrified and helpless, the two took refuge in humor, telling each other absurd stories every time the strangers were present. One night, for example, they recited the lyrics to a popular children's song called "The Ducky":

Ducky goes running and searching in her purse-y
For pennies to feed her own little duckies
Because she knows that when she gets back

All the ducks will run up and ask
What did you bring me, Mamá, quack quack?
What did you bring me, quack quack?

When González Rodríguez flew to Juárez in 1995 looking for a Hollywood-style serial killer, he recalls, "I had no idea what I was getting into." Instead of Hannibal Lecter, he found a system of impunity that protected the worst criminals in Juárez, simply because they were ruthless and rich, a system that implicated the police and judicial institutions of the city, the state and the country. Once he drew these conclusions, there was no going back. "You're in a hell," he says, "that you don't know why you've been chosen to live." The heat incinerated many of his old illusions about accountability and justice, revealing Mexico's black heart.

The authorities, he believed, were deliberately trying to confuse and obscure the realities in Juárez, suggesting that the numbers were exaggerated, or that the murders were crimes of passion, or that the victims were prostitutes. He wanted to make a permanent record of his findings to contradict those stories, a record that wouldn't be tossed out at week's end.

The Part About the Correspondence

The year that González Rodríguez was first attacked, Bolaño had been working on his demented tangle for more than half a decade. Searching for information about Juárez, Bolaño e-mailed his friends in Mexico, asking more and more detailed questions about the murders. Finally, tired of these gruesome inquiries, his friends put him in touch with González Rodríguez, who, they said, knew more about the crimes than anyone in Mexico. Bolaño first e-mailed him around the time that González Rodríguez decided to write a nonfiction book about his investigation.

In retrospect, it's strange the two didn't correspond earlier. They were roughly the same age: González Rodríguez was born in 1950, Bolaño in 1953. Both had been part of Mexico City's counterculture in the 1970s: Bolaño tramping about town with the Infrealist poets, González Rodríguez playing bass for a heavy-metal band called Grupo Enigma. Both began writing novels late and prided themselves on the integrity of their literary judgments. They had several friends in common: Jorge Herralde and the critic and novelist Juan Villoro. And in middle age both were consumed by Juárez.

González Rodríguez could tell right away that Bolaño's interest in the crimes wasn't a whim. "It wasn't a temp job, like that of so many novelists," González Rodríguez says. "It was the passion of a lifetime. He would say to me, What you do think of such and such text? He had read everything."

What Bolaño needed, González Rodríguez explains, was help with the details of the murders and the police investigations, because the press accounts of them were too vague. He wanted to know how the narcos in Juárez operated, what cars they drove, what weapons they carried. "What he liked was precision," González Rodríguez says. In the case of weapons, for example, Bolaño wanted to know not just the brand but also the model and the caliber.

He was also interested in connecting with the mentality of Chihuahua's police to understand the particularities of their conduct and misconduct. He wanted to know exactly how murder cases were written up. He wanted a copy of a forensic report; González Rodríguez unearthed one in the papers he'd gotten from a defense lawyer. At Bolaño's request, he transcribed a section describing the victim's injuries. "He wanted to know the language of forensic investigation," González Rodríguez recalls. It is this language that appears in "The Part About the Crimes."

"I imagine, based on what he would ask me, that what he wanted was to compare notes," González Rodríguez says. "I'd say that the savage detective wanted the other savage detective, who is me, to draw analogous conclusions." Yet any writer knows that sharing conclusions often changes them. Comparing notes with González Rodríguez, Bolaño may have altered a few long-held beliefs. Take, for example, the two detectives' discussion of Robert K. Ressler, the former FBI criminologist who visited Juárez in 1998 to consult on the murders, thanks to a deal made between Mexico's Congress and its attorney general. Bolaño had already read Ressler's famous books--among them, *Sexual Homicide* and *Crime Classification Manual*--and he was amazed that Ressler didn't solve the murders during his trip.

Why didn't Ressler catch the killer? he asked.

That trip was just window dressing, González Rodríguez remembers telling him. He explained that Ressler had come to Juárez unprepared. He didn't bring his own translator. He was paid by the same authorities who might be implicated by his findings. He had to review criminal files in Spanish, a language he didn't know. He was given a bodyguard who watched everything he did. This information, González Rodríguez remembers, hit Bolaño like cold water.

"He wanted to believe that there was a rational power that could conquer the criminal," he observes. In fact, such a triumphant ratiocinator appears in all Bolaño's novels--except for *2666*. In *Distant Star*, the serial killer is caught by detective Abel Romero, with the help of a smart poet. In *By Night in Chile*, the crimes of the literati are unearthed by an anonymous young detective. Another anonymous interrogator traces the history of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima in *The Savage Detectives*, while these two young poets successfully locate the mysterious writer Cesárea Tinajero--whom they find in a town near Santa Teresa.

Only in *2666* do criminals slip the noose, trapping and killing or beating every Nosy Parker who comes their way. Significantly, in the final version of *2666*, the character based on Ressler (Albert Kessler) first appears as a cunning, if tactless, detective, only to have the rug pulled out from under his investigation several pages later.

More fundamentally, González Rodríguez told Bolaño how his findings suggested that the killings in Juárez were connected to the local police and politicians and to the mercenary gangs maintained by the drug cartels. The police don't seriously investigate the murders, he explained, because they're badly trained, or they're misogynists, or they've made deals that allow the narcos to operate with impunity.

So there's no serial killer? González Rodríguez recalls Bolaño asked him.

No, of course there's a serial killer, González Rodríguez replied. But it's not just one serial killer. I think there are at least two serial killers.

This revelation, González Rodríguez says, disconcerted Bolaño. By then, the writer had already devised an elaborate, ingenious structure for his novel, a structure that in some ways depends on the idea of a single serial killer. The innocence or guilt of the real Sharif Sharif wasn't the issue, González Rodríguez says. The problem was how to fit fresh news about the crimes into 2666.

Bolaño's solution, I suspect, was to adopt many of González Rodríguez's conclusions about Juárez wholesale, then to dramatize these theories in his own way. The parallels between the stories in "The Part About the Crimes" and the conclusions in González Rodríguez's book *Huesos en el desierto*--which isn't available in English--are startling. Yet "nothing," González Rodríguez points out, "is ever followed to the letter." Names are changed, nationalities transformed, characters invented, entire plots embroidered out of imagination, style and air. Bolaño may have used everything González Rodríguez taught him--he read the manuscript for *Huesos* months before it was published--but he refashioned it all to suit his own ends.

The Part About the Goat

After years of correspondence, the two savage detectives finally met in November 2002, when González Rodríguez traveled to Barcelona for the official launch of *Huesos*. Anagrama had bought the book for its prestigious Crónicas imprint, setting it alongside works by Günter Wallraff, Ryszard Kapuscinski and Michael Herr. More than 100 people attended the debut presentation. Months later, the Mexican consulate would decline to send a representative to a theatrical performance inspired by *Huesos*, stating that its officials "don't support works that denigrate Mexico."

Huesos was launched in Spain partly to protect its author. When it was printed, many of the government and police officials fingered by González Rodríguez were still in power, and its account of systematic corruption in Juárez angered those who wanted to portray Mexico as a civilized nation. But press coverage for the book in Europe provided González Rodríguez with a measure of protection against reprisals. After such coverage, there would be no way of making the book or its author quietly disappear when *Huesos* was later released in Mexico.

Bolaño didn't attend the launch, but early the next day González Rodríguez and a friend headed north to the seaside town of Blanes to meet him and his family for lunch. They arrived several hours late. Hung over from the previous night's celebration of dinner and absinthe, González Rodríguez and his friend had boarded the wrong train. Bolaño forgave their late appearance, opening a bottle of wine and offering ham sandwiches. Knowing that Bolaño's illness made it impossible for him to drink liquor, González Rodríguez had brought him a half-kilo of coffee from La Habana, the cafe in Mexico City that Bolaño immortalized in *The Savage Detectives*. Bolaño's liver was so bad that he couldn't drink coffee either, but González Rodríguez recalls that he opened the bag and buried his nose in it.

For the next several hours, they talked about the murders in Juárez. For once, they had no worries about tapped phones or intercepted e-mails. Bolaño could ask all the questions he wanted.

Listen, Bolaño joked, I'm going to make you a character in my novel. I'm going to plagiarize the idea from Javier Marías, who made you a character in *La negra espalda del tiempo*.

González Rodríguez felt his stomach sink. Really, Roberto? he said. With my name?

Yes, don't worry about it, Bolaño said. His daughter, Alejandra, was playing with González Rodríguez's friend. Bolaño looked happy. González Rodríguez didn't know what to say.

The next evening they met for sushi in Barcelona. This time they talked, not about Juárez but about literature. Bolaño asked if writers in Mexico still wore beards or if they'd all cut them off. At one point, he announced that he and Mario Santiago had officially dissolved the Infrarealist movement in Paris in 1992. He's crazy, González Rodríguez thought. He thinks that the only Infrarealists who matter are him and Santiago.

Shortly after this visit, Bolaño published the essay "Sergio González Rodríguez Under the Hurricane," which declared his affection and admiration for the journalist and sang the praises of his book. González Rodríguez's "technical help in the writing of my novel," he wrote, "has been substantial." And *Huesos en el desierto* is "not only an imperfect photograph--how could it be anything else--of evil and of corruption; it also transforms itself into a metaphor of Mexico and of Mexico's past and of the uncertain future of all of Latin America."

Seven months later, on July 1, 2003, Bolaño was admitted to a hospital in Barcelona. Two weeks later, he died.

When *2666* was released in Mexico in 2004, González Rodríguez could barely bring himself to read it. "It took me months to read the section about the dead women," he says. "It terrified me. To live through it is one thing, but to see it told by a great literary master like Bolaño isn't funny. Roberto is crazier than a goat, you understand? You can't believe it because in some way you're there."

As a reporter, González Rodríguez had cultivated a critical distance that helped him ignore how easily he could be attacked again. Finding in *2666* a character with his name pinioned to a world of killers and cover-ups shattered that illusion. At one point Bolaño even describes a kidnapping exactly like the 1999 attack on González Rodríguez, except that it ends in death. It's not clear whether the reporter who dies is the character "Sergio González."

Such pointed mind games aside, any Mexican journalist writing about cartels or corruption would have felt vulnerable in 2004. That year, five investigative reporters were killed or disappeared in Mexico. One of them was shot to death in front of his two young children. According to a report put out by Reporters Without Borders last year, Mexico has become the second-most dangerous place in the world for journalists, the

first being Iraq. Alejandro Junco de la Vega, the president of Grupo Reforma, recently told an audience at Columbia University that his three newspapers no longer run bylines, in order to protect their journalists. "We find ourselves under the siege of drug lords, criminals," he explained, "and the more we expose their activities, the harder they push back." Junco himself has moved his entire family to "a safe haven in the US."

So it may be a coincidence that the same year *2666* was published, González Rodríguez decided to stop traveling to Juárez. He'd heard there was a bounty on his head in the state of Chihuahua. Suits alleging slander had been filed, and he risked being jailed the moment he set foot in the state. Given these maneuvers, his lawyers recommended that he not enter Chihuahua under any circumstances. (It wasn't until April 2007 that President Felipe Calderón signed a federal law that decriminalized defamation and "insults," and obliged state governments to do the same.) The last time González Rodríguez visited, nobody wanted to talk about what was going on. It had become a city of closed doors.

Neither *Huesos* nor *2666* is an easy book to read. I was plagued by nightmares as I read both of them. Their pages are like freshly dug graves, but they are shadowed by different philosophies of evil. In *Huesos*, Juárez is a casualty of rampant corruption. When cops and courts look the other way, González Rodríguez believes, brutal acts become ordinary events. The rape and murder of women, the assassination of journalists, the kidnapping of people for ransom: none of these crimes are page-one news in Mexico anymore. "A malevolent person, like a serial killer, can unleash a kind of sweeping effect," González Rodríguez says, igniting a mechanism of extermination that rivals that of any totalitarian dictatorship. This "normalization of barbarism," he argues, is the most serious problem facing Mexico and Latin America today.

In the final section of *2666*, "The Part About Archimboldi," Bolaño presents a more sinister vision of evil. The section opens at the end of World War I, with a wounded Prussian's return home. Everything is changing, a stranger tells him: "The war was coming to an end and a new era was about to begin. [The Prussian] answered, as he ate, that nothing would ever change." Indeed, the whole finale of *2666*, which spans the First World War to the late 1990s, seems designed to prove Archimboldi's belief that history is nothing more than a series of instants "that vie with one another in monstrousness." As Archimboldi fights for the Third Reich on the Eastern Front and starts his career as a novelist in the ruins of Berlin, Bolaño regales us with tale after tale of rape and murder. In the hills of Germany, a man kills his wife and the authorities turn a blind eye. During the war, city folk who flee to the country are routinely robbed, raped and killed. The land around a Romanian castle is filled with buried human bones, and allusions to the Holocaust abound.

In this landscape of brutality and impunity, Santa Teresa seems less aberrant. It's just one of many places where an underlying, pervasive evil has broken the surface. As it is now in Santa Teresa, the novel seems to say, as it has always been, as it shall be in the cemeteries of *2666*. Evil is as widespread and eternal as the sea.

This vision of violence brings to mind America's own apocalyptic writer, Cormac McCarthy, but Bolaño's novel has more sex and comedy, and his hero is quite different from those in *The Road* or *Blood Meridian*. Archimboldi marches through the battlefields of Poland and Romania like a man trolling along the bottom of the sea,

immersed in the deep's dark horror yet untouched by it. As a teenager, he reads Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and is captivated by the idea of a "lay and independent" medieval knight. His own holy grail turns out to be a dead man's diary he discovers in an abandoned shtetl.

A lay and independent knight: these words could describe both the great detectives and the great writers who wander through the pages of *2666*. All of them are loners who devote themselves to reading and swimming in the abyss. Being a writer in this world is as dangerous as being a detective, walking through a graveyard, looking at ghosts.

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Back home, a fire they keep
Out here the cold wind blows
I did not want to leave
I wonder if she knows
The first word she said to me was
goodbye
In the west the sky grows darker
Back east the sun will rise
Back home my wife and daughter
Don't know where I am
tonight
But soon I will find a road that leads home
A man could die out here, they'd never know
No longer will I walk among the
ghosts
Even though I left so long ago
I got someone waiting back at home
We got married down in Texas, Texas
A little daughter of our
own
She doesn't care about
The cold wind that carried this song
All that she knows right now
Is that her father's still gone
The first
word she learned to say was to say goodbye
A man could die out here, they'd never know
No longer will I walk among the
ghosts
Even though I left so long ago
I got someone waiting back at home
We got married down in Texas, Texas
A little daughter of our
own
A man could die out here, they'd never know
No longer will I walk among the ghosts
Even though I left so long ago
I got someone
waiting back at home
We got married down in Texas, Texas
A little daughter of our own
Life out here is getting reckless, reckless
Better
find my way back home
We got married down in Texas, Texas
Our little girl will soon be grown
I can't stay, I'm getting restless,
restless
You're gonna have to let me go