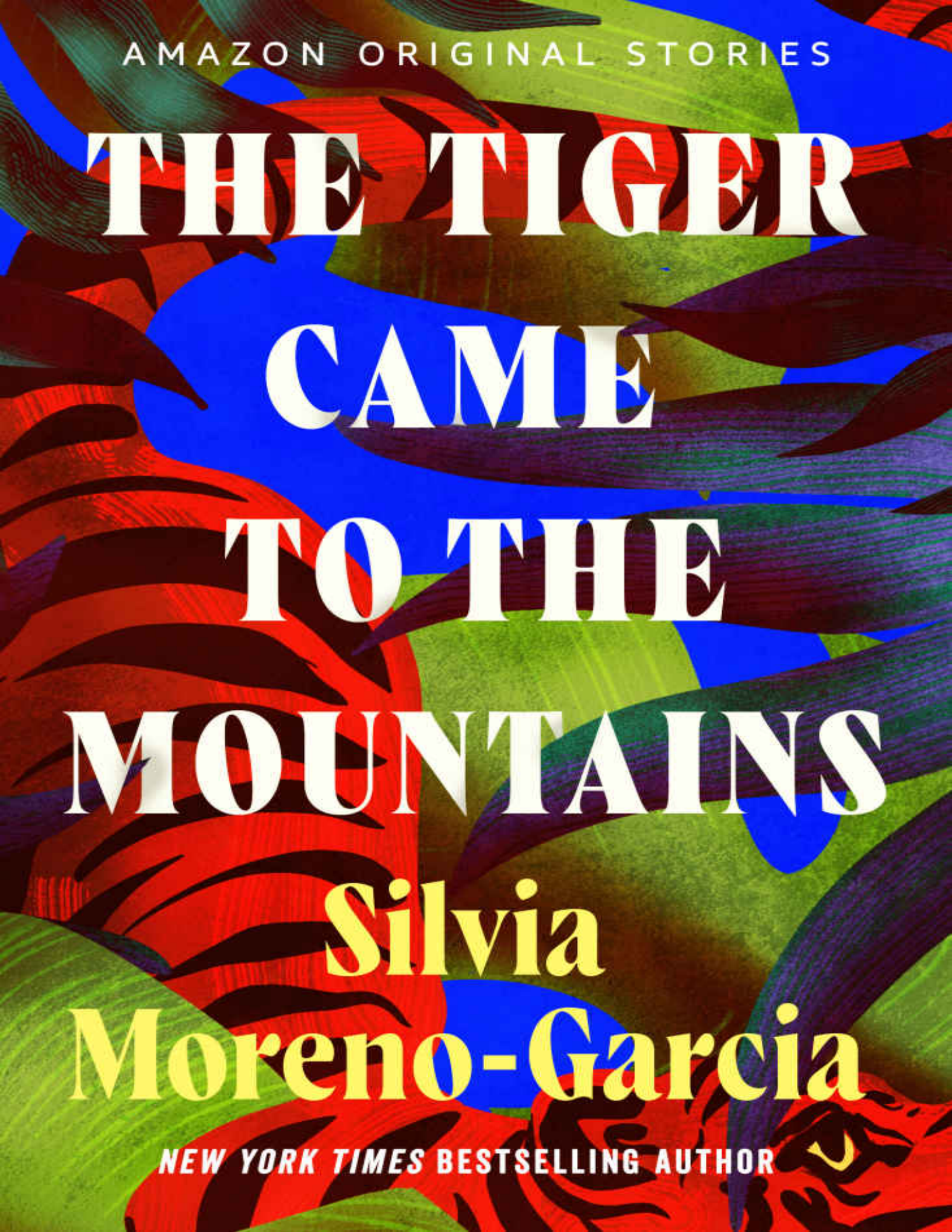
AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES
THE TIGER CAME TO THE MOUNTAINS
Silvia Moreno-Garcia
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE TIGER CAME TO THE MOUNTAINS

Silvia Moreno-Garcia

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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The tiger came to the mountains the summer when the train went off the rails, the summer I turned thirteen. In those days there were constant skirmishes, and both revolutionaries and pelones fought over the railways. The stench of blood and gunpowder perfumed the land.

My father and my uncle had joined the fight, so it was us children left behind with our mother at the farm. We were a large family. Melchor was just over a year older, and then there was me, and our little sisters. My cousins Baldomero and Desiderio lived with us, too. They were Melchor's age. There were other younger cousins and my aunt Chela, but I didn't get along with them as much.

We had to be alert when the pelones swept the area. They were like locusts and stole everything they could. They'd grab corn and pigs, and if there were men or even teenage boys, they'd snatch them and press them into service. They took women—that also happened. The revolutionaries took women, too, and not every soldadera followed a man out of love, like the corridos said. My father and my uncle fought for Pancho Villa, but his men raped the girls at Namiquipa. In Camargo, Villa ordered his soldiers to shoot more than ninety women.

I do not know the details of what my father did and didn't do during the Revolution, but I assume he drew blood as much as any other man. My uncle perished in front of a firing squad. That much I was told, but I also heard Zapata was shot in the back and bullets don't always end up where they ought to. And some men end up on coins and bills after a war, but that doesn't make them saints.

When soldiers came to our farm, whether they fought for our side or the other, the older boys ran to the caves. Soldiers grabbed what they could. Pigs, horses, food. My mother stayed with the little ones whenever men arrived. My siblings and little cousins were too young for any of the fighters to want to take them, and with the children around, my mother had a measure of safety. The men were more likely to respect a mother.

When the soldiers came, my aunt Chela also headed to the mountains with the boys. She was too nervous and could never lie. When a soldier asked my mother if that was all the food she had or if she was hiding

something, she would stare them down and say, “This is it, this is what we have.” And if the man pressed on, asking why there was only one sad pig or a tired nag, she’d say, stone-cold, “The other soldiers already came around last month and ate us clean. I’ve got six mouths to feed, and you have no shame.”

No one ever dared bully my mother, not even the soldiers, rough as they might be. She was a lady of iron and ice.

I was no lady. “Machorra,” my mother called me, chiding me for running around after the boys and getting in fights with Desiderio or Baldomero. But it wasn’t as if I could take piano lessons or purchase etiquette manuals in the middle of a war. We’d had a little money before the Revolution, but not anymore, and we needed every kernel of corn and every bit of meat we could chew. My brother and cousins set snares and loaded their rifles, trying to see whether they could stuff a rabbit in the pot and cook stew.

I’d go hunting with the boys, and they would let me make noises to spook or attract a deer so that they might shoot it. They didn’t allow me to fire a rifle or my father’s pistol—heavens no. They were much too afraid my mother would find out and slap them from dusk until dawn.

It was fine if I cleaned the hides of the animals. My father had taught me enough about the art of taxidermy. He’d learned this from his father and his father before him, the way we learned everything on the farm: knowledge of the land was spoken and not printed. I was able to continue his work and stuffed an eagle, an owl, rabbits, and several squirrels. Supplies were hard to come by at times, so I made do with what I had. Arsenic, knives, cotton, and tow can bring an animal back to life and reproduce the fierce grin of a predator.

I couldn’t hunt these animals myself. I stuffed what the boys brought me. Except for the rabbits, which I would catch in a snare, and the squirrels, which I killed with my slingshot. I know some softhearted people might think it is cruel to kill a squirrel, but it’s crueler still to watch your siblings growing up stunted and skinny. A squirrel’s tiny bones may be hard to pick when you are having soup, but hunger is harder.

But you’ll want to know about the tiger with the molten eyes and its twenty-nine teeth. I counted them, I did, and although it ought to have had thirty, there was one missing.

The tiger with the missing tooth slid up the mountain in the summer. The rains had arrived, and Melchor had caught a chill instead of a rabbit. He was better suited to our living room than the outside, even if he was a decent shot when we hunted. While I had trouble reading and the letters seemed to dance before my eyes, Melchor devoured books and would read fairy tales for me in the sweetest of voices.

Melchor was my favorite of the boys because of this. Baldomero and Desiderio were funny, laughing boys, but it was Melchor who sewed the buttons back on my doll's dress when they fell off and who helped with the taxidermy, preserving a tongue in alcohol and then painting it with oil colors, relaxing skins and cleaning teeth with a stiff little brush.

My brother was gentle—that is the sum of it. Gentle and frail. He caught colds, twisted an ankle, or sprained a wrist. The mosquitoes in the river preferred to find purchase upon his soft skin. Me, I ran and fell and skinned my knees, but no fever ever nailed me to a bed, nor did a bruise bloom as fiercely on my body as it did on his.

The night of the tiger, our neighbors came late, warning of trouble. A train, carrying among other things a collection of circus animals, had been derailed. Both pelones and revolutionaries were milling around it, and they'd soon sweep into our lands. The adults were muttering about the soldiers, but we were more interested in the circus animals.

We had never been to the circus, but we did have an alphabet book with pictures of circus animals, so I knew that *H* was for *hippo* and *L* was for *lion*, and so on and so forth. The book also said the tiger has thirty teeth and zebras have tufted tails, and although I have trouble reading books, my brother had no trouble reciting from them. Therefore, the children were excited, thinking we might catch a glimpse of a dancing bear.

Now you might wonder what a circus was doing there, in the middle of a war, and that I can't say. The Orrin Circus was considered one of the best in the world, and it toured all through Mexico and South America. That circus must have closed by the time the Revolution was in full swing, but that doesn't mean there couldn't be other circuses or tent shows.

My mother wasn't concerned about dancing bears and instead feared that soldiers would soon be upon us, so she told us to get dressed and start gathering the food and animals we needed to hide in the caves. Even though Melchor was in bed with a chill, he put on his trousers, shirt, and coat. If the

soldiers saw him, he'd be off to war, and they wouldn't give a damn if he sniffled or coughed.

My mother split us up, with my aunt Chela, Baldomero, and Desiderio heading to one of the caves while my brother and I traveled to another. That way, if the soldiers found one of our hiding places, the other might go undiscovered.

Melchor and I took two donkeys, the cow, salted meats, vegetables, grain, and a couple of jars of honey. We packed coffee and my father's pistol. My cousins took their rifles.

Melchor had dark circles under his eyes, and he was running a bit of a fever, but my mother gave him an herb to chew and sent him off with her blessing. There wasn't much else she could do.

Our cave was large, but it was damp and cold, which was why we wouldn't store grain or vegetables there for long periods of time. Besides, an animal could have broken in and swallowed our food if we'd left anything edible. We did have blankets, matches, a lantern, and a few other items that we hid there all the time. These excursions took a couple of days, so we had learned to be prepared. Once the soldiers left the area, our mother or one of the neighbors would come to fetch us.

As soon as we arrived at the cave, we set our things down and put the animals in the pen. We had built it a long time back, and the animals were docile, so it didn't take long to get them settled. Afterward, Melchor covered himself with a blanket. We couldn't start a fire for fear it might attract unwanted attention, so we ate bread and salted meat. We'd brought water in a couple of gourds, but we had clay jugs that we could fill with rainwater, should we need it, and stored under worn pieces of fabric were bottles of wine and sherry, which could be quite valuable in those days. They served as bribes when the soldiers came. My mother might offer a bottle in exchange for a promise that the men wouldn't take a prized goat or a pig.

Of course, sometimes the men took the pig anyway. I remember a couple of summers before, when the boys didn't drag Cuca to the caves because she was an old, fat sow. When the soldiers swept by, my mother begged the commanding officer to have a drink of sherry and kill a few chickens instead. But the men sliced the pig open and roasted her.

I cried when I saw Cuca roasting on the spit and pounded the commander's leg with my fists. He laughed at that and offered me a piece

of pork to eat, saying I'd earned it. I did eat it, even though it tasted like bile and tears, and I chewed each bite slowly and stared at the commander, wishing him dead. After that, my mother didn't let me stay around with her when the soldiers came. She said I was getting too old and the soldiers might take me with them, but I think it was the hate in my eyes that made her send me to the caves.

Or maybe not. Maybe I was getting too old after all. I still looked like a boy and had no breasts, but a general had taken Elvira the year before and she was only fourteen. The man had ordered the women in the nearby village to do his washing, and Elvira had delivered it. The general wouldn't allow her to return home after he got under her skirts.

I wondered sometimes whether the soldiers let Elvira eat pork where they went now and whether she ever ran into my father's brigade. I wouldn't know because I never saw her again.

That first night in the cave was like many other nights, even if Melchor looked like the color had leached out of his face. In this point my brother and I also differed: he was fair and I was dark. When he stood outside without his straw hat, his face grew red as the blood of the cochineal. He took after our father, I think. I say *I think* because there are no pictures left of either one of them. But I believe they were very much alike, which makes you wonder why my father grabbed a rifle and went off to war, although in those days, war came for you whether you wanted it or not.

Despite his chill, Melchor read to me by the light of the lantern. My brother had a beautiful voice and beautiful hands. I listened, enraptured, to any tale he told. At thirteen, I was moving past the fairy tales that had made me laugh as a little girl, and now I wished for stories of adventure. Melchor had borrowed a copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* from our cousins, and I longed to travel the ocean and battle krakens or dive for pearls. My brother wanted to write. Dreams of penning books had led him to create his own pastiches based on Verne. His incipient novels always starred a pair of courageous twins who were clearly patterned after us.

Although we were not born the same year and thirteen months separated us, everyone always said we were a pair; we were cuates. Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli and Xolotl, or Castor and Pollux. My brother gave us mythical names when he wrote his stories.

There was no profit in books, of course. The only things the soldiers never stole were those leather-bound volumes. My mother would have liked

it if my brother thought of other things. Of farming, perhaps, or of the city. My brother liked neither. He'd have been a scholar if he'd had the chance. I, on the other hand, could not stomach books unless Melchor was doing the reading. I did not have a good time scouring a pot, but at least I understood the point of it better than attempting to spell out words I could never master. *H* is for *hippo* and *L* is for *lion*. I never got much further than that.

Melchor did not read long about the intrepid Captain Nemo that night because he was too tired. After a few pages, he placed our father's pistol under his pillow, and we turned off the lantern.

If you have always lived in the city, you cannot know what nights in the sierra are like, or even worse, the nights in a cave. Outside, the stars shine like fireflies on velvet, but inside a cave is the pitch-black darkness of the grave. It's a terrifying darkness, thick and heavy, but I was used to it, and I quickly went to sleep.

My brother woke me up. He was clutching my arm with his left hand, and he held the lantern with his right.

I opened my eyes, blinking. It was raining hard. Perhaps it even hailed. It sounded like a machine gun spraying bullets outside our small cave.

"What is it?" I asked.

"There's someone walking nearby," Melchor said.

We both looked toward the mouth of the cave, but all I could see was the rain falling. It was late and I was irritated. I wanted to kick Melchor and tell him to let me be.

"There isn't."

"Yes there is."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I heard him. His footsteps were loud, and he moved strangely."

I listened as carefully as I could, but I could not hear anything except the rain. "What do you mean, 'strangely'?"

"I'm not sure it was human."

"A deer?"

"No. Heavier. And his breath was like a plume of smoke. I didn't see him well, I saw the silhouette, but it reminded me of . . ."

My brother went quiet. The hand holding the lantern trembled.

"What?" I asked.

"Like the nahual Father used to tell us about," Melchor whispered.

My brother inherited not only his looks from our father but also his propensity for telling tales. Before our father departed, following the troops of a general on a quest we could not comprehend, he sat us on his knee and spoke of all the monsters and marvels that haunted the countryside. The fearsome nahuales that slunk in the shadows, changing their shape, made us squeal in both delight and terror.

But now that we were a little older, we did not give credence to such legends. We preferred, after all, the underwater adventures of Captain Nemo to the frightful hauntings spoken around bonfires.

At first, I thought my brother was toying with me, but his lip was quivering and the lantern almost danced in his hands. I feared he was about to drop it.

“You’re being silly. Give me that,” I said and snatched the lantern, putting it down. The shadows swirled as the light changed position, yet the mouth of the cave remained lonesome and ordinary.

“I’m telling you, I saw something,” my brother protested.

“You had a bad dream,” I said and pressed a hand against his forehead. It was warm to the touch.

Melchor pushed my hand away and frowned. “I did not. There was a noise, and that was what woke me up. I wasn’t dreaming anything at all.”

“There are no nahuales. You know this as well as I do. Remember when Baldomero told us there was a mermaid in the lake, with her breasts bare, hiding behind a rock? He did that so you’d go in the water and the leeches would bite your buttocks. If you still believe in imaginary creatures and ghosts after that, you’re a complete fool.”

“I didn’t say this was a ghost.”

“It’s the same idiocy.”

“Fine. I didn’t see anything,” Melchor said, and he tugged at his covers and bundled himself under the blankets once more, turning his back to me.

I immediately regretted making fun of Melchor. Whenever we fought, I apologized first. He was my favorite person in the world.

It was not that I did not care about my other siblings; I helped my mother with the little ones whenever she asked. Nor was it that I despised my older cousins, even if they angered me sometimes when they tried to exclude me from certain games on account of the fact that I was a girl, and it irritated me that they would not let me fire the rifle when they hunted for

deer. It was not my mother's chiding, her insistence that I wash my face and comb my hair and be careful with the hem of my dress, that moved me to my brother's side.

What I loved about my brother, aside from his gentle disposition, was his ability to dream and infect me with his dreams. The war had made the world bitter and difficult; it had taken family members and neighbors away, and threatened to snatch more people each day. In years past our father had come from the city with candy and a new doll for me, but now the dusty road that led to our doorstep lay empty.

My mother wept sometimes. She tried to hide it, but I could still hear her, and she worried, trying to ensure that a few sad chickens and some beans and rice would last us for months on end, keeping a precise count of the bottles of sherry we had left. We did not know whether the world would ever return to normal. I think she feared the world had already ended, and I could see her growing harder every day.

Iron and ice are difficult to embrace.

Only my brother seemed to keep the flame of hope alive. He was the one who pretended we were in a submarine and invited me to explore coral reefs.

I could not fight with Melchor. Without Melchor, I would be utterly alone in the world. But although I whispered his name a dozen times, he would not turn to look at me, and at last I admitted defeat and went to sleep.

When the sun rose, the rain stopped for a few minutes, then started again. It was only a little patter of rain, yet it doused my spirits. Melchor was still in a bad mood, and what was worse, he looked paler than before, beads of sweat decorating his forehead. It took a long time for him to sit up and grab the gourd I held in my hands.

He drank but did not wish to eat. I pleaded with him to have his breakfast, and at last he took a few bites of the coarse bread we'd brought with us. Then he sat with a blanket around his shoulders, shivering, while I fed the animals.

We'd brought no medicine with us, not that there would have been any at the farm. In those days, you went to see the yerbero, and you made remedies from plants and flowers. There was no pharmacy in the town nearby, and the one doctor had decamped.

I decided to build a small fire and brew coffee. It might still attract attention, but it would be safer in the daytime than to keep a fire burning

through the night, when it might be spotted far away.

Melchor sipped the coffee, mixed with a spoonful of honey for his aching throat, happily. I thought to make him chamomile tea. I had picked chamomile flowers many times—they grew plentifully all over the mountains—but it was still raining and Melchor worried I would catch a chill.

“I’m feeling better, anyway,” he assured me, although he kept scooting closer to the fire and was still shivering.

I began to worry that the soldiers might linger in the area and we would not be able to go home for several days. Then I thought that even if the men left quickly, the trails could be imperiled by the rain. The rivers would be swollen with water, and certain paths would be impassable. What should I do if Melchor grew worse? We’d braved these caves before, but then he had been hearty and whole.

As the day advanced, I kept the fire going and Melchor dozed before it. Before nightfall I finally let the fire go out, fearful it might attract soldiers. At least the rain had ceased, and I prayed it would remain like this.

But luck was not to be had. Only a couple of hours into the night, the rain resumed, and with it my brother’s shivers increased. His teeth chattered, and he clung to his blankets with all his might, his head bowed as he whispered that he was fine and I should not relight the fire.

We argued. “Let me light it, just for an hour.”

“No, I said no. What if the soldiers should see it?” he muttered.

“But you’re freezing.”

“I’m not.”

“You have to sweat the sickness, Mother says.”

“Maybe at home, in bed, where we can grab a hot water bottle, yes. But not here, where the soldiers would see the flames.”

“The soldiers might have left.”

“There’s someone out there,” my brother said, and he stared at me with a terrible conviction. Then he shivered.

Until this point, I had not thought again about my brother’s talk of nahuales. But I must admit his words made me nervous—these sorcerers not only transformed into animals, but they also sickened cattle and village folk. I began to wonder whether a nahual was not hunting my brother after all.

What had to me seemed ludicrous only hours before now began to seem plausible. Why shouldn't it? I was only a girl, in this remote cave, my brother ill and growing worse. Why shouldn't phantoms dance before my eyes and childhood fears acquire new, terrible shapes?

The minutes advanced and the night outside was black as tar, while the cave teemed with shadows. My lantern hardly offered enough light, and Melchor moaned and whispered in pain, tossing under the covers. He had forbidden me from starting the fire, but I knew we needed both its glow and warmth. And so, I struck the match.

Soon we had a fire burning. My brother did not wake. His eyes were shut tight and his breathing was shallow. I soaked a piece of cloth in rainwater and pressed it against his forehead, repeating this task again and again. But his skin burned like a blazing coal, and his hair was plastered against his forehead.

My brother drifted into delirium, and at one point in the night, while I was rearranging the covers, he stretched out a finger and pointed at the cave's entrance, whispering in my ear, "It comes, it comes nearer. The light . . . you must douse the fire."

But there was only the rain outside and the cold. I told Melchor to lie back and tried to comfort him by clutching his hand. At last, he slept again.

For a while I sat next to him, watching the lightning flash outside and then counting until the thunder boomed. Melchor had told me this was how you measured how far away a storm was. I could hear it approaching. The sky was rent with light; it was as bright as the one time I saw fireworks in town, when we'd been much smaller and my father had carried me on his shoulders.

I fell asleep, and when I woke, the fire had burned out and the animals were restless. I blinked and turned toward my brother, who still slept, then looked back in the direction of the fire and the cave's entrance. I had heard a faint rustling.

The lightning had ceased, and the lantern, which I'd placed atop an empty crate, provided the only illumination. There wasn't even a moon out—clouds had choked it. Despite my brother's loud breathing and the animal noises, I could hear a low scraping coming from the left. It sounded like a nail, sliding against a board.

I stretched out my hand and pulled the pistol from under my brother's pillow. I did not know whether it was loaded, but it was the one weapon I

possessed, and the thought of checking to see whether there were bullets in the chamber did not even occur to me, especially with such poor light. I could barely see anything at all.

I stood up slowly, looking in the direction from which the noise had come. The sound was now moving, and I moved my head, too, trying to trace it.

A shape darted to the right. It was quick and I was not able to make it out. It was charcoal gray against jet black. I squinted, tried to pierce the darkness, but it was no use. But there was something there, standing in shadows.

I licked my lips and held the heavy pistol with both hands. Perhaps if I could stretch my fingers and grab the lantern, I might have a better view, but I was afraid of moving. I'd never seen a nahual, and I feared I now would.

Slowly I slid from my brother's side and grasped the lantern with my left hand, lifting it high.

But as soon as I raised the lantern, the shadow shifted and darted away. The light of the lantern showed me only the walls of the cave.

I wanted to wake Melchor, and yet I could not speak. Instinctively, I must have known that to scream would have been to summon disaster, and I clamped my mouth shut.

I shifted my position and with it the lantern. Nothing extraordinary revealed itself to my eyes, yet I knew well I was not alone, for I could now hear a strange breathing in the cave. It was very low. It was, in fact, a panting. My fingers trembled as the panting seemed to increase, growing louder. Slowly, ever so slowly, I moved, clutching the lantern.

Finally, I saw it, caught underneath that spectral glow, its eyes glinting yellow at me: it was a tiger. Like the one in the book we'd read as children. *H* is for *hippo* and *L* is for *lion* and *T* is for *tiger*.

I was surprised, but the tiger was not. It regarded me with detachment, and its yellow eyes swept over me and landed on my brother, who lay shivering under the covers.

"Don't," I whispered.

But the tiger must have known it had found easy prey. It slunk forward, edging closer to my brother, while I also moved closer. My heart beat fast.

"Don't," I told it once more.

That was when it looked at me, opening its mouth wide. It let out a roar, and its eyes glowed like twin flames. I've visited the zoo at Chapultepec and stood in front of the monkeys' cage and in front of the cage with the tigers, and never have I seen eyes like that. Those eyes were huge and gold, and the tiger's roar was more like music than the sound of a wild animal.

The roar woke my brother, who had until then slept soundly, and he sat up and his voice rang out.

I cannot remember what he said. All I recall is the tiger fixing his molten eyes on my brother, the tiger that began moving closer and closer to Melchor. I remember the blur of stripes and those huge glowing eyes.

I yelled, called the tiger names, and it turned its head.

I don't want you to think I'm unnaturally brave or that I'm stupid. I didn't have the faintest idea how you're supposed to deal with a tiger. The book about the circus showed lions jumping through hoops and clowns standing on their hands, but it did not detail the behavior of big cats. I didn't know if the tiger would be startled by my noises and flee, or attack.

What I did know was that Melchor was weak and helpless, and that if I didn't try to help him, I'd never be able to face my mother. Nor would I be able to sleep at night without having nightmares.

So I hollered and I stomped, and when that did nothing, I pointed my gun, cocked the hammer, and pulled the trigger. I had never killed a thing bigger than a rabbit or a squirrel, and for those I used a slingshot. I had not shot a gun before and was unprepared, even if I understood the mechanics of steel receivers and bullets; the kick of the pistol sent me reeling backward. I landed on the floor with a resounding thud, and the bullet went bouncing into the dark, landing nowhere near the tiger.

The kick of the pistol was so strong you'd think one of the boys had tackled me, like they did sometimes when they played rough and my mother wasn't watching. Not Melchor, of course, but definitely Desiderio, who pushed me down on the riverbank one time and shoved me into the mud.

My rump hurt, and I might have cried like a little kid, except then the tiger leaped atop me, drawn by either the blast or my squeal. I'd succeeded only in angering or frightening it.

As I said, I knew nothing about tigers, and I clearly didn't know nearly enough about pistols, so I did the first thing that came to my mind: I

smashed the lantern against the tiger’s head. But that tiger was made of granite, because the lantern shattered and left no scratch on it. I let go of the handle, and whatever was left of the lantern rolled on the floor and the flame flickered into nothing.

Now we were in darkness again. Never had the world been this dark. It was the blackness of the womb, and blacker still. When the stars are extinguished in the sky and the moon goes dim, as I’m sure it must—nothing can last forever—well, when that happens, it will not be as dark as it was then in that cave.

Dark and cold. My brother once told me there are six houses in the land of the dead, the land that the Maya in the south called Xibalba, and there is a house of darkness and a house of cold, where the wind makes the sound of a whistle as it sneaks through a crack.

I believe the dark in the cave was the dark of this house of the dead and that we had descended into Xibalba. I could either lie back and sink into the womb of the earth, into the arms of death, or I could attempt to rise up through the many layers of the underworld.

The tiger roared, as if it demanded my answer. Its maw was right before my face and I could smell its foul breath and I was able to see its eyes, which had caught a stray beam of light and were pure gold.

I have never seen anything as beautiful or as frightful as the eyes of that tiger. I could have sworn the lightning of the night had sneaked into its pupils and the cold of the rain tipped its claws, which felt like ice as they dug into my chest. I could have sworn, for one brief instant, that tiger was no great cat but a mighty god of death crouching above me. If it had been me alone in that cave, perhaps I would have let the tiger devour me and offered myself in sacrifice to the deity.

Yet I wasn’t alone. Melchor was there, weak and feverish. Melchor needed me.

What is godhood against the need of a child to save her brother? Nothing, I tell you.

I still had the pistol in one hand, and I pressed it hard against the animal’s jaw, firing once more. There was no recoil this time. It was the tiger’s body that reacted, not mine. The tiger slammed against me, and I lay under a mountain of flesh and fur. The wind had been knocked from my lungs and my eyes watered.

The tiger panted and tried to flex its claws.

I heard my brother calling my name in the dark, and I feared I'd die like this, smothered underneath the body of the tiger. But Melchor came to my aid, stumbling through the cave. He managed to pull me away, though I howled in pain: I had broken my right arm during the confrontation.

It was still very dark, and we scooted close to the wall of the cavern, with Melchor clutching me and me clutching him, and we both listened as the tiger's panting ceased. Fear cooled my brother's forehead and made me sweat, but it was an icy sweat that had me thinking we were indeed trapped in one of the houses of the underworld.

I'm not sure how long we remained like this, terrified and shivering, before the sun rose and revealed the tiger's corpse.

I moved closer to the circus cat and looked at it. I had never seen such a large beast, nor one with such strange coloring. Its fur was the color of saffron, its stripes were charcoal black, and it had patches of white. The bullet had not marred the creature much—the face was intact, with just a little red stain under the chin.

In stories about nahuales, once you shoot the sorcerer, his corpse turns back into a human. You're left with a man with a bullet in between the eyes. But either this tiger was no nahual or they told that story wrong.

I pulled the tiger's lips back and touched its fangs and tongue. I counted its teeth, which is how I know my tiger had only twenty-nine of them. Then I inspected its claws. What mighty claws it had! I was lucky. The scratch on my chest was not too deep. The tiger could have torn me to shreds.

Melchor's fever had broken, and he looked at what I was doing and slowly joined me and touched the tiger's back, stroking the fur. We looked at it for a long time, but I would not be able to tell you whether it was a Bengal tiger or one from Bali, although I'm given to understand there are differences between them.

What I know is it was massive and it filled us with such awe that we could not begin to think how I could have killed such a beast.

Not long after, one of our neighbors arrived and was shocked by the sight of us and the big cat. He helped us back home.

One would have thought that, in the immediate aftermath of such an event, I might have confined myself to bed for a few days, but I leaped immediately into action and begged my cousins and neighbors to bring the tiger's corpse back to the farm. I wished to preserve it.

It was such a strange sight that I thought if I did not preserve the corpse, no one would give credence to my story. At first my mother was aghast at the idea, but Melchor convinced her it was worth doing. It was he who actually did the bulk of the taxidermy, since my arm was in a sling and my chest was bandaged, thanks to the yerbero who had seen to me.

A tiger is big, so we kept the head and mounted it on a wooden board rather than stuffing the whole body.

That was how I earned my reputation in those parts. The girl who killed the tiger. Of course, at first I did not wish to speak about the incident with people outside our family, not because it upset me but because I feared the circus owner might demand the return of his animal and I would not have a cent to pay for it. But no one ever came around requesting that I account for the missing cat. I heard people killed other creatures that escaped the train that night, too. Those were the hard days of the Revolution, and the meat of a zebra tastes as good as that of a deer, though I must confess the meat of the tiger was tough. Carnivores are not meant to serve as dinner, and yet we did dine on tiger flesh in 1917.

The rest of the story is told easily enough: My uncle and my father never came back from the war. My mother became a widow officially at the age of forty. The Revolution had left the farm in ruins, and there was no money to be had. The world was supposed to be new, but everything felt scorched and worn.

My brother and I continued to stuff animals and sell them in an effort to raise a little money. We kept some specimens, including our tiger’s head, which we displayed in the living room of my mother’s farmhouse.

Melchor died at twenty-one, after a lump grew under his skin and drained all the life from him. The Lords of Death dragged him to Xibalba after all. Here I am, hunched down and with yellow teeth, all my close relatives buried, and God knows why I remain. Although, if you listen to some of the yerberos back in the mountains, if there are still any, they might say that it’s because I killed the tiger and kept its strength.

At the Mercado de Sonora, they sell amulets and remedies, and I’ve seen ointment jars with tigers on the label. But if you put those on, all that happens is you stink of mentholatum. You can’t bottle a tiger, and I’ve never tried to prolong my life with amulets, even if twenty-nine times three is eighty-seven and that’s my age. But I won’t pretend it’s a magic formula. It’s my lot to survive, it’s what it is, and it’s a pity to live so much and

remain with so little. A poisoned fruit, as Melchor would have said, since he was the one who could tell fairy tales. His death destroyed the farm. Nothing good grew again.

I lost the only picture of my brother I had after I went to work in the city the year after he passed away. It was a photo we'd taken in Pachuca, where he was wearing his best suit and looked serious. It was in black and white, so you couldn't tell the color of his eyes, but they were hazel, and his light hair was parted down the middle.

We were twins and we were opposites, you see. I was strong and robust where he was fragile and reed thin, and my hair was black. That hair's gone to silver now, but my eyes are still very dark. Age did not alter that.

In the city I cleaned houses. It was hard work, but my hands were already calloused from the farm. Some of my employers marveled at the way I spoke and the words I knew. They probably thought big words were only for people with big houses, but my brother read to me. I'll never spell a sentence correctly, but I still remember the poems Melchor recited. I remember the sound of his voice decades later, when his bones are yellowed.

My brother's voice was the voice of the budding flowers and the early rains.

I sent money back to my mother for the upkeep of the farm, but after she passed away, Baldomero and Desiderio never worked it well, and their children did not care for crops or goats. They wanted cars. Who could blame them? As I said, the land had grown sour.

Years ago, I went back to visit the farm and discovered my nephews and nieces had sold all the animals Melchor and I had stuffed, including the tiger's head. For a while I wanted to look for it and buy it back. But a maid's wages are not enough for such a thing, even if I had found it. They tell me a tiger's pelt or head can go for quite a bit these days. Maybe it's in a rich man's collection or moths feasted and left nothing behind. Maybe it ended up in a garbage can. I'm not sure what I would prefer.

I've always had trouble reading, the letters seeming to dance before my eyes, and a maid does not have time to pore over a copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* any more than she has time to think much about the past.

To this day I carry that scratch the tiger gifted me upon the chest, a long, puckered slash that aches when it rains. The scar feels like ice on those days, which is why I tell you this story is true, and I tell it because my brother would have liked to have seen it on paper, since he liked his books very much. The story of the summer when the tiger came to the mountains and we were young.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Image courtesy of the author.

My great-grandmother grew up in Hidalgo during the time of the Revolution. On one occasion she claimed that a lion slipped out of a circus train and roamed the countryside. She said it was eventually killed and she stuffed it. I did not get to see any of the taxidermied animals she worked on. Everything was long gone by the time I was a child. The photo here shows my grandmother, not my great-grandmother, with an eagle.

After the war ended, my great-grandmother went to work in the city as a maid. She did not attend school and was illiterate. She is the reason I'm a writer.

—Silvia Moreno-Garcia

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

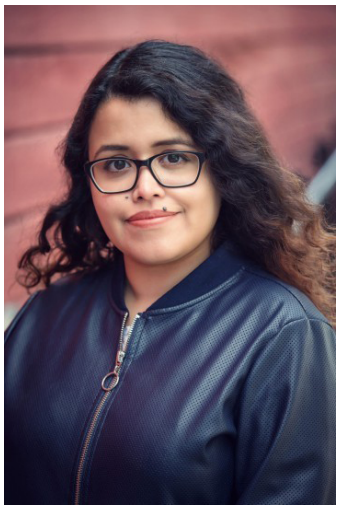

Photo © Martin Dee

Silvia Moreno-Garcia is the New York Times bestselling author of *Velvet Was the Night*, the Locus Award-winning *Mexican Gothic*, and *Gods of Jade and Shadow*. She has also edited several anthologies, including the World Fantasy Award-winning *Cthulhu's Daughters*.