

CHUCHOS

Bradley Spinelli

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For Three Toe, his people, Eva and Balam,
and all the real Chuchos.

chucho: (Spanish) a dog of mixed breeding; mutt

The moon is full and some Mexican hippie is playing his flute by the lake. Mars is closer to earth than it's been in 100,000 years. There, above the moon and to the right, red as hell. Lightning ignites the low-lying cloud cover that hides the city on the far side of the lake from view, a tease, momentarily revealing the twin volcanoes in sharp, flickering relief. The lake itself is all but still. As always, the dogs are barking in the distance.

The hippie blows a low, haunting benediction across the surface of the lake, the ripples tracing his melody in the moonlight, a groaning incantation, an invitation to see. He is from Valle del Bravo, another place famous for its lake, and he squints as he plays, as if remembering the sticky paletas of his childhood, watching the rich people water ski. Far in the distance, the dogs are barking at Mars.

A gringo crouches ankle-deep in the lake, testing the viscosity of the water with the flat of his hand. The water is clingy, and the surface lifts away from the pale hand slowly, with misgiving. The dog on the shore watches, scratching himself with his teeth. The hippie stops playing, the lightning stops with him, and the crouching man freezes, pausing the ripples in the water. The scratching dog looks off into the darkness, rests his jaws on his front paws, and blinks. The dogs in the distance bark on.

It's late by local standards, past 10, and the hippie and the gringo will move on, into the darkness of the low foliage that encircles the lake, finding their way by the light of the piercing moon, stumbling through doorways to sleep their dreams and waste the rest of the night. The scratching dog is only idly curious about these creatures... they don't seem to have any food. He rousts himself towards the lake, licks the surface one, two, three times, and pads up the incline leaving shallow impressions in the mud. The night is just beginning.

A typical local chucho, a small, blond, mangy mutt with pert, floppy triangular

ears and a long snout, the scratching dog picks his way gingerly up the stone path towards the village. A couple of humans, gringos, approach him coming the other way, shining their infernal artificial torches that are so blinding in the darkness. "Hola, chucho," one of them says in passing. That's right, the scratching dog thinks, *chucho*. Not a *perro*, nothing so common, but a chucho, a real dog, down and low to the ground, one of the pack, one to be reckoned with.

Feeling big, sure of himself, the scratching dog follows the curve of the path to the road, where dusty trucks blow past during the day, sometimes stopping and offering welcome shade from the noontime heat. Chuchos crawl under the trucks and pant, scampering out when the engine starts up again. No trucks at this time, and since the afternoon rains have already come and gone, the road is damp and cool and the night is inviting. The scratching dog looks both ways along the road, alone for a moment in the streetlight, takes two steps up towards the hill and sees him. Three Toe. Shit. The scratching dog looks behind him and realizes he's too far away from the path to disappear. He'll have to pay his respects.

Three Toe dances down the road like he owns it. It isn't far from the truth. The scratching dog stands at attention, waiting. Three Toe approaches him. The scratching dog lowers his head in deference. Three Toe sniffs his back end, nods. As Three Toe pads off down the road, the scratching dog disappears into the bushes to cop a nervous squat.

Three Toe grew up on the streets of Barrio dos, fighting for every scrap of dirty tortilla. It took him a long time to reach his current status, and he pays no mind to the talk that he's grown soft. He is still feared, and his recent "domestication" can't dent his reputation.

He got lucky, and he knows it. He took a chance and befriended a more or less local gringo, a tough female human who dotes on him and feeds him with regularity. Sure, Three Toe has been known to languish on the floor of his master's home, rolling

over and allowing his belly to be rubbed, but with greatness come the finer things in life. His street credibility as a warrior remains untainted, and not by accident.

His master would appear to be in for the night, leaving Three Toe room to breathe, free to roam. Sometimes his master has other humans over, giving him reason to hang around longer, begging affection. The humans like to smoke, both the long sticks that burn heavy and sting the eyes and the sticky, sweet smoke that makes Three Toe's nose tickle. On these nights Three Toe naps like a professional, one long siesta after another. He wakes, licks his pecker, thinking of the bitches waiting for him in the darkness, and goes back to sleep. One of his master's friends likes to try to keep Three Toe awake so that he'll stay in at night, not understanding the necessity of serial napping. He kicks his feet in his sleep, dreaming that dream again, and his master jokes with her friends that he's dancing in the Dominican Republic. She's wrong.

Occasionally she has a man human at the house, a practice that sickens Three Toe. He's seen his master, once, very close to a male human, in a position both alarming and disturbing. The humans are ugly enough with their fake coats on, but without them... hideous. The males look truly ridiculous, almost hairless, with tiny peckers that seem only a shell. Nothing comes out of them—no secret extension that makes bitches howl. Three Toe can't understand how they fuck, yet they try anyway. It makes him ill to think of it.

Three Toe pads down the path to the Hotel La Paz, hoping to find a scrap of something tasty. He's not really hungry, but scavenging is a habit that dies hard. From the muddy walk he can smell a familiar, awful smell, and his haunches are up before he walks across the threshold. Paz, the chuchos. Hate that motherfucker. Paz sees Three Toe and stops, anxious to sniff ass and say hello. Not tonight, thinks Three Toe, and starts up a low, uneven growl. When Paz refuses to give way, standing over the smashed remnants of a fell avocado, Three Toe stretches his back and bares his teeth in a rising growl that grows into several severe, threatening barks. Paz, daunted, still wagging his

tail, retreats into the dim, damp night. Three Toe sniffs the avocado and decides against it. It reeks of Paz spit.

Paz doesn't understand why Three Toe hates him so much. As the oldest son of Peanut, Paz is entitled to respect, destined to assume the position Peanut held for so many seasons. But Three Toe refuses to pay any respect, ever. He won't sniff Paz, only growls and orders him out of the way.

Farther up the walk Paz runs into his sister, Chewy, ducking out of her master's house and on her way to another human house she frequents. Chewy sniffs Paz excitedly and they play for a moment, biting each other's haunches and rubbing faces. Chewy looks just like Paz, only larger, both of them deep chocolate, like their father, with strong Rottweiler features only slightly tempered by the thin build of the bitch that whelped them. Chewy is pretty, if not very bright, and her looks have saved her from homelessness her entire life. Her current master is her third; she was first owned by a tall, dark-skinned, frizzy-haired gringo, then passed to his mate, and then, after she left as well, passed to her current master, a heavier, shorter, frizzier-haired version of the first, who acts like a local but also speaks the stilted, sibilant tongue of the gringos. Those humans all look the same, anyway.

Paz likes Chewy, even if she is stupid. She's popular with the gringos, tourists and locals alike. She wags her tail hard, making her whole ass swing back and forth, just like she did when she was a puppy. She gets a lot of attention and a few handouts, which she sometimes shares with Paz. He doesn't worry about her much, knowing that she sleeps indoors and stays away from the barrios. She's less of an embarrassment than his other sister, Spliff, who is little more than a food whore, utterly dependent on the delicate chance of random humans, taking from anyone who will come across.

Paz listens to his sister, snuffling in her shy way, saying the same things she says every day. "What a great day! Did you see the lake? It was so beautiful today! I ate the greatest food! It was so yummy! And I met the nicest human!"

It's a blessing to be stupid, Paz thinks.

The barking on the hill intensifies, and Paz saunters to the trash heap behind the hotel's kitchen to look for a bite. Not seeing any humans to pet her, Chewy walks upstairs, carefully, the steep steps always intimidating, turns around in three quick circles and lies down, long chin flat on the tops of her paws. The loud barking from the barrios scares her every night. She tries not to listen, but even from so far away, she can clearly hear the bickering that marks the beginning of the night.

The talk is typical.

"Where the hell were you last night?"

"I told you, I was hanging out with the boys."

"Hey, you. Yeah, you. Don't walk away from me, I saw you messing with my bitch today."

"You wanna shut the fuck up down there? Some of us are trying to sleep."

"Why don'tcha sleep during the day like a normal fucking chuchos?"

"Don't give me that line, I see you sniffin' her behind. Then you come on up in here and start sniffin' around, like I'm gonna turn around for you."

"You punk ass bitch, I can do better than you on a Sunday."

"I'll rip you one, for saying that shit about me today, chuchos."

"No, chuchos, honest, I just said you were going around with that gringo, hustling him, y'know, cool like."

"Fucking chuchos downtown is saying YOU said, he was walking me around on a leash."

"I saw you with her! Don't give me those big brown dopey eyes!"

"I was only tryin' to get you some food..."

"Don't use that line on me. I seen you with that bitch."

"I never..."

"Think I'm stupid? Then why that bitches pups lookin' so much like you?"

"Only two of them!"

"So you can't even keep her from steppin' out."



Chewy sighed deeply and brushed a paw over her ear.

All the arguing made her sad, and she remembered that new bitch, Molly, the white pit bull with two different colored eyes, who'd just shown up out of nowhere, acting like some sort of queen. Molly barked at some gringos who tried to pet Chewy, and left Chewy crawling off to curl up, untouched. Molly was a stranger. Molly was mean.

Chewy remembered the bite of brownie she'd had that afternoon and was happy again. She rolled over and went back to sleep. The lake will be nice tomorrow. And I'll meet a nice gringo. And I'll get to eat chocolate.

Paz came back around the building, licking his lips, and heard Chewy snoring upstairs. All the better, he thought, she doesn't need to be out tonight. He headed back up the path, pissing at the corner when he smelled Three Toe's mark. I don't care if I get my ass kicked tonight, he thought. I have to know what happens with the fight.

Paz couldn't remember this much buzz about a fight, not in a long time. The last big rivalry he knew not as a personal memory but as a tale told and repeated by others—part of the pack's history. Paz was just a puppy when that whole nonsense was going on. Dignity, the white bitch with brown spots, was in heat, and every chuchos below the road was after her. Paz could hardly believe it, looking at Dignity now, dugs gone saggy, but apparently she had been quite an item. That was several rainy seasons back. The villain in the story was Snow Dog, a stocky white chuchos with no rep to speak of, but hungry, and desperate. He was at the forefront of every attack on Dignity, and Snow Dog got his tail whipped every day for a month. Everyone got a piece of Snow Dog. But the chuchos wouldn't back down, wouldn't leave it alone, and as he told it, got his end in

with Dignity more than once. He took a beating and kept going back. No one could get him to lay off—except Peanut. Peanut ripped him apart. Even now, Snow Dog was scarred, torn apart from that season. He could barely walk, his ears were shredded... he was a casualty.

But Peanut had been a full-size, purebred Rottweiler—a monster. Paz thought that Three Toe and Johnny Black were evenly matched—it wouldn't be so simple. It would be a good fight.

Paz was finishing his piss when he heard it—Jane yelping up the path, Jane, Machete Head's sister, the butch bitch tough enough for most, barking, but with a tone of deference. Paz felt it before he smelled it, and held back, crouched in the bushes. Jane yelped, and one bark barked back, and then the path was silent. It was Three Toe.



Three Toe never barked twice if he could bark once—or get away with growling. He got Jane off his back and went on up the road. Some bitches never forgive.

He was still a little grouchy about that sonofabitch Paz, that upstart, that whippersnapper, thinks he's got some kind of birthright just because he has Peanut's blood in him. Fuck Peanut. Peanut's dead. That legacy doesn't mean shit anymore. Even that breed of fledgling pups by the road, probably the last of Peanut's line, would never come to anything. A dying breed. And Paz—that kid's not old enough to understand how one truly achieves status up in the Barrio. Not notoriety, but status.

Towards the top of the road Three Toe saw one of his regulars. He'd woken early from his nap that afternoon and squeezed in a quick one with her, fucking her hard and quick out back of a low wall protected by banana leaves dripping with soft afternoon showers. The air smelled clean and green and wet. She was still hanging around, waiting for another go, but Three Toe had another date and passed her with just a sniff. He cut up into the Barrio.

Barrio chuchos knew their place and fought for it. Lakeside perros were still too practically purebred to pass as chuchos—mutts, true hardcore motherfuckers. Paz was only second generation, as far as anyone was concerned. One step away from those assholes that hang out by the Pyramid Hotel, Blue and her son Obi Wan, big blue ugly-ass dogs, straight from Pana or the Capital or something. Dogs with “papers”—what a bunch of crap. They’re totally classless, will start a fight for no reason. Even Flaca—the one they call Nose-dog, with the shattered snout that he works up and down like a pig—he only hangs around for protection. Why would anyone put up with those perros?

Three Toe moved on, made his date only a little late, took care of his bitch and got back out on the street quick. He took a lot of heat on the street for lying with ugly, broken bitches, but Three Toe had known them for many seasons and he didn't forget loyalty. It was about the pack. Tonight, especially, it was about the pack, and only for the pack would he settle for only one fuck in an evening—and a quick one at that.

The pack needed him to do something about Johnny Black. The original Johnny Walker Black, son of Mick and his dead bitch Concha, showing his face around again. They were already talking about it as Three Toe made his way up the steep barrio path.

“Is Three Toe gonna take care of it or not?”

“If he doesn't, I swear somebody else is gonna have to.”

“Anybody touches him, they'll have to answer to Three Toe. Johnny Black is marked.”

A low bay went up from the next village over, a cry carried and passed along, a message from the other side of the lake. The rain's coming back, might cross the lake. Three Toe regarded it with little interest, then jumped sideways, catching a painful whollop at his hind leg. An Indian was kicking him. Three Toe recognized the human, apparently still angry because Three Toe stole a steak from him. That was, what, like yesterday? And he's still mad? Three Toe lifted a leg and threw a line of piss. Those man creatures just never forget.

The Indian reached behind his back to cinch up the heavy load of firewood, for a moment relieving the weight hanging from a strap across his forehead. He cursed Three Toe in Cakchiquel, saw a gringo couple walking down the path, cursed the gringos, saw them toss half a banana to another chucho, cursed the gringos and the chucho both, disgusted by the show of status. He took a running step towards Three Toe, still crouching at the edge of the path, throwing an errant kick.

Three Toe jumped aside, snorted and moved on up the path, disgusted. Man. As if standing on two legs ever got anyone anywhere.



Three Toe, for his part, couldn't remember what Black had done in the first place to get so shunned from his pack. All he knew was that the chucho wasn't welcome in town, not by any pack, and Three Toe, as the fighter with the highest status since Peanut passed, was required to kick him out again.

A crowd was already forming at the crossing. Chuchos were yelling, placing bets, staking food they didn't have and weren't likely to see. Bitches were complaining about the violence, catching sharp barbs from their mates and adding to the general clamor. Three Toe wished he'd gotten more sleep.

For a moment, Three Toe remembered his comfortable house, and his master, warm and dry and far below the clamor of the packs, now gathered immodestly, barking for blood. The humans—the gringos, the Indians, the locals, the tourists—none of them could understand the need for such an institution. All of them, in what little humanspeak Three Toe could understand, complained of the noise of the dogs at night. They couldn't understand, these mere humans, these creatures for whom life was so easy. Food was plentiful to them; you never saw them go hungry like the mangy mutts in the street. They didn't sit up late at night, terrified, listening to the reports from across the lake, "Poisoning! Poisoning tonight!" when all the street dogs ran in terror, horrified

that they would be poisoned in the night by human-laid foodscraps in the street. It would put you off eating from the trash for a week—and what self-respecting chuco didn't eat out of the trash? The humans didn't have to fight the thin line of living a proud life free, in the street, taking what the world might give, or to give up, roll over, and spend the rest of what passed for life at the end of a leash. For some, it wasn't an option; older chuchos and any bitch past her second litter could relinquish that dream entirely.

Visiting dogs, perros, talked a nonstop drivel about their homes, where everything was plush and free and for the taking. Spoiled dogs that were soft and had never been in a fight. A visiting poodle—ugly, manicured little bitch, but Three Toe had fucked her anyway, just for the status of nailing a foreigner—had spent the better part of an afternoon with him, snapping at bugs. The big buzzing beetles reminded the bitch of lawn mowers. Three Toe couldn't believe that there was such a thing as a lawn. Manicured foliage? Totally uniform? Meters and meters of it? That little bitch pooped like a princess.

That was all fantasy for a chuco. The kept life, the dream of the golden leash, shitting on a lawn, all of it. This is reality, and you fight for what you need and be damned if anyone's gonna take it. You do what you have to do. Three Toe got his status the old fashioned way: kicking ass.



Three Toe took his place at the center of the crossing, and all the chuchos around barked it up. He heard a couple of his friends in the crowd. “Fuck him up, Three Toe!” “Get him!” Three Toe took his sergeant’s pose, holding his ears up straight and tall like a shepherd, displaying his notched left ear like a badge of honor.

Johnny Black appeared from around the corner, and entered the scene with a riotous clamor of barking. Shit, Three Toe thought, they're gonna hear us in Pana. “Get

out, Johnny Black," was shouted loudly, but a few recanters were barking into their chests:

"Throw him off, Johnny. Topple him."

Three Toe spoke up. "Get out now, Johnny, or I'll have to hurt you. It's the way."

"Forget it, Three Toe. I'm here to stay."

"Get out now, if you have half a brain in your skinny little head."

Johnny looked around and the crowd died down for a minute. "Fuck you, Three Toe," he barked. "I'll notch your other ear."

The crowd erupted into a cacophony of fractured barks and shattered howls, moving towards the center in a singularity of violence. Three Toe was pushed back for a moment as the mob took over, a genuine dogfight, chuchitos yipping and machos nipping at Johnny's legs, pushing at him with strong chests, and now shoves and lunges at Three Toe—an indiscriminate mass of fur and blurred bodies, an undulating miasma of unfocused aggression. There was no choice but to fight.

As a hole opened between hirsute figures, Three Toe caught a glimpse of Johnny and sprang, catching him right at the sweet spot, the back of the neck. Johnny braced and dug his teeth into Three Toe's chest, just above the right leg. Already the crowd was backing off—still jumping and careening for a better view, still pressing the fray, but giving way to the two silhouettes at the nexus of rage. Three Toe opened his jaws, losing his hold, and sprang back to dislodge the teeth in his chest—but Johnny was quick and leapt after him. Three Toe pulled around to face his assailant, snarling, inaudible over the bloodthirsty calls of the crowd. Johnny snapped at the air. Three Toe leaned in and missed, and Johnny caught a nip of ear and came away with flesh, flecking the inside of Three Toe's ear with his own blood. "Got ya," he barked, and Three Toe barked back. "That's all you're gonna get."

Three Toe hit the back of Johnny's neck so hard he felt the spray of Johnny's blood in his mouth. Johnny yelped, temporarily blinded, and tried to pull away, but the

crowd shouldered him back into the center of the crossing, Three Toe still atop him. Johnny snapped and reeled, snapped and reeled, but couldn't gain purchase and couldn't reach any part of Three Toe to bite. Three Toe didn't let go, but sunk his jaws in deeper and thrashed. Johnny was bleeding good. The crowd was calling for his death.

Three Toe released Johnny and stepped back, disguising his limp. He snarled at Johnny, showing his blood-stained teeth, taunting him. "Get the hell out of here while you're still able to breathe."

Johnny winced. "This isn't over."

"It never is," Three Toe hissed, and Johnny jumped forward in a final effort, snapping at Three Toe's face. Three Toe bent down, pushed off, and vaulted, landing on top of Johnny—risky, considering the danger of revealing one's belly—and chomped into Johnny's ass, rolling off of him and coming up with a sticky wad of fur in his mouth. Johnny whined and leapt away, snapping.

"Fuera!" Three Toe barked, and at the sound Johnny backed out of the crossing quickly, slinking away, looking back over his shoulder.

"Don't look at me, bitch!" Three Toe called out. "And you best put that tail between your legs."

Johnny did as he was told and slipped off into the night, his tail firmly between his legs, his head lowered ahead of him, chuchos behind him snarling and snapping at his heels. The night swallowed him up in a chorus of barks.

The crowd scattered and thinned. Three Toe ignored the chattering and let one of his bitches lick him a little, cleaning his wounds, and then strode off as the rain began to come in steady, pulmonary beats. The crowd was dispersing, and in the throng Three Toe spotted Paz. He let him off with a light growl and padded down towards the road and his master's house. It was getting cold and he was exhausted.

Paz saw a few chuchos eyeing him, having witnessed the exchange with Three Toe, and decided not to push his luck. He threw a line of piss on a neutral bush and headed back downtown, unconcerned. Blood had been shed, and the rain was intensifying, stalking its prey across the lake, pounding across the canopy of banana trees in a steady crescendo, and no one was going to waste a bark on Paz tonight. He would have his day.

Paz decided to stop by his namesake hotel, just to check on his sister, and turning down off the road onto the main path saw a small dog scratching himself in a patch of moonlight by the ditch.

"Three Toe win?" the scratching dog asked.

"You couldn't hear it?" Paz replied.

"Well, did you see it?"

"Yeah, I saw it," Paz added, and padded off without bothering to sniff him. Paz was hungry and didn't want to talk about it, especially not with someone with fleas so bad.

The scratching dog didn't care what Paz thought about it, anyway. He was scared of Three Toe, even if Paz wasn't smart enough to be, and whatever the future held, whatever Peanut's legacy would be, the scratching dog would always think of Three Toe as a hero. A role model. A real chucho.

Feeling tough, the scratching dog went on down the path towards the lake, and almost tripped a human. It was him again, the Mexican hippie, the one with the strange noisemaker. The hippie laughed, a low, throaty laugh like a growl, and addressed the scratching dog cheerfully. "Buenas noches, chucho."

That's right, the scratching dog thought to himself, I am a chucho, and proud of it. He moved on, hearing the wet squish of his own feet on the stone path.

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About this story:

Since finding his way to Lake Atitlan in 2001, Spinelli has endeavored to spend at least a few weeks each year relaxing and writing in this glorious spot, a beatific lake flanked by three stunning volcanoes. In addition to interesting people, the surrounds also offer a wide variety of dog life. Most people have dogs for protection and companionship, and there is a large population of near-feral dogs. This story was originally written around 2004, utilizing as characters the dogs that roamed the lake at the time, and incorporating whatever knowledge of the dogs' heritage Spinelli could pick up from their people. No dogs were harmed in the writing of this story.

Cover photo: Three Toe, aka Fritz, October, 2007. R.I.P.



About the author:

Spinelli is the author of the novel [Killing Williamsburg](#) (Le Chat Noir, 2013), excerpted in *Sensitive Skin* and *The Ampersand Review*, winner of the Naked Girls Reading literary honors, which *The Awl* called “the first visionary neo-Romantic novel of the 21st century.” He contributes to *New York Magazine*’s Bedford and Bowery.

Spinelli is currently working on a novel set in Bangkok. He doesn’t speak Cakchikel and is slightly embarrassed that his Spanish is still so pathetic. He lives with his wife in Brooklyn.

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