

# SKIVE

A woman wearing a wide-brimmed hat, looking directly at the camera with glowing yellow eyes. The entire image has a red color cast.

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## Hell

Matthew Thompson's  
*My Colombian Death*  
excerpt

Peter V. Brett's  
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review & interview

**Ebook Version**

Short Stories & Poetry

B O O K E X C E R P T



# Hell

Excerpt from *My Colombian Death* (Picador, 2008),

by **Matthew Thompson**

*Guarne*

**THE MOUNTAINS' BEAUTY** IS CONSOLING AS WE CLIMB EAST INTO THE LUSH GREEN OF THE ANDES, MORE SO THAN THE TERMINAL'S SHRINE TO THE BLESSED VIRGIN, AROUND WHICH KNEELED A MAN AND WOMAN THIS MORNING. EL GRINGO DOESN'T BUY NEWSPAPERS SO HE HADN'T KNOWN THAT A FEW DAYS AGO THE

guerrillas stopped a bus two hours out of Medellín and kidnapped the driver. El Gringo's dozing on a seat opposite, arms wrapped around himself, head to the side. I want to rest my eyes but can't. Luck and force of will have kept me alive and in one piece these months. This is no time to sleep.

We pass hamlets of spartan little green, blue and salmon houses where women hang clothes out to dry and dogs sniff around. We overtake old mountain men riding horse- and donkey-drawn carts. The men look distinguished in their formal dress hats, trousers and with their stoic expressions. Their younger colleagues wear T-shirts and cowboy hats or baseball caps, but have the same self-reliant bearing. Sometimes a bird wheels high over the ranges, wings flung wide to ride the currents. Being out of the city would be glorious if only this dreadful, rotten hangover weren't lapping up through me, threatening to spill out of my mouth.

El Gringo wakes as we turn off the highway. He gets his bearings and nods to me as we pull into a small, picturesque village.

'Guarne is old Antioquia,' he says, looking with pride at the

tidy plaza where old men sit and a *borracho* sleeps, and down its streets of Spanish-style buildings with balustraded balconies and wooden-shuttered windows.

We stop at a corner store to guzzle juice and eat *empanadas*. El Gringo has cousins in Guarne whom we might stay with tonight, and he asks the shopkeeper if they're around, but they live outside town and the man hasn't seen them; nor does he know where the native medicine man lives.

El Gringo telephones the shaman's house and is given directions. 'He's on a *finca* before the town,' he says after hanging up. 'We should have got off the bus a ways back.'

We cross the plaza, pass the old church and stately buildings overlooking it, and head up a side street. A few men stand around talking in a mechanic's workshop and when El Gringo asks for directions again one of them says he knows the shaman and, for a price, will drive us.

We climb into the back of his Land Cruiser, thick with the smell of farm feed and muck, and bounce along the dirt roads outside town. I'm still sick as a dog but sharpening with anticipation, hanging on tightly in the back and looking around at the genteel estates tucked away in the back country. Last night I was despairing about our chances of making it, but here we are working our way to the prize. El Gringo is an undisciplined fuck-up of a 44-year-old, but he goes the distance.

The Land Cruiser revs high to haul us up a steep curve of a driveway, and now

we're on a hilltop full of shiny new Japanese and European sedans parked at the back of a two-storey house. When the driver kills the engine, I hear the puffs and trills of Andean flute music. I dig for the fare but the driver's out, walking towards the house. He's met on approach by a young Latino with a beatific smile. El Gringo and I climb out and stretch, then walk through the cars to see an Indian come around the house, hailed by the driver and fussed over by the acolyte.

The shaman is not a gaunt, hard-faced *indigena* like the many who haunt the streets of Medellin and Bogota as refugees. This is instead a fleshy and comfortable man standing proudly in his domain. He wears a striped woven poncho and, beneath it, neatly cuffed jeans, and his hair does not hang black and long but is steely patrician grey, trimmed short. His expansive, fortified house is like something out of a freshly cashed-up First World suburb; it's a spankingly new cream construction with a peaked roof instead of being salmon or blue and flat-topped in the Spanish style.

The shaman's *finca* straddles a ridge, and gardens with a vast variety of shrubs and flowers and food plants are landscaped into the hill to our right. There's a quaint wooden fernery with leafy green plants glimmering behind wire gauze. And I can see a cloud of white flowers of Angel's Trumpet.

The landscaped slope falls to dense forest and then rises to another even higher ridge. The valley to the left is dotted by *fincas*, and beyond it is another ridge. It's

beautiful country, but, like El Poblado, seems too at ease to be Colombia, especially when I was braced for rural squalor – a ramshackle chicken-run of a set-up with threadbare kids and mangy dogs and splintery old shacks. This doesn't feel right.

El Gringo is bewildered, too. 'Dude, there must be some serious money in *yage*,' he says.

The shaman shows no reaction to us; when I reach out, he shakes hands quickly with only a glance and nods at my greeting without saying a word. Then he farewells our driver and wanders back down the side of the house. As the aide hits El Gringo with a spiel about how wonderful and profound today will be for us, I pay the driver and then, with a pang, watch the solid farming man leave.

The aide asks us to be quiet, because, as I feared would be the case due to our late arrival, the ceremony has already started. He leads El Gringo and me up onto the rear veranda, where Indian music comes from the loudspeakers and the walls are stuck with glossy posters of generic spiritual art, aphorisms and timetables for workshops in native medicine. Several notices are signed Taita Luis, so I guess



that's the shaman's name. A young man in designer casuals smiles from a chair. Hanging inside the house is more spiritually enlightened motel art – a proud Indian face painted with jungle-green warpaint radiating light. Revulsion hits, tightening my chest and stiffening my jaw. This is too much like the smug, New Age spiritualism I've seen in self-satisfied pockets of Australia; yoga and Buddhism for the rich and comfortable. This tacky indulgence spits in the face of every one of Colombia's battered losers.

'Dude, check this out.' El Gringo is looking at the lawn behind the veranda where six people lie under an open marquee of corrugated iron suspended by logs. They are mostly facedown on camping mats with blankets tossed over them. Three have someone squatting beside to hold a hand or murmur encouragement, while a young man sits over to the left on a log, gazing out at the hills on his own. 'Did you see the vomit?'

No, but I do now. A man in the middle row lifts his head to the side and unleashes a gusher onto the grass an elbow's reach away. He groans and drops his head back to the sleeping mat, lying dead still as his aide dabs his mouth with a tissue. The grass beside all of the shaman's clients is slick with puke.

Our aide is saying we'll get a mat and blanket and a spot on the lawn. 'The toilet's there,' he says, pointing at a shabby hut at the far end. I'm not doing this. I just can't. No way am I going to pay some fat cat just so I can lie puking on the ground behind his gleaming mansion, crapping in a dark little outhouse, trying to kid myself it has some spiritual benefit. And look at me – I'm still drunk, I'm sick and stinking after a night out, a week's growth on my face, wild-eyed and worn out. No way am I doing this.

'Ready, mate?' says El Gringo.

'I don't like the feel of it.'

'The yuppie vibe? Dude, who do you think does *yage*? No one else's got money to spend on this shit.'

The blissed-out fellow on the chair waves us over and says, in English, that *yage* has really helped him. 'Since I started with this medicine I quit smoking, I quit drinking, I got a good job,' he says. 'And you've come to a good place. I've taken *yage* 34 times, in Colombia, Ecuador, Brazil, Panama, even America, but now I only come here. Taita Luis makes the best medicine.'

A cashmere-clad young woman assisting on the lawn signals for silence.

This is just intoxication. This whole country runs on getting wasted, on sickening levels of self-indulgence. I don't need any more of it.

The shaman appears from inside the house and sits, asking El Gringo and me

if we are prepared to start. Without waiting for an answer he launches into a rambling monologue that I don't understand and even my native Spanish-speaking friend has trouble following. 'Dude, this guy's a nut,' El Gringo says, when the shaman stops. 'He's saying something about butterflies and opening doors and fuck knows what else. He's not making any sense.'

'I'm not doing it.'

'What?' He looks like he's been slapped.

'I'm not doing it. I'll still pay for you and I'll stay here with you, but I just don't like this. I've had it, man. I don't want to be used. I don't want to get wasted anymore. I just want to get my shit together. I'll stay with you while you do it, but no, not me.'

El Gringo sinks in his chair, slowly shaking his head. 'Now, Matt, now? After all this? We finally make it here and now you don't want to do it? Man, I'm confused. I thought you – I don't know. I'm confused. Fuck.'

It feels shameful to let El Gringo down, because no matter what else he does or has done in his wreckage of a life, with me he has been dependable and honest. I can trust him, but now he is

losing trust in me. 'Well, you do it.'

'No.' He is angry. 'If you're not, then I'm not.'

The shaman goes back inside and we sit in silence. Bushy, soft-leaved trees rustle with the breeze in the shaman's garden. Clouds billow over the lip of the mountains. Someone vomits. Someone whispers. So it's not exotic. It's not what I wanted or expected. But it's what's here, and life should always be about squaring up to what is really here. I will get sick and probably hate this day, but willing myself on despite discomfort and fear is the path I've chosen and a source of strength and pride.

'OK,' I say. 'OK.'

El Gringo stands up and takes a last look around. 'Well, we made it,' he says. 'We just didn't do it.'

'No, let's do it.'

'Yeah? OK!' El Gringo claps his hands and tells the aide we're ready.

Inside the back door there's a table with a large urn of filtered water, and a pitcher streaked at the top and heavy in the hold with bottom-of-the-swamp brown ooze. The shaman fills two large plastic cups with water and two small cups with the *yage*. He carries them to a card table on the veranda and chants, waves a bundle of dried herbs above them, flutters his eyes, and then disappears back into his house.

'First the medicine and then the water,' says the aide, who holds blankets and mats.

'Here goes, dude,' says El Gringo, draining the *yage* and then turning to me with a sour-faced grimace. 'Oh, that's, that's

– oh.’ He quivers and guzzles the water. ‘Yuck.’

I lift it to my face and it smells like the deepest jungle rot. It’s a thick, rank, fibrous gunge. My tongue dries and curls back into my throat. I am close to vomiting just holding the cup. Now it’s in my mouth, bitter beyond belief and difficult to bring down through the gag reflex. It slugs and boils in my stomach, this distillation of rot.

I skol the water but all it seems to do is move more of the *yage* across my tastebuds. Now the vomiting makes sense. And the hangover had me wanting to chuck even before I went near this stuff.

We follow the aide around the prone trippers to the bottom of the covered area, where he drops our mats a metre apart.

El Gringo looks down at the others lying by their filth and suggests we stand around a campfire smouldering between the clients and toilet. We’re there barely 10 seconds before he jogs to a fence and hurls his guts over the side. Nausea is prowling through me, reaching down from my mouth to feel around in my stomach, but after all the bouts of gastro I’ve had it’s not unmanageable. I feel very tender. A wooziness builds inside, an uncertainty about all matters physical. Someone is steering a disoriented old lady to the toilet, holding her arm as they silently pass by.

El Gringo is back at the fire, accepting a tissue from the cashmere girl, a beautiful young woman, delicate and caring. She turns to me and asks if I speak English. ‘First time?’ I nod, and she takes my hands in hers.

‘It is very hard. Perhaps the hardest experience in your life. No matter what happens, you have to move towards God. Always towards God.’

I don’t know what to say or think. I don’t believe in God and I’m woozy. ‘I’ve got to lie down,’ I tell her.

She walks with me, still holding my hand. ‘I am here to help. The others also.’ She points to a pair of young men giving El Gringo a clump of toilet paper to take to the hut. ‘If you have trouble, we are here. You are not alone. We are with you.’

The ground is unstable. The grass, the trees, the glimpses of blue sky; everything shimmers and twists. My eyes close but the grass is still there, every single glistening, knife-edged blade pushing out from the earth, writhing, knotting and spearing up with all the fermenting fuel and fevers of the dirt propelling it.

El Gringo sits cross-legged on his mat, and asks if I feel much yet.

‘It’s coming on,’ I mutter. ‘Can’t really talk right now.’

‘OK, but I don’t feel a thing. Think I puked it out. What a fucking waste. Damn.’

‘The toilet OK?’

‘Huh? Yeah, it’s fine.’



I lift my head and look at the hut, the browns of its woods, swelling and fading. Maybe everyone else knew to use the toilet before drinking the *yage*. If, as I've read, this stuff has a laxative effect I don't want to shit in my jeans. So I'm up, trying to walk, but it's hard, so hard to stay upright and place a foot forward. But a helper has my arm now, and the cashmere girl plants a roll of paper in my hand. 'OK,' says the youth helping me, opening one of two cubicle doors. I nod my thanks and enter the small dark chamber.

The only light in here is a glow that slips through a hand's-width gap above the door. Good god, this is strong, so strong, and it's only a few minutes since drinking the stuff. The bowl is sprayed with soft wet shit, but the seat looks clean. I wipe it anyway with a square of paper, place the roll on a board beside the toilet, drop my jeans and sit.

Where's the purge, the great shitting I've read about? It's not here, and I don't have the energy to push. I'm reeling, so woozy, and the nausea is getting sharper and sharper. Oh, man, my head in my hands; oh, this sickness is awful.

It's OK. Don't worry. Got to expect nausea. Those shaman documentaries in which they eat hallucinogenic cactus and sing in the desert – they vomit. Natural substances don't hide their costs, their uneven surfaces. It's only the modern world where drugs have had the turbulence removed or hidden. Once the sickness passes, this will be good. I'm tough enough. The nausea will pass. This is the price, this deep, awful curling of gravity that bends me forward. Have to sit up.

Oh, oh. Here it comes. It flings my mouth wide to give maximum passage to foaming white vomit.

Shouldn't I feel better now? It's not in me, but it's getting worse. Feel dreadful, poisoned. The bitter rancid stew is contaminating and rotting my organs. Something is wrong.

I open my eyes, and here I am, in a toilet, so sick and weak I can't even slide my foot out of the pooling vomit. My mouth hangs open; my hands slip from my thighs. No strength, the sickness has eaten it away and left me shelled. I'm a husk. I scarcely have the strength to breathe. Vomit gushes again from my limp head. This poison is so strong. Help me. Please. Why do I thrash myself like this? No more. *¡Basta!* a Colombian would say – enough.



I soar from a great height into a vast plaza, older than life, ringed with stone terraces and covered to the limits of sight in red grit. Light itself burns red, radiating through teeming multitudes below, the red-skinned masses moving deftly and rapidly in all directions, unhindered by the immense atmospheric pressure that is turning me inside out, a groan covering me like skin. I am a voyager without hope of return, lost to my race, my species.

Halfway up a terrace sits a man with his hairless head stained yellow, his face a painted mask. He knows I'm here and he knows I'm in the wrong body, the wrong form, the wrong thoughts, the wrong life. The man's yellow mask draws me in towards the final knowledge that I'm the mask, painted and empty, nothing more than a vessel for other entities to see through. Talons curl into the eyeholes to twist and stretch me apart. My tongue is torn loose and my stomach ripped through my throat. Burning and liquefying. All is molten rubber, stinking and agonizing. I'm changing.

I'm sick. Profoundly sick. My heart has been lurching and struggling; now it barely pulses at all and between its weaker and

weaker beats, time hangs still for longer and longer. When it does quiver in my chest, it is so faint that my blood stagnates and inside I'm drowning.

Please, Renae. Please, God. Please, shaman. Everything is going to be OK, isn't it? It's just *yage*. Just a few plants. I have done stupid things before but never anything as serious as this. This is deteriorating. I have made it through everything in life, but nothing has been as overwhelming, as frightening, a terminal-feeling, as this.

I could die.

No! Don't think it. Can't be true. It's just *yage*. It'll pass. This has been done a thousand times. A million times. Sting did it. Tori Amos. William Burroughs. Didn't kill them. But pop stars probably get treated with care, small doses, and they go in clean and healthy. And probably do it in Brazil with film crews. Not here. Not like this. Who would know if there were casualties amongst nobodies like me? And in Colombia, who would care?

Renae, where are you? What have I done? And my baby, Avalon, the sweetest of sweet little babies, I am your daddy. You have to know your daddy. I've got to get out of here.

I have never been in so much trouble before.

Hospital.

Hospital.

Abort. Emergency. Hospital, please.

I've got a yell in me, I know it. I can yell. I can fucking yell.

No, I can't.

Stop panicking, Matt. You're Matt. You're Matt. Remember that. You live. You always make it. Nothing can kill you. You're going to be an old man. Don't panic.

I admit it. This is an emergency and I need immediate medical help, CPR, adrenalin shots, oxygen, evacuation to a hospital. I'm too old and my heart has taken a pounding from the coke. The *yage* is killing me.

I'm overdosing.

God, vomiting again and no control, it just falls from my head. But why no mercy? I've always thrown myself into crazy things – a nomadic life, boxing, underground rock and roll, toxic relationships, workaholic journalism – and then moved on, sometimes bruised but with a wealth of feeling and experience. Nothing has been fatal. No one can learn a lesson by dying.

I have to survive. Can't leave. Can't leave my child. Can't leave Renae. Jesus, Renae, anyone, pull me back. Make the heart beat. move air between my lips. This is bad. This is real. This is really happening.

Shadows and half-glimpses of people flit and float past where I slump on a bench of a bleak, hard city where there is no colour to be seen, no light in the sky. The world smoulders grey like the memory of ash.

I'm dying in a Third World toilet. I threw everything away. I put Renae through hell and stole her baby's father away to go and die from drugs in a Colombian toilet. This is nothing but the worst kind of squalor. How could I come to this? I've been lying to myself about everything. The villain in Colombia, the one to watch out for, was me. I'm the king of deception, and now that it's dawning, no matter how hard I will myself up, to get up and live and live in the truth, there's no traction, it's too fucking late. Every cell in my body is coming to total, terminal stillness. Panic detonates into endlessly expanding terror.

Traitor to your family.

Avalon, why don't you have a dad? He died of an overdose in a toilet in Colombia.

Heartbeats are long gone. My body slumps sideways, compressing the last air out of my lungs. I slide from the toilet seat and fall, cracking my head on the wall but feeling nothing, just observing an abrupt switch in view.

Motionless on the floor, hand and arm in vomit. No further to descend and no colour in last sight. Everything has bled out. These are the final moments of electrical impulses in the brain before oxygen starvation hits erase and I die. ■

– Photographs © Matthew Thompson, 2009. *My Colombian Death* is available from Abbey's Bookshop in Sydney, and all other good bookshops.