“La Puerta”
By José Antonio Burciaga

It had rained in thundering sheets every afternoon that summer. A dog-tired Sinesio returned home from his job in a mattress sweat shop. With a weary step from the autobús, Sinesio gathered the last of his strength and darted across the busy avenida into the ramshackle colonia where children played in the meandering pathways that would soon turn into a noisy arroyo of rushing water. The rain drops striking the barrio’s tin, wooden and cardboard roofs would soon become a sheet of water from heaven.

Every afternoon Sinesio’s muffled knock on their two-room shack was answered by Faustina, his wife. She would unlatch the door and return to iron more shirts and dresses of people who could afford the luxury. When thunder clapped, a frightened Faustina would quickly pull the electric cord, believing it would attract lightening. Then she would occupy herself with preparing dinner. Their three children would not arrive home for another hour.

On this day Sinesio laid down his tattered lunch bag, a lottery ticket and his week’s wages on the oily tablecloth. Faustina threw a glance at the lottery ticket. Sinesio’s silent arrival always angered Faustina so she glared back at the lottery ticket, “Throwing money away! Buying paper dreams! We can’t afford dreams, and you buy them!”

Sinesio ignored her anger. From the table, he picked up a letter, smelled it, studied the U.S. stamp, and with the emphatic opening of the envelope sat down at the table and slowly read aloud the letter from his brother Aurelio as the rain beat against the half tin, half wooden rooftop.

Dear Sinesio,

I write to you from this country of abundance, the first letter I write from los Estados Unidos. After two weeks of nerves and frustration I finally have a job at a canning factory. It took me that long only because I did not have the necessary social security number. It’s amazing how much money one can make, but just as amazing how fast it goes. I had to pay for the social security number, two weeks of rent, food, and a pair of shoes. The good pair you gave me wore out on our journey across the border. From the border we crossed two mountains, and the desert in between.

I will get ahead because I’m a better worker than the rest of my countrymen. I can see that already and so does the “boss.” Coming here will be hard for you, leaving Faustina and the children. It was hard enough for me and I’m single without a worry in life. But at least you will have me here if you come and I’m sure I can get you a job. All you’ve heard about the crossing is true. Even the lies are true. “Saludos” from your “compadres” Silvio and Ramiro. They are doing fine. They’re already bothering me for the bet you made against the Dodgers.

Next time we get together I will relate my adventures and those of my “compañeros” … things to laugh and cry about.

Aurelio signed the letter Saludos y abrazos. Sinesio looked off into space and imagined himself there already. But this dreaming was interrupted by the pelting rain and Faustina’s knife dicing nopal, cactus, on the wooden board.
¿Que crees? – “What do you think?” Faustina asked Sinesio.

No Se! – “I don’t know,” Sinesio responded with annoyance.

“But you do know, Sinesio. How could you not know? There’s no choice. We have turned this over and around a thousand times. That miserable mattress factory will never pay you enough to eat with. We can’t even afford the mattresses you make!”

Sinesio’s heart sank as if he was being pushed out or had already left his home. She would join her comrades as another undocumented widow. Already he missed his three children, Celso, Jenaro, and Natasia his eldest, a joy every time he saw her. “An absence in the heart is an empty pain,” he thought.

Faustina reminded Sinesio of the inevitable trip with subtle statements and proverbs that went straight to the heart of the matter. “Necessity knows no frontiers,” she would say. The dicing of the nopal and onions took on the fast clip of the rain. Faustina looked up to momentarily study a trickle of water that had begun to run on the inside of a heavily patched glass on the door. It bothered her, but unable to fix it at the moment she went back to her cooking.

Sinesio accepted the answer to a question he wished he had never asked. The decision was made. There was no turning back. “I will leave for el norte in two weeks,” he said gruffly and with authority.

Faustina’s heart sank as she continued to make dinner. After the rain, Sinesio went out to help his compadre widen a ditch to keep the water from flooding in front of his door. The children came home, and it became Faustina’s job to inform them that Papa would have to leave for awhile. None of them said anything. Jenaro refused to eat. They had expected and accepted the news. From their friends, they knew exactly what it meant. Many of their friends’ fathers had already left and many more would follow.

Throughout the following days, Sinesio continued the same drudgery at work but as his departure date approached he began to miss even that. He secured his family and home, made all the essential home repairs he had put off and asked his creditors for patience and trust. He asked his sisters, cousins and neighbors to check on his family. Another compadre lent him money for the trip and the coyote. Sinesio did not know when he would return but told everyone “One year, no more. Save enough money, buy things to sell here and open up a negocio, a small business the family can help with.”

The last trip home from work was no different except for the going-away gift, a bottle of mescal, and the promise of his job when he returned. As usual, the autobús was packed. And as usual, the only ones to talk were two loud young men, sinvergencias – without shame.

The two young men talked about the Lotería Nacional and a lottery prize that had gone unclaimed for a week. “Cien millones de pesos – One hundred million pesos! Caray!” one of
them kept repeating as he slapped the folded newspaper on his knees again and again. “Maybe the fool that bought it doesn’t even know!”

“Or can’t read!” answered the other. And they laughed with open mouths.

This caught Sinesio’s attention. Two weeks earlier he had bought a lottery ticket. “Could…? No!” he thought. But he felt a slight flush of blood rush to his face. Maybe this was his lucky day. The one day out of the thousands that he had lived in poverty.

The two jumped off the bus, and Sinesio reached for the newspaper they had left behind. There on the front page was the winning number. At the end of the article was the deadline to claim the prize: 8 that night.

Sinesio did not have the faintest idea if his ticket matched the winning number. So he swung from the highest of hopes and dreams to resigned despair as he wondered if he had won one hundred million pesos.

Jumping off the bus, he ran home, at times slowing to a walk to catch his breath. The times he jogged, his heart pounded, the newspaper clutched in his hand, the heavy grey clouds ready to pour down.

Faustina heard his desperate knock and swung the door open.

“Dónde está?” Sinesio pleaded. “Where is the lottery ticket I bought?” He said it slowly and clearly so he wouldn’t have to repeat himself.

Faustina was confused, “What lottery ticket?”

Sinesio searched the table, under the green, oily cloth, on top of the dresser and through his papers, all the while with the jabbing question, “What did you do with the boleto de lotería?”

Thunder clapped. Faustina quit ironing and unplugged the iron. Sinesio sounded off about no one respecting his papers and how no one could find anything in that house. ¿Dónde está el boleto de lotería? – Where is the lottery ticket?

They both stopped to think. The rain splashed into a downpour against the door. Faustina looked at the door to see if she had fixed the hole in the glass.

La puerta! – “The door!” blurted Faustina, “I put it on the door to keep the rain from coming in!”

Sinesio turned to see the ticket glued to the broken window pane. It was light blue with red numbers and the letters “Lotería Nacional.” Sinesio brought the newspaper up to the glued lottery ticket and with his wife compared the numbers off one by one – Seis – tres- cuatro – uno – ocho – nueve – uno – SIETE-DOS! – Sinesio yelled.
“No!” trembled a disbelieving and frightened Sinesio, “One hundred million pesos!” His heart pounded afraid this was all a mistake, a bad joke. They checked it again and again only to confirm the matching numbers.

Sinesio then tried to peel the ticket off. His fingernail slid off the cold, glued lottery ticket. Faustina looked at Sinesio’s stubby fingernails and moved in. But Faustina’s thinner fingernails also slid off the lottery ticket. Sinesio walked around the kitchen table looking, thinking, trying to remain calm.

Then he grew frustrated and angry. “What time is it?”

“A quarter to seven,” Faustina said looking at the alarm clock above the dresser. They tried hot water and a razor blade with no success. Sinesio then lashed out at Faustina in anger. “You! I never answered your mockery! Your lack of faith in me! I played the lottery because I knew this day would come!” “Por Dios Santo!” and he swore and kissed his crossed thumb and forefinger. “And now? Look what you have done to me, to us, to your children?”

“We can get something at the farmacia! The doctor would surely have something to unglue the ticket.”

“¡Si! ¡O si!” mocked Sinesio. “Sure! We have time to go there.”

Time runs faster when there is a deadline. The last bus downtown was due in a few minutes. They tried to take the broken glass pane off the door but he was afraid the ticket would tear more. Sinesio’s fear and anger mounted with each glance at the clock. In frustration, he posed the door out into the downpour and swung it back into the house, cracking the molding and the inside hinges. One more swing, pulling, twisting, splintering, and Sinesio broke the door completely off.

Faustina stood back with hands over her mouth as she recited a litany to all the santos and virgins in heaven as the rain blew into their home and splashed her face wet.

Sinesio’s face was also drenched. But Faustina could not tell if it was from the rain or tears of anger, as he put the door over his head and ran down the streaming pathway to catch the autobús.