

War stories

Short story talent **Daniel Alarcón** on conjuring the nameless, war-torn country of his debut novel.

"My family's Peruvian but I didn't grow up there, so when I went there as an adult, I had an outsider's perspective. I was in the streets 20 hours a day, walking around, talking to people, taking pictures. In the novel, most of my references are to Peru, but in creating this country, I didn't want to be tied down to the details of our national trauma, our civil war, our city. So it was a constant process of translating, uprooting reality and mixing it with other places I'd visited and other histories I'd read.

"Some scenes are set in a fictional version of the neighborhood where I lived in Lima, a dusty district on the city's edge. I did a lot of reading, too, on terrorism and on civil wars. The torture scene where soldiers drop a suspect into a hole and cover it with boards—that kind of stuff happened in Peru, but I got that image from a book on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These things pop into the novel, and when they feel organic, they stay.

"I didn't want to romanticize anything. I just wanted my characters to be human. Like *Rey*: I talked to former members of the rebel groups during the war, and a lot of them had stories like his. They never killed anyone, never set off a bomb; they had only passed an envelope or made a phone call. They told themselves they had 'clean hands,' but of course that's not true. I wanted to write this game that *Rey* plays with himself, and the effect it has on his family, his life, and his country. He pretends he's not involved in the war, but he's unleashed a monster."

AS TOLD TO CHRIS SMITH

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOCK McDONALD

THE WORK

Lost City Radio (recently published by Harper-Collins), a dark fable about the impact of a war that has gone on so long no one can remember how it began.

CV

Born in Peru but raised in Alabama, Daniel Alarcón, 30, is the Distinguished Visiting Writer at Mills College in Oakland. In 2001 he went to Lima as a Fulbright scholar. After renting a room in a poor part of the city, he set about teaching photography to neighborhood kids and, though he didn't intend to at first, doing field-work for his fiction: investigating the particular cruelties of Peru's protracted civil war.

WORK SPACE

A brick-walled apartment in Oakland's Fruitvale district.

RECOGNITION

2004 Whiting Writers' Award for his first book, *War by Candlelight*, a collection of short stories.

WORK IN PROGRESS



