

## P R O L O G U E

Inez Rivero Borges's one-room home in El Cocal has a green plastic roof and open walls on three sides, and is perched on stilts above the mud bordering a broad river. This is where she sits with her infant daughter to recount, over the span of forty-five minutes, the details of the mysterious deaths of her two sons, Jesús, age three, and Lizandro, age five (figure P.1). She is thirty-seven years old and has been married for a quarter century to Darío Garay Mata. She has given birth to twelve children, but only five are still alive. The infant girl she is now nursing will soon fall ill. She is one of scores of parents who moved frenetically from one caregiver to another in a desperate search to save their children, only to end up traveling to the cemetery—sometimes, as with Inez Rivero, over and over. They passed along their observations to anyone who would listen; they offered to collaborate in figuring out what was causing the mysterious epidemic. But even after the dying ended, their search for answers went on. They continue to demand, thinking both of their own children and many others, “Tell me why my children died.”

First, Jesús “developed a fever out of the blue” in mid-March 2008. On the second day, when the fever grew intense, Inez said, “I went to my mother and told her, ‘I just don’t like it. Even though his fever is not high, I don’t like the look of his eyes.’ His eyes had changed color. His eyes weren’t the same.” When Jesús tried to swallow some acetaminophen in liquid form, “it didn’t work for him; he felt like he was drowning.” He swallowed a bit, “but then his eyes looked like they were crossed. His hands were stiff, like he was already going to die.” By the third day, at times “he became immobile, as if he were asleep. When he was asleep, his legs kept moving.” He was having trouble walking, and he fell a number of times. Soon, Jesús could no longer swallow food. Held tightly in his mother’s hammock all night, he tossed and turned; whenever he started to fall asleep, he had strange dreams. “We didn’t sleep at all that night.”

FIGURE P.1. Inez Rivero with her baby daughter, 2008.  
Photograph by Charles L. Briggs.



Strangely, “he would lose consciousness—but then seem just fine.” Jesús also had frequent seizures.

Inez went to seek help from a healer who lived nearby. “I jumped out of the boat and went right up to him and stood before him: ‘I came to you because my son is very, very sick and he couldn’t sleep.’” He treated the boy and requested a return visit that evening. Back home, Jesús played actively with the family’s dog and seemed fine, but later his legs were painful, and he seemed to be growing cold. His head hurt incredibly: “He wouldn’t let anyone touch his head; he kept moving it from side to side, from side to side. He was dying. He was dying.” Returning just as cooking fires marked the thatched-roofed homes in the waning light, the healer placed Jesús in a hammock and began to massage him, “but he died in the healer’s arms.” All that night and until noon the following day, Inez composed and sang *ona ribu*, laments for Jesús, while his father and other men fashioned a small coffin and built a small house-tomb for the child.

Two weeks after his death, five-year-old Lizandro “came down with a fever just like Jesús.” At first, he continued to run about like a normal child, but “he had trouble sleeping; he would play by himself in the middle of the night.” In the morning, he lingered in his hammock. On a visit to his grandmother, Lizandro ate taro and seemed fine, but, returning home, he got a bad case of hiccups and slumped into his hammock. Turning to the medicine that doctors

and nurses could provide, Inez told the local nurse, “I came to ask for your help because my son is ending up just like his brother. He has a fever—give him an injection to bring down the fever.” Lizandro got his injection and a hug from the nurse, which he returned. At home, Inez administered additional medication precisely as indicated, but it only seemed to make the child worse, and he began to have powerful seizures, falling down several times. The headache was so intense that he kept repeating, “‘My head, my head.’ He was getting worse; it was just the way his little brother died.”

Darío, Inez, and two of her sisters set out in a hired boat with Lizandro on an odyssey to find healers. Ready to go anywhere and stay as long as necessary, Inez said, “We took our hammocks with us.” When the first healer failed, they traveled to a more distant settlement to consult another. When he failed, they went to a larger settlement closer to home, Arawabisi, where several healers joined forces on Lizandro’s behalf. In España, farther down the Winikina River, they visited a healer who took out his sacred rattle and began to shake it, attempting to call *hebu* spirits/pathogens that might be lodged in Lizandro’s body. But as soon as the spirit stones moved within the rattle, creating powerful sounds and visible sparks, Lizandro cried out, “‘That’s terrible, no! That’s scary, that’s scary, Papa.’ . . . The boy said that he was frightened, and so [the healer] stopped singing and using the rattle. Since Lizandro was older, he could express himself.”

When the family returned to El Cocal, “He was near death—just like his brother.” Desperate but not giving up, they called a healer from across the river. After touching Lizandro’s body, feeling for the shape, hardness, and size of a pathogen and intoning a few words addressed to those areas of the spirit/medical world he commanded, he said, “No, that’s not the kind that I know; another kind of illness has seized him.” Healers had heard that a disease was afoot that neither they nor the nurses could stop. In all, Inez and Darío visited twelve healers, some more than once; the treatment sessions sometimes lasted most of the night. Still traumatized by Jesús’s death, they did not sleep for days and were exhausted from restraining Lizandro during his many seizures. “Since he was big, he was strong.”

But Lizandro’s death, when it came, “took place very fast. . . . Toward the end, the saliva came; at that point his saliva just gushed.” Inez, her sisters, and Lizandro’s siblings combined their efforts, but they “could not wipe away the saliva before more came.” Demonstrating, Inez’s right hand moves rapidly some twenty times from her mouth outward. Lizandro was *amoni diana*, close to dying. His fever was high; he overreacted to sounds; and he couldn’t perform simple bodily functions, such as swallowing or urinating. He lay in his hammock thrashing from side to side, thrusting his head and body backward

as if his back would break. “His lungs were making sounds,” and “he was having trouble breathing.” Lizandro “loved everyone. . . . He hugged his father strongly around the neck and held on tightly; and his father hugged him too.” Lizandro then asked for his brothers, calling their names, starting with his older brother, Armando. In Lizandro’s voice Inez calls, “‘Come here, Armando, come here, Armando.’ He wasn’t around . . . but [Lizandro] called out to him.” Then Lizandro named the names of “two *hotarao*,” meaning nonindigenous persons, employees of a firm paid by the government to build cement bridges that would connect houses spread along the marshy ground, bridges that were never finished. “Now those drunken *hotarao* are gone. Back when there were many drunken *hotarao* here, they fell upon Lizandro, they hit him until he bled. . . .

“Then my son died.”