BEFORE GETTING TO the alleged mob hit or the mystery of the missing referee, there should be an explanation about how this quest began. An assigned profile of Luis Suarez led to a stack of things to read about his past. Whether it was a tabloid calling him Cannibal! or The New York Times calling him Luis Alberto Suarez Diaz, the portrait is of a cheat and a lunatic. If someone breathes on him near the goal, he falls down like he's been knifed. He has bitten an opponent. Twice. And, back in his childhood in Uruguay, there's an oft-reported incident that serves as explanation, or maybe proof, that he is, in fact, batshit crazy. When Suarez was 15, overcome with anger, he headbutted a referee and received a red card in a youth match, making the man's nose bleed "like a cow," as a witness said.
No soccer player in the world provokes such a strong emotional response as Liverpool's striker, with less of an understanding of what lurks beneath the surface. His recent injury, which puts his World Cup fitness into doubt, makes him more intriguing. Yet knowing Suarez is difficult, since he seems to not know himself, and, regardless, he wouldn't talk to me. The best path to that knowledge would have to be a journey through his past, looking for clues. That was the plan: talk to people who knew him and let their memories paint a picture. Those who met him during his early years, especially the first person he ever assaulted, might offer slivers of insight. So in addition to visiting Suarez's mother, friends and neighbors, I wanted to sit down with the referee.

Only I couldn't find him.

Nobody I called knew his name. I went to the bottom of the Internet in English, then paid someone to do the same in Spanish. Neither search revealed the man. He was never identified, not in a news story, not in the comments on a news story, not even in message boards. For a reporter, or even an experienced reader, something not being on the Internet sets off alarms. Further reading raised more: The referee story first appeared in one of the often sleazy London tabloids and spread from there, like fact-checking syphilis. One person told one reporter, and all the other stories repeated the anecdote. It bore all the telltale symptoms of origin myth.

Part of me wondered whether the referee ever existed at all, and that led to more questions, and ultimately, this odd little quest. Either I'd knock down a myth, which is journalist crack cocaine, or I'd come face to face with someone who'd been on the receiving end of the initial Suarez meltdown, which spawned, and perhaps would even explain, all that had happened since.

I went to find the ref.
A Portrait Of Luis Suarez
ESPN senior writer Wright Thompson discusses his exploration of Luis Suarez’s complicated personality.

THE SEARCH BEGAN in Uruguay’s capital, Montevideo, which curves around a long bend in the coastline. The water sparkles. I passed the impressive hotels and apartment buildings rising above the sea. The challenge of the phantom referee had drawn me to this beautiful city, where the rich live magical lives and, in the shadow of the main bus station, the poor live a century in the past. That’s where Suarez grew up in a broken family and came of age as a football player.

"Fútbol, no," said a former mentor, understanding enough English to correct my translator. "Pelota."

Ball.

That means street soccer. Suarez didn't love football. He loved to play ball.

Everyone defended Suarez. On the first day, my translator, Felipe, met me in the lobby of my hotel, and as we started making calls, a referee warned him that I had bad intentions. Why else would I want to find someone attacked by Suarez, if not to use the referee to bludgeon their favorite son?

We went door to door, asking the same question over and over again.
What really happened when Suarez was 15?

People who should know didn't, and the first tremors of obsession began. A high-profile local attorney escorted us into his book-lined office. His socks and tie matched. His name was Enrique Moller, and when Suarez was 15, he was the judge who reviewed all youth league disciplinary problems. He remembered an incident involving Suarez but couldn't recall details. For sure, he said, he didn't remember an assault.

"It was a verbal aggression," said a man Moller had brought to be his translator.

Moller hadn't kept any of his notes or a dusty file about the case. Felipe and I checked out stacks of old newspapers at the national library. The librarian retrieved our materials with a tiny Otis elevator. We took the bound volumes of *El Pais* and *El Observador* into the soft, yellow light of the reading room. Neither of us found a story about youth football or a mention of a 15-year-old phenom named Luis.

Someone told us the football federation would have records, but it didn't. The press officer gently admonished us, saying that there were thousands of incidents involving youth players, some minor and some serious, and we only cared about this one because it involved a kid who grew up to be Suarez. So, to recap, he didn't know whether there was an incident, and, if an incident did happen, it was surely minor, and, if it wasn't minor, it still didn't matter and our interest was proof of our own moral failings. At Nacional, the club where Luis played youth football, an employee disappeared down the dark halls of the facility to look for game-by-game stats, or even an old schedule. He emerged empty-handed.

"Those years are lost," he said.

The phone proved more useful than trekking around Montevideo. We started with a famous Uruguayan international referee, a man named Martin Vasquez, whom we caught up with in Chile, where he was working a match. He remembered rumors and whispers about an incident involving Suarez but didn't know a name. The Uruguayan referee community is small and tight, and he suggested other soccer people to call. We worked down the list, quickly explaining what we wanted and why. By the third or fourth call, we found a referee who remembered hearing about a confrontation involving Suarez, but, instead of a headbutt, it was a thrown cup of water. Two people told Felipe they remembered the alleged victim's identity.

The name of the referee, if he was the right one, was Luis Larranaga.
1. Last year, Suarez bit Chelsea's Branislav Ivanovic on the arm.
2. Ivanovic shouldn't have been shocked. Suarez was suspended in 2010 for a similar incident.
3. After the match, Suarez said, "I completely lost it." From top: Rex Features/AP Images; Andrew Yates/AFP/Getty Images; Peter Powell/EPA/LANDOV
EVERYTHING ABOUT LUIS SUAREZ is viewed and judged through his reputation, which, although familiar to fans around the world, might not be as clear in the relative soccer wastelands of America. Putting him in an American context is difficult because he transcends the sports page. Imagine the tabloid fodder of Lindsay Lohan's life with Jennifer Lawrence's acting chops. That's the unique place Suarez occupies in the European pop culture firmament. In April, the English Premier League named him player of the year. He has carried the reborn Liverpool side on his shoulders. And yet, despite his widely acknowledged greatness, people hate him.

A blogger wrote this: "Even his facial features give the impression of a deceitful person who is meant not to be trusted."

A more responsible newspaper, the Toronto Star, toning down the rhetoric, said this: "He's the diviest, whiniest, annoyingest player on Earth. Though there are plenty of aspirants, he is easily the most hated man in football. ... North of his feet, there is nothing good about Suarez. He couldn't be more awful if he came out of the tunnel twirling mustachios."

The two most well-known examples of said awfulness are, of course, the two times he bit opponents on the field. In November 2010, playing for Ajax in Amsterdam, he bit midfielder Otman Bakkal on the shoulder during an argument. Suarez never played for Ajax again. Less than three years later, now with Liverpool and jockeying in front of the goal in a match against Chelsea, he sank his teeth into the right forearm of Branislav Ivanovic. Both times, Suarez responded to the normal action of the game with a completely inappropriate, nutty overreaction.

Beyond the biting, he dives, famously and often, flailing on the ground if a defender even thinks of touching him, and there's the entire debate in England about whether he's a racist. Playing Manchester United, he reportedly called Patrice Evra *negrito* -- "little black" -- and, after finishing serving his suspension for racially abusing an opponent, he refused to shake Evra's hand before a match. The same newspaper, the Toronto Star, in the same piece, also wrote: "He will do something insane at this summer's World Cup -- mark it down. ... Eventually, he'll punch a baby."

Those were the things I'd internalized about Suarez by the time I arrived in Uruguay. His reputation prepared me to believe any sort of wild story, and, while Felipe worked the phone looking for more information on Larrañaga, a wild story is
exactly what I found. We sat in the lobby, and I searched the web for Luis Larrañaga and Luis Suarez. Nothing.

I searched again, using only Larrañaga's name and *arbitro*, referee.

Now, in print, I will try to use words to eloquently convey the essence of my internal triple-take reaction once the results popped up in my browser: *Holy Goddamn Shitballs!*

One link led to a local blog about the hidden mafia running Uruguayan football, about drug cartels using the sport to launder money. The author across many posts built a case for systemic corruption. In the middle of the allegations, there was a story about how, in 2003, the head of youth soccer, Nelson Spillman, threatened a referee named Luis Larrañaga.

Spillman, according to the story, tried to pressure Larrañaga into changing a postmatch report to the disciplinary committee -- the one chaired by the lawyer with the matching tie and socks. Larrañaga had given a red card to an unnamed player who then physically assaulted him. Quick math said that Suarez would have been 16 then, not 15, so either the timeline didn't work or the news reports were off by a year.

The story got weirder. An investigative reporter broke the news about Spillman threatening Larrañaga. Less than a month later, a hit man shot the reporter at the door of his house. The hit man had been paid $500. The assassination failed, and Nelson Spillman and his brother, Daniel, who reportedly drove the getaway car, went to jail for the botched hit.

Many media outlets covered the investigation and the trial. In these accounts of the shooting, the youth player whose assault sparked the bizarre chain of events was never named.

Was it Suarez?

**TO SUAREZ'S DETRACTORS**, the headbutt story provides a structure for the biting and the other horrible behavior, taking distinct incidents and organizing them into a narrative. The headbutt *sounds* true. Well, it sounds true to soccer fans in Europe. In Uruguay, where Suarez is a treasure, the story doesn't fit into the
nation's image of the star. To Wilson Pirez, the scout who discovered Suarez as a poor, skinny 9-year-old kid, the rest of the world is wrong.

Pirez met us at a steakhouse near the Montevideo docks, where dark bars offer cheap international calls and cheaper drinks to sailors rushing off the container ships. Daylight dies a few feet inside the lawless saloons, and everything is for sale. At the restaurant, thick cuts of grass-fed beef cooked on open wood fires, and the whole place smelled like melting fat and salt. Pirez told us about how a reporter from England misquoted him. Suarez had read the comments and called his friend to basically find out, you know, What the hell, man? Pirez assured him he hadn't said those things, then called the newspaper to rant. But the scout knew the drill. "They ask me, 'Was he that bad when he was a kid?" Pirez said. "Searching for the answer that suits their story, which is 'Suarez is violent.' I get angry. Why are you searching for that?"

Reporters only come to Uruguay to find out why Suarez bites people because, to be fair, that is a damn interesting question. Pirez knows and loves Suarez, so he is both the best and worst person to ask. He'll never believe that perhaps it isn't a completely bad idea to define someone by a few major events. Extreme moments can reveal us as we truly are. So although there is a case to be made that Suarez cannot be reduced to the bites and headbutts, there is an equally compelling case that those few seconds are the most authentic he's ever been. Suarez wears many masks, each of them true in the moment he puts them on, but perhaps nothing reveals his truest self like the mask he wears when he's threatened, for that is the one that shows all the hurt he wants to hide.

The latest bite cost Suarez a 10-game suspension, and millions of people watched the grainy footage of the attack and the photographs of Ivanovic afterward, with terrified eyes, looking as if he'd been playing a game and run into someone for whom the action meant much, much more. Everyone saw Suarez's suspension, as they'd seen an earlier one for racial taunting. But nobody saw what he did when faced with the end of his football career. After one of those two suspensions -- the friend telling the story couldn't recall which -- Suarez flew home. With rumors circling about Liverpool cutting him loose, he ran straight into the embrace of a group of men he hadn't seen in years. He threw a party for many of the guys who played with him on the Nacional youth team in 2003, the same boys he grew up with, who were there when he either did or did not headbutt a referee.

"People he hadn't seen for years and years and years," says Mathias Cardacio, who
played youth ball with Suarez.

Sitting in the steakhouse, Pirez told a story of his own, which is as true as the two famous bites. Not long ago, Suarez was at the beach in Uruguay, making an official appearance at some event that wanted the reflected wattage of his fame. Everyone saw him there, flashbulbs popping. But nobody saw him leave, driving in a rush back to Montevideo for Pirez's daughter's second birthday. So is Suarez a family guy who twice bit someone, or is he a lunatic who every now and then manages to act like a normal guy?

In Uruguay, reporters write about him being a great father and friend because that rings true, just as the stories of violence ring true in England and around the world.

The sports editor of one of Montevideo's papers met us one evening in a bar near the old colonial square. A brick oven in the back there reaches extraordinary temperatures, and the flames turn out the best pizza in town, with draft beer so cold it turns to ice when it hits the big, heavy mugs. Romulo Martinez Chenlo tucked his long hair behind his ears and took off his glasses. Martinez Chenlo said he'd never heard the story of the headbutt, which isn't part of the local boilerplate biography. He barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes when I brought up the two sides of Suarez.

"There are not two Suarezes," he said, raising his voice.

Martinez Chenlo decided to prove once and for all that his Suarez never attacked a referee. He scrolled through his phone until he found the number of a friend, a man named Ricardo Perdomo. Perdomo coached Suarez in the youth leagues. If an assault occurred, he would have been on the sideline. Martinez Chenlo dialed and then talked in Spanish for a few minutes, grinning at us every so often, as if he were getting all the details he needed to prove that the story was made up. His eyes moved back and forth, the look of someone processing information, and after a long pause, he hung up.

"It was not a headbutt," he said, sounding triumphant. Then he explained what he learned. It was 2003. Suarez was 16, not 15. Nacional was playing Danubio, another local team, and Suarez never assaulted anyone. He simply protested a referee's decision when a bit of bad luck struck. Sure, his head hit the referee's face, but not on purpose.

"He fell," Martinez Chenlo said, "accidentally into the referee."
With behavior rivaling Lindsay Lohan's and talent rivaling Jennifer Lawrence's, Suarez is perpetual tabloid fodder. *Matt West/ISI Photo*
WHAT HAPPENED NEXT had nothing to do with Suarez, but it does reveal the violence of the world that created him, and perhaps explains why nobody wanted to talk about the headbutt, because of everything that followed it. To hear the story, we called Ricardo Gabito, an investigative journalist.

A couple of days later, he walked across a downtown plaza and joined us at an outdoor café.

"The denunciation I made of Suarez's attack against a referee," he said, "ended with the shot they fired."

The bistro chair struggled to contain Gabito, an anvil of a man with the beginnings of a paunch and a fist of chest hair punching out his open collar. His legs pumped beneath the table. His dark eyebrows looked like fighting caterpillars. Since 1981, he'd worked for newspapers and television stations, chasing corruption. He's one of the only sports journalists willing to take on the corrupt side of Uruguayan soccer, whether it's drug traffickers who use player transfers to hide cocaine profits or crooked officials who want to pressure referees. The tales of corruption and narcotics and midnight gunmen set the hook completely. I was deeply obsessed with the headbutt and all that followed.

Sitting across from me, Gabito told the story of Suarez, leaning in, animated and intense: During a 2003 match to decide a youth league championship, Larranaga gave Suarez a red card and then claimed Suarez assaulted him. The actual report disappeared, so nobody can prove what the referee actually alleged. Without Larranaga to separate fact from rumor, the whole incident remains trapped in hazy word of mouth, most details coming from the newspaper accounts that followed Gabito's shooting.

According to them, Spillman called Larranaga after the match, asking him to change his official match report to eliminate any mention of aggression by Suarez, wanting to protect the star player on his favorite team. Larranaga refused, and Spillman in a voice message called him a pimp and a motherf----, threatening to end his career. Larranaga stuck up for himself and turned in his report unedited. Suarez received a long suspension. Sources at the football federation leaked information to Gabito, who ran his story on Dec. 11, 2003. More leads followed. He dug deeper on Spillman. On Dec. 21, just 10 days after the initial report, Gabito walked home from his television show. It was 11:15 at night. A strange car idled in front of his house.
Now, sitting at the table, Gabito looked around and grabbed the sugar container. That would be the car. Other bits of coffee paraphernalia represented him and his house, and here, at Café Tribunales, on a busy, urban square, he re-enacted his own assassination attempt.

Gabito got to his door and felt the hard barrel against his head. The hit man, forced into the job to settle a debt, changed his mind at the last minute. He wrapped his arm around Gabito's neck and shot him in the leg. The getaway car screeched off into the night, and, with blood pooling on the concrete, Gabito hailed a cab to the hospital. Four years later, walking down the street, he ran into the hit man. The would-be murderer asked, "Do you know who I am?"

Gabito said, "You're the one who shot me."

They parted ways, nothing left to say, another weird scene in the world of Uruguayan soccer. All three people involved in the shooting spent time behind bars, but all have been released. They've fared better than Gabito, who angered powerful interests one time too many. Fired at least twice over the years for refusing to print lies, he is now blackballed from the industry he loves. He hasn't had an investigation on television since 2011, and he hasn't had a byline since February 2013. He feels wronged, backed into a corner.

That's one reason his favorite player is Suarez.

Everyone in Uruguay knows what Suarez fought against, and rose above. That's how he exists in the national consciousness, as someone who fights to win, no matter what, running to escape poverty and obscurity. A man doesn't bite simply because he is crazy. He bites because he is clinging to a new life, terrified of being sucked back into the one he left behind. That's what Gabito believes. "Soccer was a vehicle for him to be saved," he said. "He clung to that, as if to say, 'This is where either I'll be saved or I will sink.'"

A veil was pulled back, and I saw Gabito anew. I understood him now.

"What was your childhood like?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

He seemed smaller than before.

"Tough," he said. "Like Suarez's childhood."

At the age of 11, Gabito went to work, supporting himself financially from that day on. His parents didn't have any money, so Gabito washed dishes in an outpost hotel,
near the border between Uruguay and Brazil. He grew up poor, in a country where most poor people stay that way forever. His past makes him unafraid of danger, because being shot isn't nearly as scary as becoming that 11-year-old boy again. Biting makes sense to him. He'd bite a stranger to keep from being dragged back to that border-town kitchen.

"I understand Suarez's reactions," he said. "I would have done the same thing if I played soccer. On the field, I would have done the same thing as he did. To overcome and not surrender."
A PORTRAIT OF a time and a place was emerging. Whether it was a violent assault, or an unfortunate accident, everyone agreed that the incident in question happened in November 2003, at the end of the most important year of Luis Suarez's life. He was a lazy but talented member of a talented team. The Nacional youth side had met as 8- and 9-year-olds, staying together for years, moving up through the age groups, dominating opponents.

Some of them would earn a spot on an adult pro team, and some would leave soccer for a regular life, and both would happen at the end of 2003. That was the dividing line between youth and adult soccer. They all knew. They had been each other's family, spending vacations together, discovering girls together, watching each other grow from boys into young men.

A family appealed deeply to Suarez.

Suarez's poverty is one of the many narratives about his life, and, although it is often used as a trope to explain his violence, it's true. He did grow up poor, his life mirroring the hard childhood of Ricardo Gabito. His mother scrubbed floors. He couldn't afford soccer shoes, which once kept him from trying out for an elite team. But the allure of the rags-to-riches storyline often distracts people from the broken-family storyline, which shaped Suarez most of all. His father abandoned them, and Suarez, entering his teen years, started skipping practice, drinking, staying out late. He was lost. His coach often went into Suarez's home to drag his striker to practice. He played with all of the rage fans see today, but none of the determination, and none of the grace. Luis Suarez was wasting his life.

Then, when he was 15, he met a girl.

Her name was Sofia Balbi. She had blond hair and fair skin. Luis worked as a street sweeper, and during his shift he picked up coins so he could take her out. Her family lived a comfortable life, and they let Luis into their home. He ate regular meals at Sofia's. She told him his poor grades came from laziness and not stupidity, and she demanded he work harder. In her family, he found the thing he’d never had before, a sense of belonging, of safety.

"They sheltered him," Cardacio says.
In 2003, Sofia's family moved to Spain.

Luis sank into a dark place. He had lost his new family, lost his soulmate and his muse. His work habits slipped. Years later, his rise to the Premier League seems inevitable. It wasn't. The reason Suarez became a great player is that he loved Sofia. She lived in Europe, and he lived in South America, and he could clean streets for the rest of his life and not afford a plane ticket. So his young lovesick mind concocted a completely irrational plan, typical of the teenage boy species: He would dedicate himself to soccer, working hard and endlessly, and he'd get good enough to earn a position on a European team, and the team would fly him across the ocean to his Sofia. Nuts, right?

It worked. In 2006, Suarez found a small first division Dutch team that was willing to give him a chance, and then he became a star, moving up to Ajax, then to Liverpool. He married that blond-haired girl in 2009, and they have two children. Any visitor to his house is likely to open the door to find the usual scene: Luis laughing and happy, kids crawling all over him. He loves his family, and soccer gave it to him, and guarantees no Suarez will ever again pick up coins while cleaning the streets.

His friends and former mentors struggle to explain a complicated idea. They protect him, and explain away his extreme actions, because they sense the desperation buried inside of him and don't know how to articulate it. Basically, the theory goes, anything that threatens his ability to score, and win, isn't processed in his subconscious as the act of a sportsman but, rather, as an act of aggression against his wife and his children. Watching him play certainly supports the idea because, when a defender presses close, Suarez doesn't respond as if the man is trying to take the ball. He reacts as if the defender is trying to send him back to the streets of Montevideo, alone.

The quest had led to an understanding of Suarez, just not in the way I'd imagined. With the discovery of his wife as the key to decoding his mystery, I almost completely forgot about the referee. I thought about another incident on the pitch. This one happened not long after his most recent bite; it and the bite are opposite sides of the same coin. Suarez scored a goal and then lifted his jersey to reveal a homemade T-shirt. His son, Benjamin, had just been born, and the shirt had a picture of his family on it: Sofia holding the baby, with their daughter, Delfina, leaning over her new brother. The shirt said "Welcome Benja" in English above the picture, and below it, it said in Spanish, simply, "I love them."
He couldn't have imagined such contentment in November 2003.

A championship was on the line. If Nacional lost, it would play again the next week against the same team. If it won, the season was over. Everyone remembers the officiating. "I wanted to hit the referee," Pirez said, laughing. "We should have killed the referee that day. He was terrible. Everyone was so pissed at the referee."

Suarez never quit. With 15 minutes left and the game turning against his team, he flew into a Danubio player, sliding for the ball. The official showed him a yellow card, which witnesses say was a bad call. Suarez popped up and jawed his displeasure, complaining, and Larranaga went back to his pocket for a red card, another bad call, which doesn't excuse what happened next.

The fears inside Suarez boiled over.

A red card meant he'd miss the next game. The team that had been his family through a difficult youth would play its final match without him. It was the last game of his childhood, and he'd watch it from the stands. He had scored 63 goals that year, one shy of the club record, which he desperately wanted. Larranaga had thrown him out of a game, but he also had ripped him away from his family. Rage flowed through Suarez.

That wasn't the only thing pushing him to snap.

Often there are hidden layers of meaning in a simple timeline. No violent incident happens on its own. I sent a message to Suarez's mom, asking when the Balbis moved to Barcelona. She said Sofia left for Europe in October 2003, just a month before her lovesick boyfriend attacked a referee.
IT WASN'T AN accident at all. The first eyewitness we found was Suarez's former youth director, Daniel Enriquez, who laid his own reputation on the line over and over for the striker, believing in his potential greatness before anyone else. Enriquez met us at a café in a wealthy neighborhood just off the beach. Sitting down, we made small talk, everyone avoiding the elephant in the room. He knew what we wanted to ask. Enriquez ordered a cappuccino and told us about his hobbies and passions, how he's a professional DJ and Uruguay's most important collector of tribal masks. They hang in museums around the country. We laughed about this, given how much the idea of masks had intruded on the discussions of Suarez. His favorites are the first two he found, from the Aztecs, the sun and the moon. I gave Enriquez some homework: Go through all his masks and find the one
that best explains the real Suarez.

Then it was time. The question could not be avoided any longer. He didn't dodge.

"He pushed the referee," Enriquez said, "and headbutted him."

A day or two later, an email arrived from Enriquez, with a photograph attached. He took his task seriously, and after some searching, he'd found the right mask. Ultimately, it was just his guess because, although he knows Suarez well, he still doesn't know what makes his former pupil explode, just as he doesn't know what makes him great. But he has his suspicions, embodied in the mask he chose. Those suspicions will be in my mind the next time I watch Suarez play.

The mask came from Central Africa, made by the Songye tribe, famous for its warriors and for what an art broker describes as the most belligerent masks on the continent. The mask is long and oval, streaked with lines representing the scars on the face of a soldier. Some experts believe warriors wore them to hide human weakness, to frighten their enemies. They allowed normal people to trick themselves into being superhuman on the field of battle. Its eyes are blank, dead, creepy to look at for too long. These blanks serve as symbolic pools, a way for the warrior to collect and channel the spirits of the ancestors. The whole metaphor seems a bit much, but Enriquez thought it fit Suarez perfectly, explaining his reasoning in a note he wrote after sending the photo. The mask used the power of the past to protect the living. In hiding the human face of the man doing battle, it exposed his deepest and most animal desires.
WE NEVER STOPPED looking for the ref, pushing aggressively enough that his father's secretary threatened to file a complaint with my translator's university for harassment. My fever broke. I left Uruguay, never finding Larrañaga and not really caring, trading an obsession for a referee with one about the interior life of Luis Suarez. The referee remains out there, a foil, his busted face one of a thousand clues that might explain what hunger makes Suarez great, and what flaws might one day bring him down. Clues live everywhere, in a search for a forgotten ref, in the life of an investigative reporter. The clues live in the stories and videos I reread and rewatched after leaving. There's Luis, injured in the last Liverpool match before the World Cup, looking stricken, like something more important than a game had been stolen. There's Luis under television lights, struggling to explain what he feels inside. He told the reporter he cannot stand to miss even a single ball because that might cost him everything he has built. His rage and love arise from this fear.
Watch him. There's Luis, in a normal tussle for position, wheeling around and biting an opponent. He headbutts an official, and the man's nose bleeds like a cow. He's showing his house to a reporter, and it overflows with plush stuffed animals, the children in charge of decor. He tugs at his sleeves walking into his first news conference at Liverpool, nervous, out of place, looking like a little boy. He walks onto the pitch before a game, holding his young daughter's hand, cradling his sleeping son, and, in the public madness of a stadium, his hopes and fears remain his alone.

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