

## **La Cienega: Ecuador's Childless Village**

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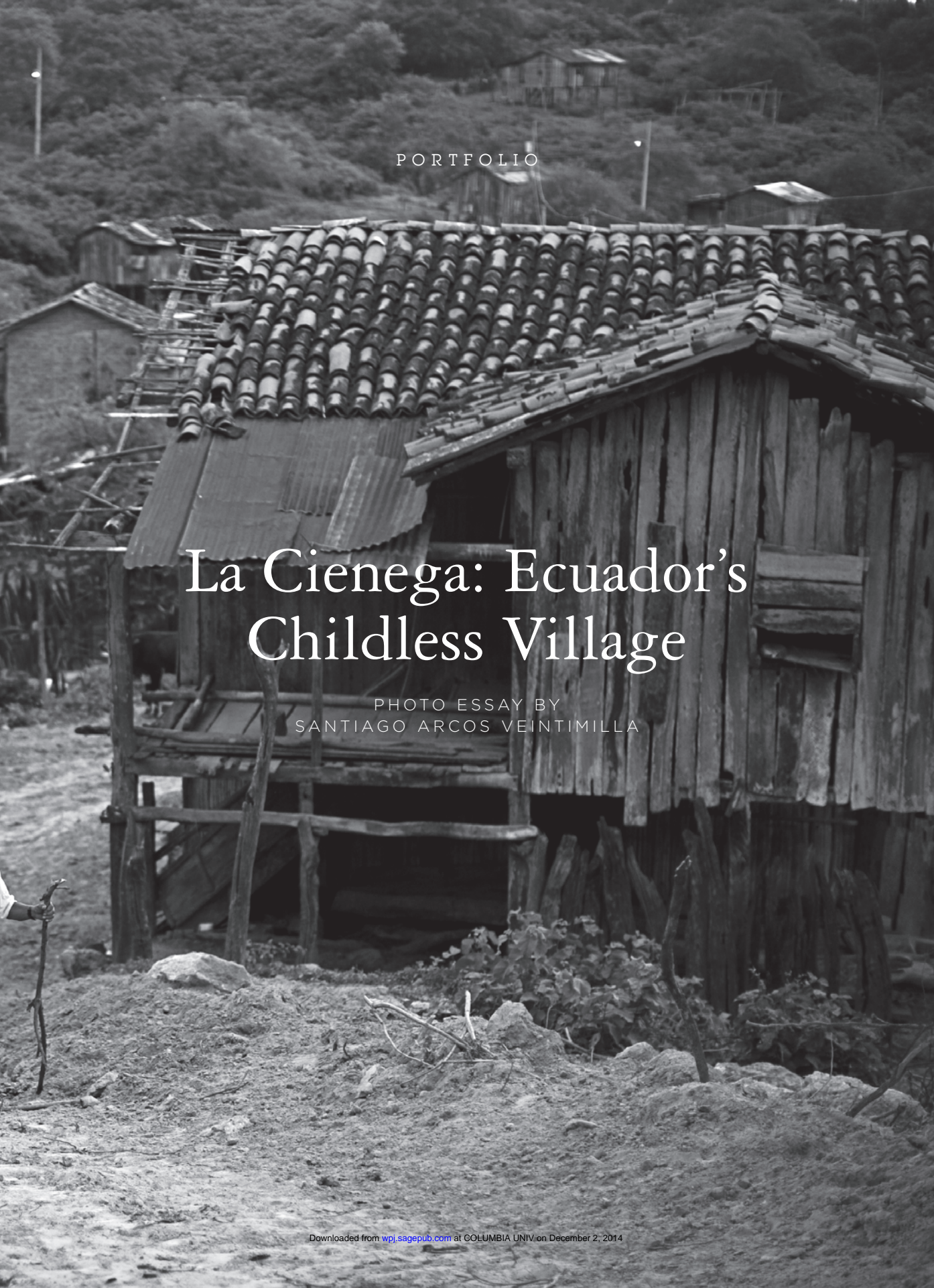
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Rosaura Mateo, 75, helps her husband Arcadio Andino, 81, walk up the hill toward their house in La Cienega.



PORTFOLIO


# La Cienega: Ecuador's Childless Village

PHOTO ESSAY BY  
SANTIAGO ARCOS VEINTIMILLA



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*Santiago Arcos Veintimilla is an Ecuador-based photographer who was chosen this year for a Magnum Photography and Human Rights Fellowship.*



**L**A CIENEGA, Ecuador—This is the last town in Ecuador without children. The youngest of the 11 remaining villagers is Geronomio. He is 63 years old, while the oldest is 98, which means their village is destined to become a ghost town. In the mid-1970s, a five-year drought combined with a lack of work and the promise of wealth in the big cities led every young person in La Cienega to move out of town. They left behind the elderly, those unable to move, and residents who refused to change their lifestyles.

Across Latin America there are similar, if less intense tributes to the rapid urbanization of this continent as increasing numbers of people gravitate toward the cities in search of a better life, fleeing the hardships of the countryside. La Cienega is 40 minutes by car from the closest town, Cerecita, which in turn is an hour away from Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city, where many of those who left here have congregated in a single neighborhood in an effort to recreate the personal and family ties they had left behind.

The town—whose name means “the swamp,” for the nearby watering hole—began as a cattle ranching outpost, but during the drought, most villagers sold their cows. Then they began making charcoal from the surrounding trees, but soon the trees gave out as well. Now they depend on government stipends, scattered crops, and farm animals for local consumption.

In La Cienega, only eight houses are inhabited today—the final tribute to the once vibrant life in this mountain town. The rest, at least 60 others, are locked and silent. The one church collapsed a decade ago and was never rebuilt. The old school is still standing, but has been empty for 30 years. Today, wounded animals seek refuge there.

Ignacia Quimi, 86, spends the afternoon staring at the rain by her house. She is dressed in black because her brother, who lived in La Cienega, died three weeks before.



Many inhabitants left their belongings when they moved to the cities. Today, with no children in town, a child's rusted bike lies on the ground, unused for years.

Since there are no more children, the local school remains abandoned. It is common to find wounded animals in it searching for shelter.



There is one main street, which until two months ago, when it was paved, was nothing more than a dirt track. Electricity finally came to the village, but there is no potable running water or gas. Water to drink and cook arrives with the water truck when it pays its twice-weekly visit. For food, locals travel to Cerecita once a week. They receive radio signals, but there are no telephone lines and only a single isolated cellular spot atop a remote hill.

Most of those who remain in the town, though having lost hope of it ever reviving, stay on by choice. Only three of the men are married. Many spend their days lying in hammocks for hours under the baking sun, laughing and talking with each other as a small army of dogs frolic

nearby—most of them named after children who are no longer here.

The wood they once used to build the houses is the same strong wood they still use to build the crosses in their graveyard, dominating the town from a nearby hill, where the first crosses are still standing. And it is one of the few remaining draws to the town for those who have left. Each year, in November, on the day of the dead, the people who left return to visit their surviving relatives and the graves of their siblings. This is the only day when the town is seen in its old glory. At the end of the weekend, filled with dancing and singing, they all leave again for another year—or until they die in Guayaquil and are brought back here to their final resting place next to their ancestors. ●



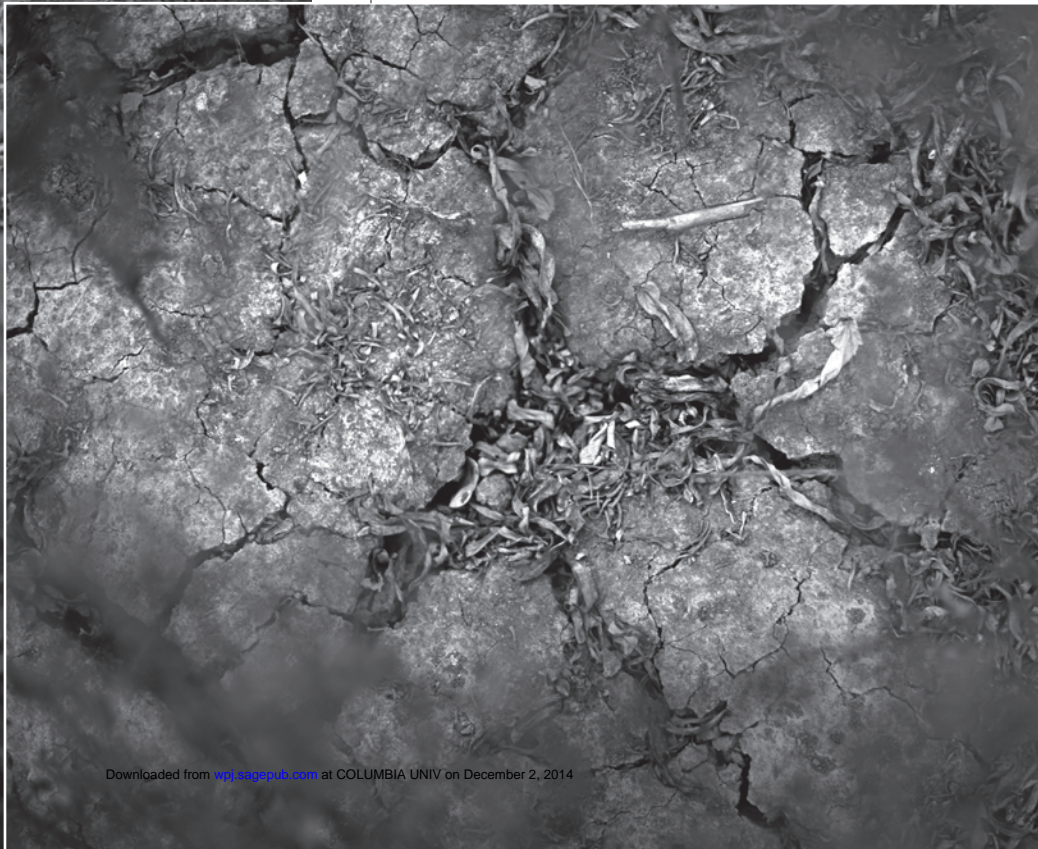




## CHILDLESS VILLAGE

Juan Yermonaque, 66, carries water from the swamp, which gave the town its name. He will use this water to irrigate a tiny corn crop he cultivates. This is the only way to hydrate the plants.

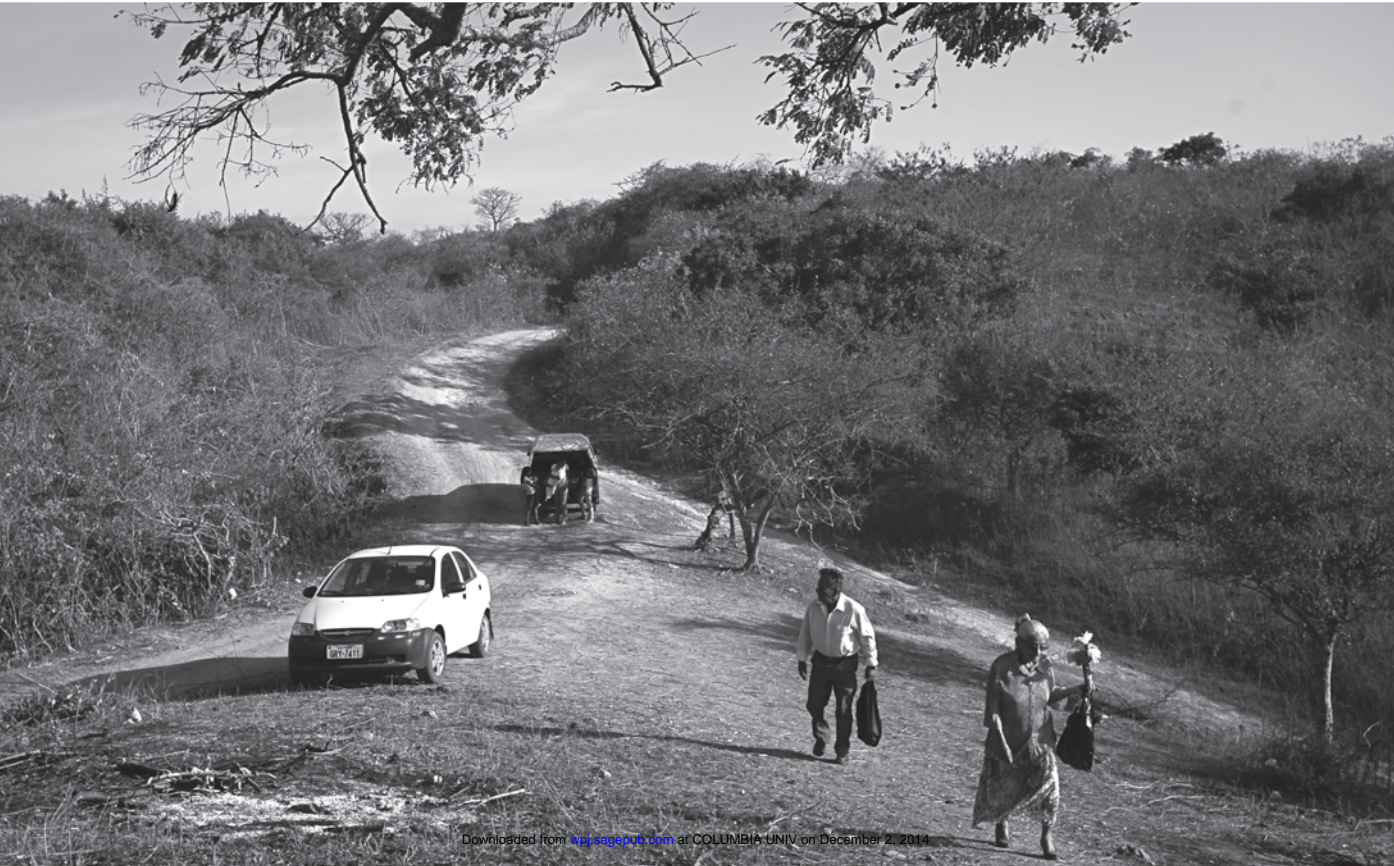
The lands surrounding La Cienega are quite fertile, but due to lack of constant irrigation, they have turned dry and largely barren.



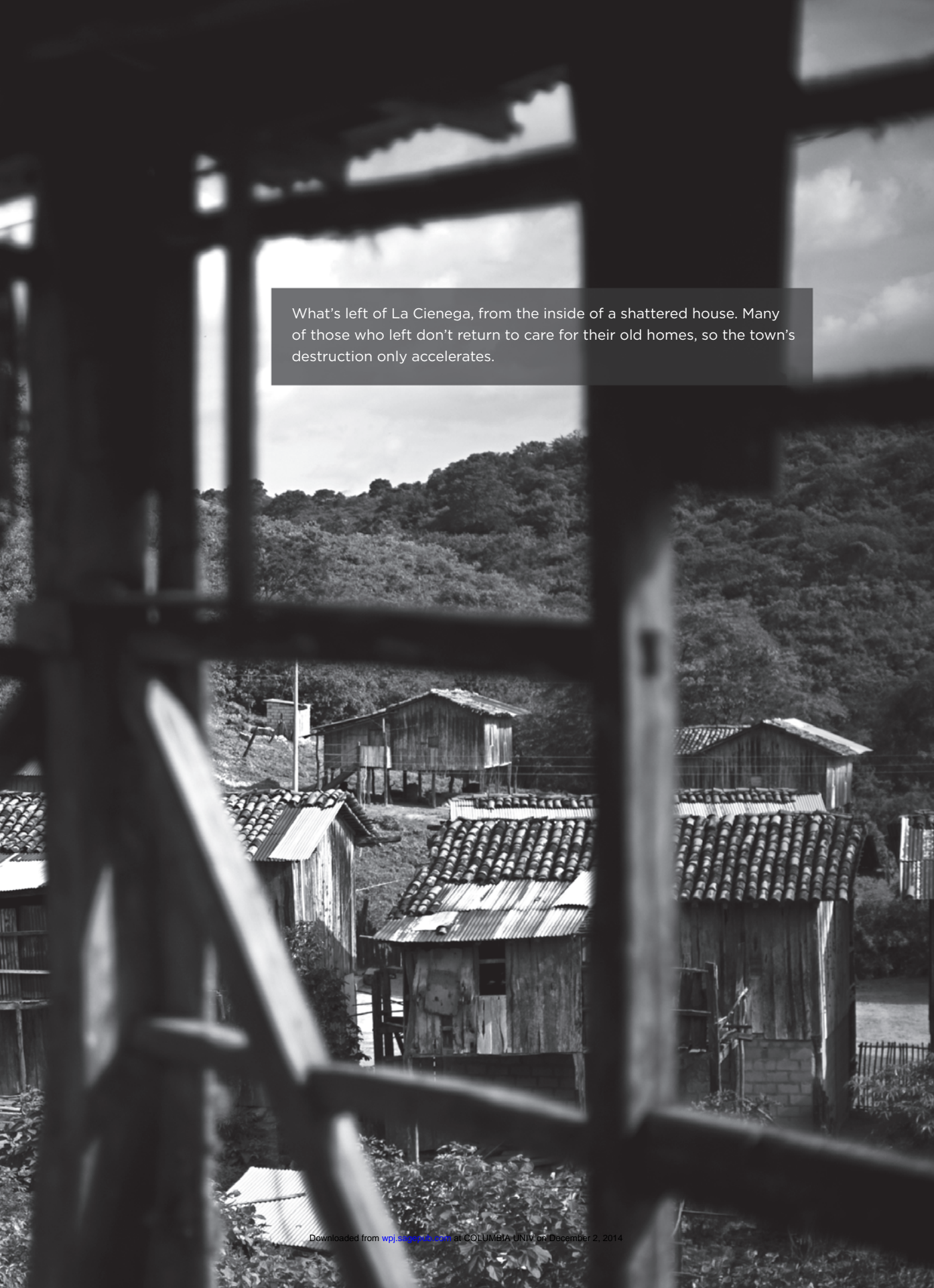


Former villagers return each November during the Day of the Dead to remember lost relatives and clean their final resting places.

Villagers who left to live in Guayaquil must travel two hours to pay their rare visits to their hometown.







What's left of La Cienega, from the inside of a shattered house. Many of those who left don't return to care for their old homes, so the town's destruction only accelerates.