RIFF samples
2012

literature
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samples
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literature
Este e-book é dedicado

À minha mãe, Maguy,
ao meu pai, Horácio (in memoriam)

E ao meu marido, Roberto

Pelo amor incondicional, pelo apoio permanente,
desde o primeiro autor, desde o primeiro contrato,
desde que a agência nasceu
– ainda nos velhos tempos da máquina de escrever
(quando os e-books não existiam nem em sonhos...)

This e-book is dedicated

to my mom, Maguy,
to my dad, Horácio (in memoriam)

and to my husband, Roberto

for their unconditional love,
permanent support
since the very first author
the first contract
from the very first day of the agency
– back on the old times of the typewriter
(when we couldn't even dream of e-books...)
Welcome to the first Riff Samples Literature issue – a selection of first chapters, excerpts and short stories. A panel of Contemporary Brazilian Literature translated to English, Spanish and German.

Here you’ll find adventure, romance, noir fiction, family sagas, humor, pop themes, erotica, memoirs, History and more from modern authors and classic authors. This is our first endeavour, so please forgive us for any small mistakes or omissions that might have fallen through the cracks. By the way, hats off to all editors out there!

We are already preparing a Riff Samples Literature Children and YA for the Bologna Book Fair. Forthcoming issues for next Frankfurt are Riff Samples Classics and a Riff Samples Literature 2013.

Many thanks to all our dear authors and to all the translators who have kindly agreed to be part of this project.

And now, browse freely through the pages, enjoy the reading and have fun!

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September 20th, 2012
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Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1960 and raised in Recife, Adriana Falcão was first noticed for her TV scripts. She wrote three popular series for Globo network, as well as a successful adaptation of Ariano Suassuna’s *The Rogue’s Trial* (*O auto da compadecida*). Her first novel, *The Machine*, an irresistible fable about undying love, was made into a successful film directed by João Falcão.
The Machine
A Máquina

ADRIANA FALCÃO

Brazilian edition: Editora Salamandra
(new edition) - São Paulo, forthcoming
Translated by Alison Entrekin

Synopsis

Nordestina is the place where no one else wants to stay. The only thing that counts in this land without a future is the void left by those who want to go to the other side of the line, where the world must be happening. And this little town — forsaken even by The Lord — is exactly the background for the love between Antônio and Karina.

With a text both poetic and precise, the author develops The Machine as a delicate and affectionate plot. The reader will know a story capable of stopping time and change the course of this
conversation, and of many others that Antônio began to tell after he saw his Karina, who, by then, already had a look of farewell, and promised: “Is it the world you want? Then I’ll bring it to you.”

“Adriana’s prose has charm. We are dazzled by it in the sense that we are delighted, but also in the sense that we become like a hypnotized snake. We come to the end without quite knowing what has happened to us. Look, another surprising talent. Where do these people come from? I know, I know. From Pernambuco.”

Luis Fernando Veríssimo, writer
Back where Antonio comes from is mind-bogglingly far. Far away as mind-bogglingly backwards, which is much farther than mind-bogglingly than farther than mind-bogglingly off to the sides. Cos coming from far away off to the sides is coming from far away in space, a huge farness that’s a cinch for winged critters. But coming from far away backwards is coming from far away in time, a farness that won’t be unimpossible for donkey’s years.

Back where Antonio comes from, there were so many things going on I’m not sure I’ll manage to tell it all. I hope no one thinks they’ve been forgotten, as this story I’m about to tell’s got a bit of all stories in it, but it’s also got some bits that were lost along the path of time that Antonio travelled until now, bringing this story with him.

It was Antonio’s time. And time passed different there. Now it was one thing, then a bit later it was something else, and not long after it wasn’t anymore. It was something else else. Antonio’s time went too fast. It was somewhere around the year two thousand that the story of Antonio’s time started. But Antonio’s time started longer ago than this, twenty-something years before that, when Antonio came into the world. Or even longer ago, billions of years ago, when the world was created.
It was all a big drought. There was no earth, no heaven, no critters, no people, no nothing. It was just pitch-black. Then God got a bit sick of it all and decided to create the world. And he thought, look how silly I am, why does everything have to be empty if I can invent whatever I want?

And off he went inventing things.

First he invented heaven so he’d have somewhere to live. But cos heaven had to be above something, he invented the earth to go underneath. Then he thought, but how can the earth have a heaven above it without nothing underneath? So he went and stuck hell under the earth. It was really pretty with that blue bit up above and that red bit underneath.

In the beginning the only reason for the earth was this. To sit there under heaven and above hell. But then God thought, well, now there’s the earth, I’d better invent people to stick there. That’s when he invented life. And when he invented life he also invented death, cos everything alive, dies.

They say he blew and Adam appeared and from Adam’s rib he made Eve. Then they were two. And they stayed there, just the two of them, and time didn’t pass. Back then God still hadn’t invented time. It was all a jumble, before, now, afterwards. It was all there in the middle. Until one day Adam thought, oh, good God in heaven, doesn’t this ever end? Luckily, God thought to invent day and night so time would pass.

The day God invented day, he concluded that now time was going to pass, there would be a day today, then another one tomorrow, and tomorrow would also have the yesterday that was today. And that was how he invented the past, the present and the future all at once.

Now came the most difficult part. Since everyone had noses, mouths, ears and eyes, it all had to have a purpose. The eyes and nose already had theirs, as eyes were for looking at the sky and noses were so you could breathe while you were alive and stop breathing in order to die in peace. But something had to be found for the mouth and ears to do. To cut a long
story short, that was when God invented the logos. Logos is what words are called. And cos for each word there had to be a thing, he had to invent a whole heap of things so there would be a thing for each word. There were neverending things. And people thought they weren’t enough and went about inventing more and more things.

From the beginning of the world until round about the year two thousand, when this story started, lots of things happened.

And all this jumble was all Antonio’s time, cos everything that happened only happened so that one day time would arrive at his time. And then afterwards a bit more decided to happen to arrive at today’s time.

But Antonio’s time, that’s how it was called, Antonio’s time, as this time came to be known, Antonio’s time was the wackiest of times.

In those days Northernville was a tiny village, about so big, and people said, what a dead-end little place. Antonio had heard this all his life and just assumed that was how things were. To get to Northernville you had to walk lots. Which no one did, of course. What would someone do in a place where there was nothing to do? But those who went the other way told everyone else how much they had walked, leading one to the conclusion that if the way out was one, the way in could only be the same.

Antonio worked at the town hall, and for the payroll, he was number nineteen. For the mayor he was the coffee boy. For the townsfolk he was Dona Nazareth’s Antonio. For Dona Nazareth he was her oldest son.

Every night Dona Nazareth prayed to God for one of her children, such that each one had two prayers a month plus a third of a prayer. When there weren’t enough pieces of prayers, she would save up three months’ worth and then pray one more whole prayer for each of her children. On the months when there were three prayers, April, August and December, she took the opportunity to pray for health, money and happiness. During the other nine months of the year they had to be happy with just health and money, which never coincided with real life, cos if Dona Nazareth
had really been good at praying, God would have sent her a new fridge ages ago. Even so, she prayed, through habit, through insistence, and cos if she didn’t pray God might forget they existed, which wouldn’t have been difficult.

If words wore out, I doubt there would have been a single goodbye left in Northernville, due to the amount this word was used in those days. There were so many people leaving that the townsfolk even got used to the spaces that were left, which gradually took over the town, erasing smells and turning sentences, looks, gestures and the faces of those without portraits into memory. On cleaning days, therefore mostly on Thursdays, objects were always turning up that had been forgotten by someone or other who had already gone, which only helped stir new resentment in abandonments that had been overcome. These objects came to different ends, the most common being the bottom of a drawer, and the most painful, razor slashes.

The reasons for this rampant stampede sometimes became notes and some were furiously torn up. The written reason was almost always a poor imitation of the real reason and was designed more to console the receiver than help them understand the sender, cos how do you explain, really now, that the reason for leaving was just the nothing.

Some departures were announced ahead of time due to the number of arrangements to be made. The news spread in a number of ways. For sale: Formica table w/ 4 chairs, 2-seater sofa, dble bed, cradle, oven and fridge. Exc. cond. Owner leaving town. Speak w/ Lurdinha at registry office. Must sell fast: house near the spring. 1 bdrm, living, yrd, inside bathroom. A steal. 38 Bridge Street. Shop for sale great location excellent profits. Behind town hall. Speak w/ Marconi at location. Tip-top cattle, two oxen, three cows, one calf for sale. Owner leaving town.

For the first few months, those who had gone would call a neighbour’s house on Sundays, almost always collect. Then the spaces between calls would grow longer and it was said that they’d vanished into the hollow of
the world, which must’ve been full by that time, as it happens.

Whether they wanted to or not, those who looked at the horizon in Northernville imagined a line perpendicular to it, the line drawn through the fate of those who concerned themselves with it, such that every last soul in Northernville thought the horizon was a cross, not a line, and this was why the verb “to cross” was understood in all kinds of ways.

Between Northernville and the town before it was a sign saying “Welcome to Northernville”. Some say that before Antonio’s time almost no one knew this sign even existed. The people who lived from the sign inwards imagined a line on the ground separating Northernville from the rest of the world. The people who lived from the sign outwards didn’t imagine anything, had never given the subject any thought and hadn’t the foggiest idea that from there on there was still a bit more.

In Northernville, right there on the next street, lived a girl who half-closed her eyes when she looked at things, who Antonio was head over heels in love with. To this day nobody knows for sure whether what drove Antonio crazy was Karina’s half-eyed look or everything else. Everything else is to be understood as even the perfume that lingered in her wake. Antonio, who was something different for each person, for Karina was just the young lad who always took a spin by her house after work. Afterwards things changed, but only afterwards. Only after everything changed.

The wee hours in Northernville were in dire need of dreams. The stashed-away smell of things left without owners took advantage of these hours to take a stroll. At seven in the morning, fewer and fewer mouths yawned. Fewer and fewer voices complained about life in general at ten thirty and fewer siestas rocked hammocks after lunch. Few cups were needed at coffee breaks. Time grew slack cos no one ever interrupted it with anything important. And Antonio, with nothing much to do, took to thinking nonsense to kill time until it was time to clock off. He concerned himself so much with the tardiness of time that he ended up becoming
intimate with it. They became friends.

Even so, Antonio had to milk his nonsense for all it was worth to help time pass, so first he thought single nonsense and then married nonsense. Single nonsense was when he thought about things like how to discover why lumps exist, but when he thought about Karina he only thought married nonsense. Owing to his lack of luck, the best nonsense was precisely when the verb “to make” called him. The verb “to make”, in the vocabulary of Antonio’s afternoons, already came with a complement. He made coffee. And then he had to serve it, seeing as coffee is served hot. The few conversations that were heard were always about the same thing and did not seek promotion. They had got used to being just talk. People sought answers for questions more to trot out their doubts than arrive at any conclusion. At the beginning of the day people’s conversations were of a higher standard. “People leave cos there isn’t any money here. Then how come they don’t send money? Why send money if everyone’s leaving? So everyone’ll stay. But there’s no money here!” By late afternoon, conversations took a nosedive. “If today is Monday, tomorrow must be Tuesday. Didn’t Dona Ernestina leave on a Tuesday? Dona Ernestina insisted on calling bottles vials. This was the hour that luck cast a glance in Antonio’s direction, afternoon prayers were prayed and he clocked off. As he was not an important person, he was never late. I’m early for training, aren’t I, Karina? It’s not training, Antonio. It’s a rehearsal.

In those days every young lady wanted to be beautiful and every beautiful young lady wanted to be a television actress. Television was this thingamajig that showed stories for people to watch. The stories took place in chunks and from time to time not one but several ads would come on, selling things like bikes. The purpose was to find someone that wanted to buy the thing being advertised, cos the ads were paid for with some of the money from the sale, and the making of these stories was paid for with some of the money from the ads, but they made the stories so well-made
that those who saw them thought their purpose was the latter rather than the former.

Karina was the name of a character in the story that was playing when Karina was born. While the soap-opera Karina cried from the pain of a lost love, the real Karina’s mother cried from the pain of giving birth. Stubborn as she was, and her daughter took after her in this, she decided to call the midwife only at the end of the episode. But between a we are presenting and a welcome back to, the real Karina was born, crying more than the soap-opera Karina, undoubtedly to show everyone how fierce she was.

And Karina was that, yes she was fierce; now she really got fierce that night that Antonio forgot to pretend he was the character and the kiss came out real, right at the beginning of the rehearsal: it is that hard to understand what a TV kiss is like, for God’s sake? And Antonio answered, not at all. A character that’s not me uses my mouth to kiss a character that uses your mouth but isn’t you. I have to feel the character right here inside me, feel his love, have his desires, but when push comes to shove I have to stop being him and return to being me so I can remember that this is a TV kiss and the person doing the kissing is not me, it’s him. And with this explanation he proved he had understood alright, but he didn’t think it was fair, cos the only one who had it good in this story was the character.

Even so, just to show he had memorised his part, Antonio tried again to gaze deep into Karina’s eyes, feel a love that was not his, say I love you Guadalupe, and give Guadalupe a TV kiss through Karina’s mouth. He tried alright, but it seemed so impossible that he almost confessed: I memorised I love you ages ago Karina, but it’s just too hard to memorise that you are Guadalupe. He only didn’t confess cos it wasn’t with those words that he was going to say such an important thing. So he began to search around among important words to find the one that was closest to the thing he meant.

Antonio thought there were words for daily use and words that
were only for sayings. He was always intrigued, what a silly idea to invent something hard to learn that you would never have the pleasure of using. Especially words that were hard to write like extravagance, since any extravagance in Northernville was considered stupidity anyway. And what a task to find an important word to explain that his stupidity, or extravagance, with an x and a v, was to want Karina as much as you could want someone in this world of God, with a capital G, cos as well as being a proper noun, God is what we call our father and creator. There were many words and not one that said what Antonio felt for Karina exactly. He even tried making a few up, but there was no sound or written letter that said anything like it. And so, without any way of letting her know what he felt, Antonio's time passed through days of Karina. Monday there was an American movie, Tuesday smelled like a street market, Wednesday was her favourite programme, after the soap, and that Wednesday The Condemned’s last clip was going to play. The Condemned were four young lads who sang and were very popular that particular September. A clip was a little film that you watched but didn’t have to understand. The Condemned’s clip must have been really good, otherwise the audience wouldn’t have screamed so much. The bit where a grazing cow appeared was a factor of great importance in not understanding that apparition and the flying nun with a yellow swimming cap on her head also deserved detailed observation as she served no purpose except that. When the clip was over, Antonio got up from the chair, said see you tomorrow and Karina answered, see you the day after tomorrow, cos tomorrow’s Thursday. Thursday was the day Karina visited her grandmother and Antonio took the opportunity to catch up on the words I miss you. On the other hand, there was a dance at the club on Fridays. There was a time when the dance hall was always packed. But not in Antonio’s time. As someone departed every week, the pairs were gradually unpaired, leaving more and more odd-ones-out. Then the odd-ones-out became fewer and fewer. Poor things, it’s amazing how odd numbers are so much sadder than even ones. One Friday the band was left without a guitarist, the next without an accordionist, the
next without a singer, and that Friday Antonio had to become many in order to play, sing and dance with Karina at the same time, or do you think he was going to leave her sitting there? Saturday was the day when the sunlight that came through the bedroom window, reflecting on the ground, woke up closer to the door. He thought it nice that the sun rose later cos it was Saturday, and it was a shame that on that day the opposite was proven. At six in the morning on the dot, with the light there, where it was from Monday to Friday, Antonio leapt out of bed with a funny feeling. It was as if he was about to conceive of a way to convince Karina of that which was nameless, formless, inevitable, uncontainable. And awake Antonio stayed, what is it you’re thinking, boy? nothing Mum, until the next day, which, being Sunday, was the day to take a stroll around the square.
Adriana Lisboa, born in Rio de Janeiro in 1970, spent her childhood and youth in that city and on her parents’ fazenda. Later she lived in Brasília, Paris and Avignon. She studied Music and Literature and worked as a flautist, singer and music teacher. Today she devotes herself entirely to writing and translating. In 1999, after publication of her first novel The Threads of Memory (Os Fios da Memória), she was celebrated as the new star of recent Brazilian literature. In 2003 she received the José Saramago Prize for young authors for her novel Symphony in White. In 2007, she was selected by the Hay Festival and by the organisers of the Bogotá World Book Capital as one of the 39 highest profile Latin American writers under the age of 39.
Crow-blue
Azul-corvo

ADRIANA LISBOA

Brazilian edition: Rocco
Rio de Janeiro, 2010 – 224 pages
Translated by Alison Entrekin
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Synopsis

In her novel Crow Blue, Adriana Lisboa tells an unusual road-story of the search for one’s roots, friendship, and the life of the Brazilian guerillas.

Vanja is only thirteen when her mother Suzana dies of an illness. She decides to move from her hometown of Rio de Janeiro to her mother’s ex-husband Fernando in the US to look for her father Daniel, whom she has never met. Fernando, an ex-guerilla from
Brazil, is willing to take care of her, even though Vanja’s mother left him long before Vanja was born. A charismatic character, Suzana is still present for both of them, and Vanja keeps discovering more and more about her mother through Fernando’s memories. He also tells her how he used to fight in the marshes of the River Araguaia.

The novel is separated into two parts, alternatingly relating Vanja’s search for her father, linked to her coming-of-age, and Fernando’s life as a guerilla. This contrast, present both in language and content, gives the narration a depth of its own. In fluid and beautiful language, Adriana Lisboa authentically creates the cosmos of a 13-year-old girl, turning the story into a literary road movie.

*A transcultural book with a marvellous narrator which without any doubt will be a great success.*

*Cristovão Tezza,*

*writer*
**Periplaneta americana**

*The year began in July.* The place was strange. Sweat trickled down inside me, behind my skin – I sweated and my body stayed dry. It was as if the air was hard, solid, made of stone. I’d drink glass after glass of water until my belly felt bloated and heavy but it was always the same, the dry sweat and the hard air and the sun with a stinger in every ray. There was no breeze, no current of air to bring me a little relief slipping through the cracks in my blouse, ruffling the hem of my skirt or rustling my hair with promises of salvation.

On the other hand, I never saw cockroaches.

The American cockroach: Periplaneta americana. I once read that they had the ability to regenerate themselves, depending on the severity of the injury. I knew them intimately, personally and by reputation (the only creatures capable of surviving a nuclear holocaust, etc.), from surprise encounters in the kitchen and the hall leading to the service elevator. In Copacabana, they were everywhere. But I didn’t see any cockroaches there. It’s possible that they were there, and managed to withstand the constant lack of moisture and harsh winters, when it was winter. But they were much more discreet.
I was thirteen. Being thirteen is like being in the middle of nowhere. Which was accentuated by the fact that I was in the middle of nowhere. In a house that wasn’t mine, in a city that wasn’t mine, in a country that wasn’t mine, with a one-man family that, in spite of the intersections and intentions (all very good), wasn’t mine.

My knuckles turned white, threatening to split. It was weird. I seemed to be progressively transforming into something else, as if undergoing a slow mutation.

Maybe I was becoming a lizard or one of those plants that can flourish in the desert. Maybe I was mineralizing and turning into a temporary river, the sort that vanishes into the parched riverbed in the dry season, and then swells and tumbles happily along as if that’s all there was to it, tumbling happily, peril-free. As if its own life as a river wasn’t seasonal and brittle.

More than once I thought, in the first few months, that it wasn’t a place made for humans, no more than for cockroaches. And yet humans had lived there for thirteen millennia, arm wrestling with the place, long before the gold and silver mines of the nineteenth century. Long before Buffalo Bill.

(...)
Crotalus atrox

She was the one who taught me English and Spanish. It was what she knew how to do. If she’d been a yoga teacher, she’d have spent twelve years teaching me yoga, and if she’d worked on the land I’d have had a hoe before I’d even learned to talk. It was what she knew how to do, and she thought it a waste not to pass on to me, for free, as an inheritance in life, some kind of knowledge.

It was English and Spanish because she’d lived in the United States, in Texas and New Mexico, for twenty-two years, and if there’s one thing that twenty-two years in a place impose on you it is mastery of the local tongue, even if you don’t have any special talent for it.

My mother had learned English formally at school. Spanish, informally, with the tejanos.

And I learned both from my mother, surrendering to her lessons with a resistance that was never any competition for hers.

¿Es el televisor?
No, senor (señorita, señora), no es el televisor. Es el gato.

Once upon a time there were four little Rabbits, and their names were –
Flopsy,
Mopsy,
Cottontail,
and Peter.

(Later on I saw Peter Rabbit in supermarkets at Easter. I remembered my mother. I also remembered Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail, who were very good little rabbits and thus escaped life’s punishments, though they lacked Peter’s heroic charm.)

The mothers in this family die young. By the age of nine my mother had lost her mother, and went to Texas with her geologist father. A work opportunity for him, which he’d gotten through his contacts’ contacts’ contacts.

My mother grew up in Texas. One day, and she never told me why, and somehow I didn’t think I should ask, she severed ties with her father and moved to New Mexico.

My mother liked severing ties with men and disappearing from their lives. The tendency began there, with my geologist grandfather.

She found a little house in Albuquerque, near Route 66 with its old-fashioned charm, more than a decade before I was born. One of those little adobe houses, with a flat roof resting on wooden beams that ran horizontally through the walls.

She still lived in this house when I was born. We lived there until I was two. I visited it much later, with Fernando and Carlos, my improbable pair of travel companions, one icy November day. It was a small house of the most absolute simplicity, as if it had sprung from the ground itself.

My mother made her living teaching English to Mexicans migrating back to New México – some time after the Americans had migrated there, as she liked to say. Who was foreign there, who was a local? What language did the land speak? (In essence, it didn’t speak English or Spanish, because the people who were there when the explorers and conquistadores arrived
were Navajo and Anasazi and Ute. And others. And others before them. But none with the surnames Coronado or Oñate, no one known as Cabeza de Vaca. Or Billy the Kid.)

My mother also taught Spanish to Americans. University students sometimes sought her out. Some, very few, wanted to learn Portuguese. By this time, it was the least fluent of her three languages. But because of her students she delved into Brazilian music and films and books. The few Americans interested in Brazil made my mother rediscover Brazil, which she did perhaps a little clumsily at first, with the awkwardness of the not-at-all prodigal child who returns home with their hands in their pockets and drooping ears. But a short time later they are crossing their feet on the table and flicking cigarette butts into corners.

I don’t remember my early childhood in Albuquerque, of course. When I travel back in time, it feels as though I was born in Rio de Janeiro. More specifically, on Copacabana Beach – right there on the sand, among the pigeons and the litter left behind by beachgoers. I think of Copacabana. I close my eyes and even if I’m listening to Acoustic Arabia and burning Japanese Zen-Buddhist temple incense, what reaches my senses, via memory, is a vague whiff of sea breeze, a vague taste of fruit popsicles mixed with sand and salt water. And the sound of the waves fizzing on the sand, and the popsicle vendor’s voice under the moist Rio sun.

I remember the light, my fingers digging tunnels and building castles in the wet sand, patiently. There were other children around, but we were all the beginning, middle and end of our own private universes. We played together, that is, sharing space in a kind of tense harmony, but it was as if each child was cocooned in his or her own bubble of ideas, sensations, initiatives, and cutting-edge architectural projects involving wet sand and popsicle sticks.

So I was born at the age of two on Copacabana Beach, and it was
always summer, but a summer wed to water, and my tools for changing the world, for altering it and shaping it and making it worthy of me, were a little red bucket and a yellow sieve, spade and rake.

And further along was a horizon I gave no thought to. The imaginary line where the sky and sea parted company, liquid to one side, not liquid to the other. A kind of concrete abstract.

I left the horizon in peace and preferred to dream of islands, which were real, and which maybe I'd be able to swim to if I ever got serious about swimming, and separated by a world of different shadows, a world where speed and sounds were different, where animals very different to myself lived. The world of fish, of algae, of mollusks, of crow-blue shells – like those I would read about in a poem, much later. A whole other life, other register, but a human being could actually swim between them, observe them, dive to the ocean floor in Copacabana and touch the intimacy of the sand, there, so far from the popsicle sticks and volleyballs and empada vendors. The intimacy that was completely oblivious to the customary chaos of the neighborhood of Copacabana, where people hurried along or dawdled in the elderly gait of the retired or mugged or got mugged or queued at the bank or lifted weights at the gym or begged at traffic lights or pretended not to see people begging at traffic lights or looked at the pretty woman or were the pretty woman with the tiny triangles of her bikini top or tallied up prices on the supermarket cash register or collected garbage from the sidewalks and streets or tossed garbage on the sidewalks and streets or sold sex to tourists or wrote poems or walked their dogs. The drama of the city didn't even figure in the subconscious of the ocean floor. It wasn't important or relevant. It didn't even exist there.

The horizon was the leitmotif of those who yearned for the impossible. So they could keep on yearning, I suspect. I've always thought searching for something you're not going to find a convenient position. Pondering the poetry and symbolism of the horizon wasn't for me. I preferred to ponder islands and fish.
Or, better yet, the architecture of the castle I was building that morning, which was not going to crumble this time. I was making some improvements to the project, which had already failed several times.

There were children and adults around me; I was aware of their existence more or less peripherally. We could get along well if we didn’t bother one another, if we interacted as little as possible. The beach was large and free of charge, the sun was for everyone.

In Rio, my mother also taught English and Spanish. And Portuguese to foreigners. She said it was a Wild-Card Profession, and she said it like she meant it. Anywhere in the world, there would always be people wanting to learn English and/or Spanish. And Portuguese – Portuguese would increase its sphere of influence after Brazil showed the world what it was made of.

You’ll live to see it, she’d say, straightening her back and lifting her chin as she spoke, defying the very air in front of her to contradict her.

When we went to live in Brazil, she became a nationalist. Advocate of all things Brazilian, among them the language we had inherited from our European colonizer and acclimatized, and which she came to consider the most beautiful in the world.

It was the 1990s and she voted in the presidential elections. All Brazilians of age voted in the presidential elections. They were still getting used to this degree of democracy, but they’d get there one day, she’d say. We’ll get there. If I hadn’t been such a small a child at the time, I might have asked how, if the first thing that the first democratically elected president in three decades had done, on his first day in office, was confiscate the money in the people’s savings accounts. He promised it would be returned at a later date. This happened a year before we returned to Brazil and my mother hadn’t felt the brunt of it, but Elisa no doubt ranted and raved and uttered swear words that I could have remembered for future reference if I’d
been present and able to understand her. But, all said and done, they were adults and should have known what they were doing, electing, confiscating, swearing.

My mother and I never returned to Albuquerque together. In fact, we never returned to the United States together.

Firstly, because she no longer got paid in US dollars for her lessons, and in Brazil human resources were pretty cheap, even perfectly trilingual human resources – as such, the trip was too expensive for our new green and yellow more-or-less-underpaid pockets.

Secondly, because my mother wasn’t one to retrace her steps. When she left, she left. When she walked out, she walked out.

In the long summer holidays, we always went to Barra do Jucu, in the state of Espírito Santo, where my mother had friends. We’d climb into her Fiat 147 and some seven hours later we’d arrive, weary and happy, and along the way my mother would listen to music and sing along, and we’d stop at luncheonettes that smelled of grease and burnt coffee to use bathrooms that smelled of urine and disinfectant, where a very fat employee sat crocheting and sold crocheted doilies and underwear next to a cardboard box that said TIPS PLEASE.

My mother would play Janis Joplin and turn up the volume and stick her head out the window of her Fiat 147 and sing along, as if she was in a film:

Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose,

Nothing don’t mean nothing honey if it ain’t free, now now.

Even when I didn’t understand the words, I was hypnotized by my mother’s trance. She seemed like another woman, which fascinated and frightened me. Her voice had a hoarseness exactly like Janis Joplin’s and I wondered why some people became Janis Joplin and others became my mother.
You sing just as good as Janis Joplin, I once told her.

The only thing we have in common is that her dad worked for Texaco, she replied. You know. Oil.

When I was informed that Janis Joplin had died in 1970, almost two decades before I was born, I was indignant. I’d thought Janis Joplin was my contemporary, and that she was singing “Me & Bobby McGee” somewhere on the planet, while my mother, who was everything Janis Joplin hadn’t been, who was her opposite, her antimatter in another dimension, stuck her head out the window of the car that wasn’t a Porsche painted in psychedelic colors and belted out what she could to the scalding-hot asphalt of the highway.

In Barra do Jucu, my mother sometimes went out dancing at night, or to meet someone for a few beers.

Two of these someones became boyfriends, who lasted a few summers. One of them came to visit us in Rio. The other one lived in Rio, was a surfer and had a five-year-old boy whom I envied, secretly and angrily. In Rio and Barra do Jucu, my mother’s boyfriend started teaching me to surf, but then things between them ground to a halt. He called me for a few months to ask how things were going and to try to discover, between the lines, if my mother had met someone else, and if this someone else seemed more likable than him, and why. I became the surfer’s ally, but it was no good. One day he stopped calling, and I stopped surfing.

My mother’s friends in Barra do Jucu also had young kids. We liked watching the crabs in the mangrove swamp right behind the house – the crabs held a terrible fascination for me and, though horrified and disgusted, I couldn’t keep my eyes off their slow, muddy walk, those lone monks in their long meditative trances. The other kids and I changed from pajamas into beachwear and from beachwear into pajamas, after a hose-down at the end of each day. Someone always butted in with a bar of soap and a bottle of shampoo: growing up is a drag. But I was violently happy there,
and returned from Barra do Jucu when the holidays were over with skin the color of dark wood, almost like the jacaranda table in our living room.

Elisa used to call me her little caramel girl. Elisa was my mother’s foster sister.

My family’s genealogy is confusing and simple at the same time. My grandmother brought up Elisa as if she were her own daughter. Later my mother was born and then my grandmother died, and when my mother went to Texas with my grandfather, Elisa stayed in Rio. She was all grown up, sixteen-years-old, and had a job and a fiancée who would never become her husband but was a fiancée nevertheless and that was better than nothing. Unlike his real daughter, she never severed ties with the man who’d brought her up, but never saw him again either, because there was an entire continent between them, and when my retired-geologist Brazilian grandfather died of a Texan snakebite on Texan soil at the age of 67, she was the one who broke the news to my mother, all the way from the southern hemisphere.

Elisa was the daughter who had accidentally sprung from the womb of my mother’s mother’s maid. There was no father in the picture. The mother died in childbirth.

I’ll bring her up, said my grandmother, and that was how Elisa came into the family.

But she’d always be the maid’s daughter, and this original sin, this hybridism with the dark world of the servant class, in a caste system deeply rooted in Brazilian society from day one, set her apart from my mother, who went to the United States, while Elisa stayed behind after my grandmother’s death. If she nursed any hurt feelings like tiny secret jewels at the bottom of a drawer, she never let on to me. Later she studied to be a nurse and got a job in the public service and broke off her engagement because her fiancée kept stalling. According to Elisa, it was better to be alone than in a dead-end relationship.
As for me, when someone asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up the only things that occurred to me were occupations that took place on a strip of sand with waves breaking against it. Empada vendor? Thus, the year spent in Copacabana and Barra do Jucu, with the powerful machine known as the Fiat 147, was one hundred percent convenient. And except for a living Janis Joplin, I wanted for nothing, ever.

But there were the Spanish and English lessons and putting up resistance was useless. This way you’ll get work anywhere in the world, my mother used to say.

And I’d mentally recite:

¿Es el televisor?

No, señor (señorita, señora), no es el televisor. Es el gato.

I didn’t want to work anywhere in the world explaining to people that cats weren’t TVs. But putting up resistance to the transmission/imposition of knowledge was useless.

My mother told me stories about her mother. About her father, she only said the barest minimum.

I imagined my grandmother as a very thin woman with tiny feet who collected postcards from places with suggestive names like Hanover and Islamabad. She had a cat that lay in her lap and bit everyone else. An eccentric cat, who preferred his teeth to his claws. One day the cat fell out the apartment window and died, sprawled across the sidewalk. People said the cat had committed suicide.
Symphony in White
Sinfonia em Branco

ADRIANA LISBOA

Brazilian edition: Rocco
Rio de Janeiro, 2001 – 224 pages
Translated by Sarah Greene
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Synopsis

*Symphony in White*, the internationally-acclaimed novel by prize-winning Brazilian author Adriana Lisboa, follows the journeys – literal, chronological, and metaphysical – of two sisters raised in the apparently tranquil backlands of Brazil in the sixties and educated in teeming Rio de Janeiro in the seventies. Sisters who share dark secrets that affect every step of their way as they finally face their past so that they might at last embrace their future.
But *Symphony in White* is much more than compelling storytelling or a novel of Brazilian manners and culture. Lisboa also makes numerous references to music and art throughout the novel, which in itself is not unlike a symphony where each character’s storyline represents a different instrument of a symphonic score, resulting in a dramatic and powerful work of great beauty and harmony. Add to that the pure pleasure of Lisboa’s eloquent metaphors, her lyrical, poetic prose, and her unexpected word choices, which allow the reader to examine the dark abysses of the human soul within a framework as delicate as the flight of a butterfly. Like all great literature, *Symphony in White* is a book of universal appeal that transcends all geographic borders.

*Sarah Green*

*Adriana Lisboa effectively succeeds in capturing the poetry inherent in the everyday, weaving her words into a symphony of silences.*

*Henrique Rodrigues,*  
*A Tribuna da Imprensa*

*Sinfonia em Branco* is the proof of an excellent writer [...] and a vital sign of life indicating the very latest in Brazilian literature awaiting our discovery, urgently so...

*José Eduardo Agualusa,*  
*writer*

We have here a writer for the future and I hope to live long enough to accompany her at least halfway along her chosen path. She holds great promise and has already accomplished a great deal as an author.[...]

I would say that here we have an author for now and for later, since no-one who has reached the point she has achieved will simply stay put there.

*José Saramago,*  
in October 2003, on the occasion of awarding the José Saramago Prize.

An absorbing intrigue, an elegant style: With Sinfonia em branco, the Brazilian writer Adriana Lisboa creates the most enchanting novel of the season. Unmissable.

*Elle*
A Butterfly, a Forbidden Quarry

It would still be a while before she arrived.

The muggy summer afternoon floated up from the road in dust and stretched in the air. Everything was quiet, or almost quiet, and lethargic, swollen with drowsiness. A man with eyes wide open (and so pale they were transparent, something that was not very common) pretended to watch the road. His eyes sketched maps of other places, and searched out shards of memory like a child gathering up shells off the sand at a beach. Occasionally the present interrupted, imposed itself, and he thought I’m going to use dirt in my next piece. But then the brown and arid and dusty world once more shrank to reveal a girl dressed in white, evocative of a Whistler painting.

Tomás remembered her. But his memory was uncertain, fragmented, pieces of a prehistoric monster’s skeleton, buried and preserved by chance, impossible to reconstruct in its entirety. Thirty years later. Two hundred millions years later.

The dog slept at his feet, and dreamt. At times it moaned. At one point it lifted its black and white head with a start and began to chew on its
paw to remove a chigoe flea. The cook Jorgina’s guinea fowl repeated their litany that she heard without listening. A lusterless afternoon, like a piece of old rubber, a worn-out bald tire. A fossil, two hundred million years.

The bougainvilleas bloomed wildly, almost aggressively. Those bougainvilleas were there long before Tomás arrived. Who knows if they wouldn’t still be there, one way or another, long after he was gone.

The dog, with no name or owner, had simply had chosen that house as its own and considered itself the rightful owner of the leftovers the cook was in the habit of placing on a piece of newspaper twice a day, next to the wash tank. It finished its operation of removing the flea and once more dozed off.

Tomás’ pale eyes watered occasionally, a habit he’d had since childhood of keeping his eyes open as long as he could without blinking, in a cruel bet with himself, that he always won and inevitably lost. His eyes always ended up watering. And so, on that muggy, hot afternoon, they released two silver threads that no one noticed, neither the dog, nor the cook Jorgina.

He was not a happy man. Nor was he unhappy. He considered himself well-adjusted, and for that he had paid the price that he felt was fair, and had received the appropriate interest-dividends-monetary corrections. He had abdicated certain territories. He had abandoned the fantasy of an empire. He reigned only over himself and over that shack forgotten in the middle of insignificant crops, and roads that turned into dust during the dry season and into mud during the rainy season. When he had gone to live there, he had realized: the end of his dreams. And now he thought of perhaps using dirt in his next piece. His thoughts were so small. So small. A hint of perfume that a woman might leave in the air.

Far away a plane passed over without making a sound, high in the sky, there were no airports nearby, it was surely headed toward Galeão or Santos Dumont airport in the state capital of Rio de Janeiro. The cook Jorgina, who had lost most of her teeth and now proudly sported very
white dentures, silently approached Tomás and placed a steaming, rich-smelling cup of coffee on the cast iron table on the front porch. She was a woman of few words, in fact, she didn’t like words. She thought, without reflecting on it, that they were as treacherous as an animal spying on its prey, and were almost always unfair. She glanced at the weather and let out a meaningless sigh. She then went back inside to the stove where the rice, the beans, the pot roast bubbled. At a distance, Tomás recognized Ilton Xavier’s new pickup, which sped along the road, exhaling dust. All of these discreet movements were like the signs of a sleeping body’s breathing, nothing more.

The coffee was very sweet, too sweet, but Tomás had learned to like it that way, it was the way of the people from those parts, light on the coffee, heavy on the sugar. The dog, which was being pestered by a horsefly, lifted its head and in one swift movement caught the insect in mid-flight with its mouth. Tomás regarded his bare legs without interest. On his skin were the rough signs of that place so far from concrete and asphalt, like tattoos: innumerable mosquito, tick, horsefly, and other insect bites, a small scar on his left calf, where the larva of a botfly had been removed at the Health Center in Jabuticabais. Things he had been collecting over the past years, since he had gone to live out there. So close to and so far from that girl in white. At his feet a laborious trail of ants carved a living groove on the ground.

Neither happy, nor unhappy. A man who only sought that small silence, a mixture of himself and the dust Ilton Xavier’s new pickup left behind on the road like an afterthought.

In the small living room with a worn-out red cement floor, his paintings were piled waiting for Cândido to pick them up on the weekend, paintings unpretentious in size and purpose at a hundred reais each, destined to decorate middle-class country living rooms, physicians’ waiting rooms, modest law offices. The Notary Public in Jabuticabais had bought two, according to Cândido. One he hung in his office, the other
was a wedding present for a niece. Occasionally someone would request a portrait, double the price, that made Cândido happy, but Tomás’ mood didn’t seem to change much, it remained as uniform as the dry afternoon.

In the landscape paintings there was almost always a road that led to nowhere. That disappeared behind a tree, or around a curve, or down a slope. And in the lower right-hand corner was the signature of someone who signed his paintings only because the buyers demanded he do so. Earlier, when he was twenty years old, Tomás refused to pollute any of his paintings with a signature that ruined the overall composition, like someone coughing in the middle of a concert, like lights coming on in a movie theater before the film was over. Now, he did whatever his clients wanted, and for those clients his signature lent authenticity to the painting. Even if it was the signature of an unknown artist. He signed his name with black paint and the handwriting of a child.

Once a client told him my niece traveled to Europe. She went to Paris. And she brought me back an enormous reproduction of a photograph, a black-and-white photograph of a man and woman kissing in the middle of the street. I will never hang that thing in my living room. But your paintings I would. Your landscapes are so beautiful, and besides they’re oil paintings, that’s worth a lot.

Tomás smiled and lit a cigarette and a spiral of smoke rose up like a charmed snake. For an instant it sculpted a female figure that soon dissipated into the air. Tired from so much sleep, the dog got up, scratched its ear with its hind paw and left the paw in mid-air for an instant. It looked into the distance and perceived something that escaped the man. It turned back its head and saw the open door behind and had a canine premonition that made it smile a canine smile. Then it went two yards forward to lie down, where the grass was higher and perhaps cooler.

There was nothing really new for Tomás anymore. Words were sparse, a consequence of spending most of his time with a cook who didn’t like
to talk and who communicated by smiles and monosyllables. Except when he periodically went to Jabuticabais, the nearest town, and did his meager shopping. Other than that, there were the visits from his friend Clarice. And the visits to his friend Clarice. Which only went to show: there was nothing really new anymore. His race was run and Tomás could now sit in the shade, in front of the finish line, which happened to coincide with the starting line, as if he hadn’t moved at all or as if he had made a huge circle, three hundred and sixty degrees. So the only thing left was for him to observe the earth’s rotation, and the almost imperceptible change of seasons. Within this reality, Clarice’s company fit in without demands, without movements, without raising a ruckus. Without causing any disturbances that might require answers, as silent as everything else. If a spiral of smoke sculpted a female figure, that figure would not be Clarice. However, as Tomás had to recognize, it might still evoke that other woman, in spite of everything. The woman he would see again the next day.

A woman his memory always dressed in white.

Many years before, that woman in white was still simply Maria Inês. And she had just planted a money tree in the company of her second cousin who was still simply João Miguel. Two second cousins with double names: that was all they had in common.

It’s still not growing, complained João Miguel, and Maria Inês shrugged her shoulders and said you just aren’t patient. You think it’s as simple as that? That we plant a seed and it starts to grow at that very instant? You have to wait a long time.

How long?

It depends. Days, weeks.

That long?

She didn’t answer. She smoothed the dirt down with motherly
tenderness, then turned her eyes to follow a butterfly that flew across the small space to the quarry, where it leaped daringly into the abyss.

Now pay attention, don’t you go telling my father that we were here, it’s forbidden, said Maria Inês.

Forbidden?

Yes. He forbade me to come here, it’s really dangerous.

That made João Miguel afraid, but at the same time it was obvious that a money tree, like the one he and his second cousin had just planted, should be in a secret place. Hard to reach. In a forbidden place.

It had taken the two children an hour to hike up the hill, crossing the pasture and the small woods at the top (like a small remaining patch of hair on an almost completely bald head), infesting themselves with ticks, up to the edge of the quarry where families of immobile lizards lay camouflaged in the sun.

Up there, leaning over the highest rock, they could see the whole world, or at least to Maria Inês, nine years of age, it seemed to be the whole world. To one side the river, a thin string of gold, the animals in the pasture like miniatures, the house and corral, colorful plastic toys. To the other side, the emptiness accentuated by the abrupt precipice: below, in the abandoned headquarters of the Ipês Farm, ghosts wandered about, round snails leisurely scuffed the walls and plants grew on the roof. The paint on the windows peeled off little by little. Day by day everything aged and became more secretive. More painful. Like other realities that Maria Inês would soon know so well.

Did I ever tell you about the Ipês Farm?, she asked João Miguel, and he lied, saying no only because he wanted to hear the lynching story again.

She began: they say the owner went crazy because he caught his wife with another man, you know. He went to the kitchen, got a big knife. They say he was drunk, I don’t know if someone would do something like that if
they weren’t drunk. Maybe he was crazy. He got the knife and he killed his wife, his very own wife! Can you imagine that? With seventeen stabs. The other guy managed to escape and call the police, the husband was arrested.

Maria Inês paused, appraised the silence on the tip of her tongue and felt its sweet and sour taste, like tamarind candy. She then continued, competent storyteller, relating how pacific Jabuticabais’ scanty population became enraged, how they rose up like a tidal wave, invaded the police station and lynched the assassin right in the middle of the street, with sticks and stones and then fire. His daughter, the embittered child who inherited those lands, was forced to mature early, like fruit in a greenhouse. Her name was Lindaflor. Some said she was as blonde as an angel, others swore she had flaming red hair and very white skin, or that she was as dark as a native Brazilian, with thick, straight hair. One moment she was sneaky like her mother, another violent like her father, another she was sweet and insane. The information as to her whereabouts also varied. She was with her aunt and uncle in Friburgo. With her cousins in Rio de Janeiro. She had moved abroad. Maria Inês couldn’t clarify any of that with her parents, because, of course, that topic was also forbidden.

All things forbidden seduced her in the same proportion that they repressed Clarice, her older sister, who was about to turn thirteen and was as obedient as a trained dog, who never went near the quarry and never asked questions about the Ipês Farm tragedy.

Do you want to know what I’m going to do with my share of the money?, Maria Inês asked her second cousin, referring to the tree, the day when it’s all grown and full of fruit-coins? I’m going to travel, she said. By ship, to Europe.

He said my father travels a lot. Even to Europe, by plane and by ship. There was an apparent detachment in his remark.

Planting a money tree using a coin for a seed had been her idea, naturally – the inventive Maria Inês, the daring, the curious. She looked
at her cousin with true compassion. Whenever João Miguel remembered
his father, and turned as somber as a rainy Monday, she was filled with
the desire to protect him, her poor abandoned cousin. He traveled a lot,
his father. All the way to Europe, all the way to his native Italy. By plane.
With his lover. While his wife wasted away in a clinic for the mentally ill.
Of course knowing those details was one hundred percent forbidden, but
Maria Inês had her ways of overhearing the adults’ conversations. With his
lover. And his only son left forgotten behind for the three-month summer
vacation on his cousins’ farm, in the backlands of the state.

Poor João Miguel, said Maria Inês, and her words were one-third
sincerity and one-third irony and one-third indifference. Her fingers softly
grazed her second cousin and husband’s wrist, which he had injured in
a tennis match, that Sunday morning, thirty-five years after the ancient,
mildewed Sunday morning that they had climbed a hill, far from there, and
gone close to a forbidden quarry to watch over the birth of a money tree.

After her caress, as gentle as the brush of an insect’s wing, Maria
Inês put her reading glasses back on and listlessly dug her face into the
newspaper. She said the Sunday editions were stupid and never had
anything important to say. And João Miguel said that was exactly the idea,
Sunday editions for Sunday readers.

Maria Inês continued to turn the pages, pausing here and there, even
though she didn’t consider herself a Sunday reader. She leafed through the
thin magazine filled with gossip about American actors and fashion and
beauty tips. An interview. A health insurance ad. A shallow, lackadaisical
column. She only stopped again to drink the last sip of her cup of coffee,
strong and black, like in Italy. She had learned to drink her coffee that way,
after all the trips. She placed the white cup back onto the white saucer that
sat on the table with a crystal top and a white marble base.

It was boiling hot and the color of the morning was an unreliable
blue. Too intense, like an oil-painting blue, an artificial blue mixed on an artist’s palette.

On the streets of Rio de Janeiro unsel...-covered thighs bursting from their short shorts, and loose, cropped shirts that revealed chubby arms and chubby stomachs beneath swaying, fleshy breasts. Refined ladies with thin eyebrows walked on the sidewalks with brassiere straps peeking out from under their blouses. On their foreheads, temples, and above their lips smeared with red lipstick, a thousand beads of sweat resisted their linen handkerchiefs. Men took off their shirts, exposing toasted, sedentary bellies. Almost everyone was too tan, faces like tomatoes, swimsuit strap marks, thin and white, decorating backs, skin peeling off like paper after the excessive sun exposure, lips swollen like ripe fruit.

The heat was everywhere and it did little good to seek out the deceitful comfort of the sea, because the sun was baking hot even as the cold salt water tried to convince everyone there was some relief. On the contrary, the water made the sunburns more severe. The heat was in the sand, on the sidewalks, in the window shops, on the asphalt, in the trees, everywhere, in the air, on the walls, in the open-mouthed, dripping-tongued dogs, on the papayas on top of the table, stamped like an extra hue in the treacherous blue of the sky.

In Maria Inês and João Miguel Azzopardi’s large living room there was, however, an anesthetic known as a twenty-three-thousand-BTU air conditioner. The apartment in the Upper Leblon neighborhood was an aquarium and in its refrigerated waters floated a few secret fish, most of them nameless.

A decorator had suggested all that white. White sofa, white walls. White ideas. A large quantity of white marble. Some brushed aluminum, as in the two chairs. Some satinwood, as in the shelves. An infinite aseptic world of fantasy.
The money used to purchase all of that had not sprouted from the tree planted near a forbidden quarry thirty-five summers earlier. It had come from the natural handing down of the business from the vecchio Azzopardi, Azzopardi senior, to Azzopardi junior, João Miguel. That year, like every year, the vecchio would receive his guests in his native Tuscany villa, where he had gone to live after his retirement, on turning seventy. Full of vitality and a desire to drink Chianti and to have ever younger girlfriends.

João Miguel’s flight would leave at night. He would first stop off in Cortina d’Ampezzo. Eduarda had decided to go with her mother to that radically different destiny where she would see her Aunt Clarice, in the backlands of the state, a place where tourists never set foot. And where mysteries breathed in broad daylight, as she would discover.
Arthur Dapieve (Rio de Janeiro, 1963) is a journalist, music critic, writer, and Journalism professor at PUC-Rio. Since 1993, he writes a weekly column for O Globo. Novelist, his books have been published in France and Portugal. Currently, Arthur Dapieve is immersed in a new novel.
From Each Love You Shall Get Nothing But Scorn
De cada amor tu herdarás só o cinismo

ARTHUR DAPIEVE

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Translated by Fernanda Abreu

Synopsis

The initial setup is a concert of the rock group R.E.M. Dino, a 46 years old advertiser, married with two children, and Adelaide, the irresistible redhead intern from the firm, begin a torrid affair that, little by little, turns into a melancholic love story. The book covers 15 weeks of the affair, with Dino’s generation soundtrack — Neil Young, Pink Floyd, Joy Division — and the bohemian geography of Rio de Janeiro as background, making references to soccer and music. “From Each Love You Shall Get Nothing But Scorn” also
relates to Dino Buzzati’s novel “A Love Affair”, revealing the metalinguistic game of Lolita-as-a-literary-genre: the mature man is called Dino, like the Italian, and the girl is Adelaide, like the Milanese prostitute.

“A disturbing novel about love in modern days”.

Wook website,
Portugal

“Gorgeous novel”.
Fórum newspaper,
Portugal
Michael Stipe yelled one last time:

‘And I feel…’

One hundred voices bellowed the answer:

‘Fine!’

Bernardino thought:

‘fuck me’

Two forty-four in the morning, January 14th, 2001.

The clock should have stopped right then and there, petrified, as if it were eight fifteen in the morning of August 6th, 1945 in some Hiroshima of the soul. Because right then, six minutes and three seconds into the live version of It’s the end of the world as we know it (And I feel fine), Bernardino understood the bald singer’s verdict. At that precise moment his eyes landed on Adelaide’s. They didn’t simply meet her eyes, their eyes didn’t lock: they just landed on hers. Softly like a little bird. While the theme-song of his Armageddon died on the speakers and the band left the stage, saying thanks both in English and Portuguese for all the applause, Bernardino
found himself becoming the character of a second-rate ad. Man looks at girl, girl looks at man, crowd parts and they slide towards each other on trolleys and tracks operated by the film crew and unseen by the viewer. At the beginning, however, it was unclear what that scene was trying to sell. But Bernardino, creative director of Milano & Associates, better known in the market as M&A, Bernardino, the genius of Napoleon III margarine, knew at once that this was the end of his world - for the third time - and he felt fine.

That’s why he thought:
‘fuck me’
‘Dino, hiii, what a coincidence…’ Protocol kisses, cheeks touching.
‘We could as well have made a date… Terrific concert, uh? I loooved it.’
‘Fuck me!’
‘I came with some rocker friends of mine but we got lost in the crowd. Too bad for them ‘cause I’m the one driving…’ She laughed, slightly tipsy, looking around. ‘The cell won’t work, no calls get through. They’ll have to manage.’
‘Fuck me…’
‘Looks like your vocabulary has shrunk since we last met, uh?’
‘Oh, I’m sorry, Adelaide.’ oh fuck me ‘Do you have any idea how long I’ve been waiting to hear these guys live?… Almost twenty years, since I heard Pilgrimage on old Fluminense FM for the first time. Were you in diapers? Not quite? It went like boum! Too bad they didn’t play that one. It was like lightning. I’m wired, I’m a bit drunk, I’m thrilled, I’m happy. All of which accounts for being a retard. I’ll be all right in a bit, sorry.’
‘I was kidding… I can understand your situation, even if I hardly know R.E.M. But I’ll want to know more, ok?’ Another look around, less anxious this time. ‘Are you here on your own?’
‘I am. My wife goes to bed really early.’

‘So… Did you take the bus? Or… a taxi?!’

‘Yeah. I took a taxi, damned expensive.’

‘And how are you getting back? Did you keep it waiting?!’

Bernardino shrugged and shook his head at the same time.

‘I am a nice girl, I can give you a lift into town. Let’s go?’

‘oh fuck me’

Anti-despair pause.

‘Thanks, yeah, I was just wondering how I’d manage to leave this place. You’re the only familiar face I’ve seen. But I think we should wait a bit, let the crowd drain, everyone will be stuck in traffic anyway.’ do something ‘I could use a drink, how about you? We could get a draft beer in one of those booths. They’re Kaiser, but right now I could even stomach a Malt 90. You’re not old enough to know, but Malt was the brand sponsoring the last festival… Well, anyway, it seems to be the most efficient way to talk the kids out of getting pissed: get a horribly bad beer to pay your bills and give it exclusive rights to sell inside the concert area. People hardly touch a drink.’

Adelaide was shaking her head up and down, sticking her tongue out and smiling. Her hair was dark red, not ginger, and it fell straight over her ears in light waves, making her look like the cocker spaniel in a Disney cartoon.

‘lady adelady adelade light of my life flame in my flesh’

They walked almost in silence up to the booth in front of the main gate, towards the parking lot where the car waited, focusing more on avoiding the moving crowds than on discussing the song Everybody hurts. Naturally, many people had had the same idea, and there was still a huge line at the booth. Nevertheless, even though they knew that at the end of
the rainbow there would be only two plastic cups filled with lukewarm Kaiser beer, they both threw themselves at the drink as if reaching the free zone of a tag game. Bernardino stared at the girl’s cheeks, beautiful cheeks, stretching to the sides of her face, slightly narrowing her light-brown eyes. Although she had not yet graduated, Adelaide was already a myth of the advertising market. She made a sensation not because of her professional skills - impossible to measure in the menial tasks she performed at M&A, such as searching for images or scanning pictures - but because, on top of being beautiful, very beautiful, and having a good body, a very good body, she was nice, extremely nice.

He had recognized these and other qualities of hers since the day the girl had introduced herself claiming to be one of his fans during one of those boring cocktail parties attended only by people of the same profession, during which people almost invariably drank too much to chase away boredom and office colleagues. For him, however, Adelaide was the work of a contemporary painter he did not like, a scribble by Mirò. He saw it, he acknowledged its beauty, he experienced a fleeting aesthetical pleasure, he recognized its value and then he moved on to the next painting in the long gallery of nice women for whom you feel nothing. Now that she was a trainee in the art department of the agency where he worked, whenever they met in the lift Bernardino would prolong the conversation just to imagine that some onlooker might think: ‘He’s doing her.’ It was an ego boost to be seen with a beauty like that. But, no. He was not doing her, nor did he fancy doing her. Until Michael Stipe decided on his disgrace. At that precise moment, during the music festival Rock in Rio III, in the half-darkness of that field in Jacarepaguá, Adelaide was illuminated with a stroke by Rembrandt and she became another picture, one of those pictures we fall in love with.
Música negra
Black Music

ARTHUR DAPIEVE

Brazilian edition: Editora Objetiva
Rio de Janeiro, 2008 – 112 pages
Translated by Alex Forman

Synopsis

This novel set up in a favela in Rio de Janeiro tells the story of the kidnapping of 13 year-old Michael Philips by the 17 year-old drug dealer He-Man, who dreams of being a famous rapper. His girlfriend, Jô, sister of a former prostitute, is responsible for taking care of the kidnapped.

In this relationship — fuelled by sex, music, violence, and threatened dreams — anger and fear give way to feelings of friendship, compassion, and love. Arthur Dapieve offers to the readers an insight, not only disturbing, but also delicate and good-humoured.
“It instigates when it averts from stereotypes”.
O Globo

“Vigorous, imaginative”.
Jornal do Brasil

“Black Music is a new way of narrating violence”.
Radio Antena 3,
Portugal
All of them wore Bin Laden masks. Five skinny black dudes and a short white one. The gruff-voiced terrorist in the green nylon jacket pointed his Uzi at me again. The others were also heavily armed. One held a small, retracted Uzi. Three had AR-15s, typically with handles on the rail section. The white pygmy carried a more robust and expensive Sig Sauer. I was surprised not to see a banana ammo clip curving forward on an AK-47.

The white pigmy was the only one showing his bare boney chest. He broke the silence:

“Maicon Filipe?”

It was the second time I heard my name said this way in half an hour.

“Michael Philips.”

My damn voice cracked. And someone boxed my ears. God knows if I got hit because of my frail voice, or because I corrected the white pygmy. The punch floored me. Two skinny black guys lifted me up by the arms and placed me back in the chair, all crooked with fear. One of them held a revolver at the nape of my neck. I think it was a Rossi. The white pygmy spoke again in an indifferent tone:

“Maicon Filipe? American citizen, 13 years old, only son of Tomás
Gordon Filipe, Ezon exec in Brazil, residing at 196 Praia do Flamengo, penthouse duplex.”

I had just learned not to correct anything or anyone.

“Yes, that’s me.”

My damned voice, cracked again. The pygmy didn’t hit me this time. He just turned to the hoarse terrorist in the green nylon jacket,

“We got our kid.”

In response, the hoarse terrorist in the green nylon jacket exclaimed in relief:

“Dotty could have warned us that the boy was black!”

Official communiqué from the white pygmy:

“It was you we wanted. Maicon Filipe.”

“What do you want from me?”

My damned voice cracked again.

The white pygmy’s masked left fielder kicked me in the right knee, which was already hurting. I almost fell to the ground again. Almost. An order came with the knee-kick:

“Talk like a man!”

“I’m a child!”

My voice came out thick and vibrato this time. Brutish like Ben Webster. I didn’t understand if the white pigmy and the five skinny black Bin Ladens remained silent because of my complaint or because of the change of register in my voice. The leader of the terrorist cell finally spoke:

“And who here isn’t a child?”

Everyone laughed out loud. The skinny masked guy to the far right
laughed so hard, his body contorting forward and back around his AR-15. All six terrorists began to talk at the same time, of people I didn’t know, using slang I hadn’t learned. I’d always had trouble understanding the fast talking poor Brazilians. I had so much difficulty I couldn’t be sure they were speaking Portuguese at all. It could be Arabic for all I knew. There were skinny Black Muslim dudes, weren’t there? There were white pygmies who were Muslim, right? There are American Muslims living in Afghanistan, so? I knew this because I’d seen it on Fox News.

I was startled awake. I heard shots outside. Many shots. Some closer. Others more distant. I imagined the Brazilian police coming to save me, and then I dreaded their coming to save me. I didn’t know much about the Sahara, I hadn’t watched Osama Bin Laden on TV sitcoms, but I knew the infamy of the Brazilian police. I started to feel nervous and began counting shots like they were sheep, hoping I’d sleep. One shot from a firearm resounded deeply. From another came five rounds sounding like the snap of a whip. Another sounded like a canon. Twelve pops like they came from a chainsaw. Or was it thirteen? I lost count; there was a lot of shooting. I knew what the guns looked like from having rifled through my father’s magazines, but I had no idea how they sounded when fired. Was the canon a Sig Sauer? Was the whip an Uzi? Was the chainsaw an AR-15? Or was that backwards? Canon fire from the AR-15, chainsaw from the Uzi, whip lashes from the Sig? This idea seemed less logical, but why? I fell asleep considering this shit. I got used to the gunfire. People will grow accustomed to anything.

Jô materialized before me. It was my second morning here. Someone untied me while Jô offered me some stale bread with cold butter, and a jelly jar of skimmed milk, the way they take it in Brazil. To my relief, Astroblema, and not the stocky black dude, was standing guard behind
Jô. He was wearing the same green nylon jacket that he wore when he'd climbed the steps of the school bus, and asked for me. The scar on his face was shiny with sweat. He didn’t bother to point the Uzi at me. Jô’s eyes were red and puffy. She sniffled every once in a while. Astroblema brought it up, in a hoarse voice in his enthusiastic way:

“The heat is on, right, kid?”

I didn’t understand. My bread was cold.

“What?”

“Shit, didn’t you hear the pipoco?”

I didn’t understand a thing. I kept looking at my cold bread.

“Popcorn?”

“No, man. Pipoco, gunshots!”

For them, I was the perfect idiot.

“Oh, yes, I heard the shooting…”

And so, I thought it was perfectly reasonable to add a perfectly idiotic question.

“…was it police?”

Astroblema laughed. Jô wiped her nose, and laughed as well.

“What goddam police! … no way. The Mato Fechado tried to invade Búfalo, but we held our own. I mean, one of ours fell, but we burned three or four of theirs down below…How long we supposed to put up with this war.”

Astroblema directed this last sentence to Jô. She sniffled and shrugged her shoulders.

“Did someone die, from here?”

“I’m telling you, loser, they killed one of ours.”
“Who?”

Jô broke her silence with a yelp. I jumped out of my chair. Getting used to Jô’s screams, wasn’t the same as sleeping with gunfire.

“Do you remember Buiú? He was here with me last night, the strong one! Him! One shot in the neck, here, just one!

Buiú. Short, strong, Black. Nice to meet you. Goodbye. One less chance for things to go wrong, for me. I never personally knew someone who had died. Mother’s parents were already dead when I was born. I didn’t know Vovó and Vovó myself. But I’d seen their photographs. Vovó was a skinny black man with a thin mustache. He was always smiling, eternally erect in a white suit at home in the living room picture frame. Vovó was sitting by his side. She wore a flowery dress, and was always very serious. Vovó died first. Tuberculosis. Vovó died soon after. Of sadness, said my mother. Vovó’s name was Sidmar. Vovó’s was Tereza. Just like in the song, *Uma Nêga Chamada Tereza*¹. I knew the song, but Vovó Sidmar died rooting for Vasco. Grandpa George was a Yankees fan. He and Grandma Liz were still alive and well, in Brooklyn.

Buiú. Well, I’d known Buiú personally and then he died. I didn’t know he was called Buiú when he was here in the room in this shack, alive, eyes glazed, pointing an AR-15. I didn’t care for Buiú. Afraid he’d kill me, like over nothing, but he didn’t need to die. Could’ve just disappeared. Disappeared al’right, from my sight and everyone else’s, forever. Wouldn’t be seen any more by anyone. Maybe in living room photographs, or memories, or dreams. I wasn’t religious, didn’t believe in ghosts. I was 13. Maybe Buiú’s girlfriend dreamed about him every once in a while. Yeah, that’s if he even had a girlfriend. Would dream Buiú be the same as live Buiú? With that glazed-over expression would he say the same things in *Uma Nêga Chamada Tereza* (Jorge Ben Jor – 1969).

¹ *Uma Nêga Chamada Tereza* (Literally, It’s February and it’s Carnaval, I have a VW Beetle and a guitar. I am Flamengo, and I have a girl named Tereza, Ah! Ah!)
the dream Buiú would say in life? Glazed over, would he say I love you? But who would he say te amo to? Jô? Her eyes were red. Weren’t they? I started to think that Jô and Buiú were boyfriend and girlfriend. So I came up with a question to change the conversation in my head:

“What was Buiú called?”

Jô and Astroblema looked at each other.

“Buiú, duh!”

Just at that moment, He-man rushed into the room. He was holding his Sig like he was still in combat. Behind him came two other skinny black dudes that I’d never seen without masks. One of them carried a loaded shotgun. Great looking piece. It reminded me of one that I’d seen on the cover of an Ice-T album. Or was it Ice Cube? For sure it wasn’t Vanilla Ice. The other one had a F.A.L. light rifle slung over his shoulder. These two had the same glazed look as the deceased Buiú. Were the three brothers? Would these two be the next to die? Would I be the next to die? He-man paced back and forth in the room tense like he was considering the possibility. Jô and Astroblema were quiet, like they were also thinking about it.

He-man finally sat down in front of me, on the chair usually kept empty for the boss. He was breathless. He was sweating a lot. His blue eyes seemed to have doubled in size over night. Even his zits were inflamed. I was scared. Jô grabbed the nearly empty jelly jar out of my hand and left the room in a hurry. He-man continued breathless, Sig at the ready, staring at me with his extra-wide blue eyes. I noticed that the skinny brothers without names also stared at me with glazed eyes. I remembered a bad joke: Brazil is the only place in the world where the dealer is an addict and the prostitute cums. There is a third crazy thing in the joke, but I can’t remember it².

My heart burst in my chest. I thought my time had come. So this was

² Translator’s note. In Brazil the drug dealer get high, the prostitute comes, and the pimp falls in love.
it. Stale bread with cold butter, a jelly jar full of skim milk that had been my last meal. I lowered my gaze. Looking down was a basic necessity for someone as tall as me, even sitting. I felt sorry for myself, so sorry that I didn’t feel any shame sniveling, a little.

“I don’t want to die.”

My damned voice cracked, making the sentence sound even more pathetic. I don’t know if it was what I said, or the way I said it, but He-man came down from his trip.

“Did you hear about Buiú?”

I nodded.

“Shit, Maicon, shit.”

I raised my head when I heard my name. He wasn’t saying it right, but in this parallel universe it was my name. I didn’t sense any hostility in He-man’s tone. He was more emotional than at other times we’d met. Maybe it wasn’t my time yet. Hope beat in my chest. I hung my head with understanding.

“It was fucked up, Maicon. The Mato Fechado attacked us head on with everything they’ve got, which was no small thing. They must have put X-9 to infiltrate Búfalo. Oh, if I find out who the son of a bitch is…”

The room became quieter still.

“But obviously we’re not assholes, and we were waiting for them, like we’ve been every night lately. Our guys had anti-aircraft defense jacked on the stairs, and responded by mowing them down, you get me? Two of them fell there in the middle of Itapiru. A buyer on the street told me today that one of those guys was nearly ripped in half by a .50. Ha! I would’ve loved to see that…. We were there for a long time trading rapid fire around the stairs. Rat-tat-tat, pop-pop-pop.

They didn’t return to their hill, we didn’t retreat to the top of ours.
Then, dude, they split up and about fifteen jumped the scrapheap wall to climb the steep *pirambeira* that gives way to the *terreirão*, and caught us by surprise. But Buiú, was right there behind a tree, *na tocaia*, good man. Rat-tat-tat, pop-pop-pop. Their guys fled back over the wall, but Buiú took a hit in the neck. He fell, blood pulsating out of him, until his heart stopped. Straight out of a movie. I didn’t see it, I was further up, but Acácio saw it all. Fucked up, wasn’t it, brother? Acácio was right there and hit one with a shotgun. Messed up shit yo, Maicon, but we’re still standing."

I didn’t know what *X-9, Itapiru, pirambeira, terreirão*, and *tocaia* were but I understood everything and I asked, in a low thick voice.

“When will Buiú be buried?”

“He already was. We weren’t going to give him up to the people of Mato Fechado, or to the cops to do the right thing with death certificate and so forth, down there at the *Catumbi* cemetary. He didn’t have documents, family, a girl anyway. For dust you are and to dust you shall return, isn’t that it? We, then…. Brought the body up here and buried him out in the *terreirão* by the forest. He must’ve liked it, cool kid, God bless.”

I questioned whether Buiú would have liked any of it. But it was grim to think that the corpse was out there, so close. Not that I believed in the walking dead or ghosts, it was enough for me to have known someone who died. I didn’t need to run the risk of tripping over his dead body, buried in a hurry. On the other hand, I appreciated the information that he didn’t have a girl, a girlfriend. If he didn’t have a girlfriend, Jô was just crying for a friend. Or for some other reason. I asked something else, but my voice cracked:

“And now what?”

“And now, Maicon, we got to have you more than ever.”
I felt almost part of the group when I heard him say this, as if we were a team and the coach took me off the bench with 17 seconds left in a decisive game. He-man said that and pulled a made-in-china cellphone from deep inside his black cutoffs. I couldn’t help thinking that the cellphone had been near his sweaty balls, but I wasn’t in a position to feel disgust for anyone. I was dirty, had peed and cum on myself for two days. I took the cellphone and waited for his orders.

“Call home.”

“And say what?”

“Say you are fine and ask about the money. Two hundred thousand dollars in change. Tell them to be quick. And talk fast, dude.”

I dialed my home phone. Mother answered. I spoke forcing a deep voice:

*Hi, mom, it’s me, I wanna talk to...*

Out of nowhere, I took a hard hit to the right temple. Dropped the cellphone. Sat swinging like a bowling pin in the chair, but didn’t fall. I moaned and cracked:

“I’m a kid…”

I took a second hit in the same place. A light, almost tender, daddy-slap. I was an idiot. Did I just say I was a child? So, I deserved to be spanked even by that white, greasy blond-haired, third-of-my-size, undernourished pigmy.

“In Portuguese!”

He-man wasn’t American. The skinny black dude carrying the F.A.L. strapped to his shoulder picked the made-in-china cellphone up off the floor, and extended his hand back to me with what was almost kindness. The gesture was so surprising that an English “thank you” escaped my lips, and I wasn’t slapped for it. I took the phone. Back at home, my mother
screamed hysterically. I wasn’t religious like her, but at that moment I prayed for my voice to deepen so that I would sound like a little man, and said in Portuguese:

“Mommy, Mommy, Mommy…. Nothing happened. The cellphone fell. I’m okay. I want to talk to Dad please.”

My prayer resulted in a tone of voice that apparently reassured my mother. Dad must’ve been next to her. I heard his baritone voice say “Hello.”

“Dad, it’s me. I’m going to speak in Portuguese so that everyone here can also understand me and stay calm. Yes, I’m okay, I’m not hurt. They’re treating me well. But they’re asking for two hundred thousand dollars to let me go.”
Beatriz Bracher (São Paulo, 1961) graduated in Literature and Writing. She was the editor of Literature and Philosophy magazine *34 Letras*, and one of the founders of Editora 34, where she worked for eight years. She was awarded with the Clarice Lispector Award (Biblioteca Nacional) in 2009. Beatriz is also an award winner screenwriter.
Blue and Hard
Azul e Dura

BEATRIZ BRACHER

Brazilian edition: editora 34
São Paulo, 2002 – 148 pages
Translated by Christopher Peterson

Synopsis

This explosive novel, written in a dizzying, harsh and yet lyrical way tells the story of Mariana, a 42 year old woman who lives in Rio de Janeiro and that absentmindedly runs over and kills a girl from her neighborhood. Years later, while skiing in Switzerland, the accident comes back to her mind, triggering a moral crisis and a questioning about her social status and her marriage to a successful lawyer.
“Blue and Hard is a novel of extraordinary strength and beauty”

O Estado de São Paulo

“Bracher is intense and precise in her work about existential tearing apart [...]”

Marcelo Pen
We’re the only Brazilians around here. That was one reason why Monica insisted on this season of the year. She claims that during the ski season in the U.S., all you hear is Portuguese all day long, and she’s embarrassed to death. I don’t know if the feeling is universal, dying of embarrassment when you meet a fellow countryman abroad. It sounds like an older sibling thing, when your little brothers and sisters embarrass you in front of your friends. As if the little ones could reveal your ridiculousness, as if all your stubbornly hidden weaknesses popped out like pus from a pimple on the day of a party. Maybe only new peoples get this feeling. I don’t think so. It has more to do with asymmetric relations.

Rich Brazilians in Switzerland can be mistaken for rich Lebanese in Switzerland or even rich French and Italians in Switzerland. The nobiliary titles are gone, but a stateless brotherhood-in-wealth survives. My father wouldn’t want me to think this way, nor would Jorge. But Jorge, where is Jorge? One works so hard, why not enjoy these magnificent days with joy and a light soul, without tripping over potholes or dog poop, without fear of getting mugged and without being offended by the errant poverty of child pickpockets? We can be elegant and happy without offending anyone.
Even among the well-to-do from wealthy countries, there’s this air of relief here, which could be typical of any summer camp (even summer camps for sugarcane plantation workers in Alagoas, if they existed). So what distinguishes them from each other, and what do they have in common? In the dinners where we talked (when I talked) with foreigners, they all spoke of their countries with love in their hearts, and let’s be honest, no doubt about it, we’re only somebody because we’re from somewhere. Oh, yes, whom did you meet today? A nice Chinese man, a serious Turk, a dry German, a quiet Swede, a curious Brazilian, a romantic Italian. We’re also somebody because we’re man or woman, tall or short, white, black, or yellow, a child, teenager, adult, or elder. So why stateless? Like the Jews, the Gypsies, or the Italians in New York, wealthy people can spot each other. I think, in my muddled and groping way, that the notion of nobility was ideological, while that of wealth is religious. Heirs and wives, who don’t perceive the difference, go into a poorly disguised panic when they realize they’ve been excommunicated. There are no formerly wealthy, not even good families. This is an archaic concept of nobility which still cloaks some fortunes, an attachment more aesthetic than functional. The brotherhood is based on the movement rather than the individuals. A job well done will be rewarded, and if there is no reward, it’s because the job was not well done. The only sin is failure. Work is not a value in itself, and effort doesn’t get you into the club, only the bottom line does. Countries, governments, social and cultural movements, notions of justice or injustice, technology, motivation, and rebellion are elements of human nature with which and against which you work. Turning the forces of nature into allies, never analyzing weaknesses with pity, but always with anger. The key is to forget. Things are what they are. A fall is a fall, you can fall thousands of times, thousands of times you shall be excluded, and with each new triumph you shall be readmitted. Belief in results is the only socially acceptable belief, regardless of the culture, the country, the subject. Therefore, stripped of prejudices, the result is what we offer to the world, and the path to it is necessarily individual, not sharable.
And money is the most unequivocal result in the world. All other triumphs of the human spirit – intellectual, emotional, and political – are vanities. To be acknowledged as a great philosopher, elected governor, praised as benefactor of humankind, builder of fantastic works, are mere vanity, futilities dear to the ego, always depending on the judgment of others and, thus, on the habits and customs of each people and era. But not money, which is only a piece of paper produced by the thousands, no longer even paper. It is a belief that no individual has the power to deny.

The sun organizes the reasons that have supported and shaped me throughout life, but, like a broken eggshell, they no longer constrain or nourish me, I float in the air, scarcely anything but bones, muscles, and cartilage withering, a fetus in reverse. I tell the story of our brotherhood as the fable of an ancient people, from Middle-earth, where men had cloven feet and smoked pipes at dusk. What I write about my people are lies, because I no longer belong to any people at all, they’re lies because everything we tell from on high, a thin skeleton sucking matter from the earth, everything that’s written without belonging is false. I no longer recognize the lingua franca, I’ve neither won nor lost, I’ve evaporated heavily. Travel impressions always tell about the traveler. A colored hot-air balloon is flying outside. You can hardly see the basket, just the colored mobiles in the sun.

(Excerpt from Blue and hard – page 154)

[...] Day broke with neon, the curious effect of morning light bouncing off the snow. There’s a thick fog, and the sunlight appears to shine from below with a blinding force.

The sun and cold had a soothing effect on my sleepless, drunken spirit. At any rate, nature is great, it puts us in our proper place, no sadness is greater than the Sun, not even death. I walked for about forty minutes to the village below. The cafés began to open and children were appearing
on the streets.

[...]

My parents spoke German at home when they didn’t want us to understand, sang lullabies in German, and perhaps their language of love was German.

I asked for bread in German and found something inside myself. The morning, the walk, the smells, the mischief in the little girl’s face, German as the natural language, the taste of bread and the crunchy cereals, something was disarmed inside, I took a deep breath. When I opened my eyes again, there were more children on the square. They play while their parents finish their coffee or grab their ski equipment. Boys and girls play in separate groups. Some by themselves. A little girl in a blue jacket, about eight, colored stretch pants, walks alone among the playground equipment – towers, bridges, and toy chalets. The little girl in the blue jacket talks and gestures as if there were other people in her game. Her little face looks serious, she stops occasionally with her mouth open, gazing up at the ski lifts climbing up the mountain in the background. Her little open mouth is so red, so fleshy and small, a perfect shape drawn on her soft pink skin.

[...] the black bread I ordered in German enters my body and awakens desires beyond hunger. And the German I heard myself speaking left a deep echo, creating a grand foreign woman, with no ties, thus powerful and voracious. I’m here at the table writing and smoking. In the little girl’s game, the other children disappear and various characters emerge. Someone takes money from her and hands her a package, some merchandise she points to with her little finger on the shelves behind the hunched old man with eyeglasses. He must be a short, hunched old man, because he takes a while to get the merchandise, he has to climb up on a ladder and it all takes so long, her little mouth closes and she nods condescendingly. It also takes him a while to hand her the change, her graceful little fur-lined brown suede boot taps the ground impatiently. But she’s a polite little girl,
thanks him with a curtsy, and leaves for the street. She’s in a hurry, needs to make up for lost time. I can make out her waist under the blue jacket also covering her little bottom, which I imagine is soft and white, still almost seamless with her strong thighs. Her legs are firm in her busy little steps, and they stand out even more under the stretch pants in psychedelic colors, ending at the thin shins inside the fur lining of her boots.

[...] I want to chew on tough things and drink something gooey and hot, not the acid cold of vodka. I light a cigarette and drag deep, I can do anything and need very little. Coffee, milk, bread, cheese, cigarettes. Cold air, blue, sunny sky, and appropriate Swiss waiters. I’m appropriate. Dark, warm clothing, I eat with my mouth closed and drink without slurping, slowly. I ask for an ashtray to avoid tapping my ashes on the floor. The little girl continues in her story, goes inside, sets the package on the table, and wipes the nonexistent sweat off her forehead. She sits and looks at the mountain, the movement of the colored skiers attracts her gaze. She is sitting on the floor of the balcony in one of the suspended painted-wood toy chalets. Her feet sway in the air as she gazes at the mountain. Her feet sway, sway, and my gaze is there, on the air her feet are sweeping. I start to get drowsy, I can’t take my eyes off the girl. What is she thinking about, what characters will still take her stage? Boys, girls, babies, mothers, and fathers are at the square talking, walking, passing by. But there is only silence around her, peopled with noises and voices I can’t hear. Distracted, she stretches, raising her little arms and displaying the top of the colored pants and the beginning of her back. The skin is almost transparent under her clothes, the veins are blue, and I want to follow their paths with my finger. She hangs from a monkey bar and, placing one hand in front of the other, still hanging, makes her way to the small door in the balcony leading to the ladder. Her little tummy sticks out and I want to feel it, grab the girl in the air by her transparent white waist and twirl her while she laughs as I place her on the ground, just as the young mother of the girl with the untied shoelaces and little Tyrolean coat would do. That’s not
true, it wouldn’t be like the young mother, it wouldn’t be like a mother at all. She turns and slides down the handrail. When she reaches the ground, her pants have wedged in, the little crack between her legs is clearly visible. The little girl straightens herself up, self-aware. It isn’t true. She wants to, it’s different. What about me?

While she straightens herself, my girl looks toward the tables, searching. She stops when her gaze finds someone who must be her mother. She’s at a table with two other young women. Her hair is bleached and short, she’s very thin, her face sunken and pale. She speaks with abrupt gestures and a cigarette between her fingers. Her teeth are dark like the tips of the fingers holding the cigarette. They speak French, thirty-year-old women complaining about life and watching men go by. My girl has little brown curls and shoulder-length hair, her white skin is pink. When she looks at her mother, she’s both comforted and embarrassed. She’ll still be there, even when all the children have left. We have good reason to be embarrassed by that talkative, disheveled woman. She looks as if she drinks and must not have slept the night before, with circles under her eyes. The black clothes she is wearing are old, very old. Everyone here wears colorful, puffy clothes. Everyone is healthy and happy. This young woman is actually aggressive with her mousy demeanor. My little girl considers waving, even raises her little arm, but then her mother lets out a roar of laughter, ugly with her nicotine-stained teeth, throwing her head back, and the girl, my girl, lowers her little arm and head, her brown curls hanging down toward the ground, hiding her serious little face. Hands crossed behind her back, head down, she slowly drags the tips of her toes. Not like a stubborn or even sad little girl, but more like a melancholic German philosopher. Mothers are always so wrong, always in the wrong place at the wrong time.
Synopsis

This polyphonic narrative, in which each chapter gives voice to one of the three narrators-characters, reveals Beatriz’s immense ability to articulate the general and the particular, the individual and the historic, creating characters unique and clearly identifiable in their social context at the same time.

The main character, Benjamim, about to become a father, discovers a family secret, and decides to hear from all the people involved. Three of them — his grandmother, Isabel; Haroldo, a friend of his grandfather; and Raul, a friend of his father — will tell him their
version of the facts, and it’s by gathering these broken pieces of memory of others that Benjamim will assemble the puzzle of his family’s history.

In 2008 Antonio won the Jabuti prize (3rd place), the Portugal Telecom Award (2nd place) and was a finalist for the São Paulo Literature Award.

“Noemi Jaffe

“Beatriz Bracher’s family narrative draws a contrast between apathy and guilt in different generations [...] Bia Bracher is able to bring up, in such a natural way, a subject that many stubbornly avoid, and its density is so fluently expressed, that those dialogues sound new and reveal us the extent of our conformation.”
Teo used to say, “There are five of us, but one died,” whenever anyone asked how many brothers and sisters they had. [...] When they were children and teenagers, it was a happy home, far different from the way you knew it. Your grandmother Bel, besides working and making money teaching at the university and high school, managed everything, and the mess was never a threat. Xavier was an editor, writer, journalist, and playwright, I imagine the daily sustenance came more from Bel’s work, and as far as I know from what was left of an inheritance. [...] there weren’t many houses on that street yet, it must have been one of the first. You were really little when you were there, I don’t know if you remember. There was a courtyard with trees, high ceilings, and sunlight. Broken furniture was never fixed, it disappeared, the empty space expanded and the indoors grew over the years. We built toy ranches and cities on the wooden tile floor and they lasted months without anybody reclaiming the space, some of the tiles came loose and served as walls and bridges, we turned their gaping holes lined with tar and sawdust into cliffs and passes. Then we graduated to assembling plastic monsters and little wooden airplanes, with the smell of glue and paint. The button soccer field must have survived there until the house was torn down. Later some cushion seats appeared, where we would lie for hours on
end talking, playing the guitar, watching tv with the volume turned off, and eating Swedish bread crusts with cream cheese, Nadia Comaneci in the ’76 Olympics, and Sonia Braga in Dancing Days. [...].

I never saw a photograph of this dead brother, and your family didn’t appear to carry the death of a child in its beginning. [...] Your father stopped strumming the guitar, turned serious, and told me the following.

“Until last week, I didn’t know the whole story either. I’d hear my father say, I have five children, but one died, and I started saying the same thing, there are five of us, but one died. I knew this child had died before he married my mother, a thing from his youth. I thought the words had a heroic ring for those of us who survived. And supernatural, too, because he says I have, not I had, the five are still present. Last week, I was on the phone with Helinho and I said, laughing, now there are five of us, but one died. I think it was about Rafa, who vowed not to come play button soccer again until he passed the college admissions tests. My father was around, overheard this, and called me over. He asked me why I was joking about a serious matter in an ordinary context. You know my father, how he gets when he takes something seriously.”

I don’t know if you remember your grandfather, he loved you. Xavier was a special person. When he was around, everything turned to joking and teasing, even his failures. He was always brewing up some new way to make money with theater or writing. [...] In the seventies, he managed to stage some of his plays. He’d perform them on the streets at six in the afternoon, going by the busy bus stops, at the factory gates when it was time to change shifts. The spectators were part of that thread, but they only realized it when it was over. I saw one of those plays, one in which Teo had a part as a musician, and it was amazing, like a whirlwind, a dream. Although there were elements of theatrical revue, circus acts and acrobatics, as a whole it was a sweet show, almost a landscape.

[...]
And so, when he turned serious, really serious, not boastful or conceited, but serious, it surprised everybody. His color changed, it was like the blood ran differently in his veins, his eyes got darker and his saliva thickened, we listened quietly, anxious to leave. He, who was always so articulate, would stutter.

“So,” Teo continued, “he told me that he, my father, Xavier Kremz, was first, foremost, and forever the father of his dead son, Benjamin dos Santos Kremz.” Yes, exactly the same name as yours. Wait, listen, everything I know I remember, but I don’t know much. I have an unbearable memory, that’s one reason I’m so good at my work, ads, jingles, scripts, a professional plagiarist, that’s why I always knew you have the same name as this dead brother, the name on the birth certificate you just saw. At the time, it hadn’t occurred to me that your mother could be the same, after all Santos is a common name. The amazing thing is that what you just saw on the birth certificates and that upset you, these papers Leonor found and called you here to see, that brought you here, this whole mess is true, apparently. In other words, your mother, Elenir, was married to your grandfather and had a son with him, a son who died, the first Benjamin. […]

This talk about “we’re five” was shortly before he decided to travel to Minas. Your father spoke in a low voice, he was moved. “He said he had never told me the story about Benjamin because it wasn’t just a story, like his projects or little kids’ pranks and young parents’ worries. No, it was the story of his rebirth, a birth into true adult life, a childbirth in which a boy had to die.” I didn’t understand, I said I hadn’t understood and realized this subject was still messing with Teo inside. “I didn’t really understand either, and my father seemed to regret having started to tell the story. I asked him how old my brother had been when he died. He got choked up when I called his son my brother, his eyes filled with tears, and I got embarrassed. He said less than a month, that his mother was very young, there had been problems during the delivery, they had needed forceps and made a mistake, injured the baby’s head, he was born with problems and died in
less than a month. I saw how difficult it was for him. [...] it was as if my father had told me a secret that I already knew. He was lifting the veil on a thing whose face I didn’t know, but always knew was there. [...] The way he spoke, it sounded like I had something to do with this first son, something kind of crazy. And syrupy too. I was angry at the time, about what, I don’t know. If it was so important, why hadn’t he told me before? Of course a brother who died is an important matter, I had never really thought about it. Later I was sad, as if this Benjamin had just died a few days earlier. I don’t know, I feel like we’ve taken his place, we don’t even utter his name at home. But in my father’s heart he seems to loom larger than all of us. It’s really weird. He’s always going to be the oldest and the baby, he’s dead, and he’s still alive when my father looks at us and at everyone else.”

And Benjamin, let me tell you, it was really strange that, precisely in that house, such a story wasn’t known, discussed, dissected, and sucked to the bone. Everything was discussed, nobody and nothing was immune. I think it was a belief of the time, the belief that we had the obligation and the power to eliminate taboos, that words and speech contained this capacity. [...] Your aunts Flora and Leonor were the most modern girls I knew. I think it was the first household where boyfriends and girlfriends spent the night together and we could smoke whatever we felt like smoking. [...] 

[...] After this conversation with his father, Teo apparently put some pieces together in his head, pieces from before and others that he made up, and he decided not to go to college. He was sick and tired of São Paulo and wanted to take some time off, travel to the hinterlands, things that no longer make much sense, but that were within our reach.

(Excerpt from Antonio - page 38)

[...] I missed my friend so badly it hurt, but we still got together once in a while. Like the time we went to slaughter one of Nestor’s hogs. Nestor was a friend of Teo’s who played the guitar, a widower who lived with
his unmarried daughter and a brood of small grandchildren. Teo helped them with the livestock and other chores too heavy for a woman and an old man to deal with alone. Whenever the time came to slaughter a pig, more people would usually pitch in, because it involved several jobs in one. Killing, skinning, gutting, cleaning, setting parts aside for cuts and sausages, salting. When people came to lend a hand, it was customary to offer pork parts in return, plus some sugarcane liquor, a costly ritual for the old man. There were actually few men in the village during the day, because they would leave to look for work. The crops hadn't done well that year, and people feared what was to come. Teo was already used to eating little and turning down food offers from the local people, who, even in their poverty, insisted on this kindness. [...]

I had never slaughtered a pig, or even seen any animal die. I went along to help and follow instructions from Mr. Nestor and Teo. The pig hadn't fattened enough, but the growing children needed meat. Outside the house, near the kitchen, we placed a wooden table to gut the animal. The boys were in charge of holding a basin to catch the blood. Maria, the daughter, and Nestor held the hog's legs and I held its head. Teo thrust the knife in. There was a lot of blood and a big ruckus. A crazy grunt that hurt to the stomach, my stomach and my guts. The pig jerked its head back and forth in violent spasms and then went limp, and my legs turned to water. I almost threw up when I saw the pig's insides, after Teo's knife slit the belly from neck to tail. I turned inside out and dizzy, and grabbed the animal’s head to keep from falling. A burst of heat rose from the crimson innards. There was too much life in that death. Once the animal was dead, I collapsed onto a wooden bench propped against the blood-spattered wall. I sat there in a daze, my body limp, eyes open wide, watching Teo skin the beast. Your father took pleasure in it, he was meticulous in his gestures, stuck his hand inside and pulled the organs out one by one. It must have been hot in there. The oldest boy, a scrawny kid, helped empty out the intestines and the bladder, a horrible stench. I remember his little hands
and skinny fingers carefully washing the bags of skin, then hanging them on the fence to dry.

(Excerpt from Antonio – page 136)

We never talked about it, so I don't know what you made of my relationship to your father's madness. I remember the first time I entered your room – which I still wanted to be my office, too, but I realized that was impossible as soon as I opened the door –, and saw all the trash strewn on the floor. More than the horror at confirming Teo's insanity, what hit me was a feeling of injustice and indignation. I had already raised my children, watched my husband die, and finally organized my own space, however small, smaller than any expectations I'd harbored in my youth, but it was mine, it fit into my budget, suited my work and my need for both isolation and contact, and now, at this exact moment, the garbage from all the houses and streets of São Paulo and the entire planet had descended on my house and destroyed my hard-won space.

[...] In addition to the trash-room, a crust of filth and glue grew on Teo's body. He would make glue from flour in the kitchen and use it to glue loose ends together, days' worth of glue on his arms, face, and hair, plus dirt from the street, sweat, and his own saliva, which he spit on himself in a nervous habit he wasn't even aware of anymore. Yes, I know you saw and bore witness to all this, but I need to talk about it, I need to remember, I need to know.

[...]

Later he started disappearing, nights on end without coming home. You worried, I remember you pacing softly around the apartment, late into the night. I couldn't sleep either, but I feared joining you and having to talk about Teodoro. What could I say to an eleven or twelve-year-old boy? You were a child, more childish than other boys your age in São Paulo, a happy, good-natured little rascal, open to the world. In just a few months, you
grew up and closed inward.

[...]

When Teo reemerged from his wanderings, the soles of his feet like a horse’s hooves, he would hole up in the bedroom to catalogue his trash collection and organize his data better, his conclusions recorded in two tattered notebooks. Did the two of you talk? I recall sleepless nights, getting up for a glass of water in the kitchen and finding you asleep on the living room sofa, in front of the mute television, and the light in your bedroom turned on, probably with Teodoro scribbling madly in there. [...]

I had gotten used to eating out or buying frozen dinners, usually pasta, so when you two came I had to learn to cook all over again. The day I decided to grill a beef cutlet your face lit up with such joy, I nearly wept. I hadn’t realized you were a teenager and how hungry teenagers get. I considered applying for leave at the university to devote more time to the two of you. But that was out of the question, Xavier’s illness had consumed all our savings, even the proceeds from selling the house, and, at any rate, I couldn’t have stood twenty-four hours a day with Teodoro’s madness, I needed a breath of sanity in my days.

[...]

I don’t know who the Palestinian and the Jew were in this story. The idea that a son will always have a birthright to a piece of his motherland made him the Jew and me the invaded Palestinian. Not exactly me, but my work. My work occupied the place that was supposed to be reserved forever for the children, and later the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Of course motherhood always took precedence over any other activity in my life, because there was no choice, among other reasons. On the other hand, without work I would have been a crazy, saturnine mother, I would have devoured my four children one by one, or raised them to be eternal children, because if they ever grew up, my reason to exist would cease. Without my work they would never have attended the schools they attended, nor
would this apartment, now in dispute, even exist. For several semesters I taught fewer classes than I wanted to in order to spend more time with my children, and my writing was always more fragmented and slower than that of my male coworkers. Brooding this way, I became the Jew trying to rediscover some kind of original situation in which plans for the future were crystal-clear and consistent with what is expected of intelligent, capable individuals from good backgrounds, a situation glimpsed before the children were born and which I had the illusion of having reclaimed when Leonor got married and left home and the house finally became my home. Teodoro’s madness ate away at me and disorganized me on various fronts, and the way I found to defend myself was to attack him.

Bathe, eat with your mouth shut at the table, wake up early, attend a university or find a job, keep tabs on your homework, go to parent-teacher conferences, enroll you in some sports activity and English lessons, smile and look people in the eye when greeting them, trim your nails, take all your medication at the right time, be independent, give me a break. That was right after he was discharged from the hospital where he was treated for his illness. Everything obviously went haywire, and I had to accept that his delusions had nothing more to do with malaria or syphilis, pretending, laziness, or a lifestyle choice, it was madness, and I didn’t know how to deal with it.

[...]

I’m tired, Benjamin. It doesn’t hurt, it’s no longer the illness itself, maybe it’s what the illness sucked out of me. A strange exhaustion. After the rains, your father came home tired. He came from the favela, where he’d gone to live. I found a friend of his there who took pity on me, after the floods he brought Teo back, drenched and sick. We took him straight to the hospital, he was burning with fever. You latched onto that man, your father’s last friend, and listened to the tale of his final feat. He knew Teo was dying, already spoke of him as a legend, we listened but didn’t recognize the emaciated Teo who was dying in the ICU. “Teodoro was a giant, he
rescued children and furniture from the floods, everything fit in his arms, the whole world. The water was like fire, with the same danger and force as fire, tongues that entered and knocked everything down, he would come in and out of the shacks saving dozens of people. Face and body covered with mud, he was like a firefighter coated with soot from a fire. And even afterwards he never slept, laboring night and day to rebuild the shacks, not a moment’s rest, night and day toiling and finding food for the children.” You asked the man to continue the story, to turn that near-lifeless body into a man you still wanted to recognize. And he went on, talking about the furniture floating in the floodwater, walls that caved in, roofs flying, a small child crying on a table turned lifeboat. Then man left, you looked at me, we looked at each other, and do you remember, Benjamin?, I understood that you agreed with me, we both knew that the Teo of all these feats was neither my son nor your father. That saintly energy came from three hundred, three hundred and fifty Teodoros, and none of them was ours; our Teodoro, thin and tired, was dying.

I don’t want to say any more, Benjamin, today I’m the forsaken one. A sick dog, a run-over cat, a bird crashed into the window pane. Poor and dirty. The bedsores stink. I sound like a hoarse toad. Don’t tell me about your love for me, Benjamin, now is not the time. Nonsense. Go away, I want to sleep.

(Excerpt from Antonio - page 181)

In the bedroom, assisted by two nurses, Leonor and Renata were washing Isabel’s corpse. It was extremely ugly, the nude body and the rough way the nurses were handling someone who, after all, was still the mother and grandmother. Leonor sent Renata to her grandmother’s house to fetch the blouse with colorful waves from the sixties, from their childhood, when their mother was still beautiful. It would be a little like dressing her up in the youth and joy that were long since gone from her life, although, it occurred to Leonor, the funeral ceremony is ours, not hers, and we can
choose the mother we want to say goodbye to, Henrique is right.

Dressed as she had left Paris, in nearly the same outfit she was wearing when she acknowledged the applause at her concert, *pas mal, maman, pas mal*, Leonor, without explaining herself, asked the nurses to leave her alone with her mother and the washing paraphernalia.

“Remember, you have to hurry, soon the body will stiffen and then you won't be able to get any clothes on her without ripping the fabric or breaking her bones.”

The two nurses left the room, and the fatter of the two remarked from the hallway, “The cotton balls are important. You probably don’t even know why, but believe me, dear, stuff them in all the holes.”

Inside the bedroom, Leonor forced the jammed windows open. She moistened a towel, dabbed it with a little cologne that Isabel kept on the night table, and began to wash and perfume her mother. She rolled her mother’s trunk partly over and noticed the bedsores and bruises on the various places where her thin, dry skin had rested on the bed. To shift Isabel’s body in order to clean her entire back with both hands free, without one hand having to hold up the body’s weight, she had to turn Isabel completely on one side and manage to prop her on one arm. Although the body was thin and light, it nevertheless had arms, legs, and bones, difficult to handle when inert. The lack of weight was more of a hindrance than a help.

Leonor made an effort to forget that the body had once been Isabel when she was forced to roll it on its side, pull the arm underneath it, bend the top leg and prop it on the bed to hold up the weight. She regretted having dismissed the nurses. When she dabbed the perfumed towel on her mother’s back, she avoided the bedsores, because the alcohol from the cologne might sting. It’s just a corpse, there’s nothing more to hurt, she remembered, and a chill ran down her spine, her legs wobbled, but she continued, washed the sores with the perfumed towel, rolled the body
back over. She leaned down over Isabel and dabbed perfume on her wrists, behind her ears, on the nape of her neck, and her silver necklace with the African seeds got caught in her mother’s thin hair.

“Sorry, mother, just a second, I’ll pull it out without hurting you, stay still and I’ll get it loose.”

As she was prying the necklace from her mother’s hair, she began to weep in anger at her confusion. She managed to free herself from her mother’s body, inspected her necklace, and a few strands of Isabel’s hair were still stuck there, and horror rose to her mouth, she rushed to the bathroom and washed her face in cold water, took several deep breaths.

She returned to the bedroom, covered Isabel’s body, including her face, with a sheet, remembered it was chilly and added a blanket, resigned now to her confusion between death and life. She arranged Isabel’s few personal items that were scattered around the room, cologne, hand cream, a book, slippers, hairbrush. Toothbrush, newspapers, cookies for visitors, that kind of thing went into the wastebasket. A sound of gases came from her mother’s body, Leonor trembled with fright and continued tidying up.

Renata arrived with her grandmother’s clothes. After putting the slacks on, Renata slowly lifted her grandmother’s back so her mother could fasten the bra behind her back and slip the blouse over the other arm, the silk blouse with the thick, colorful waves. In this lifting-and-twisting of the body, still limp, what was left of liquid inside gushed out in a brown stream.

“Shit, shit! The damned cotton, that’s what it’s for,” Leonor cried angrily.

A thick stench took over the room and the three women’s bodies. Renata, startled, had let go of Isabel’s back, and the body slumped into an odd position on the now-filthy mattress, the neck and shoulder in an impossible position for a living body. The granddaughter didn’t notice the strange position of her grandmother’s head or hear the neck bones snapping. She rushed to the bathroom, ripped off her clothes, and turned
on the shower.

Leonor removed her own dirty blouse and straightened her mother’s body, repositioned her head, and closed her mouth by tying a kerchief around her head. Slowly and carefully she rolled up and pulled out the soiled sheet and plastic lining from under the light body, as light as a baby’s. The mattress hadn’t gotten dirty, thanks to the lining. She wiped a very wet towel, then a dry towel, and finally the perfumed washcloth on Isabel’s soiled face, neck, and shoulders. Everything was clean again, she’s not going to get a rash, thought Leonor, laughing now at her intentional confusion, she can sleep easy.

She took the silk blouse to the bathroom to clean the collar and sleeve that had gotten soiled and, in the process, washed her own clothes and her daughter’s, thrown on the floor, in the small bathroom sink. Nothing that soap and water couldn’t fix. Under the shower, Renata was rubbing her skin to scour off the smell of death and of the hospital room that had seeped into her body in the last few weeks, scrubbing herself with soap and weeping from distress and exhaustion. Leonor took off her clothes and got into the shower with her daughter. Slowly, they embraced and washed each other’s bodies.
The narrator of this novel is a Professor who, shortly before moving into another city, reflects about the armed struggle period in Brazil, from the 1960’s to the 1970’s, and the contradictions it brought to the country and to his life.

This book talks of the Brazilian imagination that transforms into heroes those that fought in 1968 and are now in power. And, principally, of betrayal and its value in the educational process of any one of us.
“History is not always written by the victors, despite how the saying goes. There are powerful people who prefer to speak on behalf of the forgotten. In I Didn't Tell [...] author Beatriz Bracher turns her second novel into an emotional essay on the “internal exile” of those who have fought against the arbitrary rule of the military dictatorship that was imposed 40 years ago. [...]”

Antonio Gonçalves Filho
I went to the cemetery yesterday. I like old cemeteries, with their chapels and mausoleums, the lettering they use on the tombstones, I like the epitaphs, and especially the dates. I was sorry Eliana wasn’t here, in São Paulo. Eliana’s name and her dates. When Ligia was little, we’d go for outings in cemeteries. Her favorite was the one on Dr. Arnaldo Street, perhaps because of the row of flower stands, but I think mainly for its narrow paths and the tombs lining the sides like houses. Sunday is always a good day for cemeteries, there are more people, and everybody is usually calm. Lanes where we walk slowly, strangers greet each other, and we can stand quietly and no one finds it odd. Ligia would dash off, measuring a radius around me that she considered safe, twirling and twirling. We would buy flowers at the gate, and she would place them one by one in the little vases at the graves she liked the best, like breadcrumbs you feed to fish at the park on Sundays. Ligia imitated what the older ladies did in front of the graves, kneeling down and murmuring with her hands folded close to her face. She interpreted the murmuring as little kisses the ladies gave themselves on the hands, so that’s what my daughter did, sometimes solemn, closing her eyes and frowning, and sometimes playful. One day I saw her looking serious, in front of a grave, standing straight, hands crossed
behind her back, head low, and swaying slowly on her little feet. I watched from a distance and noticed she was imitating a tall, elegant man meditating in front of a grave. Suddenly he threw his head back, let out a long sigh, crossed his arms over his chest, and let his gaze wander across the sky. Then he clapped once, rubbed his hands together, and walked away, distracted by the writings on other tombs. Ligia repeated all the movements, which amused me. From then on, at the graves she considered most important, she would perform the tall man’s ritual, while, at the simpler ones, without statues or altars, she would do the old ladies’ dance. Ligia would kneel, kiss her hands, stand up as if she were dancing. While the tall man had clapped only once to punctuate the end of a thought, Ligia turned that into applause. Dances, kisses, and applause, the tribute my daughter paid to the dead. I might not have tolerated my daughter’s levity at a park, but there, on that ground, her laughter didn’t bother me.

And there were stories. She asked me to read the dates, the names, we did the math and figured out how old they were when they died, made up their stories. Ligia asked me to look for children. She would imagine herself and her classmates. Was he playing on top of a wall and fell? Did a big bad wolf eat him? Or did he drink dirty water from the faucet? When they were old people, she imagined her grandmother and friends, especially a neighbor lady, Dona Josefa, whose arms had blotchy, dry, wrinkled skin that Ligia always noticed. They were very nice people, gave their grandchildren presents, told stories, sipped water slowly, but grew old, so very old that they couldn’t hear, couldn’t see, started growing crooked and turning into toads, and then died. I would show her the people who came to visit the graves, tell her they were probably relatives, so the dead might have looked like them. But Ligia preferred her own collection of characters.

One day she asked to see her mother’s grave. I explained that it was too far away. But why? Because she died far away. But how come her grave can’t be here? I had told her that graves are tributes we pay to loved ones that have died. That it was a way of feeling a little closer to them; by
reading their names and the dates, we ended up remembering their life and how good it was to have been friends with that person. Like a photograph we keep, more than a photograph, because it is always in the same place, where many people pass by and read those names and remember good things. But I hadn't said the obvious, that the bodies are buried under those tombstones. I realized that Ligia didn’t know that, and how could she? Two concepts clashed inside me, that of the educator, in the sense of one who protects, nurses, and that of the traditor, who delivers, transmits knowledge. And after all, what kind of knowledge was this? The rotting corpse of the mother she had never known? My selfishness won, I wanted to preserve my joyful little ballerina-of-the-dead for what little time I still knew was possible. From the memory of the dead. And I said, it’s true, you’re absolutely right, let’s find your mother’s grave. The following Sunday, I took a box of colored chalk and wrote Eliana’s name and dates on the family plot where Armando, Dona Esther, and SeuEstevão, my father-in-law, were buried. Ligia drew some little flowers and hearts. On the following visit the name had already washed off and we decided to write it again with a piece of metal, carving into the stone, Eliana Bastos Ferreira, 1945-1970. I was happy with our work, really joyful, a childish act, a lark, and there was Eliana right there with us.

When Ligia was five or six, she took a little friend along. I offered to take them to a museum, a park, I suggested the Butantã Biology Institute, but Ligia wanted to show the cemetery to Francisca, who was excited, and I realized they’d talked about it before. They raced off from the cemetery gate, each with her flowers. Ligia stopped in front of certain graves and told her friend stories I hadn’t heard before. Princesses, geishas, and witches, the cemetery was her first library. One tome per tomb. The stories always ended in celestial flight. And then she died and turned into a bird-person and flew off, soaring. Her mommy and daddy were sad, because you can’t feed a bird-person, take them to school, put them to bed, because they fly off, they go away. So they make the graves and here they talk, and the little girl
tells stories about the beautiful things only she can see. Francisca laughed, but looked suspicious. What about the ghosts, aren’t you afraid of them? Or those skeletons that climb out of the ground covered with filthy rags and walk around like this, boo! boo! They’re stuck underneath here, aren’t you scared of the dead? Ligia laughed out loud, how foolish, there’s no such thing, and looked at me for backing. The oldest meaning of educator is to draw out, to pull something out, the sword from the sheath (gladiume vagina educere), the child from the mother’s womb (educitobstetrix). The transformation of her laughter when she encountered my serious sadness. Still I’m here, Ligia, I always will be, my look tried to add, but she no longer saw me.

If it were possible. My story perceived as a thing, without words or voice, but grasped as a whole, solid. She’s bound to ask: where did you get your degree, why did you choose teaching, which teachers had an influence on you? Where did these concepts come from, the importance of prison and movements? But how can I describe Ligia’s expression at her first funeral? When her realization finally joined dead to body, memory to rot.

(Excerpt from I Didn’t Tell – page 127)

Posters across the city displayed mug shots of the terrorists, newspapers warned of subversive forces, tv stations paraded repented ex-guerrillas, a schizophrenic air hung over us, everything and everyone was monitored, friends disappeared, militants and non-militants alike devised information networks to determine whether others were alive, no written or spoken word retained its conventional meaning and the new meanings required unstable (and thus inefficient) codes, face value and the face of relations were also suspended, friend, guerilla, snitch, coworker, mole, everyone wore blue jeans, allegories, metaphors, and combat names sprung up from every corner, and the silly little joy of secret codes, of the in-the-know deciphering and the feeling of brotherhood awaiting the dawning of a new day, and the fetid petty joy of the despicable little power-mongers that...
ratted, threatened, raised their voices, meanwhile the street, the bus, the bakery, the line at the bank, the soap operas, the love affairs, life with its good morning, how are you, four loaves please, coffee and milk, people commuting to work and back home, the crowded bus, the “bumping”, people laughing and people snoozing, small talk, stale armpits, driver smoking, old woman saying excuse me in a thread of a voice, black man yelling you sons-of-bitches, can’t you see the lady’s trying to get through, you bunch of ignoramuses, day goes by as usual, the word is worth its weight, every gesture in its place, a handshake, a wave, and, wonder of wonders, our 1970 World Cup team.

In the meetings with teachers and coordinators, in reports to the school board, in the classroom with my students, I tried to be as clear as possible. I learned to loathe metaphors and hushed tones, I sensed and overcame the fear that seeped into everyone, which had frozen me little by little before my arrest and left me mute during the interrogations. I spoke a lot and in a loud voice now, demanded attendance and punctuality, objectivity and synthesis, all the daily records and reports filled out according to regulations, meetings with an order of the day and minutes, and I knew all about each student and every teacher. I met with the parents, who were anxious about the changes in their children and the times, asked them to stay close, I managed to have the school open at night and set up a graduate equivalency course, many parents came, the teachers worked on a volunteer basis. I questioned the school inspectors and police who were harassing our staff with questions about the classes in Moral and Civic Education, Brazilian Social and Political Organization. What exactly would you like to know, Sir? Here are the class records, the syllabus, attendances, absences, notes, and grades. The class content? The students’ comments? Sir, if our reports aren’t sufficiently clear, you’re more than welcome to attend some of our classes. Sometimes they objected to the subject matter, such as Greek democracy. I would call in the social studies teacher and ask him to be so kind as to repeat the class for those gentlemen. The policemen soon got
bored and left, annoyed. In my classes and at meetings, if anyone raised
a subject near the danger zone, started some phrase in code, or made any
kind of joke involving the military, I would interrupt furiously, listen here,
dear colleague, I’m a spy, did you know that? I could be, so watch your step.
If any teacher or student missed class, I had the secretary phone them or
sent a school employee to their home to check it out. Not everybody had
telephones. If someone disappeared, we had to act quickly.

[...]

Night school was even harder. It attracted more madness from
both sides. Adult education was subversive by definition, both for the
government, for whom teaching to read and write was a suspicious act in
and of itself, and for the teachers, whose only goal, and the only thing that
made any act legitimate, even dating, was to overthrow the repressive regime
and usher in the inevitable arrival of socialism. Some of our high school
students were teacher’s aides in the adult night school course. Lucilia and I
organized things, and I taught Science and Portuguese. Lucilia was already
a professor at the university and couldn’t stay every night, so she drew up
the Portuguese class outline for me, and I managed. The other teachers
were younger, recent graduates or still in college. The more circumspect
ones were those involved in something heavy, and I feared for their safety,
but their ears and eyes were already sealed to everything except the gleam
of their revolutionary mission. Some of them were excellent individuals,
serious, generous, and good teachers. Many of them died. Slightly younger
than me, and I felt like their grandfather in various ways. Even in sexual
desire, something I had never thought of.

I had lost my lust for women, like a eunuch chamberlain in the
Chinese court, I felt like doing, organizing, teaching, working, directing,
making sure everything worked properly, that nobody got too hurt, daring
and provoking, but I also had a tame nostalgia, not for sex, but for the
desire for it. The thing didn’t even throb, and I didn’t even think about it.
I enjoyed catching the young male teachers in a long drawn-out look as
their female colleagues sauntered away, or blushing when they approached, a female teacher stammering when a comrade entered the room. And the unintentional touch, the laughter that ended with her head resting on a friend’s shoulder, a conversation where the boy grabs the girl’s arm to hold her attention, place more emphasis on his words, feel the softness of her skin, to which she responds by lowering her eyes, soon rectified by a serious look, hardly convincing. Little things like that moved me in exactly the same way as Ligia’s babbling, her first attempts at words. I saw an extraordinary power in such beginnings, just like my students as they discovered meaning in a poem by João Cabral, absolutely unintelligible minutes earlier, a foreign language. My throat tightened. I got a catastrophic feeling of love and compassion for the world, myself included. We were small and weak, with no way out, and at the same time we were together, not in the struggle, ideology, or anything like that, but in life. It was simple. Thus the apparent schizophrenia of clear-thinking paranoia, on one hand, and the bus, the bakery, and the World Cup team on the other didn’t block my action, didn’t take antagonistic shapes, there was life in common.
Journalist and writer Carlos Herculano Lopes (Minas Gerais, 1956) was born in Coluna, in Vale do Rio Doce. He began writing when he was still a child, and, at age 11, moved to Belo Horizonte, where he graduated in Communication Studies. He worked at several newspapers, and today he is a reporter for the cultural supplement of O Estado de Minas newspaper. In 1988 he won the Lei Sarney Award, as revelation author. Some of his works have been adapted for the movies and TV.
It’s the day before a holiday and the bus station is crowded with people. Carlinhos has in his hands a ticket to Santa Marta, the city where he was born, and to where he is going now, as an adult. In seat 27 — the same one he usually takes in successive trips — he will be the observer of several characters that leave Belo Horizonte towards Minas Gerais’ countryside, each one with a reason, a prospect.

In this flavorful novel by Carlos Herculano Lopes, a mixture of
fiction and autobiography, the thread that leads the bus through highway BR-381 is confidentiality. The sway of the journey invites the friendly shoulder, always willing to listen to the stories of the fellow countryman that travels right beside.

These stories not always have a happy ending. Even so, marked by optimism, passengers don’t have time to feel sad. Instead, they feel homesick.


Zu dem Ort also, von dem ich mit 12 Jahren auf einem Lastwagen zu einer dreitägigen Reise nach Belo Horizonte aufgebrochen war, zu der mich Onkel Almerindo mitgenommen hatte, der mit Käse und Hühnern handelte, zu diesem Ort war ich nun wieder unterwegs, an diesem verregneten Tag, an dem der Busbahnhof von Belo Horizonte vor Menschen überquoll und in den niemand mehr hineinzupassen schien.
Wie immer hatte ich Sitz 27 reserviert, einen Fensterplatz an der rechten Seite auf halber Höhe des Busses. Ich hoffte, dass keine Frau mit Kind sich neben mich setzen würde, denn Kinder müssen sich immer übergeben, abgesehen von dem Geheule, das sie eine ganze Nacht lang veranstalten. Auch konnte ich keine Betrunkenen gebrauchen, die zu allem fähig waren, und betete, dass der Bus nicht überfallen würde, was in den letzten Monaten mit einer gewissen Häufigkeit geschehen war.


Nur das Essen in dieser Kneipe taugt nichts. Man bekommt eine Bratwurst aus dem Supermarkt, die vor Fett nur so trieft, oder Kibbeh und Hähnchenspieße, die in der Mikrowelle heiß gemacht werden und dann wie Gummi sind und fade oder einfach nach nichts schmecken. Das ist dann auch die Gelegenheit, mit Jacira, meiner alten Freundin, ein paar Worte zu wechseln. Nur war sie an diesem Abend verschwiegen, ganz anders als die fröhliche und mitteilsame Frau, die sie sonst war. Irgendetwas war bestimmt passiert und ich war neugierig, Genaueres zu erfahren.

Die Kneipe war unglaublich leer zu dieser Uhrzeit, obwohl es Vorabend eines Feiertags war und der Busbahnhof eher einem Ameisenhaufen glich. Sogar eine Gruppe Ausländer, ungefähr 15 Männer und Frauen, ihrem Auftreten nach Deutsche, waren mit ihren Rucksäcken und ihren unverwechselbaren Schlafsäcken zu sehen, mit denen sie es sich an jeder Stelle bequem machen konnten. An den kleinen Tischen saßen
nur zwei Pärchen und tranken Bier, als ich eintrat. Seinen Gesten nach zu urteilen schien sich das eine von ihnen gerade zu streiten. Die junge Frau, die sich auf eine Tasche lehnte, die sie umstandslos auf den Tisch geworfen hatte, rauchte eine Zigarette nach der anderen und starrte den Mann an, der sich bemühte, sie zu beruhigen und ihr mit der Hand durch die Haare strich, die, sehr lang und schwarz, ihr fast bis zur Hüfte reichten. Wenn sie nicht geraucht und kein Bier getrunken hätte, hätte ich auf eine Evangelikale getippt. Der Mann war ziemlich dick und trug das alte Trikot des Fußballclubs Atlético. Sein linker Arm war tätowiert, und er rauchte ebenfalls, wobei er den Rauch auf eine Weise nach oben blies, die seine Nervosität deutlich machte. Das andere Pärchen küsste sich, als ob nichts weiter auf der Welt zählte als dieser eine Moment. Sie saßen am Tisch in der Ecke.


Ich habe Angst, dass die Polizei meinen Neffen fertigmacht, wie es vergangene Woche mit seinem Kumpel fast vor unserer Haustür gemacht haben. Der war nicht einmal volljährig; sie haben ihn einfach da liegen lassen, mitten auf der Straße, völlig blutbeschmiert, wie einen Straßenköter. Sie haben uns nicht einmal eine Kerze für den Jungen anzünden lassen, sagte Jacira. Nachdem sie dem Pärchen, das sich jetzt beruhigt zu haben schien, noch ein Bier gebracht hatte, erzählte sie, dass sie aus São José do Goiabal sei, aber dass sie seit Jahren in Belo wohnte, dass sie sich jedoch nie an das Leben in dieser Stadt hätte gewöhnen können, wo sie in der ganzen Zeit nur eine Freundin, Cleusa Helena, gehabt hätte, die auch Bedienung sei und mit der sie manchmal an Sonntagen ausging, in den Stadtpark, oder an Samstagen zum Tanz, wo sogar Mangabinha schon gespielt hätte. Dieselbe Freundin war es auch, die ihr vom Psychiater, dem Doktor Osmar, erzählt hätte; denn eines Tages, als sie einen Nervenzusammenbruch hatte, hatte auch Cleusa ihn auf Empfehlung einer Freundin aufgesucht. Beim Tanz hatte sie einmal jemanden kennengelernt, einen gewissen Márcio. Der aber wollte sie nur ausbeuten, wollte an ihr Geld, und sie machte Schluss mit ihm. Er ließ nicht locker, bis er merkte, dass sie es ernst meinte, als sei ihm vor die Tür gesetzt hatte. Noch zwei Monate danach rief er bei ihr an, spät in der Nacht lallte er ihr was vor und ging ihr auf die Nerven. Bedroht hat der Idiot mich auch noch, er würde mich umbringen – kannst du dir das vorstellen? Sogar zur Polizei musste ich gehen.

Und was sollte man auch von Goiabal erwarten, wo es nichts Interessantes für einen jungen Menschen voller Lebenskraft gibt. Wenn sie dort wenigstens einen Salon aufmachen könnten, würde es vielleicht klappen, und mein Neffe würde sich einleben, wer weiß … ? sagte Jacira, und in den darauffolgenden Augenblicken bis zur Bezahlung meiner Rechnung meinte diese Frau, schon etwas lebhafter, dass es ihr dann gut gehen würde, dass sie der Traurigkeit keine Chance geben würde, denn sonst würde sie sterben, weil es zu viel Kummer für eine einzige Person sei. Nächsten Monat, wenn Du wieder hier vorbeikommst, wird es mir besser gehen und ich werde gut aufgelegt sein. Sie streckte mir die Hand aus, fragte, woher ich käme, denn sie redete mit so vielen Leuten hier, dass sie vergäße, mit wem sei es zu tun habe … Sie sagte noch: Gott schütze
Bei solch einem Regen war die Reise keine der angenehmsten. Auch kamen wir nicht zur vorgesehenen Uhrzeit in Santa Maria an, sondern um 6 Uhr morgens, als die Sonne schon am Himmel stand und die Leute zur Messe oder zur Arbeit gingen. Dazu mussten wir kurz nach São José do Jacuí umsteigen, weil eine Brücke eingestürzt war und das Wasser mitten in der Straße einen Krater aufgerissen hatte, so dass sie in der Mitte gespalten war. Die Überquerung des Flusses war gefährlich, auf einem schmalen Steg ohne Geländer, und all das Wasser da unten, zwei Mal so viel wie sonst. Wenn jemand das Gleichgewicht verlieren und hineinfallen würde, wäre das der sichere Tod, denn das Loch muss ungefähr vier Meter tief gewesen sein und das Wasser war ein reißender Strom. Außerdem war es dunkel. Aufpassen, Leute! Aufpassen bitte! wiederholte der Fahrer unaufhörlich, während er dem Busschaffner half, das Gepäckfach auszuräumen, das mit allen möglichen Sachen vollgestopft war. Sogar einen Gasherd, einen Fernseher, einen Kühlschrank und eine große Matratze hatte eine Frau mitgenommen, denn ihr Hochzeitstermin war „für den nächsten Monat“ festgelegt und sollte die Zeremonie sollte in Penha stattfinden, wie sie stolz verkündete, wenn jemand sie fragte, ob sie nach Itamarandiba umziehen würde.

würde das die ganze Nacht so weitergehen, und am nächsten Tag würden die Zeitungen, Radiostationen und Fernsehkanäle von den Schäden berichten, die der Regen verursacht hätte. Im Innern des voll besetzten Busses herrschte eine schreckliche Hitze, denn alle Fenster waren verriegelt. Der Fahrer in dieser Nacht war Ailton aus Santa Marta, der vor einigen Monaten bei dem Unternehmen angestellt worden war und von seiner neuen Tätigkeit begeistert zu sein schien. Bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt hatte er auf dem Landgut seines Vaters gearbeitet, wo er „Mädchen für alles“ war, die Kühe melkte, auf dem Acker mithalf und Pferde zuritt, bis er schließlich merkte, dass das nicht seine Berufung war.

Für mich war das der Anfang eines neuen Lebens, hatte er mir vor ein paar Wochen gesagt, als er auf einer meiner Reisen auch zufällig der Fahrer war: er warf mir einen freundschaftlichen Blick zu, begrüßte mich mit einem Lächeln und fragte mich, während er den Fahrschein prüfte, ob ich mich nicht an ihn erinnern würde. Ich bin der Sohn von Jonas, Enkel von Dorinha und ihrem Mann Gilson, sagte er mir, und drei Stunden später, als wir am Imbiss „Lambari“ in der Nähe von Santa Maria de Itabira, wo die Busse der Firma Saritur immer ihren ersten Halt machten, Kaffee tranken, erzählte er, dass er mit der Tochter eines Freundes von mir, Osmarzinho, zusammen sei und dass er sie heiraten wollte. Aber es würde noch eine Weile dauern, denn zuerst wollte er ein schickes Haus bauen und alles so vorbereiten, bis es ernst würde. So redete er, lächelte und schien mit seiner Entscheidung glücklich zu sein. Der Busschaffner an seiner Seite rauchte eine Zigarette nach der anderen.


Der José von der Eva, immer mit einem Lächeln auf den Lippen, nahm nie seinen Panama ab und ging immer gut gekleidet. Er war ein alter Bekannter noch aus meiner Kindheit, als wir auf einem kleinen Platz in der Nähe unseres Hauses Fußball spielten, da, wo heute eine Avenida entlanggeht, die den Namen meines Vaters trägt. Seine Schwester war eben das Evchen, die Salzgebäck und Süßigkeiten herstellte und verkaufte. So wie der Bruder war auch sie eine Frohnatur und erfreute sich bei allen Leuten in Santa Marta großer Beliebtheit. Ihr Mann, ein geschickter Zimmermann, mit dem sie seit Jahren verheiratet war, hieß Josiel Pena. Auch ein Verwandter von ihm, Rubens, war ein Meister im Umgang mit Holz, dessen Geheimnisse er wie kein anderer kannte. Sitzbänke, Stühle, Kleiderschränke, Wandkonsolen und Toilettentische verwandelten sich in seinen Händen zu wahren Kunstwerken. Der Süden von Minas Gerais,
das hat was, da haben die Dinge einen richtigen Wert, nicht wie in unserer Gegend, wo es nichts gibt, sagte José von der Eva noch, bevor er mich fragte, was ich in dieser gottverlassenen Welt zu tun hatte.
Cíntia Moscovich (Porto Alegre, 1958) is a writer, journalist and has a Master’s Degree in Literary Theory. She was a book editor for the daily newspaper Zero Hora and has worked as translator, copy-editor, press assistant, literary consultant and teacher, as well as having directed Rio Grande do Sul’s state Book Institute. Jewish thematic elements are strongly present in her writing. Her first solo work, the short story collection The Kingdom of Onions (O Reino das cebolas), was shortlisted for the Jabuti award. She is also the author of a well-praised novel, Two Equals (Duas iguais) and additional volumes of short stories.
Rainbow’s Architecture comprises ten short-stories that occur in the Jewish neighborhood of Porto Alegre, a Brazilian city with a recognized Jewish immigrant community since the early 1900’s. Divided in two parts, the stories have a large sense of humor with much irony, qualities that distinguish Cintia Moscovich’s writings. Touching life’s extreme situations, the stories also find a young girl suddenly facing evil and antisemitism along with a teenager desiring to become a writer while defying her parents’ life choice.
Rainbow’s Architecture is coloured with vivid eroticism, sensuality and tenderness. This work has been nominated for several literary prizes in Brazil and has been published in Portugal and Spain.

(short stories Fair as the Moon / Schön wie der Mond and The Roof and the Violinist / Das Dach und der Geiger)
Ein Genie.

Einzige Tochter eines von jüdischen Einwanderern abstammenden Ehepaares, nach vielen vergeblichen Versuchen geboren - daher mit Zärtlichkeiten, Schmuck, Rüschen, Spielzeug und allem, was mir sonst noch einfiel, überhüft -, von mir also, der zehn Jahre alten Einziggeborenen, erwartete mein Vater nicht mehr und nicht weniger als das - daß ich ein geniales Kind wurde.

Auf diese Weise: ich mußte die Anfangstrophen von Die Lusiaden („Vergessen sei der Heldensang der Alten; / Denn hier ersteh’n erhab’nere Gestalten.“) auswendig können, sämtliche Arien sämtlicher Opern, die wir zu Hause hatten, vor allem Una furtiva lacrima in der lautstarken Interpretation Enrico Carusos und die von Maria Callas aufgenommene Casta Diva, still und aufmerksam anhören - und obendrein gut finden -, in den Ballettstunden die Füße in enge Tanzschuhe quetschen und, außer
den Französischlektionen bei Madame Vichy, Dona Vivis schrecklichen Klavier- und Englischunterricht besuchen.


„Wie macht das Kätzchen?“

Ich: miau.

Sein Lächeln reichte von einem Ohr zum anderen.

„Und wie macht das Kälbchen?“ Mein Vater setzte die Neckerei fort und schabte sich mit dem Rasierapparat am Kinn herum.

Ich, die ich auf das Spiel stets einging, denn ich war fröhlich von Natur aus, antwortete muuuuuuh - und verlängerte das *u* ungemein, um meinen Vater noch herzlicher lachen zu sehen.

„Und das Pferdchen?“

Iiiiiiiiiiiii, und nun kam der größtmögliche Realismus: ich dehnte das *i*, bis mir die Luft wegbließ, und schon war ich ein Stutenfohlen, das den Kopf schüttelte und seine Mähne über die Schulter wallen ließ.

Er lachte, lachte, lachte, er lachte sich tot. Über solche Kleinigkeiten lachte mein Vater. Da der letzte Tropfen Heiterkeit noch fehlte, folgte das Kapitel der Vögel.

„Wie macht die Ente?“

„Und das Huhn?“

„Und das Küken?“
Und das Mädchen, das ich war, machte quak-quak-quak, gack-gack-gack, piep-piep-piep, nur um zu sehen, wie mein Vater von einem vor Größe skandalösen Glücksgefühl erfüllt wurde. Und wenn er es nicht mehr ertrug, wenn er spürte, daß er nicht mehr an sich halten konnte, wenn die Liebe zu einer Sintflut wurde, floß er über vor lauter Vatersein: dann nahm er mich in die Arme und drückte mich fest, fest an sich, so fest und so zärtlich, und sagte zu mir:

„Schejn wi di levune.“

Schön wie der Mond, der Titel eines alten Liedes, das mit der Familie zusammen aus Bessarabien ausgewandert war. Eine Melodie, die, wie er behauptete, für mich, die hübsche Tochter, komponiert worden sei. Und obwohl die Jahre vergehen, habe ich nie diese vom Rasierschaum feuchten, moschusduftenden Umarmungen vergessen.

Das Gute im Leben.

Damit man einen Fehler wiedergutmachen könne, empfehle es sich, ihn begangen zu haben. Der Satz gehörte zu Vaters Repertoire an Maximen. Ein anderes Sprichwort, das mir sehr gefiel, war das, wonach ein Dummkopf, der den Mund halte, in die Liste der Weisen aufgenommen werde.

Was an dem Tag geschah, zu einer Zeit, schon weit entfernt von jener, in der Tiere imitiert wurden, ergab sich daraus, daß die Wie-der-Mond-Schöne meines Vaters der Bedeutung dieser beiden Redensarten nicht die erforderliche Aufmerksamkeit hatte zukommen lassen.

Von allem, was ich als tägliche Routine absolvierte, bereiteten mir, außer dem Spielen, die Dinge die größte Freude, bei denen man so tun konnte, als ob: in der Schule mochte ich besonders den Portugiesischunterricht und die Theaterstücke, und zu Hause lag ich stundenlang auf dem Bauch, die Beine angewinkelt, die Füße in der Luft pendelnd, das Kinn auf die


Der schwerwiegendste Fehler ereignete sich, als eines Tages am Mittagstisch über meine Berufswahl gesprochen wurde, mithin über eine ferne Zukunft. Wenn ich den Mund gehalten hätte, wäre ich in die Liste der Weisen aufgenommen worden. Doch ich redete:

„Wenn ich groß bin, möchte ich Schriftstellerin und Schauspielerin werden.“


„Schauspielerin? Schriftstellerin? So viel Geld für Unterricht und Bücher, um Schauspielerin und Schriftstellerin zu werden?“


„Theaterschauspielerin? Schriftstellerin?“ Mein Vater war kurz vor einem Kollaps. Er füllte ein Glas mit Wasser und nahm zwei kleine Schlucke.
Dann beruhigte er sich, oder es schien zumindest so.

Meine Mutter, die jetzt die Kaffeekanne und die Tassen auf den Tisch stellte, wagte es, sich einzumischen:

„Bist du es denn nicht, der möchte, daß sie Gedichte auswendig aufsagt und daß ihr die Oper gefällt? Warum soll sie keine Künstlerin werden?“

Bingo, Mutter. Mein Vater machte eine bestätigende Kopfbewegung, die sowohl bedeuten konnte, daß er für den frisch gefilterten Kaffee dankte, als auch, daß er zugab, in dieser Angelegenheit tatsächlich Schuld auf sich geladen zu haben. In nahezu mildem Ton setzte er das Gespräch fort:

„Ich verstehe, daß du Theater und Literatur magst, das geht uns allen so. Aber wie stellst du dir vor, vom Theater oder von der Literatur zu leben?“


„Alles sehr schön, aber ich erziehe meine Tochter nicht, damit sie Schauspielerin wird, eine von denen, die trinken und rauchen und andere Dinge tun, die man lieber nicht beim Namen nennen sollte.“ Mir schwammen die Felle weg. „Außerdem bist du keine _geborene_ Schriftstellerin, wenigstens solange du mir nicht das Gegenteil beweist.“ Und er erinnerte daran, daß er nicht Procópio Ferreira heiße, weshalb er es sich auch nicht leisten könne, seine Tochter Schauspielerin werden zu lassen.

Ich hatte in ein Wespennest gestochen, das Gespräch war weiter vorangeschritten als nötig. Seine Mitschuld an der Sache gänzlich vergessend, verließ mein Vater die vernünftige Argumentation.


Mein Vater bezog sich auf ein anderes altes Sprichwort unseres Volkes: ein geborener Verlierer ist jemand, der sich, selbst wenn er auf den Rücken fällt, stets die Nase aufschlägt.


Ich erwog nun auch die Möglichkeit, Ärztin zu werden. Abgesehen davon natürlich, daß ich die Karrieren als Schauspielerin und Schriftstellerin weiter verfolgen wollte.
Unsere Familie besaß ein kleines Geschäft mit Bekleidung für Damen und Schwangere. Nichts Besonderes, kein einziger Angestellter, nur ein Laden, der uns ein gutes Auskommen sicherte, was letztlich auch die Menge an Unterrichtsstunden ermöglichte, durch die ich ein *kultivierter* Mensch werden sollte.

In der Wohnung über uns lebte eine Familie von Chinesen, deren Fremdartigkeit mich wesentlich stärker anzog als die Klavier- und Englischstunden, welche die Frau, Dona Vivi, gab - ihr richtiger Name war absolut unaussprechlich. Ich hatte zweimal in der Woche Klavierunterricht, die Englischstunden folgten nach einer kurzen Pause mit Früchten und edlen Biskuits aus Reis und Erdnüssen, einem Imbiß, den ich mit der ebenso edlen Tochter des Hauses, einer Miniaturausgabe ihrer Mutter, teilte.


Dona Vivi war eine sehr kleine und sehr gelbe Frau - der Mann und die Tochter hatten eine schwefelfarbene Haut, als wären sie krank -, die mich mit einem verhaltenen Kopfnicken empfing, an das sich eine gleichermassen verhaltene Handbewegung anschloß, das Zeichen, daß ich eintreten durfte. Und ich betrat ein Wunderreich: Vorhänge aus rotem Satin, Sofas mit ebenfalls roten Kissen, bunte Laternen statt Kronleuchter und Bilder, viele Bilder, auf denen sorgfältig gestickte Drachen meine kühnsten Phantasien nährten. Unser Unterrichtsraum war das hintere
Zimmer, das letzte, irgendwo am Ende des Korridors. Um dorthin zu gelangen, mußten wir an den übrigen Örtlichkeiten vorbei, deren Türen, die ich nie offen sah, für alle Zeiten in der Stille der orientalischen Geheimnisse versiegelt waren, was wiederum mein unruhiges Westlertum zur Verzweiflung brachte.

Der Musikunterricht also.

Nachdem ich auf dem Klavierhocker Platz genommen hatte, der kaum angepaßt werden mußte, setzte sich Dona Vivi auf einen Stuhl neben mich. Sie stellte ein ebenso altes wie nutzloses Metronom auf das Möbelstück aus intensiv glänzendem Holz, schlug vor mir eine gleichbleibend geheimnisvolle Partitur auf, klopfte sich - eins, zwei, drei - mit einem riesigen Holzlineal auf den Oberschenkel und kommandierte:

„Spiel.“

Die unausgesprochene Anweisung lautete, daß ich, während ich auf die Partitur zu blicken vorgab, das Kinn in der dem Instrument entsprechenden Würde erhoben, die Schultern entspannt, das Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Si-Do spielte, wobei ich die Finger „geschickt und schnell“ abwechseln sollte, wenn es für die Bewältigung der gesamten Tonleiter erforderlich war. Und dann kam das Furchtbare: Da ich immer zwischen dem Mi und dem Fa durcheinander geriet - der Daumen mußte ein kleines akrobatisches Kunststück vollbringen, um die ganze Notenfolge abzudecken -, hörte das Lineal auf, den Takt anzugeben, und plaff.

Der Schlag landete auf meinen zarten Handrücken und auf meinen armen kleinen Fingern.

Beim ersten Mal, als das geschah, schwebte ich zwischen einem Gefühl der Scham und dem eines bodenlosen Entsetzens. Mit lehrerhafter Miene und orientalisch gelassen erläuterte sie:

„Die Musik verlangt Schmerz.“
Ich beschwerte mich bei meiner Mutter und bei meinem Vater über das Lineal und über die Unterrichtsmethode, und beide meinten sie, daß ich übertreibe. So stieg ich also weiter hinauf in den ersten Stock, betrat die Welt des Orients, und los ging es mit den Linealschlägen. Ich versuchte Dona Vivi zu erklären, daß mir die Leichtigkeit für diese Übungen fehle, meine Finger seien rundlich und zu kurz. Sie hörte mir gar nicht zu:

„Spiel."

Und schon hagelte es Linealschläge.

„Spiel."

Noch mehr.


Meine Mutter putzte mich heraus wie eine Prinzessin: ein Kleid aus blauem Kordsamt, Bluseneinsatz mit Stickerei, spitzenbesetzte Söckchen und Schnallenschuhe, die um den Knöchel geschlossen wurden. Mein Haar war ganz straff gekämmt und endete in einem schauderhaften Pferdeschwanz, der von einer gigantischen weißen Schleife zusammengehalten wurde. An den Ohren hatte ich die beiden
Perlenstecker, und am kleinen Finger der rechten Hand ließ sie mich einen schweren Goldring tragen, der eine Schnecke oder ein ähnliches Meeresgetier nachahmte. Bevor wir aufbrachen, betrachtete mein Vater mich mit sichtlichem Stolz:

„Schein wi di levun."


Dona Vivi werde keine Entgleisung zulassen, wiederholte ich tausendfach und versuchte, mich auf dem Weg selber zu überzeugen.


Dona Vivi, jene, die keine Entgleisung zulassen würde, verantwortete die größte Blamage meines Lebens.


„Sollte dieses Mädchen sich in einen Hypochonder verwandeln?“

Vorsichtshalber beschlossen mein Vater und meine Mutter, mit diesem Unterricht aufzuhören. Daß Dona Vivi mir Englisch beibrachte,
genügte. Ein *kultiviertes* Mädchen konnte sehr gut leben, ohne Klavier zu spielen.

Die Ballettstunden.


Mein Versuch mit den Tanzschuhen währte nicht lange. Ich weigere mich entschieden, irgendetwas über den Ballettunterricht zu sagen.


Eine Sache aber gab es, die mir nicht gelang: das *u* der französischen Muttersprachler, jener Vokal, den man halb offen, halb geschlossen aussprechen mußte.

„*Pupitre*“, beharrte Madame Vichy und brachte den Laut immer im selben Beispielwort unter.

Ich gab mir alle Mühe, es war eine zyklopenhafte Anstrengung der Konzentrationskraft. Doch umsonst: wenn ich die verhängnisvolle
Silbe sagte, vernahm man ein ganz und gar volles „pu“, nichts, was dem Vogelgezwitscher ähnelte, zu dem dasselbe *pupitre* wurde, wenn Madame es aussprach.

Auch mit den *passés composés* auf der Zungenspitze, auch mit allem guten Willen der Welt verließ ich das Haus der Vichys im Gefühl der Katastrophe. Ich nahm die Empfehlung mit, vor dem Spiegel das *i* und das *u* zu bilden, wobei ich ordentlich den Mund öffnen und schließen sollte, um danach, aber erst danach, die Lippen zu einem Schnabel gespitzt, weder offen noch geschlossen das bewusste *u* zu üben.


Und *Der kleine Prinz* brachte mich auf die Idee.


Eines Mittags verkündete die Lehrerin, die Hausaufgabe bestehe in einem Aufsatz. Thema: die Freundschaft.


Und jetzt?


Zwei Tage später klopfte der Assistent für Disziplinfragen an unseren Unterrichtsraum an und überreichte mir einen offiziellen Umschlag mit einem Brief der Direktorin, Dona Malvina, an meine Eltern. Ich fragte, worum es gehe, und der Bursche antwortete, daß er nicht die geringste Ahnung habe.

Zu Hause händigte ich den Brief seinen Adressaten aus. Hastig öffnete meine Mutter die Post. Sie las. Am Dienstag um zehn Uhr sollten sie im Direktionszimmer erscheinen. Es war ein Schock: was hatte ich denn falsch gemacht?


In der Nacht vom Montag zum Dienstag hörte ich meinen Vater und meine Mutter viel umherlaufen: bald gingen sie ins Bad, bald öffneten sie die Kühlschranksbürt, bald unterhielten sie sich leise im Schlafzimmer.

Gegen zehn Uhr klopfte der Assistent für Disziplinfragen an das Klassenzimmer: ich sollte in die Direktion kommen. Ich schluckte und legte dann tapfer den Weg durch den stillen Korridor zurück.


Die Direktorin eröffnete das Gespräch:

„Ich habe Sie hierher gebeten, weil ich etwas Wichtiges zu sagen habe.“

Mein Vater bewegte sich auf seinem Stuhl: er haßte überflüssige Erläuterungen. Die Direktorin fuhr fort:

„Ihre Tochter ist sehr schöpferisch.“

Mein Vater liebte es, wenn ich gelobt wurde. Dona Malvina redete weiter:

„Ich habe hier einen Aufsatz ihrer Tochter über die Freundschaft. Entschuldigen Sie, aber ich muß wissen, ob einer von Ihnen ihr dabei geholfen hat.“

Mein Vater und meine Mutter sahen sich an. Sie verneinten: wenn ich Hilfe benötigte, dann in Mathematik, niemals beim Schreiben. Die Direktorin war mit der Antwort zufrieden:
„Wie ich es mir dachte.“ Sie öffnete eine Mappe und holte meinen Aufsatz hervor: „Wirklich beeindruckend."

Mein Vater sprang auf und riß der Direktorin das Papier aus den Händen, meine Mutter beugte sich über ihn, um zu lesen, was darauf geschrieben stand. Dona Malvina verfiel in didaktischen Ton:

„Es wird Der kleine Prinz von Saint-Exupéry erwähnt, der Aufsatz zeigt jedoch auch, daß die Schülerin eigene Ideen hat. Ausgesprochen ungewöhnliche und tiefgründige Ideen.“

Meine Mutter ließ sich einen Augenblick ablenken:

„Jetzt weiß ich, warum ein Paket Zucker aus der Kammer verschwunden ist.“ Gleich darauf korrigierte sie sich: „Mh, aber das macht nichts."

Die Brust meines Vaters hob sich stolzgeschwollt. Mein Schicksal lag in der Hand der Direktorin:

„Vielleicht ist es voreilig“, überlegte sie. Doch dann rettete sie das Vaterland: „Nach dem, was sie in früheren Arbeiten und vor allem in dieser hier unter Beweis gestellt hat, glaube ich, daß ihre Tochter zur Schriftstellerin berufen ist."

Ein Sternenregen in mir. Dona Malvina schloß:


Mein Vater wußte nicht mehr, was er tun sollte. Und dort, im Zimmer der Direktorin, mitten in der Feierlichkeit des Moments, umarmte er mich ganz fest, so fest, daß er mich vom Boden hochhob. Und ich hörte ihn den glücklichsten Vater der Welt sein:

„Schejn wi di levune."

Die Wie-der-Mond-Schöne meines Vaters hatte eine Zukunft vor
sich.

Uns alle drei umarmend gingen wir hinaus.

Am Abend öffnete mein Vater einen portugiesischen Wein, der schon lange aufbewahrt wurde. Er goß mir eine kleine Menge mit Wasser und Zucker in ein Glas.

„Lechaim.“ Zum Gruß hielt er den Kelch in die Höhe.


Mit großer Kraftanstrengung wurde ich erwachsen und entdeckte, daß die Tränen das Salz des Schmerzes sind. In der Nacht und in der Stunde, in der mein Vater für immer ging, war der Mond nur eine dünne Sichel am Himmel - ein abnehmendes Viertel, schmaler noch als mein Herz.


einem guten Ende zu gelangen.

Mehr als alles war es das Schreiben, was mir mein Leben immer wieder durcheinanderwirbelte, ein Fluch, der zugleich bedeutet, daß man seinen Rückzugsort in der Traurigkeit findet. Das ist etwas, was ich weiß, es ist nur das, was ich weiß, mit einem mühenlosen Wissen, obwohl es mich teuer teuer teuer zu stehen kommt - kein Wissen ist beruhigend.

So sieht es also aus: ich schreibe, weil es das ist, was mir in der Welt zu tun gegeben wurde, weil ich glaube, damit geboren zu sein. Die Wie-der-Mond-Schöne meines Vaters ist Schriftstellerin.


Das Gute im Leben.

Übersetzung: Enno Petermann (Die Lusiaden des Camões werden in der Übersetzung Wilhelm Straubs zitiert: Luiz de Camoens, Sämtliche Gedichte, Bd. 5, Paderborn, 1883, S. 4)
Das Dach und der Geiger

Für Rosa Soirefman und Rosa Mosovich, Großmütter

Wir müssen an den freien Willen glauben.
Wir haben keine Wahl.
I.B. Singer

„Schmutzige Jüdin.“

Ich, die ich nie ernsthaft erlebt hatte, was es hieß zu sein, was ich war - denn ein Mädchen von neun Jahren ist eben nur neun Jahre alt -, war von einem Augenblick zum anderen eine Jüdin und auch noch schmutzig - der Haß in Paulas Mund machte die beiden Wörter gleichwertig. Hilflos blieb ich stehen, stand da wie angewurzelt und sah das Mädchen an, dessen Stimme plötzlich so mächtig dröhnte, als verkündete sie die Wahrheit. Ohne es zu ahnen, weder sie noch ich, gehorchten wir alten Überlieferungen - ein Wissen, mit dem die Bösen schon zur Welt kommen. Vor Haß Funken sprühend, daß man ihn fast in ihren schwarzen Augen knistern hören konnte, wiederholte Paula die Beleidigung, wobei sie sie schleppend skandierte:

schmut-zi-ge-Jü-din.
Da brach in mir zum ersten Mal eine tiefe, blutige Wunde auf, ein Blutsturz aus Wut und Schmerz, zu groß für den Geist eines kleinen Mädchens. Und das Kind, das ich war, fand noch den Mut zur frechen Pose, beide Hände in die Seiten gestemmt, und fand noch die Eingebung zu erwidern:

„Und du bist eine Idiotin. Und eine Ziege.“


Schmutzig, das war sie. Und ihre ganze Familie. Und die Kinder, Enkel und Urenkel, die sie haben würde.

Seit dem Tod meines Großvaters und seit sie bei uns lebte, nahm meine Großmutter, was auch um sie her geschehen mochte, die immergleiche Haltung ein: auf der Sofakante sitzend, die Füße nebeneinander, den Ellbogen auf das Knie gestützt, ließ sie das Kinn in der Handfläche ruhen. In diesen Stunden verlor sich ihr Blick in einer von blauen Blitzen durchzuckten Ferne, starr in der Unbestimmtheit desjenigen, der in einer Nische der Zeit verborgene Erinnerungen zu Tage fördert. Die Reglosigkeit jener Momente wurde stets von einem langen - ach, so langen - Seufzer beendet, der in einem oj, web is mir gipfelte, dem Klagelied der Juden auf
der ganzen Welt. „Ich Arme“, bemitleidete sie sich. Wie traurig war das.

Im Wohnzimmer traf ich sie in der üblichen Stellung an, als sie ihre Reglosigkeit gerade mit einer Klage unterbrach, die in recht weit entfernte Epochen zurückreichte. Ich setzte mich neben sie auf das Sofa, zog einen Schmollmund und erzählte:

„Großmutter, man hat mich eine schmutzige Jüdin genannt.“

Sie, der nie das Mindestmaß an Takt gefehlt hatte, sah mich verdutzt an:

„Wer?“


„Du bist das sauberste Mädchen auf dieser Erde. Sie aber ist meschugge. Hast du verstanden?“


Vater strich mit beiden Händen über das Holz der Tischplatte, seine Augen glühten vor Empörung. Abermals erinnerte er an jene Geschichte, die unser ererbter Schrecken war: der Haß, die Verfolgungen, die sinnlosen Toten und - Schrecken aller Schrecken - wie das Haus und die Familie der Großmutter bei einem Pogrom zerstört wurden, einem von denen mit Kosaken auf ihren Pferden. Unser Großmütterchen gab einen weiteren Seufzer von sich, die Augen verloren sich wieder in bläulichem Geflacker. Vater verlieh seiner Stimme einen feierlichen Ton:

„Ab heute spricht keiner von uns mehr mit dieser kleinen Antisemitin“, bemühte er sich, seine Patriarchenrolle auszufüllen. Während er mich mit zärtlicher Zustimmung ansah, streichelte er mein Haar und das meiner Puppe.

„Es war richtig, daß du diese Ziege eine Ziege genannt hast. Man darf sich nicht beugen oder gar schämen.“
Mutter erläuterte:

„Wenn du dich zu tief bückst, sieht man den Schlüpfer.“

Großmutter machte pü-pü-pü, eine Andeutung des dreimaligen Ausspuckens, das die Anwesenheit des Teufels vertreiben sollte.

Von diesem Moment an wurden wir Kinder uns bewußt, welche Schmach es war, gedemütigt zu werden. Es war genauso würdelos, wie den Hintern zu zeigen.

Wenn wir uns zum Schlafen fertigmachten, sagte Vater immer, das Leben werde am nächsten Tag beginnen. Der Satz wurde auf Italienisch vorgetragen, was, da er von einem Sohn jüdisch-russischer Einwanderer ausging, seinen ungewöhnlichen Charakter noch unterstrich - ohne daß er je aufhörte, wahr zu sein. Und so kamen bessere Tage. Bis die Zeit des Jom-Kippur-Festes angebrochen war. Wie es alljährlich um den Versöhnungstag herum geschah, brachte meine Großmutter eines schönen Nachmittags vom Markt ein Huhn mit.

Lebend.


vor sich hin trällernd, scheuerte die Großmutter den Reistopf mit einem Stück *Sapólio* aus. Es war unmenschlich: wie konnte sie, gerade sie, gleichgültig gegenüber dem Entsetzen dort neben sich sein?


Herrin eines Lebens, Schöpferin einer Wahrheit, sagte ich im Vollbesitz meiner erlösenden Macht:

„Dieses Huhn wird nicht sterben“, und um die Einhaltung meines Gebots zu gewährleisten, machte ich das Tier zum Menschen: „Sein Name soll Hortênsia sein.“

zufrieden, befanden wir uns in froher Erwartung des neuen Jahres, aber trotzdem beschwerten sich meine Brüder. Es war das erste Jom Kippur, bei dem kein Streit um die Hühnerschenkel aufkam. Denn es gab kein Huhn.

Das Gute hatte gesiegt.

Ich aß nicht einmal richtig zu Ende und bat um Erlaubnis, nach Hortênsia sehen zu dürfen, die im Wirtschaftsbereich bequem in einem Tage zuvor aufgestellten Strohkörbchen saß. Da es der höchste Feiertag war, fiel der Kommentar meines Vaters an der Stirnseite des Tisches gemäßigt aus:

„Nein, so was.“


„Ein Ei“, rief er schrill vor Erstaunen, „das Huhn hat ein Ei gelegt.“

Großmutters Gesicht leuchtete auf. Sie sagte, was man in solchen Augenblicken zu sagen pflegt, auf Jiddisch natürlich und auf Portugiesisch:

„Mazel tov“, lautete die Weissagung künftigen Glücks. „Möge es uns willkommen sein.“

Mutter, die Babys immer geliebt hatte, war gerührt:

„Wie reizend!“
Noch schlaftrunken, brauchte ich eine Weile, um zu begreifen. Dann ließ Mutter die Jungen wecken, alle sollten kommen, weil das Huhn jetzt ebenfalls Mutter sei. Mein Bruder merkte als erster, worum es ging:

„In dem Ei ist ein Küken?“

Vater blickte von einem zum anderen. Seine Miene war niedergeschmettert:

„Mir passieren aber auch die unmöglichsten Dinge.“


„Eine Schwangerschaft, auch wenn sie außerhalb des Körpers stattfindet, bleibt eine Schwangerschaft“, argumentierte meine Mutter, als ich das Ei nehmen wollte, um festzustellen, ob ein Küken darin war. „Laß Hortênsia in Ruhe brüten. Und tausche die Zeitungen im Wirtschaftsbereich aus, niemand ist gern mitten im Dreck Mutter.“


Eines schönen Morgens schließlich bereiteten sich alle gerade darauf vor, in die Schule zu gehen, als neuerliches Geschrei aus den Wirtschaftsräumen durch die Wohnung drang. Großmutter rief sich die Seele aus dem Leib, ui- ui- ui, stieß sie kleine Freudenschreie aus, wir sollten alle gucken kommen.
Ich und Mutter stürzten los. Vater, der noch dabei war, die Krawatte zu richten, folgte uns auf dem Fuße. So sah ich:

die Eierschale zerbrochen.

Ein winziges Küken.

Und es piepte.


Die Großmutter vermittelte:

„Bei den Tieren ist es wie bei den Menschen. Die Mutter läßt niemanden an ihr Kind heran.“

Ich verstand. Meine Brüder kamen gelaufen und erstarrten:

„Aber das ist ja ein Hähnchen“, sagte der jüngere.

„Ein Hähnchen“, echote der ältere.

„Genau, ein Hähnchen“, verdreifachte ich.

Während wir mit der Entdeckung beschäftigt waren, daß ein Quadrat nicht rund ist, erprobte das Küken das gesamte Volumen seiner Lungenflügel: ein andauerndes Piepen. Völlig aufgelöst wiederholte Großmutter mazel tov, mazel tov, mazel tov, Mutter rief immerzu, daß das Neugeborene reizend sei - und das Küken war über unsere Freude ganz verzweifelt. Halb verwirrt stellte mein Vater die Frage des Jahres:

„Was machen wir jetzt?“

„Es soll Fúlvio heißen.“


„Mutter und Kind sind wohlauf“, antwortete er und langte nach der Aktentasche.

Jetzt war ich an der Reihe:

„Nein, so was.“

Er tat, als hätte er nichts gehört.


Die Nachricht, daß wir ein Huhn besaßen, daß das Huhn ein Ei gelegt hatte und daß aus dem Ei ein Küken geschlüpft war, verbreitete sich rasch in der Nachbarschaft. Mehrfach ertönte die Klingel: Fúlvio war das Ziel von Besucherführungen - alle wurden pflichtschuldig darauf hingewiesen, daß sie mit den Augen schauen dürften, auf keinen Fall jedoch mit den Händen.

Bis dann eines Sonntagnachmittags, kurz nachdem die Jungen zum Fußball gegangen waren, wieder die Klingel ertönte. Da ich mit meiner
Suzi gerade dabei war, Fúlvio und Hortênsia Gesellschaft zu leisten, lief ich die Tür des Hintereingangs öffnen.

Paula.

Die Antisemitin.

Ich hielt die Tür halb geschlossen, schützte den Wohnungseingang mit meinem eigenen Körper. Dann fragte ich den Feind, was er wünsche.

Sie wollte das Küken sehen.

Ich sagte, daß es uns verboten sei, mit ihr zu sprechen. Trotzdem beharrte sie:

„Meine aufrichtige Entschuldigung, daß ich dich beleidigt habe. Kann ich das Küken sehen?“

Das war eine Variante, auf die ich nicht vorbereitet war: die Bitte um Entschuldigung. Warte hier, sagte ich, lehnte die Tür an und lief durch die Küche ins Wohnzimmer. Vater las Zeitung. Ich erläuterte meinen Konflikt:

„Paula ist draußen, sie hat aufrichtig um Entschuldigung gebeten und möchte Fúlvio sehen.“

„Antisemiten sind allein im Haß aufrichtig. Dieses Mädchen hat in unserer Wohnung nichts zu suchen, keine Diskussion“, knurrte mein Vater.

„Und was sage ich?“

„Sag, daß sie nicht willkommen ist.“ Er hielt kurz inne, um die Herausforderung zu formulieren: „Und sag auch, daß das Küken Jude ist.“

An dieser Stelle stutzte ich. Ich grübelte: Jude ist nur, wer das Kind einer jüdischen Mutter ist. Wenn Fúlvio Jude war, fehlte ein Stück der Geschichte. Die Frage kam sofort:

„Vater, Hortênsia ist Jüdin?“

Mit leichten Anzeichen von Ungeduld hob er den Blick von der Zeitung. Salomonisch entschied er:
„Wir haben die Henne bei uns aufgenommen. Sie und das Küken stehen unter dem Schutz einer jüdischen Familie.“

Ich dachte laut nach:

„Wenn wir Hortênsia aufgenommen haben, gehört sie zur Familie. Da wir Juden sind, ist auch sie eine Jüdin.“

Vater wandte sich von der Zeitung ab. Sichtlich interessiert hörte er mir zu, obwohl die Überlegung etwas beschränkt war.

Ich schloß:

„Und deshalb ist ihr Kind ebenfalls Jude.“

Er riß die Augen auf. Nachdenklich zögerte er einen Moment. Dann erklärte er die Sache für beendet:

„Ganz genau, das habe ich gesagt. Und dieses Mädchen setzt seine Füße nicht über unsere Schwelle. Sie ist eine schickse, eine schleper und eine sonem.“

Im verworrenen Jiddisch meines Vaters stellten die drei Ausdrücke die höchste Geringschätzung dar: das Mädchen war der Reihe nach eine schändliche Nichtjüdin, eine Bettlerin und eine Feindin. Der Fall war erledigt. Ich legte meine Zöpfe zurecht und rekapitulierte noch einmal die Ergebnisse des Gesprächs. Ohne Umschweife würde ich Paula mitteilen, daß ihre Entschuldigung nicht angenommen werde, daß Antisemiten nicht aufrichtig seien und daß Fúlvio Jude sei, genau so, auf diese Art und Weise. Vater ließ nicht einmal die Zeitung sinken:

„Ja.“

Da vernahmen wir Hortênsias lärmendes Gegacker und Fúlvios äußerst aufgeregtes Gepiepe.

Hellsicht durchzuckte mich – ich dachte an meine Suzi –, aber ich wollte der Eingebung keinen Glauben schenken, ein Fehler, der mich bewegungslos mitten im Wohnzimmer verharren ließ. Mit einem Ruck

Ich hörte Schreie - meines Vaters, meiner Mutter, meiner Großmutter.

Das Blut kehrte in meine Adern zurück. Im Flug durchquerte ich die Küche. Die Szene im Wirtschaftsbereich schien einem Alptraum entsprungen.

Paula befand sich in unserer Wohnung.

Schlimmer: sie befand sich im Wirtschaftsbereich.

Viel schlimmer: sie hielt Fúlvio mit beiden Händen umklammert.

Gelber als je zuvor, piepte mein Hähnchen panisch, während die mordgierigen Finger seine zarte Neugeborenenkonstitution zusammenpreßten. Ich wollte vorwärts stürmen, doch die Großmutter hielt mich an der Schulter fest und gab, die Halsadern geschwollen, ein grobes Schimpfwort von sich. Hortênsia war das Abbild der Verzweiflung: unter Flügelschlagen griff sie die Beine des Mädchens an, das sich durch Tritte mit der Spitze seines kleinen Lackschuhs zu verteidigen suchte. Um sie zu schützen, nahm meine Mutter die Henne auf den Arm. Energisch trat mein Vater vor und schüttelte Paula an den Schultern, wobei er loslassen, loslassen, loslassen rief. Die Lückchen und Bänder und Zierfalten wackelten bei den Stößen, das Gesicht aber zeigte die Kälte dessen, der mit dem Instinkt der Bösen geboren wurde:

„Ich denke gar nicht daran, das Küken loszulassen. Sie tun mir weh. Das werde ich meinem Vater erzählen."

„Erzähl es doch, wem du willst. Wenn du dieses Küken nicht gleich losläßt, wirst du lernen, was eine Tracht Prügel ist“, und kaum hatte er das gesagt, hob Vater das Mädchen vom Boden hoch.

Die Lackschuhchen baumelten in der Luft. Daraufhin fing sie ohrenbetäubend zu heulen an, was ihr die Freiheit sicherte.
Hilflos zwischen den Fingern der Verbrecherin eingeklemmt, piepte das Küken immer schwächer, daß es einem das Herz abschnürte. Großmutter fauchte etwas vor sich hin und gab mich frei. Bevor ich mich jedoch auf die tückische Person werfen konnte, geschah es:


Und von ihrem Sinn für gerechte Vergeltung erfüllt - der Besen war jetzt ein Säbel -, fuhr Großmutter fort zu schlagen und zu schlagen, und Mutter wich mit Hortênsia im Arm zurück, und jeder Plaff, den wir hörten, war ein Aufbegehren, ein Akt des Widerstands, ein unverhohlener
Rachewunsch, der Haß funkelte tief in ihren blauen Augen. Endlich hatte Großmutter Hände zu strafen, ein aller Zärtlichkeit entkleidetes Herz, und sie war gewillt, das Mädchen zu verprügeln - das, die Locken schon zerzaust, die Schuhe und Strümpfe mit Hühnerkot beschmutzt, schmerzunempfindlich schien vor lauter Schlechtigkeit. Und das, eine Vertraute des Teufels, mit dem Rücken zur Wand stehend und die Finger gänzlich um den winzigen Körper unseres Lieblings geschlossen, erklärte:

„Es nützt nichts, mich zu schlagen. Das Küken ist tot."

Großmutter erstarrte.

Vater erstarrte.

Die Welt erstarrte.

Das Mädchen öffnete die Finger, und der schlaffe Körper fiel auf den Haufen aus zerknitterten Zeitungen. Dann lachte die Schurkin - ein Lachen, das von einer Ohrfeige meines Vaters unterbrochen wurde. Paula begann zu heulen und lief durch die Tür hinaus, wo sie immer weiter schrie.


„Manchmal gibt es kein Warum."

Dann umarmte er mich ganz fest. Es war das erste Mal im Leben, daß ich Vater weinen sah.


Beim Abendessen wurde das Küken gegen den Widerstand meines Mannes so plaziert, daß es uns Gesellschaft leisten konnte. Ich erzählte Flávia, daß ich als Kind auch ein Küken gehabt hätte und daß es von einem sehr bösen Mädchens umgebracht worden sei. Bestürzt wollte meine Tochter wissen:

„Warum?“

Ich sah das Küken an: es ähnelte dem Eidötter, das es gewesen war, bebend vor kindlicher Unschuld. Ich sah meinen Mann an, ich sah meine Tochter an: sie warteten auf eine Antwort, die unsere Familie und die gesamte Menschheit retten würde.

„Was weiß ich“, wollte ich Zeit gewinnen.
Und ich setzte schon an, über Pogrome zu reden, über Vernichtungslager und sinnlos Erschlagene, als ich von einem langen - so langen - Piepen des Kükens unterbrochen wurde.

Unser Schatz strahlte in seiner gelben Weisheit.
Claudia Tajes was born in Porto Alegre in 1963 and spent many years working as a writer in advertising until she started writing fiction in 2000. Author of more than ten books, among novels and short story collections, she was soon noticed for her ability to turn tragedy into comedy, weaving stories full of irony and good humor in a fresh, unmistakable style.
“The ugly woman is not simply an aesthetical deformation. The ugly woman is a frame of mind.” This is how the protagonist of Claudia Tajes’ *Sex Life of the Ugly Woman* describes her own situation. Jucianara is an ugly woman – not extremely ugly, because those are considered by some people to have their own sort of charm, but plain ugly in a way that can both make her invisible or have her stand out in the most embarrassing way. This is the fate of ugly women that the world does not treat in the same way as it does the pretty ones. Jucianara learns this at a very early age, and she uses the material provided by her own life to draw a portrait
of every ugly woman’s fate in modern society. Candid, witty and often outright hilarious, the book follows Juciana’s misadventures throughout life, from the different treatment received from her family and friends at school to her adult love life.
I am that woman who crosses the room to make some copies, or gets up to have some coffee from the thermos, and overhears two colleagues whispering in a supposedly low voice: “If you had to choose between Ju and death, who would you pick?”

I am what everybody calls an ugly woman. Not very ugly, a kind of woman some claim to have her own charms. I have read over and over how Cleopatra was very ugly, and she nevertheless had Julius Caesar and Mark Antony and hundreds of other men she wanted. But obviously being a queen must have helped some.

At the firm’s annual holiday party, when every girl wins some sort of award: Best Ass, Best Mouth, Best Tits, Best Thighs, and other honours bearing no relation to dedication or effort - only to God, and perhaps a personal trainer - I am the one who never gets anything. Best Neck would already have made me happy. Or possibly Best Ears. I could never win Best Nose: mine is rather large for society’s current standards. Maybe things would be different had I been born in Cleopatra’s time.

I am that woman who changes her hair and it’s always for the worse,
she who goes out in a new outfit and nobody notices, she who spends entire
parties pretending to dance with friends when she’s actually dancing alone.
What few people know is that, for me, all this has a scientific purpose: I
have for some time now been studying the sexuality of the ugly woman,
a subject which, as far as I can recall, has never been treated in women’s
magazines, afternoon TV shows for housewives, or self-help books.

It is important to stress that the subject of my observations is myself,
although there are common aspects between the experiences I will describe
here and those of other women - all ugly, naturally. Stories heard since I was
a girl in family reunions, confessions of friends, and all those conversations
unintentionally overheard or intentionally listened to in public toilets,
crowded buses and bars filled with young and old sad women.

The following chapters elaborate on all this, and they have led me
to conclude, at the end of my study, that the ugly woman is not only an
aesthetical deformation.

The ugly woman is a frame of mind.

2. Theses on the Ugly Woman

2.1. The Name

Parents to a newborn baby girl can never conceive that some day their
daughter will become an ugly woman. However, maybe due to some kind
of instinct, they will seldom give that girl a pretty name.

There is no ugly woman named Nicole, and it is rare for one of them
to be called Julia, Leticia, Barbara, Yasmin. On the other hand, there are
countless ugly Crisleides, Rosineides, Greicelanas, Claudiomaras, and all
hybrids combining two or three names in a single, unheard-of proper noun.

I myself have been registered under the name Jucianara and, whenever
I nagged at my mother for giving me that name, she invariably answered:
‘No name would have suited you better.’
2.2. Genesis

I begin this chapter by ignoring my childhood, for I consider all children to be pretty, although my colleagues, friends and family in general, siblings and parents did not seem to share this opinion. My grandmother on my mother’s side was always complimenting me for being nice, while never failing to mention her other grandchildren’s looks. I regard this today as a consolation prize, just like my most glorious achievement at school: being crowned Miss Congeniality. A prize category usually inspired by the jury’s compassion rather than the contestants’ assets.

When I left childhood behind I carried with me all the pounds I should have shed in parks and playgrounds where I jumped and ran. These were joined by many more as I grew up, and from ages eleven to seventeen I can say I gained much more volume than I did height - a pattern I would stick to for life.

My skin, my hair, my mouth, my legs never resembled those same body parts I used to see since a tender age in ads for soaps, lotions and shampoos. And, although I eventually came to use those same products, they never improved my looks. My hair remained rebellious, growing upright and sideways. My legs did not become long and smooth. My breasts, which went from nonexistent to inconvenient at a time the world was not yet ruled by implants, felt the effects of gravity day after day. Finally, my pimples did not disappear with the oily cosmetics that should have made me prettier. Perhaps they even multiplied and came to resist all kinds of treatment, truly mutant pimples, as I used to call them.

To achieve the picture, a wardrobe in no way whatsoever influenced by fashion dictated my style. The clothes my mother chose, always pants and shirts, would no doubt have suited better any one of my brothers. The rest was handed over by an older cousin, which always had me looking like last fall/winter/spring/summer’s current fashion. If women were sporting
loose trousers, I would wear the tight ones my cousin no longer wanted. When girls wore mini-skirts, I, like a radical Muslim, would hide myself under long skirts straight out from last season.

I must mention that the fact my middle-class family did not have the financial means or even the information necessary for me to dress more appropriately was not in any way determining in making me look worse. I remember a very ugly classmate, Andremara, daughter of a car dealer, who would parade everyday clad in garments from the very same stores I most admired. Far from justifying the father’s investment, the clothes only enhanced the bad looks of that stout and short girl, while at the same time causing the jealousy of all the other girls. Every single one prettier than she, except for me. Every single one poorer than she, just like me.

On the day Andremara came to class wearing overalls of outer space inspiration, similar to those an actress on a TV soap had worn some days before, she was nicknamed Futuristic Sausage. And until the day she left the school at the end of the term, in tears, she was never called anything else.
Dodô, or Luiz Fernando Azevedo, has been a journalist for 16 years, having collaborated with Folha de São Paulo and O Globo newspapers. He holds a Master’s Degree in Literature from PUC-Rio, and divides his time between the activities as professor of Literature and Philosophy, writer, musician, and DJ. “To write is to DJ words”, he defines, explaining that his versatility was considered natural during the Renaissance.
On the Road Again
Fé na Estrada

DODÔ AZEVEDO

Brazilian edition: Casa da Palavra
Rio de Janeiro, 2012 – 304 pages
Translated by Diane Grosklaus Whitty

Synopsis

In 2003, writer Dodô Azevedo and photographer Luiza Leite decided to travel the route taken by American author Jack Kerouac in the 1950s and that inspired him to write the classic On the Road. The idea was to find out what of beatnik and counterculture still existed in the 21st century’s USA. Without any experience in travelling, and with very little money, the task proved to be an adventure. Navajos, hallucinations from peyote tea, and federal agents who mistook the author for an Arab terrorist: everything that happens to the two foreigners during this unpredictable journey puts them face to face with the simultaneous feeling of
deep hatred and love for the American culture. From the point of view of a foreigner from the 21st century, Dodô lived this very original story that originated the novel *On the Road Again*. 
If I told you, you wouldn’t believe it.

Navajo saying

Nothing human is foreign or shocking to a South American. I am speaking of the South American at best, a special race part Indian, part white, part God knows what. He is not, as one is apt to think at first, fundamentally an Oriental nor does he belong to the West. He is something special unlike anything else.³

W. Burroughs

This novel is based on events that took place in 2003 when I and the photographer Luiza Leite reconstructed the 1950s travels that formed the basis for Jack Kerouac’s now classic On the Road.

Preface by Walter Salles

There was a time we’d travel a thousand miles for a good conversation, poet Gary Snyder once said about his generation, the beat writers who built the foundations of the United States counterculture in the 1950s and laid the groundwork for the country’s 1960s protest movements. The road was the way to link the restless minds of his generation.

Writer Dodô Azevedo traveled six thousand miles to get from Brazil to America’s east coast and from there to lose himself on the trails of On the Road, the book-cum-manifesto that heralded the appearance of this brilliant, risk-taking generation that made the beat movement and unending experimentation its reason for being. Azevedo read Kerouac’s book when he was 18 but only decided to head for the United States after the twin towers had fallen, precisely when Bush’s America had become as square and xenophobic as McCarthy’s, something the Beats had felt in their skin and bones, and had fought against.

Born of this quest, On the Road Again is not steeped in nostalgia. Much to the contrary, it is a vibrant, burning account of contemporary America, a country made of contradictory urges, that Azevedo “loves and hates” at the same time. The libertarian spirit of Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, Bill Burroughs, and the other impure poets of the generation that ignited a behavioral revolution in Western culture can be found on every page of this book. But there’s more to it than that. On
the Road Again is an original, always surprising tale seasoned with a biting sense of humor and an ability to laugh at itself, while seeking in the Other an answer to its myriad questions.

Indeed, the “hero” who takes to the road in this book detests mosquitoes and camping, and doesn’t get the expected high from marijuana. Worse yet, his English is iffy, leading him to mix up words like “hitchhiking” and “hijacking.” When your interrogators are rather humorless policemen, you can imagine the results. At times mistaken for a Bolivian, Pakistani, Costa Rican, or Moroccan, the very Brazilian Dodô Azevedo grows ever closer to his venerated beat generation poets, many the children of immigrants, writers who found themselves “between cultures”: Kerouac, the son of immigrants from Quebec; Ginsberg, the son of Jewish Marxist immigrants from Eastern Europe; Cassady, of Irish and German heritage; and Corso, Di Prima, and Ferlinghetti, Italian by descent.

Sprinkled with Navajo poetry as well as encounters and misadventures with figures that might have stepped out of a David Lynch film, On the Road Again moves between the burlesque and the tragic while still attending to the narrator’s inner search: a desire to feel things in his very skin, in the first person, as the Beats proposed. Bohemians in Union Square (the old hangout of Herbert Huncke, poet, drug-dealer, friend of Ginsberg and Kerouac), poker players from Des Moines, lonely Midwestern women out for a night, drunks who seem to have escaped from Orson Welles’ Touch of Evil, Navajos who afford Azevedo his initiation into the use of peyote, madmen and poets—they all inhabit the pages of On the Road Again. The narrator’s quest is in the present tense, and it reveals how much the generation he wants to hold up as his mirror is still contemporaneous.

Your destination doesn’t matter, it’s how you get there, the narrator says. More than ever, this mantra repeated in On the Road Again applies to the America that is brought to light in the course of this journey. A country where, as Ferlinghetti puts it, there’s no more beyond, where almost everything has already been charted. Everything? This is not what guides
Dodô Azevedo. As the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy wrote in his verses about Homer’s “Odyssey” (the first road story in Western literature), you shouldn’t be in a hurry to get back to Ithaca. Just as you shouldn’t hurry to reach the American west coast. What matters is not the road but its margins. Cavafy writes:

The story of On the Road is also the story of the end of the road, as Ann Charters, one of Kerouac’s best biographers, has noted. Urban sprawl, traffic jams, and the implosion of space and geography point in this direction. Luiza, the narrator’s traveling companion in On the Road Again, is always telling us that the world Dodô Azevedo is looking for doesn’t exist anymore. But thanks to the sharp, insightful eye weaving this tale, On the Road Again shows us how much the precepts of Kerouac’s generation have survived and are needed yet today. Herein lies one of the finest qualities of Dodô Azevedo’s book—but it’s far from the only one. This buoyant, non-conformist road trip leaves us with the uncommon taste of an adventure lived to its fullest, without compromise. These days, when so many things are experienced at a distance via telereality and other forms of existence-by-proxy, On the Road Again serves as an antidote, radically free, modern, original.
Chapter 1 - Me

Life isn’t simple. That’s why it’s so good. And if I get lost, I’ll never find myself again. On the nightstand in my home in Rio de Janeiro, alongside imported antacids that never do any good, stands a photograph of Gabriela in New York, taken in September 2011 when she was participating in the Occupy Wall Street movement. She’s sitting on the ground in Zuccotti Park with other members of the movement, and she’s wearing a white T-shirt with a picture of Jack Kerouac on the front. I stare at her photograph, think about how much I despise the United States of America at the same time I envy the United States of America, and I recall how it all started.

Eight years ago, I was about to start preparing for the trip of my life. I was going to leave Brazil and travel to the United States for the first time and there embark on the mythical beatnik journey from east to west coast, retracing the route of On the Road. But things didn’t work out just then. I can remember I turned my place upside down hunting for my passport. There’s a Navajo proverb—very wise yet very naïve—that says when you look for something, you’ll find everything but what you’re looking for. And I did. Dirty socks in the refrigerator, dust-covered books I thought I’d lost, a photograph of an old girlfriend—which ate up an entire afternoon for me, because I spent the whole time sitting on the floor drinking beer and thinking about her—subway tickets that weren’t valid anymore, the instruction manual for my VCR (At last! The instruction manual for my VCR!), a CD inside the wrong box, the third page of my gas bill, and a
bottle of tranquilizers past its expiration date.

Two months went by and I still hadn’t found my passport. Then some friend remarked that maybe I’d never had one. I thought about it. Then I thought some more, and six days later I told whatever friend it was, I think you’re right. I never had a passport.

When my friends heard about my plans to take this trip right during the Bush era, they usually tried to discourage the idea. “You’ve never been outside the country.” “You look like an Arab.” “You’re going to get arrested and hauled off to Guantanamo.” “You don’t even speak decent English.” “You won’t have enough money to make it across the United States.” “Where are you going to stay? In the woods? You’ve never gone camping—you don’t even know how to pitch a tent.” And so on.

All true. But it wasn’t pitching a tent, or being mistaken for an Arab, or getting arrested on suspicion of drug possession that scared me. What scared me was that I really didn’t have any place to stay in the United States. Nor the money for a hotel.

It was at that point, one year after starting my preparations for a trip with an undotted $i$—preparations that had actually entailed nothing more than a mad search for a passport that had never existed—it was at that point that I thought of Laura Guedes.

Laura Estevão Guedes was a 26-year-old Brazilian who’d been living for two years in Boston, Massachusetts, and was in the fourth semester of her studies at the prestigious New England School of Photography. She was fluent in English. She supported herself by working as a sales clerk at a photography shop. I found her phone number and called her. Collect.

“Hello, Laura?”

“Hello, who’s this?”

“It’s Duda! How you doing? It’s been so long, girl! What’ve you been up to? How’s life in the United States? You’re going to that photography
school, right? You finished yet? And how’s work going? I heard you got a job at a photography shop, right? Cool! Gosh, it’s been so long since we’ve talked!”

Strategy. When you talk to someone you haven’t talked to in ages but with whom you’ve decided to get in touch out of self-interest, you jabber away. You don’t even stop to breathe. You bombard the person with questions, you keep repeating over and over “it’s been so long”…

Laura didn’t fall for it.

“What do you want, Duda?”

“Hey, I just wanted to talk, you know, it’s been ages since we’ve talked, I miss you…”

“What do you mean, you miss me? I sent you an email eons ago asking what was up in Brazil. You never answered.”

“Well, yeah, but so much’s gone on in my life…”

“Duda, what do you want? I know you. What’s behind all this bla bla bla? Spit it out. And don’t take all day, because I’m at work.”

“Oh all right.” I took a deep breath. “Here’s the deal: you want to cross the United States with me? We’ll buy a tent, some bug spray, rent a cheap car, do a little hitchhiking… We’ll do just what Jack Kerouac did before he wrote On the Road. We’ll travel route 66, live a few weeks like a couple of beatniks, discover the beatnik that’s still left in Bush’s square America, we’ll camp between the green corn belt and the yellow soybean belt, we’ll feel the wind of the Utah plains in our faces and drink peyote tea in the Mojave, we’ll go skinny-dipping in the Pacific, count the stars in the Californian sky and write poems by a campfire, we’ll get blasted on Mexican beer in Brooklyn, look for those folks who didn’t vote for Bush, go gambling in Las Vegas without a cent in our pockets, talk with the Navajos, and we’ll figure out and raise hell with this country that’s gone paranoid and square since 9/11.”
You get the picture: I was repeating the U.S. Army’s strategy in Iraq. A bombardment of words. Shock and awe.

Silence on the other end of the line. For a moment I thought she’d hung up in the middle of my speechified proposal, which, come to think of it, would have made complete sense. But after more silence, she finally spoke. And what she said came as a surprise.

“What’s peyote tea?”

My foot tingled.

“It’s a tea whose active ingredient is mescaline, a drug that causes you to hallucinate, puts you in orbit, you know? The Navajos drink it when they want to talk to their gods. Aldous Huxley took it in the 1940s and then wrote “The Doors of Perception.” Jim Morrison took it in the 1960s, read Huxley, and named his band “The Doors.” The beatnik writers used to do peyote to develop their senses and get in touch with the poetic spirit of things.”

“But none of that beatnik or peyote stuff exists anymore, Duda.”

“Yes, it does! It has to! A culture like that doesn’t just disappear overnight! Not a culture—a counterculture! Laura, it’s our mission to go in search of the old beat spirit in this twenty-first century America! We’re foreigners, and there’s nothing better than a foreigner’s insight for this! You remember the photographer Robert Frank, who followed the route of On the Road in the 1950s and did that book of photos called The Americans? Guess what, Laura! Robert Frank was Swiss! You’ve got to be the Robert Frank of this millennium!”

“Oh, Duda, you’re tripping…”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about! Take a trip with me! A trip without dotting the i’s. A trip that doesn’t worry about getting it just right, you know? Everybody goes on trips with dotted i’s! Nobody’s brave enough to go on a trip with an undotted i! A trip, Laura! With a capital, undotted
That’s how I was talking on the phone, exclamation points at the end of each sentence. So let’s just say my exclamation points gradually won over the periods at the end of Laura’s sentences, and so three months and sixteen phone calls later, I finally convinced her to at least consider the possibility of our actually taking the trip. A trip without dotting the i’s.

After I’d talked Laura into it, I decided to put my Travel Plan into effect. But this time, in properly organized fashion. All in the goal of reaching the United States of America before fall in the northern hemisphere, about a month from then. I grabbed a spiral notebook, opened it to one of its few clean pages, and, chin raised high in pride, wrote:

To do list for a trip with an undotted i — August 27, 2002

1) Find my birth certificate

2) Once I’ve got my birth certificate, get an I.D. card

3) Once I’ve got my I.D. card, open an account in some bank

4) Start working to earn money and put it all in the bank account I’m going to open once I’ve got my I.D. card
Chapter 2

Hijacker

I hated the United States.

I hated traveling. Things like camping, dealing with mosquitoes, eating canned food, breathing fresh air, meeting new people you’ll never see again in your life after your trip—that’s for other folks, not for me. I have no clue how to pitch a tent. I have a pathetic sense of direction—I can get lost in my own apartment. If I get lost, I’ll never find myself again.

What I hated even more than traveling was the United States, led and represented by the Bush family and their invincible fear of everything: freedom, black gods and black music, Indian gods, drugs, a possible petroleum shortage, a possible shortage of money for the banks, the other languages spoken on the planet, Americans who don’t give a damn about money, MP3 players, the internet, organic food, vegetarians, poets, people who like sex, carefree people, and, of course, foreigners. I’m a foreigner, I like sex, I don’t give a damn about money, I don’t speak English well, I pray to all the Afro-Brazilian gods, I know how to play drums, and I can play all of Robert Johnson’s blues songs on the guitar. And if I get lost, I’ll never find myself again.

It was eleven p.m. in some desert in the state of Nevada, in the American southwest. I was seated in a metal chair, locked in a very hot room with very white walls, answering the questions of an arrogant, bigoted, and
very square little American cop. It was summer in the United States.

The desert was quiet. The interrogation room too. The cop’s name was Christian, Christian Estevez. At one point he decreed a break in the interrogation and let me get my pen and notebook out of my backpack. I also asked for my mini-recorder. He said it wasn’t necessary; our conversation was already being recorded. The whole trip I was never without my notebook or recorder. That’s how I tried to register everything that happened to me. Most of the time, I forgot to take notes or turn on the recorder. But not that day. I opened my pad and wrote: “Christian Estevez must be 30-something and he’s wordlessly searching my backpack.”

Christian Estevez found the following things in my backpack, in this order:

1) Four cans of food
2) Two blister packs of Brazilian tranquilizers
3) A T-shirt with Che Guevara on the front
4) 25 road maps
5) A bottle of nose spray
6) Two bottles of extra virgin olive oil
7) A glass jar filled with dried basil leaves
8) A copy of Memorial de Aires, by Machado de Assis. With pages 36 and 141 ripped out.
9) A dawn opener.
10) A rustling nail.
11) A river shrinker.
12) A horizon stretcher.⁴

⁴ T.N.: Items 9-12 are lines from a poem by Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros (O livro das ignorâncias, “Mundo Pequeno,” XII). My translation.
13) A copy of Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*.

I love, in this order, dried basil, extra virgin olive oil, and books. My favorite book is Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. It tells the story of the writer himself, who one day decided to challenge square America and take to the road, journeying from the east coast to the west in the 1950s with barely any money in his pockets.

The story Kerouac tells in his book transpires at a time almost identical to 2003. In the 1950s, America was living through a traumatic post-war period that, for the first time in history, had left the country in the position of leader of the entire Western world. An Empire was being born. In 2003, America was living through the war on terror, a hazy war where the enemy had neither a specific face nor a specific place, just a name: “terrorist.” And anyone could be a terrorist. Anywhere.

I could be a terrorist. That’s what Officer Estevez, a Latino, was trying to figure out. The dry tension palpable in that isolated room in the desert was the tension palpable across the country at that time. In the desert, by then I’d learned, a refreshing gust of wind would come along once in a while, changing everything. But in the United States back then, neither I nor Officer Estevez could imagine that a few years later the first black president would be elected, take office, bring hope to the world, succeed in hunting down the leader of America’s terrorist enemies, and fail to resolve the American people’s insecurities about foreigners.

Officer Estevez didn’t trust my skin color—too dark. The black man who would become president of the United States some years later had the same color skin as me. Officer Estevez had the same color skin as me and as the future president who would kill the leader of the terrorists. The leader of the terrorists had the same color skin as Officer Estevez, as the first black president of the United States, and as me. And therefore Brazilian writer Machado de Assis had the same color skin as this author, the president, the terrorist, and the policeman.
“It’s just that we don’t see many folks your color on the road,” explained Officer Estevez in apparent sincerity.

Jack Kerouac was white. He had the same color skin as the Bush family. His book *On the Road* gives people the urge to travel. Actually, it gives them the urge to take the exact same trip described in the book. And many people have done just that. Most white. People from different places around the world have set off on motorcycles or in the cabs of trucks, their thumbs stuck out to catch a ride, their hearts open to meeting people and experiencing adventures.

I hated experiencing adventures.

“For the last time, sir: what are you doing in the United States of America?” asked Officer Christian Estevez, respectful and serious, as he examined my passport and called me sir.

Silence and heat in the small white room. There was no reason to lie. That’s why I answered him, in English, “I already told you: I’m hijacking.”

I was living the happiest, most fun and most intense days of my whole life.

And I calmly said it again, because I didn’t have a thing to feel guilty about.

“I’m a writer and I’m hijacking.”

If I get lost, I’ll never find myself again.
Flavia Lins e Silva is an author of books for children and teenagers, with more than 15 books published. She also works as a Cinema and TV Shows screenwriter. In 2004, she got a scholarship from Eisenhower Fellowship to specialize in entertainment for children. Her most famous character, Pilar, is a curious girl that loves to travel and discover myths and stories from several different cultures. Pilar has been in adventures in places like Egypt, Greece, Amazonas (Brazil), and Machu Pichu (Peru).
Mururu is a little tree trunk, a boat for just one person, that sails like a loose leaf in the vastness of the Amazon waters. Mururu is the little tree trunk of a young girl that presents herself being just like her name — Andorinha. Dorinha leaves her mother and her floating house to search for her father, but finds Piú instead, a half-indian, a young man that tastes like fruit and smells like earth. Dorinha crosses the junction of the crystal waters of the Rio Negro with the muddy broth of the Solimões and becomes a woman. Winner of the FNLIJ award for YA literature in 2011.
Chapter XI

My love for the Anavilhanas was a head-over-heels thing: I dived in. I had never felt such an urge to pour myself out in a single place before. I let my ears go numb underwater and, little by little, moss started sprouting on my body, telling me: stay, stay... The first time, I didn’t stay. So, I had to go back. Now all I want is to let the moss cover me because getting a mantle of moss is something magical that doesn’t happen anywhere else. You receive your mantle and go green all over. Those who choose this moss make a pact of time: forever.

A kiskadee mistakes me for a plant and lands on my shoulder, colouring me delicately. I accept its feathery affection, but our rendezvous is short-lived. A screech comes from the forest, tearing the air and driving all beauty far away.

A dry cry comes from the forest and I beg time to make the screeching stop. The nervous, metallic sound of a saw arrives, without waiting, without afterwards. I touch the water in parting and dress my feet for the forest. I don’t understand land. I have to move carefully so as not to rouse the animals. On land there may be snakes, ants, scorpions. I look at everything from afar. Tells fall on trees and the land is gradually stripped naked. I can’t
bear so much end.

Who is that hugging the cedar as if he were a vine? He is clinging to the last tree as if it were a person. The saw continues screeching, cutting down time and history. So many roots torn up, so much life piled up on the ground. The logs are taken downriver and the forest cloaks itself in darkness. It is a day of mourning.

The boy’s feet are firmly planted. He doesn’t let go of the trunk. He doesn’t shout or speak. He is trying to protect that life with his body, but here comes the screeching. On an impulse, I take his hand and pull him into my dugout canoe. He gets in with me, but he has the lost, sad gaze of one who has seen the land die a little more without being able to do anything. I look at him and realize: lots of water outside, lots of silence inside.
Chapter XII.

I am woken by the pelting rain. The downpour has made the river rise during the night and my canoe has been swept away on the current to a far-flung place I’ve never seen before. We are lost on a tributary. No help comes from the sky: the rain becomes a waterfall and if it continues the canoe will end up at the bottom of the river, serving only as a home for fish. We station Mururu under an enormous silk-cotton tree, which shelters us. After tying Mururu up well, the boy breaks his silence.

“My name is Guapiú.”

“Guapiú?”

“Guapiú, like the healing vine. But you can call me Piú,” he says, then looks at me, waiting. I tell him my given name, my nickname and also mention that the canoe’s name is Mururu. Piú’s grin is as wide as the Amazon. My brown skin turns red. Now I’m feeling slightly dizzy and don’t know how to continue the conversation. Luckily, a songbird perches on the prow and starts warbling. Piú mimics each of its notes. It’s as if they were chatting musically. The singing deepens my happiness. I feel as if the world has just been invented right before my eyes. It’s as if we are the only things in existence: me, Piú and the songbird. To make the moment even more beautiful, I’d invent a plant with eight colours and Piú would create a blue and purple bird; I’d invent a fruit that you can eat and eat and it never ends; and he’d invent a soft tree trunk for us to lean on...
Piú seems to be on friendly terms with everything that flies, everything that swims and even everything that doesn’t move. I feel a chill without cold in my stomach. Without wind or breeze, Piú causes me to bat my eyelids. I could go on staring at Piú forever, without a thought for my mother, my father, what time it is or the rising river. But Piú knows what he wants and he wants to go back to the canoe, to life, to the river that never stops. We need to find our way back.
Chapter XIII.

Sitting in Mururu, I row with the oar while Piú rows with a dry branch. I follow his movements and we cross the long waters, looking for a way back to the Anavilhanas. There are many waterways in these parts but no sign of a way out. The sun slowly turns orange and suddenly we row into a big mirror. It is the river dressed as a tree! Everything is reflected in the water, even the sky! The sky wanders vainly through the river, now decorated with clouds. The forest also admires itself, bathing itself in the water’s mirror. Tree branches yawn, splitting into two. Everything is duplicated, even Piú. Now there’s a good-looking guy! I don’t mean to stare, but in his reflection I can gaze into his forest-coloured eyes. I’ve never looked at anyone like that... Piú is handsome like no other. If I were a fisherwoman, I’d throw my net over his image and take it with me. Oh! Whew! For an instant there I thought he was looking back at me in the water’s reflection. I’d better look away before he discovers my thoughts sinking into desire.

Piú rows in silence in the agony of trying to find a channel to take Mururu back to the Negro River. His concern is serious, something deserving of his full attention. He wants to find our bearings, to find land that is familiar, where he knows his way around. I’m not much help. I’m so full of emotion that I can’t even pay attention to the geography of the river. All I know is that a river is forming inside me, with lots of water rising quickly. It’s not going to be a temporary channel. It’s a flooded jungle: a river that has burst its banks and won’t recede.
In Piú’s presence, words leap about savagely in my chest and I think it’s going to take me a while to tame each one. I wish I could say beautiful things. I wish I could tell him about the water rising in me. But I’m afraid he’ll figure things out. I don’t even know what you call this thing that’s almost drowning me. Before, I only existed inside. Now I need to learn to let these feelings spill out.
Chapter XIV.

By the time dusk fell, we had secured Mururu with a vine. I dreamed of Piú’s arms around me, warding off the cold of the night. Fear and desire swirling together like the place where the Negro and Solimões rivers meet. Too much water. Luckily, Piú is still asleep in his corner, softened, unaware that I’m awake. Swallows play in the water, beginning a new day. I could go for a swim too, but I can’t stop staring at Piú’s feet: he has thick nails, a sore on one of his big toes, skin flaking off at his heels and a scar on his ankle. He’s awake! I wonder if he saw me staring at his feet? I don’t think so. He talks about fruit and hunting. He’s hungry. We jump onto the beach sand and I grab a handful of buchuchu, a bluish fruit that looks like a flower. But buchuchu only sweetens your tongue. It doesn’t fill your belly. Piú heads into the forest looking for fruits and nuts. I prefer to stay here by the water’s edge, trying to catch a fish with my hand.

Distracted, I don’t even notice the river turtle. A really big one just went by! It’s a turtle! Yes, it is! It has to be! I have to catch it! But it swims quickly and disappears upriver! I should’ve been paying more attention! I scour the beach from end to end. I follow the turtle’s prints in the sand and... I knew it! It was a female! She left everything there: a pile of eggs waiting in a hole in the ground. I bend down to pick up an egg, without looking around, and along comes the slitherer! I barely have time to spit out a scream before it has wrapped itself tightly around me. It wants to grind my bones and squeezes me hard. First the air vanishes, then colour
and everything goes black. Just one thought remains: I wish I’d had more time with Piú. My last breath is entirely for him, his vine-like hug, his portrait in the water, his grown-man’s feet and his smile as wide as the Amazon. I wish he’d called me his, even if only once. I wish I’d found out if he felt something for me... Suddenly, silence in my mind. I don’t think about anything. The end.
Chapter XV.

It was hunger, Piú explained. Water is still pouring through me, inside and out, and little by little my courage returns. I open my eyes and see Piú in front of me. He strokes my hair and soothes me with songbird warbling. Then he gives me a piece of fruit and tells me what happened. I was so hungry I fainted. I'm not convinced. I tell him about the Big Snake and he smiles.

“There was no snake! If there had been, I would have choked the wretched thing with both hands!”

“No you wouldn't have!” I say to provoke him.

So he gets up and starts showing me what he'd do to save me from the Big Snake. First, he'd throw a cupuaçu fruit at it to frighten it, making it release its hold. I like imagining Piú saving me. Such a beautiful thing, a man wanting to save a woman. I think it shows how deeply he cares. Piú goes on: after throwing five fruits at it, I'd roll free and the snake would forego lunch to fight the enemy. Then he'd take a Brazil nut shell, the hardest thing there is, and throw it right at that head with a forked tongue. Finally, he'd cook the snake’s white flesh and eat the whole thing to get its strength.

“You’d really eat that thing?”

“You would too!”
“No way, never!”

“Yes, you would, so other snakes would leave you alone.”

Just as well there’s no snake to fight or eat. We have lots of **cupuaçu**, which Piú makes me eat so I’ll regain my strength and not miss the world’s colours. I feel better but he’s still messing around: he takes a **cupuaçu** pip and shows me what he’d do with the snake’s flesh, grinding each piece between his teeth. He makes me laugh. Suddenly, he laughs too and places his hand on mine. Feeling awkward, I get up and point to the place where I thought I had seen the turtle eggs. Piú goes over to the spot and explains: it was all invented by my hungry tummy, wishful thinking. I probably didn’t even see the turtle. Then I began to wonder: what if my bad dream was actually an inkling of what was to come? And what if the Big Snake had cast a spell on us? They say snakes do that. They tire out their prey by causing them to get lost, wandering around in circles until they just about give up. Then, when the prey is desperate, the snake strikes. It might have cast a spell on us and that’s why we’re lost, going round in dizzy circles, unable to find a way back to the Negro River. If that’s the case, Piú thinks we’d better turn all of our clothes inside out to break the spell. I don’t think twice. He has gone over to one corner, while I turn myself inside out right here by the water’s edge. I’m not even sure what is inside out and what is the right way around any more. For an instant, I see myself reflected in the water with the body of a woman: hair covering my mound, budding breasts, body ablaze. Does Piú notice all this? Does he see everything almost leaping out of my clothes? Before my thoughts get any bigger, I jump into Mururu and huddle in the bottom.
Flavio Carneiro (Goiânia, 1962) is a prize-winning author of novels, short stories, essays, texts for children and teenagers, and screenplays. He holds a Doctorate in Literature and is a Professor at Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro. Some of his books were published in Portugal, Mexico, and Colombia.
The Championship
Die Meisterschaft
O Campeonato

FLAVIO CARNEIRO

Brazilian edition: Editora Rocco
Rio de Janeiro, 2009 – 384 pages
Translated to German by Wolf Schmidt

Synopsis

André, a young man, has an uncontrollable compulsion for reading crime fiction. Inspired by characters like Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, he decides to take detective lessons by mail, which will put him in a weird investigation named The Championship. Going through the streets and bars of Rio de Janeiro, André is Flavio Carneiro’s tribute to the city, to mystery novels and to its
most accomplished authors, in particular Rubem Fonseca. The main character, after all, is the crime novel itself, the object of passion for heroes and thugs.
Als der Direktor mich rufen ließ, wusste ich schon, worum es ging.


Ich war zwar anwesend, aber meine Gedanken waren bei dem Roman, den ich gerade gelesen hatte, einem Krimi. Ich steckte die Hand in die Tasche und hielt das kleine Buch fest. Ich schaute auf die Uhr an der Wand: Vier Minuten, ich saß schon vier lange Minuten auf diesem Stuhl.

"Das ist eine Folter“, dachte ich, "der will mich foltern“. Als ich
begonnen hatte, in der Bibliothek zu arbeiten, war das Erste, was der Direktor mir sagte, noch bevor er mich begrüßte, das heißt, er begrüßte mich eigentlich gar nicht: ”Es ist verboten, während der Arbeitszeit zu lesen“.


Ich dachte an die Folgen, wenn ich das Buch aus der Tasche herausholte und zu lesen begäbe, direkt vor den Augen des Direktors. ”Er kann mich fertig machen“, dachte ich, ”aber das wird er ja eh irgendwie tun. Entweder, er zieht mir was von meinem letzten Gehalt ab, oder er ruft meinen Bruder an, den Ärmsten, der mir als Freund von Dr. Camargo diesen Job verschafft hatte“. Der würde sagen: ”Da hast du mir ja einen tollen Idioten angeschleppt.“ Das letzte, das ich im Leben wollte, war, meinem Bruder Unannehmlichkeiten zu bereiten.


Wenn der Direktor noch dreißig Sekunden so weiter machte, wusste ich schon, was passieren würde. Ich würde die Kontrolle verlieren. Ich spürte, dass das Buch jeden Moment wie ein Fisch aus der Tasche springen würde. Ich musste etwas tun, also sagte ich:

"Dr. Camargo, ich weiß, dass Sie ..."

"Was wissen Sie?“ fragte er und schaute mir ins Gesicht, wobei er die Brille mit einer brüsken Bewegung abnahm.

"Nichts.“

"Senhor André“, er nannte mich zum ersten Mal Senhor, und meine Beine zitterten, ”sagen Sie mir eins: Haben Sie ein Diplom als Bibliothekar?“

Ich legte mir gerade eine Antwort zurecht, aber er antwortete selbst:


Es war schwierig, dennoch gelang es mir, fast einen ganzen Absatz zu lesen, während Dr. Camargo mich derart fertig machte. Ich hielt die Augen gesenkt, als ob ich mich für etwas schämte. Meine Hände befanden sich in der Tasche und ich schaute auch nicht auf meine Füße, wie Dr. Camargo vielleicht meinte, sondern auf die Seite, auf der ich beim Lesen unterbrochen worden war. Wenn er noch ein bisschen so weiter redete, wer weiß, ich käme vielleicht noch bis zum Ende der Seite.

"Was habe ich Ihnen gesagt, als Sie hierher gekommen sind?“

Er sprach schon nicht mehr, sondern knurrte von oben herab:

”Sie wissen es. Nun, es ist das dritte Mal, wohlgemerkt, nicht das erste und nicht das zweite Mal, es ist das dritte Mal, dass ich Sie während der Arbeitszeit beim Lesen erwische. Habe ich Recht?“

Ich schwieg. Ich hatte beschlossen, kein Wort mehr zu sagen.

”Ich komme an den Tresen und was sehe ich? Ein Benutzer wartet darauf, bedient zu werden, die anderen Angestellten sind beschäftigt und Sie lesen einfach.“

In einer Bibliothek zu arbeiten, war definitiv keine gute Idee.

Der Direktor machte eine kleine Pause. Er holte tief Luft, sein Gesicht war immer noch rot, knallrot. Etwas ruhiger sagte er mit fast unbewegter Stimme:

”Sie sind entlassen“. 

Ich schloss meine Tasche und erhob mich ohne etwas zu sagen. Ich drehte mich um und marschierte zur Tür.


In der Personalabteilung gab mir eine ältere Frau einen Scheck.

”Sie haben Glück“, sagte sie und schaute auf die Uhr, ”halb vier, es ist genug Zeit, ihn heute noch einzulösen“.

Ich blieb an der ersten Bar stehen, einer Spelunke im Stadtzentrum. Es gab nur zwei Stühle drin und drei auf dem Gehsteig. Leute gingen vorbei, Busse, Qualm, Lärm, mir war alles egal.

Ein Tisch war noch frei. Mein Gott, was wird in dieser Stadt getrunken … Es war vier Uhr nachmittags und diese Kneipe hatte nur noch einen einzigen freien Tisch.

Ich setzte mich, bestellte ein kaltes Bier und holte das Buch aus der Tasche. Es war nicht der beste Ort, um ein Buch zu lesen, aber ich war nicht wählerisch. Ich machte es mir auf dem Stuhl bequem, füllte mein Glas und nahm einen großen Schluck. Bevor ich meinen Roman öffnete, sagte ich noch ganz laut, fast schreiend: ”Scher dich zum Teufel, Dr. Camargo!“

Niemand hörte etwas.

”Weißt du, wie man so was nennt, weißt du, wie man so was nennt?” Raquel war wütend. Wenn sie so die Dinge wiederholt, ist sie wütend, das weiß ich schon.

”Besessenheit, kennst du dieses Wort: Besessenheit. Du bist besessen, André.”

Ich ließ sie reden. Frauen müssen viel reden. Das ist wie atmen. Es geht ihnen schlecht, wenn sie nicht viel reden können. Das ist was Organisches, glaube ich. Bevor sie weitermachte, ging Raquel zum Nachtischchen, nahm eine Packung Zigaretten, zündete eine daraus an, machte nur einen Zug und drückte die Zigarette voller Wut wieder im Aschenbecher aus. Dabei machte sie die gleiche Bewegung wie das Mädchen im Film, den wir letzte Nacht gesehen hatten. Ich fand es lustig.
"Über was lachst du? Worüber lachst du, André?“

Raquel hatte verstanden, ich merkte, dass sie es nicht lustig fand und wurde wieder ernst.

"Wusstest du, André, dass es Leute gibt, die ihr ganzes Leben lang arbeiten, ohne jemals entlassen zu werden, wusstest du das? Du bist sechsundzwanzig, André, du arbeitest erst seit zwei Jahren und es ist das dritte Mal, dass sie dich heimschicken! Okay, in der Bibliothek hat es ein bisschen länger gedauert, das ist schon ein Fortschritt, aber ist es normal, wenn jemand drei Arbeitsstellen verliert? Antworte mir, ist das normal?“

Ich musste nicht antworten.


"Das Problem ist, dass dieser Mitbürger während seiner Arbeitszeit liest. Das, nur das. Er ist ein Zwangsleser.“


"Du, André, du ...“

Sie sprach und weinte gleichzeitig. Es war furchtbar traurig.
"Es ist nicht meine Schuld, dass ich gerne lese“, riskierte ich einzuwenden.

Sie schaltete exzellent um:

"Du liest nicht gern. Wer gern liest, liest zu Hause, oder am Strand, oder in der Metro, oder in der ...“ Beinahe hätte sie Bibliothek gesagt."Wer gern liest, hört deswegen nicht auf zu arbeiten. Dein Problem, André, dein Problem ist, dass du abhängig bist, verstehst du, du bist krank!“

Das tat weh. Raquel merkte, dass sie etwas zu weit gegangen war. Sie kam herüber, setzte sich neben mich, wischte ihre Tränen ab und streichelte mein Gesicht.


Noch ein Doktor in meinem Leben, dachte ich, sagte aber nichts.

Das Erste, was mir in der Praxis auffiel, war die Reinlichkeit.


Raquel kümmerte sich um mich. Wir wohnten nicht zusammen, aber sie schlief unter der Woche an einigen Tagen bei mir und sorgte für Ordnung. Sie wusch die Teller und sagte immer wieder, dass ich eine Putzfrau einstellen sollte. Als ob ich Geld übrig hätte.

Dennoch kam es immer wieder zu der einen oder anderen erniedrigenden Szene, wie zum Beispiel der Anblick des halben Glases mit Erdbeerjoghurt. Raquel war verreist und das halbe Glas Joghurt wurde
auf dem Wohnzimmertisch zwei Wochen lang vergessen. Es produzierte die höchste Anzahl von Pilzen und Bakterien, die je in einem bewohnten Haus registriert wurde.

Bei allem guten Willen von Raquel dachte ich manchmal, dass doch alles sehr schmutzig war: Meine Wohnung, meine Kleider, meine Haare, mein Leben.

In der Praxis standen helle Möbel, das Sofa hatte einen blauen, durchsichtigen Überzug, die Klimaanlage machte nicht das geringste Geräusch, die Teppiche, die Wände, die Kleidung der Empfangsdame, ihre hochgesteckte Frisur, das Telefon, die Decke, die Bilder an den Wänden, alles strahlte Sauberkeit aus. Jedes Insekt, jede armselige Mikrobe würde sich schämen, hier zu sein. Ich wusste nicht, was mit mir passieren würde, als ich die Praxis von Dr. Epifânio de Morais Netto betrat, aber auf dem weichen Sofa zu sitzen, war wie im Paradies. Ich hätte auf diesem Sofa sterben können. Sterben und dabei in die grünen Augen der Sekretärin schauen.

Es waren diese Augen, die ich anstarrte, als das Haustelefon auf dem Tisch läutete und sie abnahm.

"Ja, Doktor. Sie können eintreten, bitteschön."

Als ich an ihr vorbeiging, versuchte ich einen anderen Blick hinzukriegen, einen verführerischen Ausdruck, was aber nicht leicht war, weil ich mich lächerlich fühlte. Ich war hier in dieser Praxis mit meiner Freundin, wie ein Kind, das mit seiner Mutter zum Doktor geht. Die Sekretärin dachte bestimmt: was für ein Schwächling. Ein verrückter Schwächling!

Der Doktor Epifânio de Morais Netto war ein kompletter, perfekter, absoluter Schmieren-

darsteller. "Gestern war ein Foto von ihm in der Zeitung“, hatte Raquel erzählt und sie war ganz angespannt, als wir am Haus des
Schmierendarstellers ankamen. Er hatte Interviews im Fernsehen gegeben, war auf den Titelseiten der Illustrierten, er war der Therapeut, der zurzeit in Mode war.


Doktor Epifânio kratzte sich nachdenklich am Kinn.

Es war in der Tat nicht ganz so, ich wollte den Schmierendarsteller provozieren, aber ein Quäntchen Wahrheit war schon dran an dem, was ich gesagt hatte. Machmal las ich die Sportseiten irgendeiner Zeitung, aber mein Laster war die Literatur. Und in den letzten zwei Jahren hatte ich
eine andere Manie entwickelt. Eine Art spezieller Manie innerhalb der allgemeinen Manie: Ich las nur noch Kriminalgeschichten.

"Nur Kriminalgeschichten? Wird das nicht einmal zuviel?"

Ich betrachtete sein dickes Gesicht. Ich hatte mich maximal beherrscht, um nicht grob zu dem Kerl zu sein. Ich wollte Raquel nicht widersprechen, aber dieses Mal war es unmöglich und ich sagte:

"Wenn es mir zuviel geworden wäre, wäre ich nicht hier."


Er fuhr fort, zu fragen und ich antwortete. Er hörte zu, wackelte mit dem Kopf und zeigte jenes Lächeln, als ob er sagen wollte: "Ich kenne schon diesen Typen". Ich war nervös.

Als die Befragung beendet war, kommentierte Dr. Epifanio mit allgemeinen Worten, wie er betonte, meinen Fall. Nach jedem zweiten Wort sagte er "also". Wenn es etwas auf der Welt gibt, dass ich hasse, dann sind es Leute, die sagen "also". Er sagte: "Weil, sehen Sie, ihr Fall, wie soll ich sagen ... also." Also was? Er hatte vor dem "also" nichts gesagt!


Raquel übernahm die Führung, sie beantwortete nun die Fragen an meiner Stelle und da änderte auch Dr. Epifanio seinen Ton, die Kanaille. Raquel war eine schöne Frau, sie war blond, groß, mit perfektem Körper. Sie zog die Blicke auf sich, wo sie auftauchte. Ich hatte immer Pech mit
den Frauen, ich bekam immer nur die hässlichen ab, aber mit Raquel hatte ich verdammtes Glück.


Er erschrak. Ich glaube, er hatte ganz vergessen, dass ich auch da war. Dann sagte er zynisch: "Wie Sie möchten. Die Stunde ist sowieso gleich beendet“.

Raquel war wohl etwas überrumpelt, aber sie reagierte schnell und stand auch auf. Sie verabschiedete sich ganz freundlich vom Doktor. Ich sagte gar nichts, drehte mich um, nahm Raquels Hand und zog sie aus der Praxis.

Die Sekretärin machte einen neuen Termin aus und schrieb alles auf einen Zettel, den Raquel in ihre Tasche steckte. Ich würde also noch öfter hierher kommen und wieder diese Kanaille sehen müssen. Ich hatte den Wunsch, das ganze Gebäude in die Luft zu sprengen.

In jenem Moment wusste ich genau: Es gab einfach zu viele Leute, die mir sagten, was ich zu tun hätte.

Ich war es leid, Befehle anzunehmen. Da waren mein Bruder, der Dr. Camargo, der Dr. Epifânio de Morais Netto und Raquel. Ich hatte die Schnauze voll!

Klar, ich brauchte Geld, aber nicht viel. Ich bezahlte keine Miete, ich hatte die Wohnung. Ich brauchte Geld, aber ich wollte mich niemandem unterordnen. Ich musste nicht die Marotten der anderen aushalten, meine


Zum Beispiel fragte ich: Was ist Ihr Problem? Und ich antwortete, ich selbst antwortete:


können Sie richtig?

Es hätte die erste Frage sein sollen. Hätte ich eine Firma beauftragt, hätten sie wohl gleich als Erstes das gefragt. Aber bei meinem Spiel kam die Frage eben später und als sie kam, war es wie ein Donnerschlag.

Diese Frage machte mich fertig. Ich saß Stunden vor dem Heft, trank Bier und schaute das weiße Blatt an und trank und schaute und trank und schaute, bis mir der Kopf auf den Tisch fiel und ich einschlief.


"Das war die Lösung meines Problems“, dachte ich, immer noch benebelt vom Bier und vom Schlaf.


Die Zeit vergeht schnell, wenn man sie gut nützt, pflegte meine


Außer dem faden Kurs musste ich auch noch jede Woche eine Sitzung mit Dr. Epifânio über mich ergehen lassen. Der dicke Kotzbrocken war mein Alibi. Ich wusste, dass mich mein Bruder und meine Freundin in Ruhe lassen würden, solange ich in Behandlung war.

Augusto dürfte es wahrscheinlich wirklich gefallen, meine Behandlung zu bezahlen. So hatte er in der Runde seiner Freunde beim Whisky am Freitag nach der Arbeit ein Gesprächsthema.


Dadurch, dass es mir gelungen war, während jener vier Wochen den
The Confession  
A Confissão

FLAVIO CARNEIRO

Brazilian edition: Editora Rocco  
Rio de Janeiro, 2006 – 236 pages  
Translated by Alison Entrekin

Synopsis

A kidnapper explains to his victim, during a long night, his reasons for capturing her. Tied to an armchair, she hears a story of love, fear, and surprises. From the weird occupation of the protagonist — a thief specialized in stealing books — to the discoveries he makes about his own identity, everything is revealed in the kidnapper’s long monologue in The Confession. Written in the first person and with no dialogues, the book is the mazy and choppy account of the many stories the narrator has to tell. The reader follows step by step the adventures of this seductive stranger that seems to want, at the same time, to attract and to frighten the woman he has before him.
“A seductive fiction”.

Correio Braziliense

“It’s a novel magnificently built by Flavio Carneiro. Divided in two blocks, past and present, that dialogue with each other with an extraordinary intensity, the author contrasts the absence and the presence, the existential disquiet and a perennial feeling of loneliness, pain, and pleasure, life and death.”

O Globo

“A novel that establishes him as one of the most important contemporary Brazilian authors.”

Jornal Rascunho
Please listen, ma’am. First of all, I apologize. I know it wasn’t at all nice of me to intercept your car at that time of night and point a gun at your head, ordering (or asking, depending on how you look at things) you to step out of the car. I believe I asked, although, granted, the act of pointing a gun may suggest that it was an order rather than a request. Anyway, let’s not split hairs. I recognize that it wasn’t very nice.

Nor was stowing the gun in the waistband of my pants a sign of good manners. No, I admit that I didn’t do it out of regret, remorse, or any other more delicate sentiment. I simply needed both hands free. It would have been impossible to press the handkerchief soaked in chloroform to your face without both hands free. I also needed them to accommodate your unconscious body in the trunk. Good thing you don’t weigh much. One can see you look after your figure, your physique.

I also know it’s not at all polite (gentlemen certainly don’t do it), it’s not at all polite to tie someone to an armchair like the one you’re on, from where you stare at me as if you don’t know where you are, a bit dizzy, trying to examine your surroundings, glancing around, looking for a clue, any reference at all, raising your eyebrows in this room at the end of the world,
where we’re going to spend a few hours until I’ve told you my story from start to finish.

I at least hope, given the circumstances, that you’re reasonably comfortable. I understand, it must have been traumatic to suddenly find yourself deprived of the company of your husband, your children, your spacious, cozy, clean, plentiful, well run home. Yes, I understand all that but don’t think I’m a thug. I have manners, I’ll have you know. Time and certain women have given me refined tastes. I hope you appreciate what I have to tell you. Are you happy with the armchair? I can get some cushions if you want. I want you to feel comfortable and pay attention to what I say. I promise to do my best so we can make the most of the few hours we have together. I can assure you they will be few, don’t worry. I’ll do everything I can to make my story as pleasant as possible. I’ll try to tell you everything that really happened clearly and precisely. This point is of the utmost importance. The truth, I’m going to tell you nothing but the truth, but I want you to know beforehand (I’m sorry but I need to say it up front; I’d rather you didn’t find out later; I’ll just come out and say it; if it has to be said then out with it), I want you to know that I’m going to tell you strange, perhaps even scary things — for me they’re not but for you they might be. At any rate I assure you from the outset, it’s all true.

No, ma’am, there’s no point screaming. As well as not being a thug, I’m also not stupid. I wouldn’t leave you without a gag if there were even the remotest possibility that we might be heard outside. I’m not stupid. This room was prepared beforehand: the walls, the windows, the doors, even the floor and ceiling. No sound gets out of here. We can talk in loud voices, scream if we want — as you just have, naturally. I decided to take away your gag because I’m concerned about your comfort, of course, but also because I’d like to hear you. I’d like you to speak, please. Say something from time to time. It’s important. I don’t just want you to listen. I need your words from time to time, if possible — is it possible?

You don’t want to answer. You refuse to answer. Maybe you’re a little
headstrong. Maybe you want to irritate me, which would most certainly be a small but precise form of revenge. It’s your right to remain silent, I agree, but our brief time together could be a little more pleasant, or at least bearable, if there were a little more cordiality on your part, the odd response, even just a yes or no when the question requires something of the sort, as was the case. Don’t be impolite with me, ma’am. You’ll understand everything in due time. You may even come to the conclusion that I’m right. You might even understand that my case is rather unusual, atypical. I know you’re an intelligent woman. Perhaps you’ll understand better when I’ve finished telling my story.

In the beginning I tried to find a rational explanation for what was happening to me. I didn’t talk about it to anyone. I had no one to talk with, no friends or family, and even if I had it would have been useless. But at any rate I tried to find an explanation on my own. The very sequence of events, however, made me abandon the idea. Later I realized how silly it was. In the beginning I didn’t think it was silly but now I know it was. It was silly to want to find explanations for what had happened. It was so extraordinary that it didn’t deserve analysis, none whatsoever. The very desire to explain would have been, in fact, a form of aggression.

Imagine this, ma’am, please. I was nineteen. I could have been older or younger, fifteen or forty — the issue of time can no longer be resolved normally for me. I don’t even worry about keeping track of my age these days. You can guess if you like, I don’t care. I know I was nineteen because the date was marked in red on that calendar over there on the wall, see? Actually, I should tear it up. I’m going to tear it up. There, I’ve done it, see? I’ve torn up the calendar. I’ve erased time just like that, with the wave of a wand. Now we won’t know anything about the remote past, before the date marked on that old calendar. Soon we won’t even remember what day it is today, what year we’re in. I’m going to make you forget everything. Soon we’ll be almost eternal.

It was a cold night. I was in the metro, heading home from the movies.
It mustn’t have been very late: ten-thirty, eleven o’clock. I was drowsy, as I always was when I left the cinema. I don’t go to the movies anymore, I haven’t seen a film for millennials, but when I used to go, back then, right afterwards I’d feel a narcotic drowsiness, an anesthesia that was also mental, which prevented me from coming to any conclusions or commenting on what I’d just seen. I think it’s because the darkness of movie theatres is a bit like a womb, don’t you think? Someone must have already said that, and they were right, because it’s absolutely true. When we walk out it’s as if we were leaving the coziness and warmth of the womb, and we want to return, obviously, which is why it takes us a while to readapt to life outside, with light and real people, cars, deserted streets, mansions, wee hours, kidnappings.

I was sitting there, a bit anaesthetized by the experience of the film, my left hand in my trouser pocket to warm it up, my right in my coat pocket, stroking a novel I’d brought with me to read on the way back, even though I knew I never read anything on the way back. I’d brought it just in case, so I wouldn’t feel I had nothing to do. It was a cheap paperback from a newsstand, any old story, a detective novel or a cheap romance, I don’t remember. When I was nineteen I liked books like that. I had a few at home. I don’t any more. I sold them all to a second-hand bookshop. Anyway, that was probably the kind of book I was carrying in my coat pocket that cold night.

There weren’t many people on the train. I was sitting alone in a row of double seats leaning against the window. I didn’t want to think about anything, see anything. All I wanted was to sit there quietly, like a dog under an awning on a rainy day, curled up around itself, keeping warm. I wasn’t thinking about anything. I saw the darkness of the tunnel through the train window and the advertisements in the stations when the strain stopped: giant luminous signs. One was for a steakhouse and it pissed me off (pardon the language, I know you don’t like rude words), but I got really pissed off when I saw that advertisement: a huge skewer of meat dripping
blood. I felt a pang in the mouth of my stomach. I was hungry. I’d only had lunch that day, and not much. I didn’t have a penny to my name. I’d only have some money the next day and the next day was still hours away. That photo was a blow to the stomach. The guy who’d put it there had just punched me, the son-of-a-bitch. Sorry.

Back then I often went hungry. Nothing chronic. Don’t think I like to dramatize things, but every now and then things got a bit difficult. I lived alone in a room in a cheap pension, an old building in the centre of town. The room had a miniscule bathroom, a sink with a rusty tap, and a ceiling full of leaks. I didn’t have a job. I didn’t because I didn’t try, to be honest. I didn’t want to work, I confess. Feel free to disapprove, though you’ve never worked a day in your life either, but you can disapprove anyway, it doesn’t matter. That’s the story: I didn’t want to work. Sometimes I’d approach some tourists and the more naïve ones ended up accepting me as a guide, which brought in a little cash. From time to time I helped out in a bar near my place, serving the customers and helping behind the counter when an employee didn’t show up for work. I also handed out flyers for street vendors downtown, stuff like that, odd jobs, nothing very serious. Actually, my main source of income, so to speak, came from the books I sold to second-hand bookshops and the occasional collector.

I stole the books from libraries. I was a book thief — a small-time thief but a thief all the same. I stole from public libraries, or universities. From time to time I’d even risk a bookshop. It was pleasant work, if you will allow me to refer to the exercise of changing a book’s address as work. My earnings were minimal, a pittance, but my expenses were also minimal, so it was enough to keep me alive at least, and at that time I didn’t want much more than that: to be alive. It was a line of work that guaranteed me my freedom, didn’t subject me to bosses and all the limitations of a normal job, and I actually quite liked it, despite going through the occasional rough patch. It wasn’t always possible to steal books. Rio de Janeiro doesn’t have that many libraries, and not all of them allowed one direct access to
the books. In some an employee would fetch the books and return them to their places after use, so my options were limited. I couldn’t repeat the same places all the time.

I thought about books in terms of food. This Drummond hard cover is worth lunch plus a beverage and dessert, maybe even enough for a coffee afterwards, I told myself when I saw Drummond on the bookshelf. The Don Quixote in two volumes afforded me the luxury of three meals, three days without going hungry. It was a deluxe edition with old photos of Rio, without stamps on the pages, only the title page, which wasn’t a problem — all I had to do was tear out the page. It fetched me half my month’s rent. But that was rare. It was rare for me to pay half the rent with a single book. Most of the time I went hungry, as I said before, but I’m not complaining. That’s not it at all. All I’m saying is that that’s life, isn’t it? That’s life.

I was still cursing the guy who’d put the steakhouse ad in my path when the woman got on. She was tall and thin with short black hair and was wearing a black skirt and stockings, high heels, and a white pullover. She was clutching a brown paper bag to her chest and sat on the seat in front of mine. From where I was I couldn’t see her face but I didn’t need to. The few seconds in which I’d seen it had been enough. I’d never forget the features of her face: her white skin, milk-white, like that of Nordic women, her large eyes, black like her hair, her thin lips set off with crimson lipstick, her nose a little too long and thin, which was reminiscent of a witch or enchantress, although she wasn’t ugly. She had strong features. I’ll never forget her. I remember every detail of Emma’s face. That was her name: Emma.

I took a guess: twenty-five. I was wrong, she was twenty-six, I found out later, a few days later, when I saw her for the second time. We weren’t in a rush and were able to talk, but that night in the metro we didn’t talk at all. She didn’t even see me. She just sat there, while I gazed at the whiteness of the skin on the back of her neck, the small bare strip between her pullover and her hair — two centimeters of white skin, where there was a suggestion
of soft down. Nice to stroke, I thought, imagining my fingertips caressing her neck. I imagined it was really nice, and it was, as I was able to confirm on another occasion.

She had two bottles in the brown paper bag. They looked like two bottles of wine, and there was something written on the outside of the bag but I couldn't get a proper look because her arms were covering some of the words. There was a picture too, with some writing underneath. It appeared to be from a liquor store — an importer perhaps. She had just bought two bottles of wine in an import liquor store and now she was in the metro, well dressed and made-up. Going where? I wondered. To a party, maybe, or to meet her boyfriend. Did she have a boyfriend? So what if she does? I asked myself, what did I care if she had a boyfriend or was married, or widowed? What did I care? She was just a skinny girl (I could see her prominent collarbone under her pullover). Rich and a bit nutty — she had to be a bit nutty to prefer taking the metro to a taxi or her own car, or a car with a chauffeur. That's all she was, nothing more, a woman who by sheer coincidence had sat in front of me and managed to distract me from my hunger, the hunger that would come back to bother me as soon as I got off at the next station and the sight of that moon-white neck was just a memory, seeing as I'd never see it again, I thought.

Before I got off, the train, which was already pulling into my station, braked more suddenly than usual and the bottles slipped from Emma's lap. She managed to stop them from falling but in the confusion half of a bottle was exposed as she organized them again in the paper bag and I managed to see the label: Tignanello. Back then the name didn't mean anything to me. It does now, in fact it's one of my favorites, but back then it wasn't. All I was able to deduce, without much certainty, was that it was an imported wine. I liked wine, red wine. I liked it without knowing it, of course. Actually, I liked to fill up on cheap wine, to drink well into the night in the downtown bars when it was cold, throwing back glasses that weren't actually glasses but greasy cups or mugs. It was even better, I thought, when
I realized a glass hadn’t been properly washed, with a lipstick mark on the rim or grease floating on the surface. When I was drunk I thought of the grease as nourishment. I thought it was fortifying, it fed me, warmed me.

I’m sure you’ve never drunk red wine from a greasy glass and wouldn’t know what that is, but I know, and I liked it, and I hated that I liked it, I’m not sure if you know what I mean. I drank every visible and invisible drop of that grease. I drank it with rage. You don’t understand, or perhaps you do but pretend you don’t, but you will. When the time is right you will. I drank with rage because deep down I liked it and I knew I shouldn’t. I wished I could like something else — expensive wines, fine wines. I wished I could tell myself: you like fine wines, you know how to appreciate them, but you can’t drink them because you can’t afford to. I wished I could think like that, that the problem was not having enough money, but it wasn’t the problem.

I once went into a wine bar and ordered a really expensive wine. I don’t remember which, I’ve forgotten, it doesn’t matter — all I know is that one bottle cost as much as a month’s rent at the pension. I had to steal lots of books to pay for one measly bottle of that wine, but I wanted to prove to myself that I wasn’t ignorant, stupid, that I had a palate, that I knew how to appreciate a sophisticated beverage. The waiter brought the wine, poured a little for me to taste, I nodded, and he filled my glass.

Now listen, please. What I’m about to tell you is really sad, it really is, but I have to say it. I started all this so I might as well just say it as it is, even if it’s painful for me. It’s embarrassing, to say the least, but truth is I didn’t perceive anything special about it, and I knew that the problem wasn’t the wine but me. That night at the wine bar I came to the cruel realization (I hope you understand — it was very cruel), I came to the realization that I had no palate, that it was my fate to like cheap wines in greasy mugs. That’s why I drank with rage. Do you understand now, ma’am? Do you understand?
Needless to say, I harbored a deep, all-consuming, unbearable envy of those who had what I never would, or at least what I thought I never would. I envied people who knew how to taste with all my heart, people who could appreciate fine wines and knew every detail of how they were made, of everything necessary in order to arrive at that divine flavor (it wasn't divine to me but it must have been to those for whom it wasn't unattainable). I wanted to be like the people who were intimately familiar with the entire process, from the planting of the grapes to the proper way to store a bottle. These days I know all those things and a little more. I learned along the way — that is, in my own way, which you will soon understand. Now I know, but I didn't back then and it tortured me more than hunger or cold; it gnawed at my soul. I'm not exaggerating. Seriously. Only I knew what it meant, my pain. Everyone has their own. Don't make light of my feelings.

Once... Listen carefully. Focus. Forget Emma and the metro for a minute — we'll come back to that. What I'm going to tell you is very important. It's how it all began. Once I was walking through the streets of Gávea after stealing some books from the Catholic University library, and I stopped in front of a restaurant that you know. You've been there before. It was an expensive restaurant. I could tell an expensive restaurant when I saw one, not because I'd ever been in one, but just by looking. One wall was floor-to-ceiling glass, so I could see who was inside on that hot afternoon. It was summer but inside there were men in suits. Inside it wasn't hot, the air conditioning didn't allow it, and I stood there a while, staring through the glass. I saw a woman at a table by herself. An elegant woman, well dressed, about thirty I figured, maybe married to a millionaire, or well-born herself. Maybe she was taking a break after some shopping to drink her wine in peace and quiet, away from her husband and children, before going home to give the maids instructions, get dinner started — I created a biography for that woman as I stood there, outside, looking in.

That woman was you, ma'am. Of course, who else could it be? It was you sitting there, that warm (or cool, depending on where you were)
afternoon. It was you raising the glass to your lips with the soft, firm gesture of one who had done it many times before, and the glass then returning to its original place, quiet, intimate with the hand that has just touched it, in a perfect understanding between skin and crystal, as if they had come into the world with the sole purpose of one day resting against one another, that afternoon in the restaurant. “I wonder what she’s thinking now?” I thought, at the exact moment that you looked my way and saw me. We looked at one another for a few seconds, just seconds, and you wouldn’t have noticed my pleading look, you wouldn’t have noticed me. You just looked, as you would look at a crack on the wall, a cat on the sidewalk, a bike crossing the street, and then you forget you’ve seen the crack, the cat, the bike, as you return to whatever it was you were doing, without remembering, without registering what you saw.

But that wasn’t how I was looking at you. I was giving you a pleading look. I wanted to know what you were thinking at that moment, or even more — what you were feeling after placing your glass back on the table, drinking the wine. I wanted something very badly. Have you ever wanted something very, very badly? Then you’ll understand me. I wanted something badly, and as soon as you looked away from me and picked up your glass again, and raised it to your lips again, taking a tiny sip of wine, without haste, slowly, as if time weren’t precious, as if time didn’t even exist — at that instant I said in a low voice (no one heard me, there was no one nearby), I looked straight at you and said, “Teach me, please.”
It’s tradition for those who speak of the pleasures of the body to use pseudonyms. Be they Apicius, Anonymous Gourmet, Juarez Becoza, Alain Goust, Pauline Réage, Catherine M., Crébillon Fils, or the Marquis de Sade. Some say they hide behind the pseudonym. Nonsense. The pseudonym undresses the writer of his proper name. Nude, without history, without zodiac sign, or identity papers, the writer experiences a freedom that only imaginary beings posses.

Fugu honors this tradition.
Two Mouths: Nightstand and Kitchen Chronicles
Duas Bocas: Histórias de Comida e Sexo

Brazilian edition: Editora Nova Fronteira
Rio de Janeiro, 2011 – 128 pages
Translated by Alex Forman

Synopsis

Two lovers explore their senses in culinary and sexual experiments.

From the mixing of slow food with slow sex and comfort food with comfort sex Fugu’s chronicles for bed and table are born.
The two mouths

Once my doctor forbade me to eat salt.

I despaired the first week. Fishing for dipped cheese in my hot coffee, the dizzying aroma of salami, improvised foods, all forbidden. I could never again be inattentive to what I put in my mouth.

It was a pinch of nothing, a tiny touch of salt. But it was taken from me and nothing else would fill its place. Though I didn’t know it, my internal order depended on those few grams of sodium.

The first few days, my tongue acted kind of crazy in my mouth. It sought the prohibited flavor. It wanted to lick, scavenge, mine everything that came its way. Where in the world would there be salt?

After a while I was able to capture the desired taste in a piece of bread, in a cookie, in a garlic clove, or a piece of fish from the sea. It was a learning process: one of recognition. To learn to detect what one wants not because it exists in abundance, but because it exists — and, to sharpen my senses enough to perceive it.

The interdiction exposed the hidden nature of the most minute flavors: herbs, citrus, peppers, nuts, mushrooms.
It was disgusting to eat chicken, liver, or beans without salt, but fish, vegetables, cheeses, and meat never surprised me so much, touched as if by magic, in mixtures that I observed with some awe. And the colors of the ingredients, the painting on the plates, the texture of the napkins, the weight of the silverware, the embroidery on the linen, the cushiness of the chairs, the dreaminess of the light, the ritual of the teeth, the gratitude of the mouth.

It is not for nothing that when the doctor gave me a clean bill of health, I had become a good cook.

When the spice had gone out of my marriage, something similar happened.

But unlike my medical diet, the salt of married life was removed in such small increments that I hardly noticed. I let my body dive into the comfortable sleep of prolonged relationships. I let myself age. Lacking desire, I concentrated on what one expects of a good wife. I kept house, husband, and children without ever so much as remembering self.

Until the day.

Until.

My eyes encountered a pair of brown eyes. They looked away. And looked again. Curious.

I floated there, suspended. At the back of those pupils shined crystals of salt.

We became lovers.

Passion spread through my body like food through my mouth. Conscious of every pore, every sensation, my mucosae and my soul awakened, not from a deep sleep — that would only take me to the night before at the moment of falling asleep — but they awakened a new awake,
an epithelial and concrete reality.

If I had imagined that all delicacies of sex had seeped away with the last few drops of estrogen, I witnessed a new body arise in me. An eroticized flesh, a sensibility capable of penetrating bone, electrified senses like nothing I’d every experienced before.

Enchanted, I nicknamed my lover, Fugu.

Fugu is a more acceptable way of saying baiacu, as it’s called in Brazil, or blowfish in English, a hideous looking fish capable of inflating itself to greater heights of ugliness, and lethally venomous.

In Japan, where they were given the more delicate name, fugu is a rare dish. Only qualified chefs can prepare it. They won’t remove all the venom from the fish. They leave a tinsietiny bit. Just enough to inebriate; not enough to kill. The problem always, is how to measure the right amount.

Dealing with fugu is a unique sensorial experience: for the host who prepares the fish — and acquires a nearly divine power over the life and death of their guest; and, for the guest who eats them — entrusting the chef to determine the exact dosage of poisonous ecstasy.

To prepare fugu is a test of knowledge. To eat fugu is a test of trust and confidence.

For this reason, he also began to call me Fugu, but much later. We had become, each and at the same time, cook and diner, priest and offering, venom and medicine.

We are about to turn fifty— in the ocean where the fugu live, there are no novices. Evident to us, an extraordinary discovery: a mature and new body endowed with complex senses: a greater libido, more smell, touch, and taste.

It was inevitable that we would make the alcove a place of sensorial experimentation. There, slow food found slow sex and comfort food found comfort sex.
From that mixture this book was born, made of our favorite alcove foods and waiting time: the two temps into which the life of lovers is divided.
The upside-down world

With regard to the femininity of fruit, some fruits remind us of the enchantments of the lover’s body. Among them, the most precise is the lychee.

Upon first sight, a lychee is a pretty fruit, less red than the strawberry and less morbid than the plum.

The skin is rough and hard, and can be pulled to pieces like a tangerine. But when undressed, its flesh is nothing like the citrus. It has no lady-like gemma. On the contrary, a light and large bud surrounded by a very thin skin is suggestive of a glans; it is impossible not to take into the mouth immediately.

The same texture, the same softness, the same invite.

Try pressing a lychee between your lips, let it slide across like lipstick; kiss, lick, stick it a little inside the mouth, and return it to the lips.

A glans, isn’t it?

The head of Fugu’s cock is exactly like a mature lychee. Firm, soft, smooth readily slipping into my mouth.

In the middle of the fruit salad, he convinced me to try “soixante-neuf” again. I never found it comfortable. I couldn't concentrate well on feeling and providing arousal at the same time. But with Fugu I wanted to rededicate myself to the most basic positions.
So one day, when we went down on each other, I hugged his thighs the way I would have his shoulders. His belly resting against my chest kept a steady feeling of contact. 69 transformed into an embrace.

Instead of using my free hand to hold his penis, I let it play with his ass; kneading the soft flesh, gliding into the gap between spheres, seeking new entryways, which made his cock vibrate anew — as if it now had antennas.

I opened my mouth and let the lychee slide to the middle of my tongue, where I held it lightly. Only then did I relax the back of my throat in an invitation to dive deep, till it nearly cut off my breath.

I made a movement to swallow, but the cock would not be swallowed.

So I returned it to the middle of my mouth while I inhaled and relaxed to be penetrated again.

Holding onto his waist, with my head resting on his left leg, it was as if we were really fucking. A fuck-kiss. He penetrated my mouth like it was pussy. I moved my thighs like his tongue was dick.

After coming, we let our heads hang there. And never were thighs so like shoulders.

And I felt so perfectly enlaced.

That was when I first noticed that his body was entirely mine, even if his eyes — those eyes I adore — were far away.

Whenever I miss him, I remember this scene. This unlikely and perfect fit. The belly turned chest, mouth turned pussy, tongue turned dick, legs turned arms, and everything its opposite, the world turned upside down.
João Anzanello Carrascoza (São Paulo, 1962) has published more than 30 books, including short stories and novels for children and teenagers, several of them award winners. He has taken part in international programs for resident writers, such as Ledig House (USA) and Château Lavigny (Switzerland), and has had some of his works translated into English, French, Italian, Swedish, and Spanish. João also worked as a copywriter for two decades in big advertising agencies in the country.
The Volume of Silence
O volume do silêncio

JOÃO ANZANELLO CARRASCOZA

Synopsis

*The Volume of Silence* carries the best of João Anzanello Carrascoza’s short-stories production. Selected by Nelson de Oliveira, the stories of this book disclose the trajectory of a unique author within the contemporary literary scene. Carrascoza’s stories reveal patience and depuration. The result comes out in the shape of delicate embroidery, characterized by the power of agglutination of minute daily actions. The tension found in his prose magnetizes the iron-dust of the prosaic. In Nelson de Oliveira’s words: “In Carrascoza’s literature, small epiphanies of daily life challenge the fissure between subject and object, I and the other. They happen
between lonely people who, separated by silence and routine, suddenly meet”. In the words of Alfredo Bosi, one of the most important literary critics in Brazil: “The inner side of daily life is made of images that emerge from outside. Alone they may seem simply prosaic, but the novelty of these epiphanies makes us feel and feel once again the world’s figures as seen for the very first time”. With this work Carrascoza in 2007 was the recipient of the Jabuti Prize, the most traditional Brazilian literary prize.
**Couples**

_We wake up at seven_ in the morning and start making the bed, stretching the linen, and fixing the quilt. We shower in silence, still feeling sleepy, and we don’t want to talk. It would be a good time to make love, but we don’t feel like it. We brew the coffee, we heat the milk, we eat bread and butter, we read the newspaper’s headlines. We read the headlines and leave the newspaper aside, with the firm conviction of resuming reading at evening. We know we won’t, but we keep this illusion alive. If it is raining, we say that it is raining and the traffic is shitty and it is impossible to live in this city. If it is sunny, we complain about the heat, the thirst, and the blinding light. We always make some comment about the weather. We small talk. We have nothing to say, but we can’t keep quiet. When we meet someone, we party, we recall the good times, and we feel something comforting that yet we can’t precisely define. We are not always sincere in these occasions. We unfold Ariadne’s thread. We roll it back into a ball. When someone scores a goal, we shout goal. We get neither happy nor sad. We live in a twilight zone. We don’t want to die and we don’t want to live. And we work. We work. We work. At noon they set us free for lunch and we should be back at two. We swallow the food; we are in a hurry. We
go out for groceries, browse magazines, visit the bank. There are banks still. So we comment last day’s tragedies, the last technological novelty, the broadcast speech of Mr. President of the Republic. We struggle to learn all innovations. We know that who is not updated is at risk of dying while still alive, of being forgotten. We can’t afford ignoring what is known by everyone. Our voices mingle. We strongly feel that our words don’t belong to us. We have been losing our memory for years. Yet, this fact has not damaged us. On the contrary, amnesia has protected us from feeling guilty and regretful. For sure someone has taken our best recollections. But what one can do with recollections? At night, when the sky is most mysterious, when life reveals its secrets, we silently snug in front of the TV. Usually, we don’t watch anything. We turn it on only because we can’t stand our solitude. We are afraid of bringing in new subjects. We never go beyond what is allowed. Sometimes one of us farts. We smile. It’s a code. We are alive, after all. In the cold weather, we wrap ourselves in blankets and attempt to find one or another star amidst the fog. It is a beautiful sight. But we are tired of beautiful sights. The truth is that we are tired of everything. We can’t fall asleep in windy nights. We hug each other. Not exactly out of love, but out of habit. We cough. We pant. We change positions; we make noise between sheets. We need to communicate to each other that we can’t sleep. We are unable to fall asleep. Dreams are a burden. We are unable to count sheep. We no longer know how to count. There are millions of things to do. We wake up. Thousands of activities. Thousands of different alternatives. The city has a hundred and fifty movie theaters, ninety theater halls, eight hundred restaurants, a zoo, museums, nightclubs, bars. But we don’t need to go to any of them. Anyhow, the world comes to us. We can’t escape. We got used to war and peace. We need to renovate the house, to change the furniture, to buy a new car. Then we need to renovate the house, to change the furniture, to buy a new car. If we want to be different, we must be equal. If we want to be equal, we must be different. And we are funny, in spite of all. To cook, to drink wine, to be under the rain—many things amuse us. We laugh. We laugh for suffering such simple pains. And,
as we laugh, we cry. We are amazingly strong. We are outrageously frail. We are too lyrical. We are too poor. When an acquaintance has a birthday we sing happy birthday. We are loved and hated. We cheat. We are cheated. We argue. We break up. We make up. We are ashamed of our nudity, of our bellies, of our baldness, of our clothes. When we are home, we want to go elsewhere. When we are elsewhere, we want to return home. We like to travel, but our travels are confined to getting ready. Yes, getting ready is idyllic. At the very moment we jump into the car and hit the road or climb into an airplane the trip ends. Problems arrive, one after another. And they follow us. Uncertainties exasperate us. We are not sure in what to believe: psychoanalysis, astrology, oriental sects, the Third Wave, the imminent end of a nuclear war, Nostradamus’ prophecies, the new Catholic Church. We kill God. We resurrect God. We kill God again. We resurrect him once more. At every minute they feed us more data, more information. We no longer remember who Hitler was. For a second, we climb to the hall of fame. We are interviewed by newspapers, invited to write a book, to make a CD. In every corner they talk about us. We become idols of a new generation. A generation that lasts hours. And then we are forgotten. Suddenly, once again we climb to the hall of fame. We are interviewed by newspapers, invited to write a book, to make a CD. In every corner they talked about us. We become idols of a new generation. A generation that lasts hours. And then we are forgotten. We are forgotten in the same way that we forget the price of rice and last week’s pain. We keep living; we keep dying. We always have ready excuses, one for each occasion. We ask for help with every glance, but almost everyone is blind. We are victims and innocent. In the streets, we meet people we know. People who everyday pass the very same places we pass. We never greet each other; we never exchange a word. But we keep complicity. And we feel abandoned when one of these people disappears for a day. They are our security. We know the city quite well. We get into the car, we close our eyes and we drive. We know how long each green light lasts. We know all about the traffic. We know all avenues that change the direction of the traffic flow. We are tired of the sameness
of these changes. We ask questions. They answer. They ask us questions. We answer. True or false, it doesn’t matter. When spring comes, we say it’s springtime. And we visit museums. We don’t know much of modern art. Nor of post-modern art. We rely on the opinion of the critics. We disagree with the opinion of the critics. We don’t give a shit for the opinion of the critics. We point the gun at the head. Attention: we point the gun at the head. We don’t shoot. We are not cowards. We still have a drop of courage. We pass through long corridors. Suddenly—forsaken—we hug. Now and then we kiss. We nearly forgot how to kiss. We unlearned many lessons. Feeling clumsy and awkward, we prefer the dark. We make love without joy. We are not prepared for joy. We have no time for friends. We have no time. On Sundays, we eat spaghetti with chicken. It is the best day of the week. We eat and drink and sleep. Then we eat and drink and sleep. In certain moments, we are overwhelmed by a sudden happiness. Then we sing. Out of tune. But we sing. Happiness doesn’t last very long. In any case, we sing. We even get to the point of dancing. Yes, we dance through the living room, slowly. We are not as agile for dancing as before. But we dance. Soon, very soon, we will have a son. And we will teach him all that we know.
**Minimal Loves**
Amores Mínimos

JOÃO ANZANELLO CARRASCOZA

Brazilian edition: *Record*
Rio de Janeiro, 2011 – 144 pages
Short story *Ceramics*
translated by Marcos Fernando Vescovi Pera
Short story *Sign of these Times*
translated by Renato Rezende

Synopsis

Love in all aspects, between parents and children, siblings, lovers, friends, is the subject of this short stories book. In *Minimal Loves*, Carrascoza tries to bring his prose closer to poetry, thus dissecting the feeling that emerges in any stage of existence. There is the tenderness, compassion and certainty that the small things, almost forgettable in everyday life, are the ones that constitute the greatness of life. Finalist of the Portugal Telecom prize.
Maureen McQuillan

CERAMICS

She stepped lightly onto the front lawn of her house to water the plants just as I was walking by. The afternoon sun filled her face and lingered there as if it had found the perfect frame, and the euphoria of the birds, sensing the oncoming evening, took hold of my consciousness. If this would be like all the other times, I would gaze quickly at her as I passed, and in this brief glimpse, she would invade my mind like a cutting stone. But after she had disappeared from sight and been replaced by the row of eucalyptus trees in front of me, behold, the desire to return to give myself over to the exquisite fullness of her shadow would fall over me like a tree, my resignation as sharp as an axe. But the lock inside me had suddenly sprung open, my legs turned to move me in a different direction, and where before I was used to catching sight of her through the fence’s barbed wire gaps, now I could see her between fence posts waiting for someone to cross them. It didn’t matter if my calculations were right or wrong; the only option open to me was to attack – not like Attila, for I was far from being a Hun – and I confess I felt divided between what I had been my whole life and what I was embarking upon at that new moment. I needed to be, then, the man who invaded her front garden to blossom at her feet,
although I knew nothing about her other than what I had learned from
the stolen glances every afternoon on my way home from the brickyard,
her presence a sign showing that the machine blades of the world turned
regardless of whether I existed or not. As I moved closer, her fresh watered
grass dampened the bottom of my trousers, the green waves curled by my
eyes, and though she was fresh and within reach of my lips I said nothing,
but simply took her in as one looks at a whole life. As I was continued
walking towards the door, which fairly beckoned me to cross, I heard the
gentle slap of her sandals behind me and knew that she was following the
wind of my windmills. Like Ulysses, my body knew that house more than
it knew my mind, and I was carried up the staircase to the chosen room
where the sunlight was carelessly filtered through the window. I lay down
on the bed and awaited her, knowing that if she followed me here for the
first and only time, I would enter her forever.

He came along the dirt road, the same road that surrounds my lawn
and follows the row of eucalyptuses, and despite knowing nothing of his
life, I knew, as certain as every day is born from the womb of a night, that
he came from the brickyard. Not because his hands and face were dirty,
but because I could see every afternoon when he passed that he had mud
on him as he moved, and it was this humanity that attracted me. I was
watering the lawn and didn’t find the change in his direction strange. I felt
like a plant waiting for water, and suddenly the weather front was moving
in my direction. All around me, the silence flowed in drops, engulfed by the
song of birds returning to their nests in excited anticipation of the darkness
that would settle on us soon. I kept watering and pretended not to notice
the change in his route, but at the same time, like a tree experiencing the
wind and, despite its rigid and inert trunk, feeling its branches moving, my
entire being was stirring and my muted siren desire bobbed to the surface
and dived down again. He left the road and came closer on my wet grass
and I could feel what the earth felt after each one of his steps, could feel
his resolute courage and, if the moment was like quicksand for both of us, he was the first one to step in it. And I think, or rather saw, that he veered in the direction of my door. The still living, crawling sun tried biting his heels but the hem of his trousers protected him like the shadow of Achilles. Without checking if there was anybody with me inside the house and before he climbed the stairs in front of me and lay down on the bed, he stopped and looked intensely at me, his green eyes carving me in half as if he had molded my clay body his whole life. I walked after him, my sandals following the footsteps he spread in my own land, and when I lay on top of him, I disappeared from myself like a person leaving her own skin, and threw myself aside like a garment in order to never cease being the other person I had become.
The couple stopped in the middle of the way to rest. They were both tired of fleeing and took shelter in a cowshed near an empty road. Soon the woman felt the first warnings. It was a providential stop; the most appropriate time and place for the birth of the child.

That night, under the intense light of a star, the woman intensely suffered the pains of delivery. It was late at night when, between her muffled moans, they heard a strange wail.

Perplexed, they looked at the newborn baby. But they were careful not to repeat the same mistake. They picked some leftover pieces of wood that was laid around and choose two of them, preparing the ritual. They were fast. The husband, a carpenter, had a lot of practice.

They crucified the boy on the spot. Then they gathered the animals and resumed the trip.
José Luiz Passos, born in Catende, Pernambuco, in 1971, is Associate Professor of Luso-Brazilian Literatures and Cultures at the University of California in LA (UCLA). From 2008 to 2011, he was also director of the Center for Brazilian Studies. Passos has previously lived in Recife, São Paulo and Berkeley and has published a number of short stories, essays and plays.
Synopsis

José Luiz Passos’ debut novel Our Finer Grain is a lyrical portrait of family decadence and love gone wrong in twentieth-century Brazil.

Alternately giving voice to Vicente and Ana, two former lovers that meet again after decades and recall the end of their liaison, José Luiz Passos has created a haunting love story of two people connected by loneliness yet separated by fate. The beautiful prose and the dense atmosphere make this powerful novel one of the new
literary discoveries from Brazil.

Passos explores the intimacy of the feudal families from the northeast of Brazil with incredible richness. This is great prose.

A Tarde

I can only recommend it.

Milton Hatoum,
writer

A matured prose style, bordering on poetry, makes this novel an adventure of language and sensibility.

Literary supplement of Pernambuco

This work represents a truly modern novel within Brazilian literature.

Jornal do Brasil

A beautiful novel, enveloped in memory and the scent of sugar.

Pepetela,
writer

A daring novel in its attempt at unpeeling the identity game of a ‘regional’ self.

Jornal do Comércio,
Recife

The sugarcane landscape that serves as a background to the story of love and family decadence created by Passos is haunted with ruins.

Jerônimo Teixeira,
Veja
We went inside Garau’s farmhouse at nightfall. Right away I noticed the thick walls, magnificent even with the cracks, and the red and white tiled floor shining in the gaslight. I’ll never forget the gable where a little bronze bell hung by a thin rope. He would ring it whenever he wanted anything. And since the truck had not yet arrived with Cicero and Fedora, the hunting dogs, my brother invited everyone to go outside, “I’m going out to warm up my fingers on the bats,” and would I go with him?

I was just betting on how many misses he’d have before giving up—defeated by creatures that flew without even opening their eyes. What a waste. But I followed him outside.

Zelino planted himself on the porch and waited. Hoards of bats whizzed through the eaves. We couldn’t tell which ones were after blood and which ones just wanted to suck the juices from the orchard nearby. But the zigzagging didn’t throw off my brother. I’d be lying if I were to claim to know how many shots he fired, or how many hit the mark, because he missed most; still, the few he got led to eager howls. There we were, the three of us, along with the assistants waving our arms as if we were going to keep that loathsome prey. Even I got excited, but knew if I were to take a shot I’d mess it up. As for old man Garau, I believe he really missed being able to fool around like that, taking shots.
We finally gathered up the empty shells and Garau rang the bell for dinner, a wild guinea fowl cooked in its own blood and some raw sugar. And as it got dark we went into the living room, looking forward to our early morning outing the next day.

The high open ceiling, its tar-filled beams and battens interwoven like a brown inlaid basket, gave shelter to all sorts of beetles, and yellow and blue winged moths. I realized the huge bat swarming around us had probably gotten in by way of the gaps in the eaves or else through the broken glass of the bull’s-eye window, which made the house look so bizarre from the outside. That creature kept us awake, demanding a reason for the deaths of her little ones. I copied Zelino crossing his fingers, but also laughed at myself, at the two of us, for our superstition. Everyone knows most bats go after fruit and never even think about human blood. Even so, I aimed my crossed fingers at the shadows and at my brother’s bed. Zelino had fallen asleep before me, and I saw there, locked at the end of his arms, the evidence of his fear. My brother slept with his fingers crossed on both hands. And as useless as it was, I did the same thing, embarrassed for both of us—what a couple of weakling hunters...

Before falling asleep I asked Zelino if he knew why, behind his back, people called our host Crazy Garau. After all, he had created his own persona, the freethinking artiste. The story went back to the time when, over at Humboldt Station, they started labeling the migrating birds. The birds flying through Garau’s farm had those little metal bands attached to their ankles. They came all the way down there from the U.S. To collect as many of those bracelets as he could, the painter would down each and every one that flew overhead. Crazy Garau. Much later he turned into a softhearted saint and stopped hunting altogether, but he still allowed his visitors the pleasure.

Through the night a green canvas covering broken roof tiles ruffled in the wind, reminding me of the palm leaves rustling in the eaves of our big house back at Santo Antão. Their shadows and their steady scraping
were the background to my late night studying for so many years that eventually they disfigured the outside walls. Back then, whenever I was away from home, I always wanted to return. But once I got home, I ached to see the world. It seemed to me the mill slept—but the big city never did. That night at Garau’s place, all those ideas came to me as they used to do throughout my early manhood.

First thing in the morning the two dogs arrived in the Benz truck. I can still see it; Fedora climbs out, then Cicero, mother and pup. They jump out of the truck bed, barking. They’re frisky, kicking up dust, running around in circles, Fedora licking my palms with her pink tongue, growling happily and, I’d say, even sort of laughing, very sweet. Cicero doing the same thing, bumping his mother out of the way, more to taunt Fedora than to greet me. Once the dogs calmed down with their cool water and scraps of leftover meat, we finally headed off to the plateau where, according to Garau, the low, dry brush hid coveys and coveys of partridges.

The vegetation close to his house, even more lush and damp near the marsh, gradually broke up and gave way to a prairie of yellow earth and gravel that extended as far as the eye could see.

To the left and right, shrubby spurge divided the neighboring farms and, stooping under the tangle of greenery, I’d shut my eyes afraid the milk from the branches would drip on my face and blind me. But once past the shrubbery, it smelled like squished honeysuckle and here and there you’d see blankets of little yellow flowers draped over long, flat stones, like puddles of spilled milk on a green and brown woolly rug.

Then I noticed Zelino’s expression, his usual dark look, his blue eyes squinting, anticipating his prey. And yet, at the same time, the ever-present shame of not being able to bring the bird back to life. He was better than I was.

But my brother was getting ahead of himself. Our last chat had made me wary. I saw the pleasure of victory in his face. I know what Ana
Corama admired in him, even as she reprehended his laziness—it was his lackadaisical approach to life, the comfort of our grandfather’s will. I was sort of like him, except I was bookish, just starting out with my sugar chemistry lessons, always reading far into the night, sketching, and even taking a stab at languages. And all I got from Ana was a polite handshake offered by a slight hand marked by delicate, confused lines; a life that any gypsy would see as aimless, the life of the beautiful Ana. She was so young, how could she remedy the split between two boys seemingly so disconnected? I saw Zelino preparing to shoot, taking too long, yelling at Fedora, “Go Fey, get going!” It made me mad.

Okay, Zelino, go ahead and hunt what you see and also what you don’t see. You have longer range than I do. Rub your narrow chin against the butt of the shotgun and hold on with your long, anxious fingers. Beyond us there’s the sky, the pond and its full extension, the sea—the old engine that propels everything. But you don’t understand how it all works. You’ve got your shotgun, shortening the distance between the birds and the two of us, compensating for your wings clipped by our family ties. My eyes are shallow, yours deep. I’m all thumbs while you’re the sharp shooter, accepting a fancy handkerchief from Ana, not to mention the full name you got from our grandfather. I came out short in that deal.

“Vicente, hand over that shotgun,” you say. You’re like a bullet ricocheting off the ground. Silly as a bird. “Hurry it up, would you? I’m going to miss my chance, kid,” and suddenly your cartridge blows between our heavy breathing, taking off, bursting with smoke and steam.

Now you ferret, looking for the most colorful feather, a treasure for our friend Ana—someone else’s future wife, our own uncle’s; something we’d been ignoring until then. And one more red-breasted tanager soars down, stunned by your shot catching him midair. The bird’s path is a dusky colored line drawn with crimson feathers, the same color of the next bird whose timeless, auburn flight will soon be stopped short just to please Ana.
Hunting, what is hunting? To measure existence by the shot of one life taking another? Could it be the power sought in stealing from smaller beings what we ourselves have inside and cannot name whether miracle or accident?

Zelino led the way in silence, collecting his timanou and quail, the birds still barely chirping with their last ruby-red discharge as he stuffed them inside his hunting bag. I walked behind the firing line, watching Fedora’s head popping up here and there through the tall thin brush. Her big, fuzzy ears flopping, her pink tongue dripping from her mouth; she was indifferent to the black gunpowder, while we kept fanning it out of our faces. Like I said, we took turns hunting the game, passing that treasure of a shotgun back and forth. Meanwhile Garau, still very much the Bohemian back then, stayed at the house drinking and working on the painting that years later I was to recognize hanging at Ana Corama’s house. I remember it on the wall, the very same picture he was working on that afternoon, *Man with Blue Hands*—Garau’s masterpiece.

And onward went Zelino carting his thirty prey; treading heavily with the trembling weight of the dead fowl, their heads drooping and their eyes draped shut with fuzzy, grey silk. We were quiet as we walked back. Maybe it was the combination of our shots having downed less than expected and the hot wind unsettling our innards, making us short tempered and jumpy. Meanwhile I was thinking about getting engaged to any girl that happened along. Didn’t matter who, I just had to put an end to that rivalry over Ana, and fight off the pain of having witnessed Zelino and her quarreling. Their silly “You’re are no good!” but all the while laughing at each other during that feigned bickering. All I saw there was more proof of how much they cared for each other.

At some point during any game hunt, it’s best to call it quits. But we kept going, trudging along. By then I was carrying the shotgun. Beyond the palm grove and the marsh rushes, far from where we had started out that morning, we caught sight of Lake Constance covered in tiny green
foliage. Flocks of birds came to drink its murky waters. We had agreed; nothing but partridge. We’d shoot at nothing but rust colored partridge, the big spotted ones. The species whose male does the brooding and feeds his young, like a mother. Tender, kind birds. I watched Fedora’s stiff tail as she trailed the game. The partridge trotted through the grove. Fedora wiggled her snout and yelped, trying to corner the bird. I said, “Go on Fey, you got’em... Go!” One of her ears was bent back from the chase, while the partridge went along at the pace of a bird that, given the distance covered, didn’t really want to take off.

Well, if one thing is certain, game hunting brings out the best and the worst in folks. As I look back, I can’t figure out why we were so eager to get that bird. The radical change in people’s psyche is usually gradual, but not on that day. It happened all at once. Much later, reading a manual on game birds, I found a reference to the kind of partridge exactly like the one running just twenty feet ahead of us.

In the first place, no birds like to fly with wind on their tail, because it ruffles the feathers. During the warm season, the winds blowing from the Northeast make the birds jittery. At the slightest sound, they take off in all directions and are afraid of hiding; even when they are tired and thirsty with their beaks open, they run around aimlessly, irritating both the hunter and bird dog. And it’s useless to hunt against the wind as recommended, since the jittery partridge won’t wait around. When the shot is fired, it will simply take advantage of the favoring current and take flight, changing direction immediately, which compromises the shot.

So, was that the case? It was hotter than usual, since we visited Garau in December that year. I was in a terrible mood on account of the fooling around I’d seen between Ana and Zelino. I was also mad at fat old Garau, so full of himself. He was back at his farmhouse acting like a buffoon, all messed up with paint and working on a canvas bigger than he was. Maybe these are the variables that explain what happened afterwards.
Fedora was running with her mouth slightly open, not showing her teeth. She was all attention, wheezing and sniffing out where the bird was, tussling on the ground. We went on like that for almost two hundred yards, and then we came up to some small, thick bushes. It happened in a flash. Fedora barked and the partridge took off within range. I was stunned.

I fired my first barrel. The partridge's usual chirping was somehow off, as if it were coming from somewhere else. Just the fluttering of the wings made me realize I had made a bigger hit than we had imagined. The shrieking bird was now flying low with wings spanned to stay as close to the ground as possible. That was my mistake. The partridge was more than fifty yards up ahead. I had lost its path. My shirt and pants were weighing me down, soaked with sweat and the dampness of the marshes. I was beginning to drag my feet. I set one before the other and got ready to fire again. I lowered my aim and put my finger on the guard and pulled the trigger. The shotgun fired. Fedora had her eyes fixed on the low flying partridge as it continued circling. A cloud of pellets set off and reached the bird as it nearly disappeared on the horizon. The partridge was downed in an instant. Like a small, warm pillow it fell disjointedly through the sky. Fedora should have run through the thickly branched bushes and, fine retriever that she was, jumped through the foliage excited over the hit; but she didn't. That was odd. Yet, right after the second shot I'd heard a louder cry—or was that just my imagination? I thought to myself, can this be a good sign?

A howling sound came and went like some sort of siren. I fooled myself into believing in good luck. Nowadays, any St. Joseph I would trust either comes with a halo or a staff—adornments that establish him as elderly, alone, and of sound mind. They also provide the necessary support a common man needs to attain holy grace.

St. Joseph—I begged repeatedly—forever guide me through my hour of darkness and let me bring home only the edible and musical.
I looked at the ground and saw the smoke from the gunpowder hovering in the branches, like a light mist, a stream of white fog clouding the dark furrows between the tiny leaves close to the earth. In the grasslands, by late afternoon, there wasn’t very much light. Then I saw. Fedora was lapping at her neck, trying to lick herself, to reach her body, her back mottled with black and brown spots. And echoing her frail yelping, I remember having yelled, terrified and afraid. I was scared, like any man, of the blood that could spill from my own ears, as it was dripping from hers. Whose shot had blown that low, my brother’s or mine? Where are you, Zelino?—what have you done, Vicente? Fedora was moving her head from one side to the other, as if to dry her ears. Her howling had quieted and the sorrowful, thick, red juice made its way around her eyes. Her troubled back paws began to bend. It must have been her grief over not being looked after as she carried out her task of leading the way, right in the line of fire, sniffing out the fowl that had taken off in such low flight.
A few days before retiring, Jurandir—a worker in a textile company—travels to Recife, Brazil in order to settle a labor issue in court. He ends up committed to a psychiatric asylum. At his doctor’s request, he reports on his memories, dreams, and his daily life. In his dreams, he feels magnificent; in his dealings with others, he realizes the eccentricity of old habits and the need to change his notion of what constitutes a fulfilling relationship with people past and present.
Followed by the old nurse Ramires, Madame Góes, and memories of a former boss and childhood friend, Jurandir discovers the possibility of putting into practice the heroic talents experienced in his dreams. His recalling of amorous game playing with Minie, a young female coworker, echoes his youth.

His fixation on heroics leads to a role reversal precisely when the clinic gets caught up in the political activities of the late 1960s. Jurandir seeks another identity, free from an inauspicious past. In this reluctant hero’s new persona, the cloak and dagger destiny and the disasters in his love life are framed by a melancholy point of view in search of justice and better company. The Amateur Sleepwalker chronicles the adventures of a disenchanted, humble protagonist whose life oscillates between forceful demands in friendship and politics.
Chapter One: November

When the rain stops, sometimes I turn off the air-conditioner and stand there, looking out the open window. I spend over a half hour watching the goings on in front of the building. Down on the street, trucks head for the weigh station and, once in a while, a yellow harvester passes by, its tracks leaving long trails of mud behind the shovel held by mechanical arms. At the curve in the river, where it widens, and where there used to be two rows of sweet olive trees, now there’s scrap metal. I haven’t been out that way for a long time. I’m always fascinated by the overturned wagons, a dead locomotive, the kind with an open top, and the tractors, once so colorful, now falling apart and gradually covered with a layer of brittle, brown rust. From a distance, anyone seeing that pile of scrap metal might even mistake it for a crack in the earth, the place where the clay is darkest, or else for hay, or rubble, or even sugarcane bagasse. But in fact, it’s only retired machinery.

Since Big Green was built facing away from the river, you can’t see the bridge or the banks at Velha rock, which is a very pleasant place to have
lunch when I feel like eating outside. The enormous building isn’t pretty, like the clinic, with its thirteen arches on the façade, as if it had a long veranda. Nor is it as spacious as the cotton mill sheds with their sixty-foot high ceilings, ladders, and iron walkways around the drum carders, the steel bobbins feeding thousands of needles. But Big Green is where the company’s most important decisions were made.

It’s true it looks like a domino, balancing on one side, abandoned, larger on the bottom, with a strip running along the side made of hollow, diamond shaped bricks that show the stairwell and let the dust inside the building. From way on top four gutters stick out, and when there’s a lot of water, it accumulates and cascades. In rainy season there’s a particular smell, the rain drains down directly, hits the earth, digging puddles and sounding like brutish urine because the earth is soft and Big Green, far too tall. Since there are so few gutters for the wide rooftop, huge quantities of water run together and splash into them, spraying a thick shower into the air.

From a great distance, almost all the way downtown, you can still see the old name of the factory at the top of the building. On the way home, sometimes I stop and look back, pondering its decay, the paint peeling off the building and the marquis ridden with holes. I think about what Marco Moreno used to tell me, how he would criticize the building his own grandfather had constructed. That’s when I bend over to light a cigarette or untie my shoelace, only to tie it again, one foot resting on a low wall or anywhere else. When I remember what the textile mill once was, and what’s left of it now, I feel my chest cave in deeper. And that metal sign alone, painted in large letters covered in sun-parched moss, is enough to make that happen.

I don’t know where you all work, or used to work, but here the siren goes off at 1:45 p.m., calling the workers back from lunch. It’s for the workers in the cafeteria and also for the workers that go out to eat. And
there’s no way to avoid the reminder since you can hear the whistling from downtown. It also sounds at 6:00 p.m., the end of the workday.

Sho, sho, shoooo, it’s always two short whistles, then a long one.

But it’s true, I’m terrible at imitations.

What I mean to say is that during these breaks, I normally stay by myself on the fourth floor. It’s been a long time since I’ve gone out for lunch and, when I do, I like to go to Neco’s bar, because sometimes they serve rabbit there.

My coworkers wander back in, and one or another of them always looks at me, all cheerful, trying to joke around, telling me some funny story about what went on at lunch. They think I’m dying of boredom locked up here in the office, or else that I’m mad at someone. In fact, that’s not the case. I like to stay in the office organizing folders, writing letters, or taking care of official correspondence I may need to send later on that day, or the following day. Sometimes I make a private phone call or answer calls from anyone that might try during off hours. I also read part of the newspaper and listen to whatever radio station I feel like. Because of the arrangement I made, since I don’t take a lunch hour, I get to leave a little earlier. I take advantage that it’s still light out.

When I walk, I take forty-five minutes to get home from Big Green. On my bike, at a leisurely pace, it’s under twenty. Along the way I sometimes stop to smoke a cigarette, run an errand, or watch people in the plaza discussing politics and soccer, or playing dominos, which I myself don’t do since I don’t like it. So the days go by without much variation. But this week, on the afternoon I decided to go to the capital to deal with the case of the burned boy, I ended up going over to talk to a worker who was sitting with two others around a deck of cards, on a bench in the plaza.

Jurandir, are you really going or not? You’ve given up, he said.

Since I was walking, I couldn’t just go right by and ignore the
comment. It’s none of your business, I answered, looking at him. You’re sure not going instead of me. Or are you? That got no answer.

Another guy, who was dealing the cards, laughed so loud, making fun of the nosey guy and using a card to slice his throat, that I decided to have a seat. I’m not much on gambling, but they needed a fourth. I found out the talk at lunchtime had been about Minnie, who’d dumped half a bottle of ketchup onto a paper napkin, folding the edges to make a funnel, and swallowed the whole thing in one gulp. She got a case of beer out of it, since she’d done it on a dare. I ignored everyone acting like it was such a big deal, they just didn’t have enough to keep them busy. Nor was I about to start arguing with Minnie, who’d apparently let on I’d done the same thing for half a case or less, that I’d always been cheaper than she was.

When I found out Minnie referred to me as someone who’d get involved in a stupid competition like that, I thought the following. Although we’d spent the previous years together, at Big Green, walking from there back home, going out to eat sometimes, in fact, we knew very little about each other. Minnie herself, when she’d first gotten here, right after the cotton mill had been sold to the current group, told me I was a hero for staying on because, with the coming of the new owners, the work was bound to change a lot and no one knew exactly how. I remember one time I ended up telling her a few stories about the start of the company, about my adventures with Marco Moreno, his affair with a married girl, a decent girl. I told her, then immediately regretted it, since the truth is at the time Minnie and I weren’t that close at all.

Wearing shorts and a cropped top, her legs crossed, sometimes she looks at me strangely, while I’m sitting there talking, like the day when, for no reason at all, she dumped a glass of Coke on my lap.

We were in the living room and I was telling her about what had happened with Marco when he and I were young. I was telling her more or
less the same story I’d told her before.

The sky was clearing up, or I think it already had. We were silent, walking along the route from the road to the bridge. When the olive trees bloomed, we would set the bird trap along the banks of the river where it makes a curve around the big rock, the place Marco used to call Velha rock. When I started taking my own lunch to Big Green, a couple of times I ate sitting on that rock, watching the river wander along near the railroad switch, which isn’t used anymore since nowadays everything is transported by truck. With all the rain, the distance from one side of the river to the other used to measure eighty feet, but now it’s under forty. At that stretch of the river, the banks were steep and full of green cane with a lot of pickerelweed. The bridge, built before the cotton mill, had originally been designed with two lanes and a wood rail. Now the stone paving is underneath the asphalt and the guardrail is made of metal. Back then, we felt like building a ramp and jumping from one bank to the other in our go-carts which, of course, we never did.

Walking around there that day, we were staring at the yellowed, churned up river, watching the current drag tufts of weeds and sometimes a plank of wood, a paper bag or a twisted branch. Somewhat bored by all that, my friend stood up and went to the edge of the river. The road had no sidewalk, so there were a lot of puddles because the earth was soaked from all the rain. The puddles were like a mirror of the slowly swirling clouds, and they were actually easier to see in those mud puddles.

Without warning, Marco threw a rock at the birds on the other side of the river. Let’s ride the go-cart, Jurandir? You can drive today, he said, and headed toward the city hall promenade, with me following him.

At the time, I was surprised since we always used to argue over who got to drive. Now that I think about it, it seems to me Marco let me because he knew I was feeling down, and he thought it might cheer me up.

City Hall is about three blocks up from the bridge. Along the way we
must have run into people coming back from the Saturday market, which is even bigger now, but the truth is I don’t remember seeing anyone at all. I walked along, distracted, pulling the go-cart by a string I’d wrapped around the front axis so I wouldn’t have to carry it. As we approached the new promenade, I turned to the slope and pointed the cart toward Imaculada Conceição. The wall of the convent school was low and at that time of day the nuns were sweeping the patio. On the weekends, when the school was closed, the street was quiet. Marco, seeing me just standing there, waved to indicate I should take the driver’s seat, which I did.

Even now, when Minnie hears me talking about this, or other things from that time, she strikes an interested pose, taking sips from her cup of Coke and looking at me with an increasingly vague expression on her face. I give her more and more details, details I haven’t included before. So, I tell her stories and Minnie pays me back with ever-growing disbelief, trying to get me to keep talking.

The truth is, I told her, with a mere push, or not even that, I would be racing down the hill at a very high speed. But what happened was, that day my friend ran even faster in the push-off. I saw I wasn’t going to make the curve without a spinout and I yelled to warn him. Marco, it’s okay, let go now, I said. But the steel wheels, scraping the cement and rocks, made a loud noise, it was nearly impossible to hear anything. I don’t know if he heard me or not, because the push-off continued for a while longer. I yelled again and that time he must have noticed because I was already pulling the handles left and right, making the go-cart curve its way down. At the time, scared of how much my speed had picked up, I had given up the idea of going to the end of the promenade and had decided to abort our regular route. I made a sharp turn to the right to get onto the street and the cart turned sideways. I thought it was going to flip, but it didn’t. I put one foot on the promenade, trying to slow it down and, with my leg sticking out, stiff because of the speed, without realizing it, my body also stiffened. I clenched the handles and kept the soles of my sandals about ten inches
in front of the wheels. When I crossed the main street, jumping from the promenade to the dirt road, the dust came up and I thought I was in luck. The sand would slow me down and, before reaching the other side, I’d end up stopping. But since I was still going so fast, I crossed the street sideways at full speed and realized I was going to crash into the divider head-on. I must have closed my eyes. I remember I twisted my body off the go-cart and it turned over. I slid the rest of the way onto the ground and kept moving without the cart, just my body, all the way until I hit the sidewalk below. Then, with one leg out, my foot hit the edge of the new cobblestone promenade. The impact was huge, but it could have been worse. I crashed on my side and sensed the terrible taste of dirt in my mouth. I opened my eyes and saw my sandals on the ground, next to the go-cart, which had gone flying and crashed into the wall of a house. It was totaled. I say it could have been worse because, way behind me, my friend was in shock. He’d gone mute with fright. I think he was watching and taking in what he’d just seen. It was only when I moved and started to touch my leg that he called out how cool the ride had been. But as he approached and saw what had happened to me, he started talking differently. He said to stay calm, everything was going to be alright. Then my friend got up and cupped his hands to his mouth. He started screaming as loud as he possibly could to the passersby, for the love of God, someone please come quickly.

On the weekends I like to visit the small towns along the coast. Whenever I see one of those beautiful baby blue Simca Chambords on the highway or pulled over at the side of the road, with their purring V8 engines, fishtail hubcaps, white synthetic leather upholstery and mother-of-pearl steering wheel, a picture of my friend forms in my mind. I stare at the car, to make sure it’s the same model, and when I see someone behind the wheel who is fair skinned, posing with one hand on the wheel and the other out the window, I can’t help thinking, it can only be him. This time it’s really him,
Marco Moreno Prado, he just can’t stand it anymore and he’s come back. But as I approach, or hop off my bike, I see once again that it wasn’t.

The truth is, sometimes I’m overtaken by the desire to talk about memories of my friend to Minnie or things about my childhood to other people, and it’s an odd feeling, typical of conversations we have when we’re on a break and one of us, having had a few drinks, ends up saying things they shouldn’t. I started thinking about this again as I was taking notes for the meeting with the lawyers in Recife.

I spent the entire afternoon gathering documents for the case of the boy with the burn injuries, since it had dragged on too long and now it had to be settled in court. Following the advice from someone around here, his mother called me the other day, sobbing. I tried to calm the woman down, but she would not stop until I promised I could get a favorable verdict, downplaying the carelessness of her son who, for not knowing how to operate the new compressor, had gotten steam burns on his hands and face. Just today, I caught myself pondering the merits of the case. And also, thinking about his mother’s concern for her son’s future.

I remember having gone through a similar experience, when my son was born sickly and I asked Marco to be his godfather. I kept reliving that moment and the excuse my friend had given me, that it would be better for both of us if he declined. Then an even worse memory came back, more vividly, the two of us walking on the roads surrounding Big Green, avoiding the puddles, kicking stuff on the road while we talked about how our lives were going to change. Or I might be confusing that specific occasion when we talked about the baptism with another time because, in the weirdest moment of the conversation, I remember we were at a table in a bar or restaurant and, when Marco finally said, why mix friendship with family, the image that comes to mind is of a table covered with a colorful cloth and, sitting on top of it, a stack of clean paper napkins rolled up inside a glass or maybe a jam jar that I kept revolving between my hands as I waited for my friend’s answer. I’d more or less imagined what it would be. That it
was better to keep things separate.

When I finished gathering the paperwork on the burned boy, Minnie came by my office desk and looked at me for a while. Then she started that pestering of hers.

Jurandir, I didn’t mean to be rude to you. It was just talk, she said.

You said it though. What was it again? That I’d lost my courage.

I said you used to be nicer. You’d go out with us. That’s all.

Oh sure, Minnie. What’s the problem? Do you think I’m like your friends, getting a kick out of any old thing? You’re really something.

What do you mean Jurandir?

Sometimes you don’t care about anything. That’s so easy, I said. We then kept quiet.

Before long, she brought it up again. My offer still holds, take the car. Stop being so stubborn Jurandir, come on.

You really don’t listen, do you, girl? Sometimes you act like you’re deaf.

Take it. I’m telling you. You can take it and, while saying that, she got closer to me. She rested her hands on the table, leaned all the way over, almost into my files, and repeated herself, tapping her purse, rattling her keychain.

I’ve already told you, Minnie. I’d rather take the bus. I really like it better, I said. I wanted to put an end to the conversation. Since we’d raised our voices, a few people turned around to see what was going on. Then I gestured so she would notice that people were reacting. She didn’t say anything. I straightened the pile of folders and moved the calculator and telephone to one side. I kept looking at Minnie, planted there in front of me.
Jurandir, it was a joke. Please.

What joke? I’m the one who knows what people have told me. What I heard.

She stayed silent. Then she turned around as if to leave.

I’m going, see?

Go. You can go, I said.

And it was only then that Minnie finally left the office.
Leticia Wierzchowski (Porto Alegre, 1972) is a talented contemporary Brazilian author, with more than 20 books published in Brazil and several other countries, including Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Italy, and Serbia-Montenegro. Her fifth novel, *The House of Seven Women*, was adapted by TV Globo to become a TV miniseries, and was aired in more than 40 countries.
A Bridge to Terebin
Un Puente para Terebin
Uma Ponte para Terebin

LETTICIA WIERZCHOWSKI

Synopsis

In A Bridge to Terebin, Leticia turns into a novel the journey of Jan, her polish grandfather and one of the first Wierzchowskis to set foot in Brazil. Jan arrived at Rio Grande do Sul in 1936, three years before his country was invaded by Germany.
... 

(1938, un mes después que Alemania exigió que Polonia entregara el puerto de Gdansk.)

Jan entra en casa y se arroja en la butaca cerca de la ventana. Afuera, el cielo que pasó todo el día escaldándose en un azul inenarrable, ardente y casi cruel, recién ahora empeza a ganar una nueva luz, una finísima piel rojiza. El calor disminuyó y una brisa discreta hace bailar las ramas de los jacarandás.

casualidad no se acuerda el 1920? Su padre le narró la historia más de mil veces. Y el aún lo tiene muy claro en la memoria. Dos días enteros en una rama del árbol, y era invierno. Las llamaradas erguiéndose hasta el cielo, llegando de los dos lados de la aldea. Rojas. Ardientes. Y gritos también, después solamente el humo negro. Su madre, Hela y él, ocultos en el bosque, y hacía mucho frío en las ramas más altas de aquel árbol...

Para él da lo mismo. Que se junten, que deponganel presidente Getúlio Vargas, que se adueñen de los cuarteles. Pero no lo llamen. No escriban su nombre en las atas. No es un tonto... Su mujer está embarazada de un niño de siete meses. Y Jan lo sabe: un pequeño resballo y a él lo expulsan. Un polaco de más o de menos, ¿cuál sería la diferencia para ellos? No. Él tiene el cuidado necesario. Tiene sus proyectos para el futuro, para un largo futuro. Ellos se quejan del Brasil, pero no saben lo que es vivir en los talones de Hitler. ¿Y acaso los bolcheviques hicieron algo cuando el Führer invadió la Checoslovaquia?

Jan quita sus botas y mira a los pies cansados, que pasaron todo el día en la prisión de esas botas. Ah, añora la Polonia. Sus grises noviembres... Por un instante, él se da a la nostalgia. Casi nunca se lo permite. Sabe que eso no es posible, y siempre ha sido un hombre muy práctico. Muy decidido, decía de él su matka.

Siente el tacto blando de otra piel en sus pies y, un instante después, el agua tibia los envuelve hasta los tobillos. Jan abre sus ojos y la ve, vesu rostro, rotundo como una luna llena. El rostro de su Anna, y sus manos blandas que empiezan a masajearlo.

“¿Como estuvo hoy, Janku?”

Él le cuenta que como siempre. Que todo va bien, solamente el trabajo. Enquistar puertas y medir repisas y hacer entalles. Todo el día acepillando maderas.

“¿Y contigo?”, pregunta Jan.
“Yo cociné y costuré. Fue al almacén, y la gente hablaba de Hitler, da Checoslovaquía. Que Polonia también mordióla canilla checa.”

Ella decía las palabras sin darles mucha importancia. Habla así por él, y él lo sabe. Entonces le contesta:

“No escuches esas charlas, Anusia. No valen la pena.”

Y Anna pregunta:

“¿Pero es verdad?”

“Son cuestiones de frontera, Anna... Ellos estaban hablando de Teschen, una ciudad checa. Bien, en verdad, Teschen ya se llamó Cieszyn cuando fue territorio polaco. Ella fue dada a los checos en uno de estos tratados, después de la Primera Guerra.”

Ahora Anna frota el dorso de sus pies, y él siente que la sangre circula libre otra vez.

“Polonia fue tantas veces dividida, ni lo puedes creer, moja kochana... Las fronteras cambiando sin parar, dejando por detrás una estera de odios, de resentimientos. Las personas aquí ni lo sueñan, no conocen como es vivir así, un país dividido por más de un siglo.”

Él habla eso y se calla. Anna sigue lavando sus pies con todo cuidado. Cuando termina, los enjuga con una toallita.

Jan espera que ella lo termine todo. Es un ritual y no puede ser interrumpido. Cuando ella acaba, él toma sus manos entre las suyas.

“Kochana, querida... Dejemos eses temas para tras. No te preocupes con todo eso y no hables de eso por ahí. Este es un país bueno, hecho de buenas personas. Pero nosotros somos y seremos extranjeros, Anna. Y el régimen aquí nos es exactamente democrático...”

Anna concuerda con su marido. El calor de las manos de su marido, fuertes, los dedos gruesos, ablandece su cuerpo.

“Un único error y puede que se les ocurra echarnos del país”, dice Jan.
“Pero, no tú, de cierto... Tú eres brasileña, aunque no lo parezca mucho. Pero yo... Bueno, necesito andar muy listo.”

Anna reclina su cuerpo. El embarazo adelantado es un raro contrapeso al cual aún no se acostumbró de todo. Con un poco de esfuerzo, ella abraza su marido.

“Todo andará bien, Janku. Con nosotros, con Polonia. Con tu familia.”

“Dziekuje. Gracias, Anna.”

“Ahora, la cena... ¿Qué te parece, Janku?”, dice Anna, sonriendo.

...(La vida es rara. Mi abuelo falleció hace casi treinta años. Estoy buscando una copia de la certificación de su muerte, la cual necesito para recibir desde Londres un documento, y hoy llamé en dos notarías hasta que hallé un registro en su nombre. Un hombre y una fecha. Al teléfono, yo deletréé su apellido despacito.

J-a-n. Eso es. W-i-e-r-z-c-h-o-w-s-k-i.

Dije la fecha de su muerte.

La persona del otro lado de la línea me informó gentilmente que mediante una taja de u$12,00 puedo yo sacar una copia del documento que necesito. Apunto la dirección de la notaría, 3a. zona de Porto Alegre, agradezco y cuelgo el teléfono.

Tan sencillo... La vida reducida a papeles. Uno para el nacimiento. Otro para la boda. Un atestado para cada hijo que vino al mundo. Y después un papelito para la muerte. Aunque aquí estoy yo deambulando por la vida del abuelo Jan como quién anda por una casa vacía. Estoy sí cercada de papeles y de libros. Huellas de aquel tiempo. Yo camino de puntillas por esa casa invisible. Cosechando pistas por los imaginarios muebles, entre
sillas cubiertas por sábanas de polvo y pasado - viejos fantasmas, tan viejos cuanto él, Jan.

No dejaremos mucho más que eso. Huellas. Papeles amarillentos que serán consumidos por el tiempo y el descuido. Fotografías que ya han perdido su brillo. Extinguido el sentimiento, ¿lo que queda? Así que camino por la vida de Jan y Anna con mucho cuidado. Y me pongo a imaginarlos en aquellos años tan difíciles...

Pienso en los dos en su sala, su salita tan quieta. Los dos esperando.

Ellos comerían en silencio, mientras la sopa reposa en su terrina de porcelana. Y después de la cena, después de la mesa arreglada y las vasijas limpias, Anna entonces rezaría. Por su hijo. Por Janku. Por la paz en la Europa. Rezaría con una voz bajita, hojeadando su pequeño libro de oraciones en polaco, en su butaca bajo la luz de la lámpara... Jan estaría quieto. Acechando. Todo, todo se hacía aún en aquel momento, no solamente en el vientre de mi abuela, pero en el mundo.)
Eran las siete horas de la mañana del día 13 de enero del año de 1939, cuando en la Santa Casa de Misericordia nació João Wierczowski Neto, primero hijo de Anna y Jan. Un varoncito canijo, blanquito y de pocos llantos. Ganaba su nombre como una tradición familiar que venía desde lejos, de distantes provincias polacas - todavía era el primer Jan brasileño. Era João.

Yo no sé si mi abuela sufrió mucho al parir su retoño, si se quedó muchos días con los dolores y contracciones, se lloró, se gritó, o solamente guardó su silencio resignado, cumpliendo el hado de dar a luz con la paciencia suya de toda la vida. El doctor que ha traído el niño al mundo también es un misterio para mí.

Nació solamente, ese João. Con un destino y una fortuna. Con unos ojos mansos, herencia materna. Con el alma frágil. Un varón bonito y de rasgos bien hechos, que tuvo los brazos maternos como su cuña elemental. Que hizo Juan llorar de felicidad por la vez primera en su vida.

En uno de sus raros arrebatos de alegría, mi abuelo compró regalos para su mujer y su hijo. Para Anna, le regaló un gran broche de marcasite en formato oval que ella habría de usar en todos los compromisos sociales de su vida (el cual yo lo tengo conmigo entre mis alhajas). Ha traído ropas para el pequeño, y también un regalito para Ludmilla, pues su cuñada viniera del campo para ayudarlos con los quehaceres de la nueva vida.
Después de estar con su mujer e hijo, después de contar sus deditos y revolver su pequeño cuerpo en busca de un defecto que no existía, Jan fue echado de la habitación compartida con otras dos mujeres, para que Anna reposase de los trabajos todos de traer su hijo al mundo. Él recibió los saludos de una enfermera apresurada, y se fue por la calle silenciosa, sin saber mucho bien donde ir... Por la vez primera, se sentía parte de algo entero y vivo, una cosa hecha con sus propias manos y que no levaba madera o ladrillos. Ya pasaba de las nueve de la noche, y andando por las calles desiertas, mi abuelo de golpe se descubrió un hombre de gran fortuna. Era joven, fuerte, ambicioso lo suficiente para crecer en la vida y dar al hijo todas las cosas que pudiera necesitar; además, había Anna, y Anna era su tesoro.

Miró el cielo lleno de estrellas, rezando que su hijo heredase la compleción materna, o aprendiese con ella a ver la vida. Él, Jan, era un hombre rudo, tenía muchas ganas, ganas casi incontrolables. Jamás aprendería con Anna... En el medio de la acera, el cuello de la camisa arrugado, recordó su mujer en la cama del sanatorio, recordó el brillo en sus ojos, y comprendió como el destino había sido bueno con él. A pesar de tantas cosas. Apesar de la propia Feliska. Anna era la tierra en la cual crecería su semilla. Anna era la parte del Brasil que estuviera esperando por él.

Mientras mi abuela vivía sus primeros días de madre, abigarrándose a aquel niño, aprendiendo sus suspiros y su hambre, acostándose con él en su cama en las primeras horas de las sofocantes tardes del verano porto-alegrense, lejos de allí, allá de las fronteras brasileñas, allá del océano, el III Reich abriría su gran boca otra vez. Y la presa ahora era la Polonia.

Aún en enero de 1939, von Ribbentrop fue a Varsovia para exigir la soberanía alemana en el puerto de Danzig. La visita del canciller alemán era un avance en las presiones diplomáticas contra Polonia. El gobierno polaco rechazó enérgicamente la proposición de Ribbentrop, pues el puerto de Danzig era la salida polaca al mar. Pero era del conocimiento de todos que la ambición alemana no sería tan fácilmente ablandada y que, después
de Checolosvaquia, era la autonomía polaca que corría serios riesgos.

Mientras el resto de la Europa esperaba, en la primera quincena de marzo los alemanes entraran en Praga y asumieron el control absoluto de la Checoslovaquia. Las promesas hechas en Munique al Primer Ministro inglés se deshacían, y Checoslovaquia fue ocupada sin ninguna resistencia. El 31 de marzo, sin embargo, surgió una esperanza: el parlamento inglés dio garantías a Polonia, ofreciendo sus ejércitos en caso de una supuesta invasión alemana. En los días que se siguieran, Francia hizo lo mismo. Los ejércitos alemanes, debido a la ocupación de la Bohemia y la independencia eslovaca, estaban ahora en la frontera polaca.

En su casa, mientras Anna cuidaba su hijito, mi abuelo vivía angustiosas horas tentando descifrar los dichos de los locutores de la radio que hablaban de las terribles noticias europeas.
La vieja en la fotografía:

Cuando los malditos hitlerowcy llegaron, todo cambió. Nuestros hombres pelearon. Pelearon con sus almas, porque la gente polaca siempre fue muy temperamental y ya sofrío mucho, y fue ese sufrimiento todo, dejado de padre para hijo, hizo con que este pueblo amara tanto su país. *Polonia jamás morirá mientras estuviéramos vivos, lo que nos fue robado, con nuestras espadas retomaremos*. Todo polaco piensa así. Nosotros éramos obligados a eso por las circunstancias. Así que luchamos mucho por Polonia. Con armas. Con las manos. En el silencio de la noche. Horneando el pan prohibido. Dando de comer a los rebeldes. Todo eso sucedió después que el ejército perdió la batalla para los hitlerowcy que tenían cañones y fusiles y sus tanques, y ellos, los soldados polacos, se escaparon, atravesaron la frontera, y dicen que hacia Francia - aquellos que lograran sobrevivir y todavía tenían las condiciones necesarias, esos se marcharon hacia Francia. Un gobierno en el exilio. Cosas así. Y seguir luchando desde las afueras para derrumbar los hitlerowcy aquí en Polonia.

Pero nosotros nos quedamos. No fue la guerra con los disparos y tanques, aunque fue peor. Por que mataban a todos. Los chicos mismo, los mataban así. Todos los días mataban todo el tipo de personas, y era muy triste lo que hacían con las familias, en las aldeas, en las ciudades.
Nos convertimos en algo así como bichos. Bichos de los hitlerowcy. Y nos mataban por gusto. Bastaba mirar en sus ojos y era tan claro, mój Boze, el placer en disparar contra el hombre que atravesaba la calle, en dejar colgado por una semana el cadáver de una dueña de casa que ocultó un puñado de harina para darla a sus hijos hambrientos, ellos dejaban eses cadáveres colgados en la plaza. Y nosotros teníamos que andar por allá y ver la muerta, ver todos los muertos, todos los días. Yo iba siempre con Danusie, mi nietita, por la mano... Ella era tan pequeña, y siempre había uno u otro colgado en la plaza, con sol o con lluvia. Y yo le decía, “No lo mires, Danusie”, y tapaba sus ojitos. Pero, en algunas noches, Danusie despertaba llorando y gritando por los difuntos. Creo que incluso podría ser cosa del hambre, puesto que todos sabemos que la carencia sistemática de comida trae esas pesadillas. Pobre Danusie, hablaba de los muertos colgaditos en la cuerda como ropas en un tendedero.

Después los hitlerowcy nos dieron unos pases. Para andar por las carreteras, de una ciudad a otra, los pases eran necesarios. Aquellos que trabajaban en el campo los ganaban con alguna facilidad, puesto que los alemanes querían a nosotros para eso, para el plantío. Eso querían: convertir la nación polaca en una gran huerta para su propio uso. Entonces plantábamos nuestra comida, y después ellos confiscaban casi todo, dejando solamente lo necesario para que cada familia no se muriera de hambre. Algunos de nosotros empalmaban aquí y allí alguna cosa y escondían bajo la tablas de la cocina o algo así. En el corral, en huecos. El precio para eso era la horca. Pero algunos robaban así mismo.

Yo nunca. Yo tenía miedo. Horneaba el pan llorando de rabia, después lo repartía... Nunca era suficiente para todos, y era muy triste ver los hijos alrededor de la mesa, masticando despacio, despacio para engañar el hambre. Ver mi nieta tan flaquita, las piernas finitas, sus pulsos de muñeca y las pesadillas nocturnas... Ver Hela desmembrándose. Pero yo tenía siempre aquella horca en mis pensamientos. Ellos, los szwaby, ya habían destruido algo de mí, y yo no lo sabía entonces. Yo prohibía, incluso, que los
chicos hurtasen, que ocultasen los granos de la cosecha, que ayudasen los clandestinos, yo lo hacía con vergüenza, pero lo hacía. A mí no me tuvieron en cuenta, sobretodo Stanislaw. Pero yo lo sabía, yo miraba en los ojos de Stach y lo sabía... Él siempre decía cosas como “yo no moriré como un pato, matka”. Mi pobrecito, mi querido Stach.

Una lista de los rehenes se quedaba siempre en la plaza. En Terebin sucedió lo mismo. Una lista con más o menos cuarenta nombres. Todo tipo de gente, viejos, hombres, mujeres y niños. Era la lista de los que serían ejecutados en venganza de un ato llevado a cabo por la resistencia. Porque la gente de la resistencia estaba por todo. En las matas, en los doblados, trabajando en las casas ocupadas por los hitlerowcy, arreglándoles sus camas. Y ellos hacían cosas, eran muy activos, y mataban alemanes, y boicoteaban, y explotaban furgones y robaban comida. Ellos hacían lo que podían, y todos tenían orgullo de ellos, un orgullo secreto. Pero yo no. Yo tenía miedo demás.

Miedo de que a mí me pidieran ayuda, una ayuda que yo no les podía alcanzar, miedo que mis hijos se envolvieran con ellos. Mis hijos tenían coraje. Ellos descendían de la acera para que los hitlerowcy pasasen, pero lo hacían por la ley: todo polaco debería dejar la acera libre para los szwaby, y mis hijos lo hacían llorando.

Mis hijos lloraban de vergüenza todos los días. E incluso mi marido. Pero él lloraba escondido, escondido de los alemanes y de mí. Mi marido ya había vivido tanta cosa, luchado en dos guerras, pero terminó allí cerrado en una habitación, llorando escondido.

Mój Boze, no quiero recordar... Después ellos empezaron a llevarconsigo unas muchachas. Las rubias, las más hermosas. Las detenían en la acera, cuando iban al trabajo o cuando volvían de la misa, después las metían en camiones y mandaban a Alemania. Allá, los alemanes las embarazaban, ellas tenían esos hijos, después adiós. Volvían a sus fábricas, las pobrecitas... Eso era para reponer los hombres que habían muerto en
las batallas, más o menos eso... Para que la población volviera a crecer otra vez. Eso se escuchaba todo el día. Era muy triste... Yo pasé a encerrar Hela en casa. Iba yo para la calle en busca de las cosas que necesitábamos, o mandaba mi pequeño Mietek, pues entonces él acataba mis órdenes, todavía no estaba contaminado por el odio que después lo contaminó totalmente. Pero ni sé porque empecé a hablar de eso. Se lloro, el papel se quedará mojado. Llanto de fotografía también gotea. También borra. También duele.

Cuando ella encontró ese retrato, cuando lo llevó, me quedé desconfiada. Yo no quería hablar mucho, recordar eso, no quería... Mój Boze, sólo querría quedarme bien quieta, llana, en esta rara dimensión, en esa lámina de papel picoteado en el reborde. Cerrada para todo el siempre en un carrón, solamente comida para las polillas. Yo solo quería... Pero entonces esa historia empezó a nacer. E con ella todo el pasado. Enterito. Yo lo veo aquí, el pasado, con este ojo que me mira. El ojo de mi biznieta. Todos los días. Intentando adivinar un poquito de lo que fue. De lo que viví. Pensé en decirle que no valía... No valía la pena revolver este pan clandestino. Moler estos granos. Pero ella lo quiso, ella siempre lo quiso.
Livia Garcia-Roza is a psychoanalyst and writer of novels, short stories, and books for children and young people. With more than 15 books published, Livia’s prose always immerses itself in human emotions, with extreme tenderness and depth.

“What I love the most about fiction is to be able to look in another direction, to have an alternative, a respite, a break in the routine”, says Livia Garcia-Roza.
A Thousand Loves
Milamor

LIVIA GARCIA-ROZA

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Translated by Rebecca Lippman

Synopsis

Maria is almost 60 years old and, since the death of her husband, lives with her daughter, who treats her like an old lady incapable of taking care of herself. Hoping to regain joy in her life and determined to create new memories, she nurtures a platonic passion for a man she barely knows.
Chapter One

In spite of all the diets, the constant effort to go to water aerobics and the routine of long daily strolls, my body has failed me. There’s nothing to be done about it. My body has gone, the way that springtime comes to an end. Now I only find it in photographs. My only consolation is that young woman. That young woman is me. Was me, rather. But my soul remains untouchable. A cultivated orchid, lush and beautiful. I tend to her carefully, keeping her in the most absolute verdure...

“Talking to yourself, Mom?”

“For a few years now.”

I live with Maria Inês, my daughter. I didn’t have a choice. Taking advantage of the confusion after Harold’s sudden death, Maria Inês took me in. Her house sits on the top of a hill in the last building on a cobblestoned street, difficult to reach. Harold, if he were alive, would call it a goat’s path. I never thought I would spend my last days stuck up on this kind of hill. Maria Inês says she chose the area because from here one can enjoy the view of Christ, the Redeemer – from behind, which is not something I think bodes very well. But even in that position, there he is, beautifying
the view. I’m actually very grateful towards Maria Inês for having taken me in during such a difficult time. Rarely are one’s children capable of such generous gestures.

We live well, my daughter and I. It’s a nice apartment, spacious, clear and empty because she doesn’t like furniture. She needs to move around – the very few moments that she is in the house – with nothing around her, in emptiness. Actually, the fern leaves and I live way up here together. With a daily exchange of ideas. And we have two visitors, Maria Inês and the cleaning lady. Yes, because my daughter works all day and when she finishes she spends the night with her friends. Conversation with me is rare. When I start to talk – if it’s not to complain about some kind of pain – she loses interest immediately. She’s always in a rush. She even eats breakfast on her feet, next to the front door. What matters, I suppose, are the friends I have gathered over the course of my life. But I was talking about Harold’s sudden denouement.

We lived together for several years, Harold and I, but with the passage of time, rather, with our passage through time – which turns everything to dust – our relationship thinned. Sometimes it even surprised me to see, accidentally, his sex. It was just one extra in our relationship because we had become friends, dear and tender friends. Harold, other than being an excellent listener (a rarity in today’s world), was a great companion and an incredibly just man. But I found a great love. One day a radiant sun rose over the line of the horizon and emitted its flashing rays. But let us return to Harold.

It was a hot summer afternoon. We were talking in the living room with the air-conditioning turned on, our legs stretched out over the pouffes, when he let out a sneeze. Harold sneezed quite often. It was perhaps his most common form of bodily expression. It always happened the same way. He usually let out a series of sneezes. That’s all really. It wasn’t too exaggerated. He was fighting off a small cold, even though he had gotten the flu shot. My God, how they tricked us! Before getting up to make
coffee and give Harold a moment to finish his sneezing session, I asked if he wanted me to turn off the air-conditioning. Harold shook his head. When I returned he was still sneezing, coughing dryly after each sneeze and losing air, one instant after another. Harold began to breathe with his stomach, if that’s possible. That was the sequence of it all. Then Maria Inês, on her way out as usual, suddenly entered the room. When she saw him in this state she ran for the phone book. She called our doctor and explained what was happening. She hung up quickly and said, “let’s go Mom, I’ll take you both to the hospital.”

Hospital?... I didn’t know what to say. I tried to change my clothes, but she said there wasn’t time. We left in a rush.

“Calm down Mom,” she kept repeating to me in the car. I was completely terrified, as I usually am in these kinds of situations. Nothing in my life is more present than fear. Ever since I was a child, I have lived under its protection. But before touching on that subject, let’s talk a little bit about Maria Inês.

Maria Inês lives to work. Nothing is more interesting to her than her career. She became herself through her profession. It was what she wanted the most, to become a competent professional, and she made it. Maria Inês was a terrible student as a child. Even so, when she decided to study she didn’t hold anything back. She graduated with a B.A. in Communications and went on to get a Masters and a PhD. Now she works as a producer for a large firm. I, on the other hand, gave up everything to get married. But that’s another story. I’ll speak more about my childhood a little bit later. What’s important is that Maria Inês did not veer from the path that she drew for herself. She is a qualified professional with a high salary. At least that’s what they say, but I haven’t seen a penny since I moved here. She tells me not to worry, that anything I might need, all I have to do is to tell her and she will figure it out. But I don’t live as well as I did when I had my money in my hands. Even the pension that Harold left me, Maria Inês makes a point of collecting. She says that nowadays nobody goes to
the bank, only old people leave the house to pay the bills. Despite that, the lines have grown and she sends the kid at her office to pick up my pension. She doesn’t want me to get tired. She just wants me to stay at home and take care of everything related to the house. I, who never wanted to be confined to a strict routine, have life become rather uninteresting. Such a longing for how it was before…even those days when Harold wouldn’t say a word to me because he’d forgotten himself. He was like that, an old man. A dreamer without a destiny.

Every day passed exactly the same, calm and identical. My eyes wandered through the house with profound gloom, as if the silence were carrying me about. My life was stretched out over an armchair. The only good thing about it was the time available to read. I read one novel after another. As for the rest of my time, life was an immense monotony, an unnamable boredom. If only it weren’t for this recent surprise. A flash between dawn and twilight. A beacon of light amidst the fog. But let’s get to the scene of it. We were at a family party – Maria Inês was recently separated; in a moment I’ll tell the sad story of the husband that she lost – when an older man arrived with a couple. That’s all it was really. The scene was quite simple. A couple joined a party along with a man. Nothing more. Even so, just a glimpse of this man was enough to invade my dreamland. What a fine looking man! I wouldn’t know how to explain what happened next. I’m embarrassed just to be saying these things, but something happened. A light. A lantern. A beam that did not cease to unfurl its scintillating rays. I began to have tumultuous dreams about this man who I had only seen once. Barely just one time. Those hands of his…sinewy arms and a voice that roared from afar, as if we were in the middle of a desert. We weren’t introduced, but I knew his name. A recent widower, that information I also knew. Indeed, I understand that kind of abandonment, that sadness, that misfortune. We could have spoken together for hours. Through a discreet inquiry, I managed to get his phone number. What was happening to me?

I don’t know if it would be better to start talking about the details
of Maria Inês’ disaster of a marriage or tolet loose the hopes of my own new possibilities. Let’s discuss the new. The truth is that this man hardly saw me. Rather, he seemed distant, most likely surrounded by the haze of the past, hearing voices, remembering scenes, which is quite common. I performed various ocular exercises towards him in vain. But I was happy to feel completely free of the weight hovering over me. I remember with clarity how crushing that experience was. Until that point only one man had managed to confuse me that much. And it wasn’t Harold, who had given me a peaceful relationship devoid of any arguments. Harold didn’t bother me. On the contrary, he was a powerfully relaxing man. It’s good to live that way too. While the two of us were married I had friends that reached a certain abyss, desperate, while I lived in a small haven. In the end, though, we waded through stagnant waters. We shared our pains, Harold and I, night and day. He complained about his thumbs (he felt a lot of pain in those fingers…), he said he couldn’t do anything with them. And I, well, my body is a mess.

“What are you doing in there?”

“I’m in my room, Maria Inês.”

“Doing what?”

“Thinking.”

“About what?”

“That I could have been happier.”

When I respond that way she gets quiet. It’s better then.

Before going to bed, because I wasn’t going to fall asleep anyway, I heard the phone ring. I thought it was for Maria Inês, because almost all of the phone calls are, but it was Estela, my 80-year-old godmother. She suffers too, but from rage. She turns around and fights with people. Luckily I’ve been spared from this. Estela likes to play games and she lives for Bingo. One day she caused such a fuss at one of these Bingo clubs that she
had to be subdued by security. So she told me over the phone anyhow. But today she was calling because she had come to the conclusion that global warming was a fact. And she had done very little about it. However she had witnessed the phenomenon in her own bedroom and within her very body. From one night to the next, before going to bed, a hot air suddenly came streaming out of her nostrils. She was warning me about this problem, had I ever felt anything like that?

Harold used to say that every one of us has a trigger for going insane, and once it’s been set off, it fires. And there’s nothing that can stop the person. For his late mother it was when she heard the name Odette, that’s the story he would tell. Harold was very observant and always made curious remarks. I liked that about him.

The next day I saw Maria Inês. I told her what my godmother had said and she quickly said that she didn’t have the patience for that dragon woman’s syndrome. And she slammed the door. She didn’t even laugh. Maria Inês doesn’t find humor in anything!

I almost forgot to say that I have another child. My dearest Victor, terribly married. Victor was an only child for a few years until Maria Inês came along. But in some way it’s as if I had never had him, because I don’t see him. My daughter-in-law gets jealous of Maria Inês’ friends. She thinks our house is a brothel! I don’t know if I should be saying these kinds of things. At the end of the day, these are the things one says about family. Well, the fact is that she forbids my son from coming here and that he, for his part, won’t compromise his wife’s wishes (Maria Inês thinks he’s afraid of her!), at least he doesn’t seem to. Thelma has her qualms with everyone, even the maids. One day she even got into it with our housekeeper, a devoutly religious woman with a fiancé as big as a barndoor! But after marrying Thelma, Victor began to disregard any and all women. As if they didn’t exist. Because of all this I only see my grandchildren on holidays. How I wanted Maria Inês to have a child…to be able to love a new child would have been my salvation. A peaceful return to the infantile.
The thoughts that would take me in the other direction, that of kindness, tenderness and purity. A return to the docility of affection. But Maria Inês didn’t want to hear anything about children. Only when she was reaching forty.

“Forty, Maria Inês?”

“If that’s the case,” she says. I’ve lost all hope.

Victor, like Maria Inês, is also enjoying life, and I don’t think little of him either. Sometimes Maria Inês misunderstands him over the phone. She says that things are hard on her, that I’m his mother too, etc. After some discussion (rare between the two of them) she hangs up saying that she can’t count on him. It’s all because of that vicious woman.

“Vicious woman, Maria Inês?”

“Today I’m having dinner with people from work,” she said, turned her back to me and left.

As if she would ever eat at home. She eats lunch at work and has dinner out on the street. And she never responds to me. Every day the same thing.

The sound of the car driving into the garage. I would hope that God accompanies her and brings her home safe and sound. What would I have left without my daughter? Would I still have the chance at a new relationship? With Alencar? There, I’ve said his name.

I thought I would fall right to sleep, but I stayed up ruminating – Harold liked to use that word – on how I might get in touch with this great man. If Maria Inês were to find out what’s been going on with me she would say I’ve become senile. She always performs little tests with me to make sure that I’m still rational. Carefully observing any neurological slip-ups. Luckily I’ve been able to disappoint her. The other day I got frightened though because, before she left, Maria Inês struck up a conversation with me. She told me about the mother of a friend of hers. A notable woman,
Greek, according to her. Where on earth had she been hiding? We were having breakfast and Maria Inês, already standing by the door as usual, began singing the praises of this woman.

“What a majestic woman,” she said, “a Queen!” I think Maria Inês is influenced by the films she watches. “She knows when to talk, when to stay silent and everything that she does she does so majestically!”

“What is this woman’s name, Maria Inês?”

“Matacata.”

“She’s not Japanese?”

“Have a good day Mom.”

And just like that my highly successful daughter left.

Alencar. What on earth is happening to me? I’m very worried. Does this have anything to do with the final farewell of my hormones? Or has all this spare time given way to the awakening of a new enchantment?

Later, after the housekeeper had left and while Maria Inês was probably still at work, I was in my room with the door locked practicing the phone call.

“You don’t know me but we were together…”

“Who are you talking to?”

That was MariaInês’ voice. Was she already home?

“Well there’s no peace around here, huh?” I said and opened the door. I found Maria Inês standing there staring at me with her hand on her waist.

“What’s going on with you?” she asked.

“With me? Nothing. Why? Is there something going on with you?” I asked. I learned this technique with Harold, who always managed to change the tables on me during conversation.
“I don’t know, I think you’re acting very strange.”

“It’s my age, Maria Inês, it changes people.”

I urgently needed to tell someone about what was happening to me. I was afraid that I would confide in Maria Inês and end up telling her everything. That would be a disaster. She has a confused way of listening to me, especially when it comes to what she says about me. I just know that after that explosive moment my memories took flight. I wander through paradise now. That stubborn previous past upon which I had fed myself regularly – my daily bread – and to which I would run insistently, went up in smoke. I even forgot about Paulo – even him!
Luis Fernando Veríssimo (Porto Alegre, 1936) has a vast literary work that includes books for children and young people, comics, essays, and novels, published in Brazil and worldwide. Some of his books were adapted to the movies, TV, and the theatre. He writes weekly for several newspapers, such as O Globo, O Estado de São Paulo, and Zero Hora.
Still healing from the hangover from the weekend on a Tuesday morning, the employee of a small publisher receives a white envelope with the first few pages of a confessional book written by some Ariadne, who promises to tell her story with a secret lover, and then commit suicide. Luis Fernando Verissimo creates, in this novel, a hybrid allegory of mythology, humor, and mystery. On each line, like a thread sewing comedy to day-to-day drama, the author weaves the web from which his characters may, perhaps, not
escape — an allegorical universe, diabolically funny and polished, that captures the reader till the end of this enigma.
I’m a literature graduate and seek oblivion in drink. But I only drink at weekends. From Monday to Friday, I work for a publishing company, where one of my tasks is to vet the unsolicited manuscripts that arrive by every post; they come in through the windows, drop from the ceiling, push up through the floorboards, or are dumped on my desk by Marcito, the owner of the publishing house, with the words: ‘See if this one’s any good.’ This festering deluge of authors wanting to be published began after a little book of ours, entitled Astrology and Love – A Sidereal Guide for Lovers, proved such a success that it allowed Marcito to buy two new motorbikes for his collection. All those would-be writers suddenly became aware of our existence, and the torrent of manuscripts hasn’t stopped since. It falls to me to read them and decide their future. On Mondays, I always have a hangover, and any typescripts that arrive then go straight from my trembling hands into the bin. And on Mondays, my rejection letters are particularly ferocious. I not only advise the author never to send us anything else, I also suggest that he or she never writes another line, another word, not even a receipt. If War and Peace were to arrive on my desk on a Monday, I would tell its author to take up gardening. Cervantes? Give it up, man. Flaubert? Proust? Don’t make me laugh. Graham Greene? Try a career in pharmacy. Not even Le Carré would escape. I once advised a woman called Corina to concentrate on her housework and spare the
world her demented belief that she was a poet. One day, she barged into my office, brandishing the rejected book, which had ended up being published by someone else, and hurled it at my head. Whenever anyone asks me where I got the small scar over my left eye, I say:

‘Poetry.’

Corina has since published several books of poetry and *pensées* with great success. She makes a point of sending me invitations to her various launches and signing sessions. I understand her latest publication is a collection of her complete poetry and prose, four hundred pages of the stuff. In hardback. I live in dread that one day she’ll turn up at the office and throw that great brick at my head too.

A more immediate threat, at the time, came from Fulvio Edmar, the author of *Astrology and Love*, who had never received any royalties for his work. He had paid for the first edition himself and felt that he should receive full royalties for all the editions printed after the book took off. Marcito did not agree, and I was the one who had to respond to Fulvio Edmar’s ever more outraged demands. For years, we exchanged insults by letter, although we never met. He once described to me in great detail how, if ever we did meet, he would put my testicles where my tonsils are. I, in turn, warned him always to carry a knuckle-duster in his pocket.

However, even my most violent rejection letters, my Monday-morning diatribes, end with a charming PS. On Marcito’s instructions. If, however, you would care to pay for the publication of your own book, the publisher will be delighted to review this evaluation etc. etc. I’ve known Marcito since we were at school together. Two spotty fifteen-year-olds. Knowing that I was the best in class at writing essays, he invited me to pen some dirty stories, which he then stapled together to make a book entitled *The Wanker*, which he rented out to anyone who wanted to take it home with them, on condition that they return the book the following day - unstained. After we left school, we didn’t see each other for years,
until, that is, I sought him out on hearing that he had started his own publishing house. I had written a novel, for which I needed a publisher. And, no, it wasn’t a dirty book. We had a good laugh about *The Wanker*, but Marcito said that, unless I paid for the publication costs myself, there was no way he would publish a spy story about a fictitious Brazilian nuclear programme sabotaged by the Americans. The publishing house was only just getting started. His partner in the company was an uncle of his, who owned a fertiliser factory, and whose sole interest in the enterprise was the publication of a monthly almanac to be distributed among his customers in the interior of Rio Grande do Sul. Marcito, however, made me an offer. He had plans to start a real publishing house and needed someone to help him. If I went to work for him, he would, eventually, publish my novel. He couldn’t promise me a large salary, but… At that point, I recalled that he had never once shared the rental money from *The Wanker* with me. He was doubtless going to exploit me again. But I was seduced by the idea of working for a publisher. I was, after all, a literature graduate and, at the time, working in a shop selling videos. I was thirty years old and had recently married Julinha. João (Julinha wouldn’t allow me to call him Le Carré) was about to be born. So I agreed. That was twelve years ago. My first task was to copy out an encyclopaedia article about chameleons for inclusion in the almanac. A prophetic choice: the chameleon is a creature that adapts to any situation and merges into the background. That is precisely what I’ve been doing ever since. I read manuscripts. I write letters. I come up with most of the copy for an almanac intended to boost the sales of fertilisers. I feel sorry for myself and I drink. And, very slowly, I’m merging into the background.

The publishing house grew in size. I discovered that Marcito wasn’t simply the cretinous rich kid I had always imagined him to be. He had a taste - which I would never have suspected in a collector of motorbikes - for Simenon. Since the success of *Astrology and Love*, we’ve published more books, mostly paid for by the authors themselves. If we’re lucky or if the author has a large family, some of these books even sell quite
well. Occasionally, I recommend that we publish one of the unsolicited manuscripts that arrive on my desk, especially if it arrives on a Friday, when I am full of good will towards humanity and its literary pretensions because I know that I will end the day at a table in the Bar do Espanhol, where my weekly booze-up begins, my three days of consciousness numbed by the cachaca and beer with which I cut myself free from myself and mi puta vida - my wretched life. My most frequent companion at that table in the Bar do Espanhol is Joel Dubin, who comes into the office twice a week, on Wednesdays and Fridays, to edit the text of the almanac or check the proofs of any forthcoming books. They say that, despite his short stature, his blue eyes thrill the girls at the college where he teaches Portuguese. He swears blind that he has never had it off with any of his students, although he does promise wild nights of love to those who manage to pass the university entrance exam. I know little about Dubin’s real sex life, except that it must be better than mine. Even the chairs in the Bar do Espanhol have a better sex life than I do. Dubin always used to fall in love with one such girl when she asked the waiter if they had any sparkling wine without the bubbles. He decided there and then that she wasn’t safe out in the world on her own and they very nearly got married. He wrote poems, bad poems. He introduced himself as ‘Joel Dubin, minor poet’. He used to recite one of these poems to any potential girlfriend, something about a hypotenuse in search of a triangle. He called this his ‘geometrical chat-up line’. Any girls who understood the poem or smiled just to please him would immediately be rejected, because he loathed intellectuals. He preferred girls who bawled: ‘What?!’

Dubin and I had long arguments, at the office and at our table in the bar, about literature and grammar, and we disagreed radically about the placement of commas. Dubin is a legalist and says that there are rules regarding the use of commas and that these should be respected. I am a relativist: I think that commas are like hundreds and thousands, to be
distributed judiciously wherever they are needed and without spoiling one’s enjoyment of the cake. It’s not uncommon for me to re-revise Dubin’s revision of a text and either cut out any commas he has added or add a few of my own in defiance of the rules, wherever I think fit. In the bar, our conversations used to begin with the comma and then branch out to take in the human condition and the Universe. These debates would become increasingly vitriolic and strident the more we drank, until the Spaniard who owned the bar – hence the name – would come over and ask us, please, to keep the noise down. We would heap ever more rancorous insults on every writer in the city. I still don’t know if Dubin accompanied me into the very depths of my weekly plunges into unconsciousness. I don’t even know how I got home on Friday nights. Perhaps Dubin, having drunk rather less, actually carried me. I’ve never asked. On Saturday evenings, we would find ourselves back at the same table in the Bar do Espanhol, where we would start getting drunk all over again and resume the same insane conversation. It was a way of dramatising our own inescapable mediocrity, a way of mutual flagellation through banality. Dubin called our endless arguments ‘Pavannes for the living dead’. Once, we spent almost an hour yelling at each other over some grammatical query or other:

‘Enclisis!’
‘Proclisis!’
‘Enclisis!’
‘Proclisis!’
‘Enclisis!’
‘Proclisis!’

Until the Spaniard signalled to us from behind the bar to keep the noise down.

I also don’t know how I managed to get home in the early hours of
Sunday morning. I spent all of Sunday sleeping, while Julinha and João went to lunch at her sister’s house.

I was left alone with Black the dog. The sweet Julinha whom I married when she became pregnant had disappeared, never to be seen again, inside a fat, embittered woman of the same name. On Sundays, she only left food for the dog. If I wanted to eat, I had to negotiate with Black. She hardly spoke to me at all. João, who was twelve, didn’t talk to me either. The only one who did was Black. At least his eyes seemed to say ‘I understand, I understand’. On Sunday evenings, I would return to the Bar do Espanhol to meet up with Dubin. The Spaniard, by the way, isn’t Spanish. His name is Miguel, but Professor Fortuna started calling him ‘Don Miguel’ and then ‘the Spaniard’. Equally, Professor Fortuna is not a professor. He was a regular at the bar, but never sat at our table. He said that he didn’t like to mix, not with us personally, but with humanity in general. He explained that he called the Spaniard the Spaniard because he reminded him of Miguel de Unamuno, whom he had, in fact, met. Now, as far as we knew, Unamuno had never visited Porto Alegre and the Professor had never left Porto Alegre. Sometimes we wondered if he had ever even left the Bar do Espanhol. Besides, the ages didn’t match, even though the professor is a lot older than me or Dubin. ‘A bluffer,’ was what he called Unamuno. We suspected that the Professor had read none of the authors on whom he had such definite opinions. He used to say:

‘Nietzsche is the man. All the others are rubbish.’

‘And what about Heidegger, Professor?’

He would rub his face with both hands, the invariable prelude to one of his categorical statements.

‘A fake.’

Marx?

‘Completely washed up.’
Camus?
‘A queer.’

Professor Fortuna was always unshaven and, regardless of the time of year, wore an overcoat the colour of a wet rat. He’s not an ugly man, but it was easier to believe in the sexual adventures he recounted (‘I learned all I know in India’) than to believe, as he claimed, that he could read Greek. He said that any day now he would hand over for publication the book he was writing, a response to *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which had the provisional title of *Anti Kant*. We knew almost nothing about his life, but we were sure of two things: the book did not exist and he had never read Kant. Or Nietzsche. Dubin and I frequently involved him in our discussions, even when his table was far from ours and we had to shout so that he could hear us.

‘What’s your position on the comma, Professor?’

And he would answer:

‘I’m against them!’

The Professor’s thesis was this: you can put a comma wherever you like. The true test of a writer is the semi-colon, which, according to him, no one has yet mastered. With the possible exception of Henry James, whom he clearly hadn’t read either. A recurring topic of debate was: Can detective or spy fiction be good literature? I said it could, Dubin wasn’t sure, and the Professor declared roundly that it was arrant rubbish. He reacted to my evidence to the contrary with dismissive noises. Graham Greene. Pf! Rubem Fonseca? Ugh! Raymond Chandler? Huh! Once I asked him if he had bought a particular book by John Le Carré.

‘What for? I have toilet paper at home.’

The only reason I didn’t get up and hit him was because I couldn’t. It was Saturday night, and I was already halfway down to the bottom of the pit.
But why am I telling you all this? Take it as a plea either for mercy or for punishment. An attenuating or perhaps aggravating factor for what is to come. My defence or my condemnation. This is what I was before the first white envelope arrived. This is what we were. Garrulous but innocent members of the living dead. I swear we were innocent. Or take it merely as a description of the background into which, like a chameleon, I was gradually merging when the story began. First chapter, first scene, colon: a sulphurous swamp, a lake of lamentations, upon which, one day, a white envelope alighted like a lost bird.

It’s all over now, what the stars ordained would happen happened, and we are no longer innocents. Or, rather, we are not the same innocents. Nothing can be done or undone, all that’s left is the story and our lingering guilt. Curse us, please. Be kind and curse us.

The first envelope arrived in the post at the publisher’s on a Tuesday. I was still suffering the effects of Monday’s hangover and very nearly threw it in the bin unopened. There was something about the handwriting, though, that stopped me. Something appealing, almost supplicant about those capital letters, written in a tremulous, childish hand, made me open the envelope. Inside were four sheets of paper bound together between transparent covers by a spiral binding. On the first sheet of paper was a title, ‘Ariadne’, written in ballpoint pen, with a little flower above the ‘i’ instead of a dot. The one thing I never understood about this whole story was that little flower. If I had understood it, the story would never have happened and we would all have been spared. Between the first and second sheet was a note folded in two. It was from someone signing themselves ‘A friend’, explaining that the author of those sheets of paper did not know that they had been xeroxed and sent to a publisher. They were the first pages of a diary or an autobiography or a confession. The ‘friend’ asked that
we read the text ‘kindly’. If we were interested in publishing it, she would send us the rest of the book when it was ready. A ‘yes’ from the publisher would help persuade the author to finish what she had begun with those few pages. ‘Please say Yes!’ said the note in conclusion.

I read the first lines of that handwritten page.

‘My father met a painter in Europe who was obsessed with Ariadne. I owe my name to a stranger’s obsession. I sometimes think my whole life has been ruled by other people’s obsessions. At least the obsession that will kill me will be mine alone because nothing is as self-indulgent or as solitary as suicide. But not yet not yet.’

‘Obsession’ was spelled incorrectly, but that didn’t make me throw the pages in the bin as I had with Corina’s poems, when she wrote ‘lusid’ instead of ‘lucid’. I continued reading. ‘Ariadne’ was twenty-five. She would not commit suicide at once because ‘I need to close myself up gradually like someone closing up a house before setting off on a journey. Window by window room by room. My heart first.’ Only with her heart closed could she avenge herself for what they had done to her and to someone she called ‘the Secret Lover’. To avenge herself on those who had destroyed everything ‘our past the living room in the old house with the candles burning on the floor the corner of the ruined garden where he said that if the moon smiled she would resemble me and I cried “Are you calling me ‘Moonface’?!” and he kissed me on the mouth for the first time.’ Only with her heart closed could she exact a just revenge for what they had done to her father too, ‘the poor distracted man probably doesn’t even know he’s dead’. In those first four pages there was no explanation as to who ‘they’ were, the people on whom Ariadne would take her revenge before committing suicide. Nor what form that vengeance or that suicide would take. The pages ended with the author evoking ‘the house of the catalpa tree’, home I presumed to the living room with the candles burning on the floor and the ruined garden where she and the Secret Lover met.
I found those four pages fascinating. Not because of their literary value – that smiling moon was a bit too much for me to stomach, well, I still hadn’t quite recovered from the weekend’s drinking. I don’t really know what it was I found so enchanting, which means that I cannot explain this whole story. It was more like being dazzled, in the sense of being in the presence of a light that dissolves all shadows. It was a sudden incursion into the darkness in which I lived. Ariadne had invaded my mind along with the light emanating from her words. In an instant, I imagined her so entirely and so intensely that my next feeling was an absurd twinge of jealousy for that Secret Lover. Or perhaps what attracted me was the imminent tragedy she described, my identification with a co-suicide in the making. Or perhaps it was just the complete absence of commas.

I looked at the back of the envelope. The return address was a P.O. Box number in the town of Frondosa.
Luiz Eduardo Soares is an anthropologist, political scientist, holds a Post-Doctorate in Political Philosophy, and is a leading authority on security policies in Brazil. He was National Secretary of Public Safety and Security, Justice and Citizenship Coordinator of the state of Rio de Janeiro, among other positions. Professor at the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro, and at the Escola Superior de Propaganda e Marketing, he is also a prizewinning author with several books published, including essays and novels, dealing with themes such as violence, corruption, and drug dealing. Rights to his books were sold to several countries.
Elite Squad
Elite da Tropa

LUIZ EDUARDO SOARES

Brazilian edition: Editora Nova Fronteira
Rio de Janeiro, 2006 – 312 pages
Translated by Clifford E. Landers

Synopsis

Elite Squad reveals violence from an absolutely original point of view — the eyes of the Police. For the first time, we will follow the routine of the police officers, listen to their own voice, follow their footsteps, their daily drama — men who receive disproportional salaries in regards to the threats they face every day. And that have to practice brutality, because they don’t feel ruled by the laws of the Constitution, but by the imperative of war instead.

The book is a fictional work based on the real experiences of the authors. Places, facts, and characters have been modified, recombined
and have had their names changed. Signed by anthropologist and expert on public safety, Luiz Eduardo Soares, the Military Police Major André Batista, and former BOPE Commander, Rodrigo Pimentel, *Elite Squad* reveals explosive undergrounds of a divided city.

“*Elite Squad* shows, bluntly and without concessions, the innards of life as a police officer. The rawness of the book is its greatest asset.”

Época

“*Elite Squad* is a punch in the stomach of the middle-class, of those sitting in front of the TV, clamouring for justice against the gang of godforsaken people that disturb the peace and quiet of their Sunday.”

Zero Hora
The news about Amâncio took me by surprise. Maybe that’s a dumb thing to say, of course it was a surprise. Who could have been prepared to find out, from one minute to the next, that one of his best friends had taken a bullet in the back and was hanging between life and death in the Intensive Care Unit of a military hospital? It was more than a surprise: it was almost like catching a bullet myself. He was a policeman too, a former BOPE sergeant. He’d left the force when his first child was born. His wife asked him to, and he felt her concern made sense. Funny. When you’re in the BOPE you practically never think about danger. But danger is our constant companion. So much so that you should never be surprised by the news that some colleague was wounded and is hovering between life and death in the ICU.

Maybe Amâncio’s case was so shocking precisely because he had already left the BOPE, and because of the reasons that had led him to get out. It was fucking ironic that he had survived dozens of BOPE
incursions into the most dangerous favelas\textsuperscript{5} to end up shot like that, on a Sunday afternoon, as he was getting ready to go home after a 24-hour shift, probably anxious to see his wife and kid. He was part of the 2nd Battalion P2, the section responsible for intelligence. By law, P2 should limit itself exclusively to investigating improper conduct among fellow officers of the Battalion. But that’s not what happens. Since the Civil Police, with rare exceptions, doesn’t investigate shit, it’s P2 that campaigns\textsuperscript{6} at the entrances to favelas, taps traffickers’ phones, and tails suspects around the city. That’s why P2 cops drive civilian cars with standard license plates.

There are several advantages to being a policeman. One of them is that you know everybody at the military hospital. In urban warfare there’s always something going on there. People come by carrying people, visiting, telephoning to get the news. So you can understand how it wasn’t hard to get into the ICU, violating medical regulations. I sat down beside Amâncio, who was hooked up to all kinds of apparatus, and took his hand. He opened his eyes, forced a half-smile, closed his eyes and whispered, “It wasn’t in the goddamn back. It was in the stomach. Shot in the stomach.” I felt the tremor that runs through my body when I’m about to explode. Putting it that way, it sounds like I’m a some kind of weapon. What explodes is a grenade. But there are situations when I feel like a weapon. More specifically, a grenade. In this case, the metaphor is very appropriate.

Amâncio squeezed my hand and joked, “Remember the grenade?”

“Shit yes, of course I do, how could anyone forget?” I said. “The lives of the entire team were in your hand. Literally.”

A clearing in the Serra do Mar range, winter, 3 a.m., some years earlier

\textsuperscript{5}Favelas are shantytowns, usually found on hillsides, in Rio de Janeiro. [Translator’s note]
\textsuperscript{6}In police vocabulary, “to campaign” means to keep a watch on, to observe without being seen. [Authors’ note]
the tale of the grenade. But to do that, we have to leave the hospital for a moment and go back in time, to the qualifying tests for the BOPE.

After riding a horse bareback for sixty miles without resting, dying of hunger and thirst, totally devastated from physical exhaustion, our thighs and asses chafed raw, we had the option of sitting in a basin of brine. The experience showed that it was worth it to sit, despite the shooting pain. Some of us fainted from it. Even so, it was better. Whoever spared himself was unable to even move the next day: inflamed sores, covered with pus; swollen thighs, balls, and ass. The result: immobilized, they were washed out. And the worst part was the ritual of humiliation that went with their dismissal: they had to dig a grave and simulate their own death by lying in the bottom of the hole.

Let’s skip the brine, because what comes later is better – or worse, depending on your point of view. While some of the horses dropped dead from fatigue – I’m not exaggerating, they actually died – the meal was served. But if you’re thinking of a bountiful and tasty meal on a tray, you’re mistaken. The food was thrown onto a canvas spread on the ground – remember that we’re out in the open and it’s a winter night. We have two minutes to eat. I did say “two minutes.” With our hands. Eat what you can, however you can – that’s the motto. Anything goes. At times like this you see that, reduced to our lowest common physiological denominator, all of us humans are alike and resemble the lower mammals. The fight for survival is ugly to see and even worse to experience.

But after the storm comes the calm, just as after extreme physical challenge comes contemplation, abstraction, and intellectual instruction. Now, try to imagine this: a band of dirty mud-caked guys, stinking of horses and with their balls rubbed raw, their asses and thighs burning, drained of their last drop of energy, still famished and thirsty, their fingernails black from vestiges of food, their hands greasy, forced to listen to a long and boring lecture about the theory of antiguerrilla tactics in which there’s no reference to action, just the fundamental concepts.
Add to it the following ingredient: the lecture was read, in a deliberately hypnotic monotone. We were a bunch of sick, sleepwalking specters. We forced our eyes wide open, knowing that dozing would cost very dearly.

Amâncio couldn’t resist and began to nod, overcome by sleep. The instructor rose slowly and addressed him. He ordered him to squat over a tree trunk, took a grenade from his belt, pulled the pin, and placed it in the wayward student’s hand. One slipup would mean the end of that fine and brave pack. From then on, no one took his eyes off Amâncio – watching our colleague’s watchfulness. Fear kept us awake better than the best hot, bitter coffee could have done.

Back in the ICU

“You held us all in your hand,” I repeated. Amâncio still maintained his half-smile, taut as a tent in the troop’s camp. Now the combat was his alone, just his. He was by himself, with the grenade tied to his hand. I squeezed his hand so he’d know I was still at his side. “You know what happened? What really happened?” he asked in a faint voice. I told him it was better not to talk, he needed all his strength to win that battle. I didn’t mean to be all dramatic and talk like that, with fight-for-life images and stuff that looks pretty in a book but does a godawful lot of damage when spoken at the deathbed of somebody who knows there is no fucking battle, just a pitiless massacre.

But he insisted. That’s how I learned what had happened that Sunday afternoon.

Santa Teresa, Sunday, four p.m.
This is the faithful account of what Amâncio told me: “Me and my partner were heading back to the 2nd Battalion in the plain-wrapper Volkswagen that we used for certain missions. We were on Rua Almirante Alexandrino, in Santa Teresa, because we’d been following a guy who was the link between the traffickers in the Santa Marta favela and the lowlifes of Tabajara. But we lost him and, since we’d already been on duty for over 24 hours, we decided to go back. Up there, near the Balé favela, there’s a fork in the road. We wanted to head down to Cosme Velho and Laranjeiras, but my partner, who was driving, took the wrong road. When we realized it, we were on a very steep incline that was taking us straight to the heart of the favela. There wasn’t any way to back up, or to put on the brakes, get out of the car, and run away on foot. We were practically sliding right into the middle of the favela. Our car was like a neon sign. Shit, two men in a Volkswagen like that, we had to be either outlaws or cops. Either way, we were gonna get shot at. The car moved ahead slowly, down the slope, and I could already see the traffickers were gathered in the middle of the street. They were handing out the guns and ammo. It hit me that we had only one way out: accelerating.

“I shouted: Step on it, push it to the floor and keep your head down. It was like bowling a strike. The car shot forward down the hill and we got three or four of them. It was a shitstorm; guys were thrown everywhere; the car rolled over several times. I managed to escape, in a hail of bullets. I ran, firing and looking for cover. I don’t know what happened to Amâncio. I couldn’t look back. All I could do was run down alleyways in the direction opposite the entrance. You must remember the favela. It’s in a valley, between the incline coming down from Santa Teresa and the steps that go up, at the other end. I ran up the steps. They didn’t follow me. They must’ve been seeing to the wounded. Probably their leader was one of those we ran over. I gave it all I had and took the steps three at a time. When I was about halfway up, some guys from the 1st Battalion showed up at the head of the steps. I signaled to them and thought I was saved by the bell.
“Suddenly they pointed a rifle at me from up there and all I felt was that kick in the stomach. Everything went black. I woke up here, after surgery. It was friendly fire, amigo. Friendly fire. What I wanna know is why? Sure, I’m black and I was armed and out of uniform, but fuck, why shoot at me before identifying a fellow officer?”

Amâncio didn’t live beyond that day. At the funeral, when they fired the salute, I felt like telling them to stop that farce, that charade. But I thought about his widow, his son, pondered it a bit and decided the best thing would be to put a rock over the affair. Better to have a father who was a hero, killed by enemies, than the victim of a misunderstanding. I say misunderstanding in order to maintain a certain level of moderation, out of respect for the memory of a dear friend, a courageous man. What I really felt was like crying and vomiting out the truth about all that shit.
The Special Operations Battalion, BOPE to insiders, arrives at the war grounds. We’ve got a real hard-on to invade the favela, fucking A. Excuse me for talking like that, but am I supposed to tell the truth or not? Soon you’re going to discover that I’m a well educated guy, with schooling that few in Brazil have. You may even be surprised to learn that I’m a student at the Catholic University, speak English, and have read Foucault. But that comes later. I’m going to take the liberty of speaking with total frankness, and, you know it is, when you’re sincere and speak freely, your words aren’t always the most sober and elegant.

If you’re expecting a nice, polite testimony, forget it. Better put the book away right now. Sorry, but I get irritated at people who want the truth and a refined account at the same time. Truth has to be coaxed out, and it only descends upon the foulmouthed type who refuses to filter the voice coming from his heart. Therefore, the truth follows rough street language rather than the bowing and scraping of court. This testimony is as if it were my house. It’s going to be beautiful, sublime, and horrendous, just like me, just the way my life has been. And the way yours probably is too. Come on in, make yourself at home. The place is yours. At first you’ll find a few things strange, but you’ll soon get used to it. I also found them odd in the beginning. When I joined the force, I found a lot of things odd. But I soon got used to them. People adapt. Therefore, my dear friend – may I call you that? – fasten your seat belt and let’s go on.
The first story takes place in the Jacaré favela.

It was more or less this way. We were arriving at Jacaré overflowing with love to give – if you understand me – and with a shitload of willingness. As soon as we got out of the wagon, two junkies came toward us – because we had stopped just beyond the curve of the main incline. I was a lieutenant at the time and commanded the patrol. They didn’t even have time to pretend or try to flee. I grabbed the taller one by the arm and shook him, for the son of a bitch to wake up and understand he’d been caught in the rattrap. He wasn’t armed but had some envelopes of coke in his pocket.

“So the cocksucker’s here to score some blow, eh? I’ll bet you this fag also gets a kick out of marching all dressed in white and demonstrating for peace, huh? Say something, asshole.”

“No, sir.”

“No, sir what, you piece of shit? You didn’t buy powder or you don’t like parading for peace?”

“I don’t deal, sir. I just came to get some for my own use.”

“Oh! Just for your personal use, so that’s it.”

I grabbed a fire extinguisher from one of our wagons and discharged it in the guy’s nostrils. He looked like a meringue pie.

“You want powder? You want white? Then have some white, you animal.”

Well, at that point I must admit that I got hot under the collar and lost it. But I just knocked him around a little, because I had a brilliant idea. I ordered Rocha to stop beating on the other junkie.

“C’mere, you two. Stand up and look at me. That’s right, at my cell phone. You’ve got three options: phoning your daddy and asking him to come get you, that’s the first; eating a dozen boiled eggs, each of you, without water, that’s the second; getting the shit beat out of you is the
third. Your call.”

They both chose the eggs. I knew they would. The last thing a junkie wants is for his father to find out. What they didn’t know was that the eggs had been in the transport since the night before because of an occupation the BOPE was executing. In that delicious summer heat in Rio, the eggs were equivalent to a good working over. God writes straight with crooked lines. Free will was honored. Even so, the divine plan was carried out. Careful, don’t think I’m a born-again. That’s purely a preconception on your part. Not every cop or crook who mentions God is a born-again. So, you see? It’s not just cops who are prejudiced, after all. Speaking of prejudice, write down in your notebook that I’m black. Black in the politically correct sense of the word, because from the merely physical point of view I’m mulatto, dark-skinned, in reality. But let me make it clear – no pun intended – that I’m black and prefer you to think of me as black, okay?

The problem was that there was only a dozen eggs, which forced me to improvise. But, all modesty aside, I’m quite creative. The solution I found was ingenious. While the shorter junkie was swallowing the eggs, to the rollicking applause of my men, the other was burying himself up to the neck in a dumpster. Be honest – don’t you find it an interesting punishment? If at this moment you recoil in horror and evoke human rights, maybe you’d better close this book right now, man, because you’re risking a heart attack in a little while.

Well, actually I don’t want you to close the book, and I wouldn’t like you to get a bad impression of me. Don’t take what I say all that seriously. Sometimes I say whatever comes into my head and end up conveying a wrong image of myself, as if I were inhuman, perverse, that kind of thing. But it’s not like that at all. When you get to know me better you’ll see it’s not like that at all. I just wanted to tell this story because it has a very funny ending. Here’s how it happened: I was coming down from the favela worn out; it had been a rough night. Over three hours of chasing junkies, without result. Two soldiers from my unit were already waiting in the vehicle. I
could hear their laughter from a long way off. When I approached, they pointed the searchlight at the dumpster, from which the junkie’s head was sticking out, buried in that shit up to his neck.

“What’re you doing there, man?” I asked.

“You told me to stay here.”

“You can go now, dickhead.”

I swear to God that I’d forgotten. If it wasn’t for the sound of the rats, the boys wouldn’t have seen him. And if they hadn’t seen him, he might even be there till now.
All or Nothing
Tudo ou Nada

LUIZ EDUARDO SOARES

Brazilian edition: Editora Nova Fronteira
Rio de Janeiro, 2012 – 352 pages
Translated by Julia Powers

Synopsis

All of Nothing tells the story of a yachtsman and former stock market’s trader that knew international drug dealing from the inside. Among glamorous sailboats, professional killers, and experts in disguises, the book reveals, by reporting real facts, lived by real people, the behind-the-scenes of the international dealing of cocaine — from negotiations in the middle of the Colombian jungle to the arrival in Europe. It’s a book that surprises by joining two completely different points of view: one, from a man that knew the core of international drug dealing, and the other from one of the greatest experts in public safety in the country.
“My wish is that the book will make people think, and that it will inform about how this ghostly machine, the drug dealing, about which everybody talks and very few people know from the inside, works”, declares Luiz Eduardo Soares.
Reclining in his seat in the small airplane, Albino contemplates the landscape. The plane flies amid the magnificent Andes of the Colombian interior, well below the highest peaks.

After leaving Rio, where he met Lukas and recruited DaCosta, he passed through São Paulo, went from there to Mexico City, then Caracas, visited some islands in the Caribbean, and continued on to Bogotá, where he caught the flight to Pasto. This is how it works.

The captain asks the handful of passengers to fasten their seatbelts and prepare for landing. The plane accelerates and ascends, dizzyingly, reaching the altitude of a loop of black rock which juts out over the abyss: this is the airport that serves the city of Pasto. The plane oscillates, establishes the direction of the wind, circles the runway, selects the most suitable direction, swings back to find the appropriate incline and dives for what would seem to be an improbable landing.

Albino is met on the runway and driven into the mountains in the back seat of a Japanese van, winding along at high speed, cruising with an
abundant entourage of vehicles that could figure perfectly in a film from the 70s. The fleet crawls miraculously across the narrow wooden bridges.

Pasto has the aspect of a Mayan sanctuary, in the shadow of the Galeras Volcano, supposed to be extinct, until it cremated a scientific expedition a few decades back.

In the modern international hotel, Albino is received by a functionary of his hosts as he glides through the lobby with the same familiarity that he shows in greeting the men who await him in a private room. This encounter will result in an initial agreement on the basis of which, eventually, in some remote location in the Colombian interior, a meeting with the commander of the Cali cartel will take place.

Albino will be conducted down from the mountains to the airport, where a plane waits to bring him to an airfield in the middle of the rainforest.

Two days later, he will participate in the summit negotiations.

The summit meeting is brief and leaves a balance of few words, one ton of pure cocaine, and twenty two million pounds. It will be Albino’s task, as always, to ensure the cargo reaches its destination, to stock it, distribute it among the european wholesalers—who will resell it to the retailers—to receive payment and to compensate the Colombian suppliers, who control the production and are responsible for the first stage of the transport, which is aerial and brings the product from the jungle to the ocean, where it is collected by the vessels under Albino’s command. The final price of the blow for the consumer on the streets of Europe and the United States corresponds to a much higher value than that of the costs involved in the production, transportational logistics, stocking and distribution, because the drug that arrives to the user has a greatly inferior degree of purity.

The nine hosts assembled in a rustic hall in an inhospitable and
remote local, deep in the middle of the forest, rise to greet Albino with no excess of camaraderie. They take their seats again. Albino sits with them.

Albino: A ton for England. I need an immediate delivery so we don’t miss the season for the passage across the Atlantic, which ends in June, as you all know. I’ll pay eight million dollars by February of next year. Eight thousand per kilo.

First Supplier: A ton of pure cocaine is worth six times that much, retail. We deliver a product with a purity of almost a hundred percent. The retailers multiply the amount by six. The purity drops to fifteen percent. Those guys will make six times more than we do. The street value, if there were no other costs, would be six hundred percent greater than the amount you want to pay us.

Albino: Wait a minute. It’s not like that. I’ve already worked a good part of the profits into those eight million pounds. And we all know that the production of a kilo of coke comes to about fifteen hundred dollars for you. Less than a thousand pounds.

First Supplier: We know it’s not like that. It’s worse: you and your pals sell a pure kilo to the English wholesalers for twenty, twenty-two thousand pounds, more than thirty thousand dollars. They’re going to sell it to the group that distributes coke to the retail market, which comes to about forty-five thousand dollars. These vendors can keep the value at thirty thousand pounds a kilo, because they make their profit reducing the purity up to six times. We’re businessmen, just like you. We know our arithmetic. You want us to accept eight million pounds for a ton that you are going to sell for twenty-two million pounds? And which afterwards is going to become thirty million pounds, at the very least? And which is going to become much more in retail? You proposal is indecent.

Albino: What about the costs? The risks?

Second Supplier: You think we don’t have costs beyond the fifteen hundred dollars you mentioned? And risks?
First Supplier: You think that clearing the army runway, for our plane to take off loaded up with the product, is free of charge?

Second Supplier: One hundred and fifty thousand dollars per takeoff.

First Supplier: That’s without counting the risks and the losses of product and personnel. We only have authorization to use this runway once a week. If the scheme fails, we lose the opportunity and there could be misgivings. Once in a while the soldiers seize a batch of the stuff to inflate their kickback.

Second Supplier: Not to mention the problems with the climate in the jungle. The storms and everything.

Albino: Why is it that we have to go through this same argument every time?

Third Supplier: Twelve million dollars. Ten less than you and your guys are going to make.

Albino: We are not going to make twenty-two million dollars. That total is going to pay for the transport and the delivery, secure delivery, to the wholesaler in England, who is afterwards going to sell it to the retailer. Our profit is a lot less. But, fine, this time I’ll compromise. I raise my proposal by twenty-five percent: ten million pounds. Ten thousand pounds per kilo. Let’s close this deal and be done with it. If the coke molds in the jungle, we all lose out. We’re up against a tight deadline.

Fourth Supplier: Ten million is far from reasonable, but we are indeed running out of time. A stalemate is not in anyone’s interests. We’re not going to risk our longtime partnership. The mutual trust we have is not just built overnight. It’s a closed deal. I’m in with two hundred kilos.

Second Supplier: A hundred kilos.

Third Supplier: Four hundred.

First Supplier: Three hundred.
Far away from there, ten days after the summit meeting, uniformed soldiers step away from the control room in front of the runway in the middle of the Amazon rainforest, where a little airplane is being loaded. They smoke and play checkers while the plane takes off.

The flight range is eight hundred miles, which means four hundred to get there and four hundred to get back. The landing strips are located about a hundred miles from the coast. Therefore, Albino’s boats have to collect the cargo at the most 300 miles from shore. The best way to describe what happens is to imagine we’re at the theater, watching a movie.

In the rough open sea, a dark point can be seen from above, between waves. The focus, zooming in, gradually reveals the ship and, fifteen lateral meters away, a small raft.

From the perspective of the boat, a plane is seen approaching, flying in low circles. A grazing flyover and six cigarette crates, measuring two meters squared, are pitched out. One falls exactly between the boat and the raft, facilitating the activity of the two men who are aboard; four miss the mark and require an almost heroic change of course by the four sailors who man the raft.

The rescue operation begins.

Another flight and six more crates are tossed down. This time, all fall in the preferred space.

In total, fifty boxes are recovered and stashed in the boat, which will make a technical stop in the Caribbean before continuing on to London.

At sea, a plane flies over at medium altitude.

Adopting its point of view, a sailboat can be seen with two women in
bikinis on board, lying on their backs, sun-tanning, beside a man in short trunks propped up with his elbows on the towel under his body.

The plane gains altitude and disappears over the horizon.

On the boat, the extraordinarily convincing scene is dismantled, but kept, in the meantime, available for immediate use. Several men get to work checking 150 cigarette crates measuring two meters by two meters, covered by a tarp—crates identical to those recovered from the sea in the previous operation.

This same boat, as night falls, still in the open sea.

In the cockpit the radio crackles; the radar is observed, identified movements are accompanied on the monitor that exhibits the geoprocessed cartography, linked to the navigation equipment by satellite. Technical messages relative to the location are exchanged.

Through a microphone, while they eat lunch, the crewmen are informed by a metallic voice, “We are approaching the boundary of the British territorial waters. Attention: territorial waters. Approaching in fifteen minutes. I repeat: fifteen minutes.”

A yacht with three couples aboard approaches.

The crew who moments before were eating are posted, strategically, to transfer the cargo.

While the yacht finds the ideal position, four sailors, in the boat that transports the cargo, unplug the more technologically sophisticated communication and location equipment and heave it into the sea. Next, they throw the dismantled props into the water—the two women in bikinis, etc.

With difficulty and effort, the precious cargo is transferred to the
yacht.

The two crafts separate and pilot to distinct locations on the English coast.

The boats arrive, at night, to different English ports, far from one another.

The transfer of the goods is crucial.

A yacht with a few couples aboard that leaves from and returns the same day to the same English marina is far from raising suspicions.

It’s expensive to throw sophisticated communication and navigation equipment into the ocean. But it’s worth it. Who would suspect a boat free of orientation instruments? A craft wouldn't be capable of getting far in such state, much less crossing the ocean.

The three couples are received by a group of men and a few women, who drink champagne and help to transport a part of the cargo into vans parked at the port.

Thanks to the sails and other bulk generally associated with ships, the risk of the operation is reduced. Men carrying heavy objects of the most diverse sizes and shapes is not an uncommon scene in the marinas.

At any rate, unloading is always risky and can take weeks. For this reason the mission falls to the English operatives.

Vans pull out of the marina.

One van stops in front of a garage. A man in the passenger seat gets
outs, lifts an iron gate, and steps aside to let the van enter. Then he lowers the gate.

The scene repeats itself a number of times: different vans, different people involved and various garages being occupied.
Luiz Eduardo Soares is an anthropologist, political scientist, holds a Post-Doctorate in Political Philosophy, and is a leading authority on security policies in Brazil. He was National Secretary of Public Safety and Security, Justice and Citizenship Coordinator of the state of Rio de Janeiro, among other positions. Professor at the Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro, and at the Escola Superior de Propaganda e Marketing, he is also a prizewinning author with several books published, including essays and novels, dealing with themes such as violence, corruption, and drug dealing. Rights to his books were sold to several countries.
Marcus Wagner (Rio de Janeiro, 1965) is a Brazilian author, designer and illustrator whose work has appeared in many publications since 1990. In the last 6 years he published in France: Fête au Ciel and Soirée à Copacabana.
The graphic novel adaptation of *Elite Squad 2* counts with the collaboration of graphic artist Marcus Wagner and revisits themes and characters from *Elite Squad* as well as from *Elite Squad 2* and the homonymous films.
All new love is a rampage of the senses, pieces of people in a foolish race for a center of gravity dislocated to beyond. Beyond our body. All that was mine, what had been, and what would be, the toothbrush, the umbrella, my books, plans. Keepsakes, and newspaper clippings, all plummeted in free fall for the center that was her.
We have to break up

I love you, but I have to live my own life.
I don’t remember if I stayed there dumbfounded for a minute or an hour or if she said anything else. I think she said something in a very sweet and tender voice. I vaguely heard variations on the same theme: She needed to live her life and contrary to what I thought we would not live it together.

The darkness slowly thickened and covered the landscape that connected me with the natural light from where I drew my life. Her life was hers and hers only.

The seconds that dragged late into the night were filled with a meticulous exercise: as if I were playing chess with myself. I reconstructed each detail of the situations we were in together, trying to identify points of possible modification. These actions and words that, if they were altered, would have determined another path for our destiny. Useless waste of energy.
I didn't understand anything. Nothing made sense.
If only I could breathe.

What remained was this: a man that departs from nowhere for nowhere.
IF only I could breathe.
My body and clothes dress the remains of an explosion
That was how I felt:
pieces reunited in assembly after the bomb and death
did its dirty work
Lya Luft is a novelist, columnist, essayist, poet, and short story writer. One of the most prestigious contemporary Brazilian authors, she has more than 20 published books, including novels, essays, and children’s stories, some of them published in 15 foreign countries. Since 2004, she writes a biweekly column for Veja magazine, and is also a translator, from German and English, and has translated to Portuguese works from Virginia Woolf, Hermann Hesse, and Thomas Mann, among others.
In this novel, Lya is true to her universe of mystery, magic, and very human drama, which, in one way or another, affect us all.

The difficult relationships between lovers and within families are the ground on which her characters walk. The duel between life and death underlies all other subjects. The enigmatic element remains on many characters, like the singular Vovinha, whose origin is unknown, the Cyclops-baby, and the tormented father who sleeps with a gun under his pillow. As interesting as the other characters are Dália, the favorite daughter, who plunges into despair; the tiger
that lurks in the shadows of a nonexistent grove; or the people that have drowned near the beach house called Casa do Mar, who, at night, come to shore and talk to the main character, Dôda.

Dôda was born with a leg shorter than the other, but, although physically challenged, she owns all the mysteries: she trails paths that the others cannot reach, like the world inside mirrors — which, according to her, has a life of its own and watches us. She records everyone’s plots, speaks for everyone, and feels and suffers for everyone. She also dialogues with her alter ego, or with her friend inside the mirrors, Dolores, who is, in many ways, like she would like to be.
Chapter 1: Mirrors that observe

At the end of the hall

a floor length mirror is a glass

house;

a mirror lying on its side is the sea,

abyss.

In both something observes me

calmly licking its paws.

It is life and death,

real

or with bizarre disguises:

who bothers with the truth?

It is always someone’s invention.
The man takes the revolver from the highest shelf and places it under the pillow. And he thinks before falling asleep: I need someone.

A woman opens her eyes in the dark and thinks: I need to find someone.

A mother holds her newborn baby in her arms and doesn’t understand why his little face is covered in gauze.

A girl dreams she has two equal legs.

(In a hospital room where someone is going to die there are no mirrors. Death doesn’t need to gaze upon itself.)

I observe and record.

I speak and write.

I bleed.

I bleed this narrative as if it were draining from my open wrists.

When they were in a good mood the gods opened their hands and poured the oceans with their secrets over the earth, the fields where the wind runs, the trees with a thousand voices, the herds, the flocks – and, to muddle everything, the people.

But where is everyone? Seeking to anaesthetize themselves or to gain answers, following the same inexhaustible questions, how, when, how much, why, why me?
Me, the short-legged girl, spoke with the girl in the mirror and raised a tiger cub deep in the backyard.

When they launched my fate the gods were somber.

And so begins this complicated story.

My mother, who didn’t love me, had two daughters:

The first was named Dalia, like in a novel read years ago. She wanted to give all her daughters names of flowers. She only wanted daughters. My father agreed with everything, and if he wanted a son, he never said so.

She stopped with Dalia, who was sweet and happy, easy to raise, according to mother, and she became a beautiful adolescent with black eyes where flecks of gold appeared when she smiled. Mother loved that daughter until the end, through all life’s detours, with an obsessive love which resulted in her estrangement.

My sister always complained:

– Dalia? Who knows that flower? Only in an old novel or in one of those gardens in the country, something for old ladies, I hate my old lady name. – But she added:

– But our granny is an old lady that I adore.

Everyone loved our grandmother, so different than her only daughter, our mother. She liked to use huge colored silk shawls that my grandfather, a sailor, brought her from some voyage; she had yellowed cat eyes that narrowed when she was going to say something important, or when she laughed, or when she was reflecting upon something.

(Or when she looked at me quickly as if to say, I know, I know.)

I was the second daughter. Mother named me Dolores. A dark name,
foreboding and mournful, full of lugubrious ôôôs. She said she chose this name because she suffered a lot to launch me into the world. I was trouble for her since the time I was born, and always would be, because of the way that I am.

Everyone says “Dôda” because my sister, since she was little, wasn’t able to say Dolores, she said Dôda. The boys in high school said Dôda, Dôda, Choda. I ended up getting used to it, but I always write my name with a circumflex accent.

I was the complete opposite of Dalia: rebellious, difficult, confused, mixed up in my daydreams, oscillating between euphoria and sadness.

What’s more, I was born with this defect: one of my legs is shorter than the other. It’s not a big deal, but the way I walk, slightly leaning to one side, is ugly.

To some people, like my mother, this defect defines me, like having dark red hair and gray eyes. Only it’s worse. I think she never forgave me for being one of the many deceptions that rumpled her forehead and lowered the corners of her mouth – she never smiled at me.

Behind the house and deep into the backyard there were few trees. One special one was mine: there I sat to read, frolic, or just do nothing. Sometime later no one would remember that tree: people’s memories are messy.

There I found my cat nestled amongst the roots.

I crouched down, picked it up, it was big and heavy. It wasn’t a cat: it was a tiger cub. He had dark stripes, although pale, on his golden pelt. But he didn’t seem dangerous. He curled up on my lap and purred.

I went to grab bread and milk from the house, I returned as quick as I could, walking for me wasn’t like walking for other children. He wasn’t there anymore: I dropped off an old tin with the food inside. At the end
of the afternoon, I escaped my mother’s vigilance and returned: the old tin was empty. The tiger had made an alliance with me.

I didn’t tell anyone. If they found out, they would bring him to the zoo.

It didn’t even occur to me that there weren’t tigers in the depths of backyards (only, perhaps, in the depths of a mirror), and that all this was impossible. Like granny, I believed in the impossible. She liked to say:


(I almost forgot to say that my little tiger had blue eyes.)

When I was still a girl I discovered that mirrors observe us. When I said this everyone laughed, it was just another one of my crazy ideas.

– This child’s imagination is too much – they said.

Granny wasn’t shocked nor did she make any comment at all.

In my room, separate from Dalia’s even when we were girls, because our mother said, she was the object of special care since she was going to be a famous ballerina, she had a kind of vanity with mirror. We pulled up a tabletop, and there I remained writing or drawing.

I looked at myself a lot in that waveless surface: I wanted to see how the others saw me. Who I was after all. People praised my dark red hair, smooth and thick, my clear gray eyes. Mouth, nose, nothing was ugly or jarring.

I extended my hands, examined the reflection, they were quite pretty.

(Seated, my legs couldn’t be seen.)

Once I had the impression that the girl in the mirror was observing me. I closed my eyes, dropped the pencil, and left the room without looking back. I was just tired, that was all. It was a fantasy, a dream.
But it continued and became an everyday occurrence: there was a girl in the mirror, the same as me, but it wasn’t me. Whenever she did something different than me, or clearly observed me, the hair stood up on the back of my neck – I closed my eyes and ran out, sometimes knocking over the chair, without the courage to return and stand it upright.

After a while I got used to it, and we mutually observed one another. At first, in silence. She imitated me, but unexpectedly doing the exact opposite of me, like staying still when I made a gesture.

My fear was subsiding and transformed into curiosity.

I provoked:

– I’m going to smile now. I doubt you won’t smile.

One day I asked her, without expecting a response:

– What’s your name?

It was really strange to her voice when she responded:

– Huh, I’m Dolores!

I replied:


She gave a little giggle:

– I know.

Since then, when I looked at myself in the mirror, at times I saw Dôda, at times I glimpsed Dolores. Frequently she was already there waiting for me. But she vanished so quickly, that I was never able to see if she had two straight legs or a mermaid’s tail.

Sometimes she called me and I entered into the other side of things. It wasn’t dark or dangerous there. We were allowed to play calmly, to invent, and do as we pleased without anyone controlling or gazing upon me with masked pity. There I was normal, I walked straight and with ease.
I could even dance.

I named this place Dôda and Dolores’ House.

To narrate this plot I conjured up two halves that form just one character, Siamese twins who don’t even themselves know where they are connected, and it doesn’t matter. Perhaps united through difference: in the mirror, Dolores, sensual, funny, sometimes mischievous. Or imitating the ballet steps of my beloved sister. On this side, me, Dôda, the girl with a short leg, in that agitation wanting to know, understand, live, and be less debilitated.

And so I was more than one, two. Or many, for with the passing of time I discovered, here and there, inside of me and of others, someone totally unexpected.

Aren’t we all that way, right and wrong and good and bad and lost and found? “I am many”, said the devil stubbornly confined in the body of his possession.

We are many.

My father, who loved me, had within him a violent temper.

My mother, who loved no one, had not been loved.

My husband and I shared a house, a table, children, but we never knew each other.

Nobody knows anybody: we invent our relationships.

In future years I would have doubts: was Dolores my invention, or was it she who had constructed me? Nobody knew of her existence: thus the amusement.

I asked:

– You being there inside is weird, right?
– Weird is the best – she said – , at least we enjoy ourselves. The conventional is so boring.

It was the kind of thing my sister Dalia would also say, with that pleasant laugh that she conserved for many years, before it began to change.

Our mother calls with her impatient voice, she loves to do this when I am happy reading or thinking:

– Dalia! Dòda! Run!

Dalia goes, tenuous and curious. I follow behind, almost always late and easily exhausted. Our mother doesn't think to call us in a more patient manner, knowing that one of her daughters struggles to walk and fears falling, since I have bad balance. My baby photos display a scraped knee or nose.


Mother, embracing her, awaits me. It was just to show some sort of nonsense. For Dalia, it's nothing. For me, one more useless sufferance. I remember when my sister was little hanging around the neck of our mother, seated in her lap letting her comb her hair and dress her even when she was an adolescent. Dalia had a wide and seductive smile. For a while she struggled to be what our mother wanted her to be: a sweet and docile wax figure, easily molded. This had its advantages. But it wouldn’t last forever.

I in compensation fled, resisted, persisted, kicked, instigated punishment, stuck out my tongue, made my body hard and rigid, and when it got too difficult to handle, I fainted.

(That brief death was my last resort.)

Each time that we spent part of the summer in the beach house of my maternal grandparents, named House of the Sea like the ancient sign next
to the gate said, I had the same nightmare: the sea invaded everything. The waves that almost reached the lawn, just a strip of sand separating them, in the dream the waves became monstrous.

— Dad, do tidal waves exist?
— Yes.
— And could it happen here, on our beach?

Dad barely raised his eyes from his book, he spied from behind his myopic glasses:
— It could happen anywhere.

He didn’t know that he was giving a sentence, provoking a tidal wave in the soul of a young girl: all harm was possible and could be close by.

— And would we know before?
— I don’t think so.

And so in my nightmares I saw the tidal wave, before tsunami was the word to use: the wave was the width of the horizon, a dark strip growing, thundering, arriving at the beach to destroy the houses, life, sweeping away chairs, tables, people. Me and all of our small family. And my beloved father disappeared in the dark tumult.

I called for my father, tried to run to the mountains that could be seen in the distance, small uneven legs. I was taken, rolled, suffocated, mouth full of sand and shells with those creatures alive and moving inside.

I awoke with a scream, father’s steps, his concerned voice, what was it my little daughter, another bad dream? He took me in his arms to the front room, he consoled me. Soon granny brought me hot chocolate. For her, a good amount of the ills of the world could be resolved with a delicious hot chocolate.

I confided in her, and so another time I told her:
— Granny, at night before falling asleep I hear people, voices, they speak and speak, but I don’t understand exactly, I don’t know what to say.

— Don’t worry — she wasn’t unsettled. — They’re the drowned people. They live at the bottom of the ocean, late at night they come to the shore, they sit on the rocks looking at the lights in the houses. They don’t hurt anyone.

— But granny, if I don’t know what they’re saying, what should I do?

— You don’t need to do anything. They only need someone to listen to them.

— Sometimes it scares me.

— Nonsense, child. We don’t need to fear the creatures of the sea. Nor ghosts. What we need to fear is people.

Dalia and my mother didn’t like it much there, sometimes they stayed at home, in the city, then House of the Sea was all mine.

My grandparents and my mother didn’t seem to be parents and daughter; they didn’t even seem to be relatives; nor were they friends. They were like acquaintances that have almost nothing in common. I felt much closer to my grandmother than to my mother. Granny didn’t shy away from opening the door wearing one of those bizarre masks.

Mother detested it:

— We’ll be embarrassed.

Granny seemed not to care.

Nothing was ever said about the family of my grandmother, only that they weren’t from our town, or close to it, she came from very far. One time someone realized that she was from humble origins, the daughter of fishermen, something that my mother always emphatically denied.

— Granny, how did grandpa meet you?
– He found me in the sea – she joked.

To me that was the most plausible story.

The adult world that Dalia found to be a bore fascinated me and frightened me a little as well. The gestures masquerading as anger or grief, the quick and venomous or delighted looks, and the words. Ah, the words as feathers or daggers. I observed them thrown from one side to the other during the family lunches that my father liked to give, those uncles, and aunt, and some friend, sometimes my grandparents.

My nose barely reached the tabletop where the truth was sinking and the pretense emerged.

But the silences were most interesting. In the silence anything can happen. Who knows what moves in empty rooms, in abandoned houses, at the end of the hall, when nobody is there?

It’s like in the sea: no one is able to imagine what exists there below, things that no diver or instrument can detect: a reality more real than all the rest.

Or like in a mirror that doesn’t display a short little leg, and that doesn’t mean anything – because another reality pulses there.

Dôda and Dolores are two.

I am two.

A transgressive that opens her arms and legs and spills from within the dark caldron of my fantasies, and the responsible one who doesn't know how to live here. Dolores always spied everything, laughing alone. Dôda died each hour of abandon and rejection.

Dolores stuck her tongue out at teachers when they weren’t looking, even made mistakes in her spelling, on purpose, to confront even just a
little bit that authority that didn’t allow her even a second to breathe.

Dôda didn’t want to learn how to make a bed without leaving a wrinkle, to embroider without knots appearing on the back, to walk measuredly, to not laugh loud, to be like all well behaved girls who make their mothers happy.

Dolores and Dôda were creating me, dash by dash, dot by dot, like the doll I drew for my young children and my granny drew for me: dot, dot, comma, scratch… a circle surrounding, here and there a tiny ear… on top a little hair, and my little girl is ready!
Lygia Fagundes Telles, one of the greatest female writers of Brazilian literature, author of more than 30 works, including novels, short stories, and memoirs, many of which award winners, was elected to the Academia Brasileira de Letras in 1982. In 2005, she has received, for the body of her work, the Camões Award, the most important prize of the Portuguese language. She was State Prosecutor, president of the Cinemateca Brasileira, and vice-president of the União Brasileira de Escritores.
The Girl in the Photograph
As Meninas

LYGIA FAGUNDES TELLES

Brazilian edition: Companhia das Letras
São Paulo, 2009 – 304 pages
Translated by Margaret A. Neves
English by First Dalkey Archive edition, 2012

Synopsis

In a boarding school run by nuns in São Paulo, in 1973, three young college students begin their adult lives in very different ways. Narrating in the first and the third person, assuming, at different times, the point of view of either one of the protagonists, Lygia Fagundes Telles builds a pulsating and polyphonic novel, about the spirit of those troubled times, filled with vertiginous transformations, especially of behavioural nature. The Girl in the Photograph eventually became one of the most celebrated books by
the critics, and one of the most popular among the author’s readers. It was considered a very courageous work when it was released (1973), for describing a torture session at a time when the theme was strictly forbidden. It has received the Coelho Neto Award from the Academia Brasileira de Letras, the Jabuti Award, and APCA.

“Such beauty, such strength, such live and excruciating theme in The Girl in the Photograph”

Carlos Drummond de Andrade

“Lygia Fagundes Telles really has something of the atmospheric tenderness of a Katherine Mansfield. The only difference is this: she also knows how to write a novel, and The Girl in the Photograph really is a classy novel.”

Otto Maria Carpeaux
“Ana Clara, don’t squint!” Said Sister Clotilde, about to snap the photo, “Quick, Lia, tuck in your blouse! And don’t make faces, Lorena, you’re making faces!”

The pyramid.
Chapter 1

I sit down on the bed. It’s too early to take a bath. I flop onto my back, hug the pillow and think about M.N., the best thing in the world isn’t drinking the milk from a green coconut and then peeing in the ocean, Lião’s uncle said it was but he doesn’t know, the best thing is to imagine what M.N. will say and do when my last veil is removed. The last veil! Lião would write, she becomes sublime when she writes, she began her novel by saving that in December the city smells of peaches. Imagine, peaches. December is peach season, that’s true, sometimes one finds peach pits on the streetcorners with the smell of an orchard about them, but to conclude from that that the entire city is perfumed is just too sublime. She dedicated the story to Ché Guevara with a very important-looking quote about life and death, all in Latin. Imagine Latin entering into the Guevarian scheme. Or maybe it does? Suppose he liked Latin; don’t I? The delicious hours I used to spend lying on the ground, my hands crossed under my head, Latinizing as I watched the clouds. Death combines with Latin, nothing goes together so well as Latin and death. But to accept that this city smells like peaches, that’s going too far. Que ciudad sera esa? he would ask, thoroughly perplexed. Tercer mundo? Yes, Third World. Y huele a durazno? Yes, in the opinion of Lia de Melo Schultz, it smells like peaches. Then he would close his eyes, or what used to be his eyes, and smile where his mouth used to be. Estoy bien listo con esas mis discípulas. Well, that’s her problem, mine is M.N., an M.N. naked and hairy, much hairier than
I, he’s very hairy, kind of like a monkey. But a beautiful monkey, his face so intellectual, so hare, the right eye slightly smaller than the left, and so sad, all one side of his face is infinitely sadder than the other. Infinitely. I could keep repeating infinitely infinitely. A simple word that extends itself through rivers, mountains, valleys infinitely long, like the arms of God. The words. The movements renewing themselves like the smooth new skin of the snake breaking through from under the old. It isn’t slimy; I touched one once at the farm, it was green and thick but not slimy. And M.N.’s gestures also new, it isn’t true that it will be the same as the other times, he will come with a clean skin, inventing or invented down to the last minutiae. If God is in details, the sharpest pleasure, too, is in small things, you hear that, M.N.? Ana Clara told me about a boyfriend she had who would go crazy when she took off her false eyelashes, the bikini scene didn’t have the slightest importance but as soon as she started to remove her eyelashes, it was glory. The naked eye. Verily I say unto you, the day will come when the nakedness of the eyes will be more exciting than that of the sex organs. Pure convention, to think sexual organs are obscene. What about the mouth? Unsettling, the mouth biting, chewing, biting. Biting a peach, remember? If I wrote something, it would be a story entitled “The Peach Man”. I watched it from a streetcorner as I was drinking a glass of milk: a completely ordinary man with a peach in his hand. As I looked he rolled and squeezed it with his fingers, closing his eyes a little as if he wanted to memorize its contours. He had hard features and his need of a shave accentuated their lines like charcoal shading, but the hardness dissolved when he sniffed the peach, I was fascinated. He stroked the fuzz of its skin with his lips, and with them, too, he went over the whole surface of the fruit as he had done with his fingertips. Nostrils dilated, eyes narrowed. I wanted him to get it over with, but it seemed he was in no hurry, almost angrily, he rubbed the peach against his chin, rolling it between his fingers as he hunted for the nipple-point with the tip of his tongue. Did he find it? I was perched at the café counter but I cold see it as if through a telescope: He found the rosy nipple and began to caress it with his tongue tip in an
intense circular movement. I could see that the tip of his tongue was the same pink as the nipple of the peach, and that he was already licking it with an expression near suffering. When he opened his mouth wide and bit down to make the juice squirt sharply out, I almost gagged on my milk. I still go tense all over when I remember it, oh Lorena Vaz Leme, have you no shame?

“No”, says the Seducer Angel out loud. Quickly I light an incense tablet, oh perverse mind. I’d like to be a saint. As pure as this perfume of roses that enfolds me and makes me drowsy. Astronaut used to get sleepy too when I would light the incense. And he would stretch the same way I do; I learned how to stretch from watching him. Worthless cat, what’s become of you? Hmm? He used to give daily lessons in lasciviousness and indolence, but he would never repeat his movements, all ballet dancers should have a cat. The cunning. At the same time, the abandon. The scorn for things that were really to be scorned. And that calculated obsession. Made entirely of dangerous delicacies, my cat. Or was he a demon? During the pauses between lessons, he would stare at me, so much more conscious than I in my unconsciousness, how could I know? I didn’t even know M.N. yet, I didn’t spend hours and hours woolgathering. Lord, how I’ve woolgathered lately. Only Jesus understands and pardons, only He who went through everything like us, Jesus, Jesus, how I love You! I’m going to play a record in your honor, I offer music just like Abel offered the lamb, of course, a lamb is much more important, but Jesus knows I have a horror of blood, my offerings will have to be musical ones. Jimi Hendrix? Listen, my beloved, listen to this last little tune he composed before he dies, he died of drugs, poor thing, they all die of drugs, but hear it and I know you’ll lower Your hand in blessing upon his sweat-stained, dusty Afro hair, dear Jimi!...

With an elastic leap, Lorena threw herself onto the gilded iron bed, which was the same color as the wallpaper. She practiced a few dance steps, raising her leg until her bare foot touched the iron bar of the bedstead, and jumped down onto the blue stripe of the jute rug. She straightened
up, shook her hair back and, looking straight ahead, moved forward by balancing herself on the stripe until she got to the record player.

“Jimi, Jimi, where are you?” she asked, examining the pile of records on the bookshelf. She was wearing a pair of soft pajamas, white yellow flowers, and around her neck was a chain with a small gold heart. She held the record by the tips of her fingers. “And you, Romulo? Where are you now?”

Squeezing her damp eyes shut, she placed the record on the turntable. Softly, she raised the needle and guided it as if it were the beak of a blind bird seeking a dish of water. She let it fall.

“Lorena!”

The voice was coming from the garden. Quickly she pulled her hair together, wound it up at the back of her neck, and stood on tiptoe. Opening her arms, she walked on the spiral stripe of the carpet, tense as an acrobat on a highwire.

“Lorena, come to the window, I want to talk to you!”

She hesitated dangerously, her right foot planted on the stripe, her left suspended in the air. Only when she managed to put the left one down in front of the other without losing her balance did she relax; she had made it across the wire. She bowed deeply to both sides, her arms arched backwards, her hands touching like the tips of half-opened wings. She waved her thanks to the audience as she moved back slightly, smiling modestly downward. But she thrilled to catch a flower in the air, kissed it threw it triumphantly to the grandstand and went whirling toward the window. She waved to the young woman who was waiting, arms crossed, in the middle of the driveway. Bringing her hands to the left side of her chest, she sighed loudly and said:

“My dear, welcome! Look what a lovely day! It’s spring, Liào,
primavera. Vera truth, prima, first, naturally, the first truth. Hum? On a morning like this I have to hold onto myself, otherwise I fly right off, look at the daisies, they’ve all opened!” She pointed to the flower box under the window. “How sweet. Good morning, my little daisies!”

“Lorena, do you think you could listen to me for a minute?”

“Speak, Lia de Melo Schultz, speak!”

With a brusque motion, Lia pulled her heavy white socks up to her knees. Her leather tote bag slid to the ground but she kept her eye attentively on the socks, as if she expected to see them slip downwards immediately. She pecked up the bag.

“Do you think your mother could lend me the car? After dinner. Let’s say about nine, understand.”

Lorena leaned out the window and smiled.

“Your socks are falling.”

“Either they strangle my knees or they keep slipping. Look at that. When they were new, this elastic was so tight my legs would get purple.”

“But what are you thinking, dear, wearing socks in this heat? And mountain-climbing boots, why didn’t you put on your sandals? Those brown ones match your bag.”

“Today I have to walk all over the place, dammit. And if I don’t wear socks, I get blisters.”

Probably on the soles of her feet. Super-hick. The only thing worse than blisters is bunions, like Sister Bula’s. Bunions must come from onions, there was once an old lady with bumps on her feet like onions, and her grandchildren inherited the deformity, bumps, onions, bunions. Oh Lord. Spring, I’m in love, and Lião talking about blisters on her feet.

“I’ve got some great socks, I haven’t even worn them yet, you want them?”
“Only if they’re French, see?”

“They’re Swiss.”

“I don’t like Switzerland, it’s too clean.”

And they won’t even fit her, imagine, she must wear size twelve. How can she possibly wear socks that make her ankles even thicker, the poor thing has legs like an elephant’s. Even so, she’s thinner, political subversiveness is thinning.

“Lião, Lião, I’m in love. If M.N. doesn’t phone, I’ll kill myself.”

I’m much too annoyed to stand here listening to Lorenense sentiments, oh! Miguel, how I need you. I speak softly but I must be breathing fire.

“Lena, listen, I’m not joking.”

“Well, am I? What’s the hurry? Come on up and listen to Jimi Hendrix’s last album. I’ll make some tea, I have some marvelous biscuits.”


“But our music doesn’t move me, dearest. If your Bahians say that they’re desperate, I believe them, I think it’s great, but if John Lennon comes along and says the same thing then I’m turned on, I become mystic. I am mystic.”

“You’re silly.”

Silly, Lião? You said silly,” she repeats.

She leans father out the window and, in the middle of a laugh, turns sideways, puts her thumbs in her head, and wiggles her hands like ears, oh! it takes patience to put up with this girl.

“Lorena, it’s serious. I need the car tomorrow,” I say.

She doesn’t hear me. Suddenly she becomes angelic as she waves to
somebody inside the big old house, Mother Alix? Mother Alix who opens the window and is exactly the same height, her hand raised in the manner of the Queen of England. But as soon as the nun goes away, she makes a worse face, the one she reserves for last. Oh, Miguel, “stay cool,” you said, and that’s what I’m trying to do. But at times I go hollow, don’t you see? I can’t explain it but it’s just too hard to go on in the routine, I wish I were in jail, in your place, why couldn’t I go in your place? I wish I could die.

“The university is still on strike,” groans Lorena, yawning. “What have you got there? A machine gun?”

She straightens up as if she were using one, squinting down the sights, shoulders shaken by the discharge, tat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat... She aims at the house, tat-tat-tat-tat-tat, and fires at Sister Bula who pretends to play with Cat but whose attention is riveted on us. I am grinning because I know that Miguel would react exactly that way.

“Loreninha, don’t start in, I don’t like this game. Are you going to get the car? I’ll give it back the next day, like the last time. No problem.”

“You guys should kidnap M.N., Lião. Why don’t you kidnap M. N.? He could stay hidden under my bed per omnia seculum seculorum, Amen.”

I light a cigarette. What do I care if I sleep beside the drunks, the whores, the live coal against my breast, yes it hurts, but if I knew you were free, sleeping beside the road or under the bridge – ! Only free. I can’t stand other people’s suffering, understand. Your suffering, Miguel. Mine I could stand all right, I’m tough. But if I think about you I get flaky, I feel like crying. Dying. And we are dying. One way or another, aren’t we dying? Never have the masses been so far away from us, they don’t want anything to do with us. We even make them angry, the masses are afraid, oh, how afraid they are. The bourgeoisie resplendent at the top. Never have the rich been so rich, they can build houses with door handless of gold, not just the cutlery but the door handles too. The faucets in the bathrooms. All pure gold like the Greek gangster had them on his island. Intact.
Watching out the windows and thinking it’s funny. There’s still the mass of urban delinquents left. Urban neurotics. And half a dozen intellectuals; the friendly sympathizers. I can’t explain it but the intellectuals make me sicker than the cops do, the cops at least don’t wear a mask. Oh, Miguel. I need you so badly today, I feel so much like crying. But I don’t cry. I don’t even have a handkerchief, Lorena wouldn’t think it was nice to blow my nose on my shirttail.

“Lorena, lend me a handkerchief, I’ve got a cold,” I say, wanting to wipe my face which is wet with tears. Handkerchief, hell, what I want is the car. “I want the car, Lorena. Can I count on you?”

“I have white, pink, blue and light green. Ah, and turquoise. Look how beautiful this turquoise one is. So, Lia de Melo Schultz, what color does Madame prefer?”

I gaze at the box of handkerchiefs she brings. She keeps everything in little boxes covered with flowered cloth, this one has red and blue poppies on a black background. Plus the silver and leather boxes which sit on her shelf. And bells. Wherever her brother travels he sends her a bell. Other people collect stamps, or ties. Still others get in line to go to the movies. Maurício grinds his teeth until they break. He doesn’t want to scream so he grinds his teeth when the electric rod goes deeper into his anus. In the cartoon, the cat takes a walloping that makes its teeth and bones splinter. But in the next scene they glue themselves together and the cat comes back in one piece. It would be nice if it were like in the cartoons. Sylvia Flute-player. Gigi. Jap. And you, Maurício? When the electric rod goes deeper, you faint. Faint quick, die! We ought to die, Miguel. As a sigh of protest, we should all simply die. “We would, if it would do any good,” you said,
remember? I know, nobody would pay the slightest attention. We could rip our hearts out, look, here’s my blood, here’s my heart! But some guy shining shoes nearby would say, What color shoe polish does the gentleman prefer?
Marcelo Ferroni (São Paulo, 1974) is a writer and a journalist who has worked in prestigious Brazilian newspapers and magazines. Since 2006 he is the Publisher of Alfaguara, branch of Editora Objetiva, responsible for foreign and national literature titles. His novel, A Practical Guide to Guerrilla Warfare, released in 2010, had its rights sold to Portugal, Germany, Italy, and Spain.
Synopsis

Everyone knows who Che Guevara was, but few know the details that led to his ruin in 1966 and 1967.

Isolated in Tanzania, depressed by the guerrilla failure in Congo, he gathers his most loyal subordinates to put together a new revolution, now in Bolivia. Tired of the Cuban bureaucracy, he wants to do things his way, with no deals and no concessions.

Trusted men of the leader seek for a propitious region to set up the
guerrilla, while an undercover female agent, infiltrated in the high spheres of La Paz, meets with a Cuban emissary to construct the urban network. But the inexperience of them all, added to the local difficulties, threaten the venture from the beginning.

The saga of the Argentine guerrilla is recounted by an unnamed biographer — the unreliable narrator of this story. This is a novel about ambition and madness that starts from actual facts, but subverts the documented history, recreates characters and situations about the few people that stood by the soldier’s side until his final moments.
On his first day back, Guevara intended to put the camp in order. He lay down in a hammock, still weak, with Pombo sitting next to him as his private secretary. He wanted to talk to Antonio first, get the story straight about the rumours he’d heard of desertions. The guerrilla was hovering about like a lost soul, waiting to be called. Guevara grew irritated with the onlookers standing around and ordered them to occupy themselves. He’d returned missing two men. He felt that in the almost two months of marching through the jungle the guerrillas hadn’t learned a thing and since early that morning planes had been buzzing in the sky, like giant mosquitoes. Tania was still anxious to talk to him and approached him without being invited. She sat on the stool they had placed in front of him. She hadn’t seen, or hadn’t wanted to see, Guevara’s furious face and hadn’t prepared herself to face him. Before she could say anything, he called her a worthless whore, who brought whomever she wanted into the camp, while they floundered in disorganization. “I can’t remember exactly what he said to her,” wrote Bustos, “but they were harsh, violent things, not at all pleasant. She started shaking like a leaf and left in tears.” Bustos remembered well what it was like to live with Guevara. “After his outbursts of anger, he’d calm down and go read, serenely, while the guys he’d punished wandered around feeling like shit.” João Batista said that Tania never recovered from the conversation. “She’d see the others sniggering and thought it was
He summoned Antonio. The Cuban transpired, beret clenched in his hands, and remained standing, head down, staring at his boots. He confirmed the news of the desertions with great difficulty. Che bellowed that he couldn’t hear him, what was that, speak up, and sat in the hammock waiting. Antonio repeated himself (Che continued glaring at him without blinking). He then whispered that the army had been through the Zinc-Roofed House, searched everything, locked up Serapio for two nights and the kid was traumatized, easily frightened, and they feared he’d try to run away some night soon. Who? asked Che.

“The one with the limp,” said Antonio.

“What? Open your mouth, for fuck’s sake!”

“The one with the limp.”

“There’s no one with a limp here.”

When he heard details of the military raid, Che lost his patience and threw his pipe at Antonio, who didn’t dodge it. It hit him in the chin, fell to the ground and broke. Antonio dropped to his knees to pick up the pieces, tried to fit them back together, Guevara yelled at him to get out of there, piece of shit, leapt out of the hammock puffing and shouted at everyone within earshot.

“What’s going on? What kind of cowardice is this? Am I surrounded by fuckwits and traitors? I don’t want any more sissies around here. You bunch of sissies.”

“Yes, commander,” spluttered Antonio and, still hunched over on the ground, handed him the broken pieces, which Che reluctantly accepted.

“And to top it off you broke my pipe,” he muttered, falling back into the hammock.

Danton was next. They talked about his role in the revolution on the
continent. He was to leave the camp, establish contact with Cuba and head to Brazil to meet a certain Carlos Marighella. “He’s already expecting a visit.” He was then to travel to Europe and obtain the support of leftwing intellectuals, carrying a letter to Sartre written by Guevara himself. Danton tried to tell him that he had revolutionary blood in his veins, his vocation was to take up arms and fight the enemy face to face, but Che insisted that his role was far from there. “You’ll leave on the next trip out,” he informed him.

He then talked to Bustos about forming a guerrilla force in Argentina. He explained that he should make contact with three trusted men, Jozamy, Gelman and Stamponi, and he needed to set up “a good line of contact between Bolivia and Argentina.” “This job has to be well done, OK? Not like this shithole, where everyone does as he pleases.” Bustos was also to leave with the next group, along with Tania and “that bourgeois Brazilian that’s with her,” said Che. “Please advise them of my decision.”

Tania’s group’s trip back to La Paz, planned for the end of March, had to be put off. On the 22nd, the first soldiers were spotted heading up the Ñancahuazú River and Che decided that the risk of running into the army on the way back to Camiri was too high. He had a private chat with Rolando, the Cuban who commanded the advanced sentries. Uniformed men had been seen with guns on their shoulders, as if they were taking a stroll, and their voices could be heard hundreds of meters away. Guevara should have been enthused by the news; if he were to follow the method of guerrilla warfare that he himself had published years earlier, he wouldn’t enter into combat until his forces were ready, nor would he defend a fixed position. “Guerrillas should blend into the jungle, pounce on the enemy and vanish again, like a skirmish with ghosts,” he wrote. But maybe he didn’t remember his own book, or was still bored by the lack of activity, because he designated Rolando himself to organize an ambush upriver.
On the morning of 23 March he was lying in his hammock with a cup of coffee, when Coco appeared panting with a message from the front line. It took him a moment to catch his breath. He had come running on Rolando’s orders to let him know that they had clashed with the army. There were dead and wounded. Che leapt out of his hammock, looking excited. He said Coco was like Philippides, who had run kilometres to announce the victory in the Battle of Marathon. The lad looked at him, perplexed, afraid of being punished for not understanding something fundamental. Che did get irritated when Coco got his information muddled. He didn’t know exactly how many there were, nor the number of dead and prisoners. “Some shitty Philippides you are,” he said. An hour later the group from the ambush appeared with fourteen prisoners in Indian file, tied to one another by a rope around their necks, like slaves. They were very young and scared by the bearded, pungent-smelling guerrillas; one was crying, begging them not to kill him as he was an only child. Tania paced along the row of soldiers smiling from ear to ear. She asked why they were fighting alongside imperialists. You’re capitalist pigs, puppets, pawns of a corrupt government. A couple of guerrillas took heart, approached them and repeated the insults they had only half-learned: imperialists, pigs, puppets, pawns. Some yelled and screeched. Inti seemed to approve of what they were saying, occasionally casting an uncertain glance at Che and feeling reassured when he saw him unaltered, his patched-up pipe in his mouth.

Among the prisoners were a major and a captain, who were taken aside for interrogation and “spoke like parrots.” As for the others, their documents were examined and they were ordered to strip down to their underpants. They were then herded together in a clearing with their hands on their heads. They were given water and the wounded were treated by Moro. Che didn’t want to skimp on medical supplies; he wanted to show that he had plenty of everything, that they were ready for a long struggle in the jungle.

The soldiers spent the night in the same clearing, with cramps. The
small campfire wasn’t enough to take the edge off the cold night. In the morning, they were lined up once again and Che himself, who couldn’t bear to remain anonymous, said they’d be released and would have a two-day truce to recover their dead.

João Batista, in a corner of the camp, hadn’t taken part in the insults the previous day, nor did he say anything when, to the sound of laughter, the soldiers were tied up by the neck again. His hesitation was noticed by Inti, who started calling him “bourgeois.” The nickname quickly spread among the Cubans, who seemed to look down on him. All he had left was the company of four Bolivians who were with the trade unionist Moisés, called “the waste” by everyone else. They spent their days lying about like lizards, eating leftovers, thinking about running away. “I was just waiting to leave there,” said Batista.

The soldiers were found in a feverish state on a dirt road between Camiri and Lagunillas. The next day, they made the news: they had been sent on a routine patrol and hadn’t been expecting an ambush. The story provoked a violent reaction from the Fourth Division of the Bolivian army. Captain Augusto Silva Bogado, with half a dozen soldiers, returned to Ñancahuazú and busted into the Zinc-Roofed House. This time the Indian Salustio was there. They dragged him out by his hair, kicking him without asking any questions. He was handcuffed and, back in town, would tell them everything he knew. They made a second stop at the neighbour’s house. Ciro Algarañaz, who at that moment was fixing a stretch of fence with his foreman Rosales, from the province of Vallegrande, stood up smiling and held out his hand, but he didn’t even have time to say anything in greeting; they grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him over the fence. He was kicked, trampled, spat on. They also knocked down the foreman and, because he tried to react, beat his head open with the butts of their guns. He died before they got to Camiri. A few days later, he’d be presented to the press as a suicide. Algarañaz would spend nine months in prison.
During this time, even the doors of his house would be stolen.

Back at camp, Che was celebrating their first victory over the army and, with his men gathered around, chose a name for the guerrilla group: the National Liberation Army. They still didn’t know the army had raided the Zinc-Roofed House, because they were having a hard time sending and receiving information. They had two American radio transmitters from World War II, connected to a gas-fuelled generator, but because they hid them in moist holes, in direct contact with the earth, one of them had stopped working in January and the valves of the other had burnt out in March. Loro, sent to Camiri to fetch replacement parts, was told he would only find them in Santa Cruz. He went to the city, showered at the bus station, had his hair cut and got drunk (he couldn’t bear the privations of the jungle). He got in a fight, used some of the money to get out of jail, went back to drinking and used some more to get a little Indian woman working behind the bar to give him a head job out back. After drinking again, he lost some more of his funds in cockfights. He returned to camp penniless and valve-less, hair and beard trimmed, with a far-fetched story about some corrupt policemen who had cleaned him out along the way. He went without food for one day, considered light punishment by everyone else. The radio transmitters, in turn, were abandoned in the holes. The guerrillas also had a radiotelegraph unit, but didn’t know how to operate it. “We’d have got by better with string telephones,” wrote Pacho in his diary. They now depended on a shortwave radio, brought by Che to listen to news from Radio Havana, and it was on this that they tuned into local transmissions about the battle that night. At a press conference, Barrientos explained that it had been a “subversive act by communists” and Guevara, listening smugly, gazed at the ground with an ironic smile. The dictator alleged, however, that many of them “were taken down by the brave soldiers of the Bolivian army.” At this moment a scowl came over Che’s face and when he heard Barrientos mention fifteen dead guerrillas and four injured, he slammed his fist down on the radio, knocked it to the ground
and stomped off to his hammock. “It was Soviet-made,” wrote Pacho, “and very resistant.”

Rocking in his hammock the next day, with his feet hanging over the edge and the radio on beside him, Che heard, in the news bulletins playing over and over, something that worried him. Among the guerrillas, said the radio presenter, there were Cubans, French, Peruvians and a woman, possibly a communist agent, who had infiltrated “the most important social circles in La Paz.” The authorities were keeping her name a secret and hoped to make arrests in the next few hours. “The deserters obviously talked. We just don’t know exactly how much they said and in what circumstances,” wrote Che. “Everything seems to indicate that Tania’s cover has been blown, with which years of solid, patient work are lost. It will be very hard for them to leave now.”

The information about the guerrilla group, however, hadn’t been obtained by interrogating the deserters, but from an appointment diary left behind by Tania in the Toyota abandoned in Camiri. It contained the names, addresses and phone numbers of everyone she knew, coded, but easy to decipher. Arrests began in La Paz that same day, starting with Mariucho, the easiest to find. He was caught leaving the university, taken to the Villaflores barracks, beaten up, drowned in a trough and electrocuted. His father and younger brother were also taken into custody during a Department of Criminal Investigations raid in Oruro. They were held captive for six months, without the right to a lawyer.

They also invaded Alcira Dupley de Zamora’s boarding house and confiscated papers, photographs and tape recordings of indigenous songs from Tania’s room. The owner was handcuffed and the only reason she didn’t spend the night in prison was because she had influential friends in the government. When interrogated, she defended Tania, saying she knew her very well and, if she travelled frequently, it was because she “studied folklore.” Among the papers seized, they found a photo of Tania next to Barrientos, at a luncheon at the Argentinean embassy, which led them to
the erroneous conclusion that she had infiltrated his circle of acquaintances.

When the leaders of the urban network got wind of the arrests and interrogations in La Paz, they left town and officially shut down their clandestine activities, which, in practice, had ceased since they’d lost contact with the guerrillas. “When we heard the army was closing in, we feared the worst,” Rodolfo Saldaña would say years later, exiled in Chile.

That night, Che called together the visitors. The drivers Coco and Papi were sitting in a corner, while he paced back and forth puffing at his pipe. He didn’t take his eyes off his boots as he summed up what he’d heard on the radio. Tania’s cover had been blown, he didn’t know how, probably because of those “shit-head Bolivians.” He complained that he was surrounded by bumbling idiots, stopped with his hands on his hips and stared at them; they said nothing. He went on: due to what was probably going on outside, Tania, Bustos, Danton and João Batista couldn’t leave the group, at least until the situation became clearer. He waited another moment, but they remained silent. In his diary he would write, “I got the impression that Danton wasn’t at all pleased by the news.”

Bustos finally asked Che to explain the “can’t leave the group” story better. He asked how he could make contacts in Argentina. Danton lit a cigarette nervously. “I didn’t think it would last; I thought it was a joke, maybe a test. I kept my mouth shut,” remembered João Batista. “Tania had covered her face with her hands, doing her best not to cry, and was the first to leave there.”

Tania was the one who felt Che’s decision the most; she wanted to talk to him in private, but he refused. She tossed and turned all night and caught a chill in the small hours. In the morning Moro was called to take a look at her. She was sprawled in her hammock breathing heavily. She said she felt nauseous, refused to eat and was running a fever. The doctor told Antonio on the side that it was nothing serious, just a reflex of fear.
By midday, the news had spread throughout the camp. From where she was, she may have been able to hear the laughter, the comments. If she seemed so valiant before and could talk the hind legs off a donkey, why was she shitting herself now? By late afternoon she was vomiting, fainting and crying in between, but she still hadn’t managed to get Che to see her.

Danton became self-absorbed and wrote reams. In his notebook, he described a tense atmosphere. They fought over anything, from their next moves to the unequal division of food. According to him, Che was a taciturn commander who had little contact with the lads. “Isolated, sitting in his hammock, smoking a pipe, under a plastic cover, he read, wrote, thought, drank mate, cleaned his rifle and listened to Radio Havana at night. Laconic orders. Absent.” Bustos spent his days hovering around Che’s hammock, anxious for news. “Each one closed himself off in a corner, but they were Che’s friends,” João Batista would say. “They had food, I didn’t.” Batista offered to take part in forays into the jungle and, while his first tries proved unsuccessful, his insistence probably reached Che’s ears. On March 29, he was picked for a patrol led by Benigno. He had his first decent meal in weeks and, moments before leaving, was given a rifle.
Born in Santos in 1942, Maria Valéria Rezende is a nun of the Congregation of Our Lady–Canonesses of St. Augustine. She spent over thirty years teaching literacy, first within the working class movement in suburban São Paulo, and then in north-eastern Brazil, where she now lives. The author travels frequently abroad to act as a consultant and organize workshops. A great revelation of contemporary Brazilian literature, she has also written two short story collections and also books for children and young authors.
The Flight of the Red Ibis
El Vuelo de La Ibis Roja
O Voo da Guará Vermelha

MARIA VALÉRIA REZENDE

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Rio de Janeiro, 2005 – 184 pages
Translated by Carles Sans Climent

Synopsis

*The Flight of the Red Ibis*, Maria Valéria Rezende’s first novel, is the tale of an unlikely and deeply moving love between Rosálio, an illiterate construction worker in São Paulo, and Irene, an HIV-positive prostitute who has lost the will to live. He needs someone to listen to the stories he has to tell – even though he doesn’t know how to read or write; she in turn needs someone who can truly love her. Together, these two anonymous and invisible people weave a beautiful tale about the need for affection that afflicts people in
the modern world, especially in cities as vast and harsh as South America's largest metropolis. In a truly original voice, the author deftly crafts a narrative both sophisticated and very easy to read. She draws inspiration from classical references such as *Thousand and One Nights* as well as from the pace and language of *cordel*, a traditional style of popular writing very common in north-eastern Brazil.
Gris y encarnado

De las hambres y las voluntades del cuerpo hay muchas formas de cuidarse porque, desde siempre, casi toda la vida es eso, pero ahora, crecientemente, es un hambre del alma lo que fastidia a Rosalio, bien adentro, hambre de palabras, de sentimientos y de gentes, hambre que es como una soledad plena, una oscuridad en el hueco del pecho, una ceguera de ojos abiertos y que ve todo lo que hay que ver aquí, ningún vivo, ni hormiga, un olor a nada, las paredes de resacas tablas grisáceas, los montones de grava y arena, grises, la enorme carcosa de cemento armado, sin color, los edificios que prohíben cualquier horizonte, un pesado techo gris y bajo, que toca la cima de los edificios, chapa de nubes de plomo que no se mueven, no dibujan pájaros, ni ovejas, ni lagartos, ni caras de gigantes, no traen ningún mensaje, y esto es todo lo que hay que ver, sin conocer levante ni poniente, ni mañana ni tarde, todo tan aquí, tan cerca que la vista pronto va y vuelve, cortita, sin poder estirarse más lejos, ni hacia fuera ni hacia dentro, revolotea como pájaro recién enjaulado, ahogándose, ceguera. Todo tan nada que Rosalio ni consigue evocar historias que lo hagan saltar a otras vidas, porque sus ojos no encuentran colores con que pintarlas. Hambre de verdes, de amarillos, de encarnados.
Un remolino de viento remueve la arena suelta y hace chispear la puerta de la valla, llamando a Rosalio para que pruebe los caminos escondidos entre aquellas paredes excesivas, se vaya, escape, busque gente y pasto para el alma hambrienta. Vino por esos caminos, senderos que se redoblan sobre sí mismos, engañando a aquellos que andan mareados por las letras mudas que de todas partes espían y escarnecen al hombre sin letras, Rosalio vino lanzando preguntas que el viento se llevó enmarañadas con pedazos de papel sucio, sin merecer respuesta ni mirada de los transeúntes, se guió por el olor que el hambre del cuerpo le ayudó a separar de muchos olores extraños y grisáceos que acechaban entre los muros y llegó aquí, donde había tantos otros Rosalios, llegados por las mismas veredas, taciturnos, revestidos de tristeza gris, y le dijeron que se quedase si quería, que había un cobertizo y una tarima donde tumbarse, había una caldera torcida y negra, había alubias fiadas, virutas que quemar para calentarse, un caño de agua y un cubo, había una pala y una azada, que trabajase, que trazase el cemento y la arena, que trabajase. Comió alubias, trabajó, se lavó, durmió, comió alubias, trabajó, se lavó, durmió, comió alubias, trabajó, se lavó, durmió. Hoy se han ido todos, sólo han quedado el no-color y el silencio de ceniza en este mundo y en Rosalio han medrado el hambre de voces, el hambre de encarnados. Recuerda al final una historia que le contó el Indio, se llena los bolsillos con puñados de grava y sale, sin rumbo, sujetando el asa de cuerda de la caja de ipé que nunca abandona, buscando colores de vida en las calles vacías. ¿Hacia dónde ha ido la humanidad?, ¿ha desaparecido toda?, ¿se ha convertido en hombre lobo, boitatá, alma en pena, mula sin cabeza? Rosalio va dejando un rastro de piedrecitas para marcar el camino de regreso porque aún no está preparado para soltarse otra vez por el mundo sin conocer el camino de vuelta y aún debe las alubias que comió.

Irene, cansada, cansada, ¡cuánto esfuerzo cuesta no pensar en nada!, cómo cuesta alejar del pensamiento al niño en los brazos arrugados de la vieja en aquella barraca hincada en el barro, el papel amarillo con el resultado del examen, el médico que habla, habla, habla, el tiempo que
pasa, pasa, pasa deprisa, casi todos los días es lunes, cómo cuesta tener que ir a llevarle dinero a la vieja, ir para saber si la medicina prometida ha llegado, coger el paquete de condones y oír a la asistenta social decirle que cambie de vida. Irene ríe, de forma amarga y torcida, con un lado solo de la boca para que no se vea la falta de dientes en el otro lado, aunque nadie la vea ahora, aunque nadie le mire la cara de frente, nunca. Qué graciosa la asistenta social, «deja esta vida», de acuerdo, dejo esta vida, no me importa si todo se acaba ahora, que esta vida mía sólo tiene una puerta que da al cementerio, pero ¿cuidará usted del niño y de la vieja? Estaría bien, que Irene ya casi ni consigue llevar dinero todas las semanas, muchos hombres no quieren saber nada del condón, se buscan a otra, y ella no puede hacer como Angelita, que quiere pasar la enfermedad a todo el mundo, con odio, Irene no, no puede hacer daño a ningún ser viviente, a ninguno, por culpa del zagüí, de aquella angustia en la boca del estómago cada vez que se acuerda. ¡Ah!, Angelita, si tú supieras...

Ya hace tanto tiempo y pasó tan lejos, pero cuando pienso en el zagüí la agonía está ahora y aquí. Qué alegría cuando Simón volvió de la cacería sólo con dos tórtolas que no llegaban ni a dar sabor a la mandioca, pero con el monito dentro del morral, tan pequeño que yo, también tan pequeña, podía sujetarlo con una sola mano, sintiendo el calor y el temblor del cuerpo enfermo, ¡ay, qué ganas de llorar de pena!, días y noches cuidando de él, enrollado en un trapo, reclinado en mi pecho, dándole agua gota a gota con la punta de una hojita de naranjo, pedacitos de fruta, el zagüí mejoraba cada día, me miraba y reía ya crecido, agradecido, tirándome del pelo, ¡ay, qué travieso este bicho!, no tiene juicio, quiere soltarse, volver al monte, ¿para enfermar otra vez y morir?, no puedes, no te dejo, no soltaba al monito ni un segundo, no fuese a escaparse al bosque, ¡qué difícil es vivir así haciéndolo todo con una sola mano!, agarrando con la otra el rabo del bicho, no se lo entregaba a nadie por miedo a la traición, a que lo soltasen, no me fiaba. «Esta chica se pondrá enferma, mira qué delgada está, no come ni duerme por culpa de ese zagüí, ¡suelta eso, Irene, suelta ese bicho, duerme!»
Entonces Simón se fue al mercado y trajo una cadena fina, hizo un collar suave de piel de cabrito, ahora ya podía dormir, jugar al corro cogida con las dos manos, normal, trepar a los mangos, con el zagüí sujeto a la punta de la cadena atada a mi muñeca, al pie de la mesa, en un tronco de guayabera. No sé cómo me descuidé, sólo me acuerdo del susto, del ajetreo, el zagüí corriendo, corriendo, suelto por el terreno, corriendo, corriendo como un loco alrededor de la casa, yo corriendo, corriendo detrás de él, tanto, tanto que ya no podía respirar, mareada, mmmareada, mmmareadaaa, la cadena se soltó como una cobra delante de mí, un último impulso, la punta de la cadena al alcance de mi pie, el salto, mi pie pisando la cadena, el estirón del collar en el fino cuello, ahogándolo, el cuerpecillo peludo enfriándose entre mis manos, sus ojos pidiendo socorro, apagándose, el dolor, la culpa, mi remordimiento que nunca jamás pasó, ¡hace ya tanto tiempo!, hasta hoy...

Para de pensar, mujer, no pienses en nada, piensa en el vacío como esta calle, piensa en cómo te duelen los codos de estar así apoyada en el borde de la ventana, ¡estoy tan delgada!, es la enfermedad... Se aparta de la ventana, atraviesa la habitación, las tablas flojas de la tarima, cualquier día este suelo se hunde y la tierra me engulle, el zaguán vacío, nadie, no hay clientes, han comido y bebido demasiado, están durmiendo en sus escondrijos en algún lugar de esta inmensa ciudad abandonada, el domingo por la tarde todo duerme, las otras mujeres todas duermen, pero Irene no puede, espera la suerte de que aparezca algún cliente, quién sabe, algo, mañana lunes, el niño y la vieja, arrastra los pies por el suelo de mármol enmugrecido hasta la puerta carcomida de la mansión antes señorial, después chabola, hoy burdel, mira otra vez el bochorno de la calle, mareo, se apoya en el portal y, cuando abre de nuevo los párpados, ve al hombre cargando la caja, los ojos fijos en ella, yendo en su dirección, se vuelve a animar: ya verás como es del campo, recién llegado, de esos aún con olor a tierra y bosque, joven, inocente, no cuesta nada probar, inocente, pensará que el condón es un detalle, modernidades de puta experta, ven, mi amor, ven.
Rosalio ve primero la mancha roja en movimiento, que lo sorprende al doblar la esquina, luz, ráfaga de aire que alivia la garganta atragantada por lo gris, sólo después ve a la mujer dentro del vestido encarnado, dibujando despacio una media sonrisa, moviendo la mano repetidamente, «ven, ven», él va, «ven», la mano de la mujer en la suya, el pasillo, la habitación, un olor de humanidad, antiguo, múltiple, concentrado, colores pálidos, manchados, pero colores, todos los colores, en trapos de vestir, en colchas y cortinas, almohadas descoloridas y muñecas estropeadas, en los restos de pinturas y papeles en las paredes, en imágenes de santos y restos de velas, en flores de plástico, en bibelots rajados, en frascos vacíos de formas fantasiosas, en botes y cajas con rótulos rasgados, colores de vida, mustia, pero vida, aún latente, colores redoblados, multiplicados en los espejos partidos, en el brillo de retales de satén y de las franjas de lámpara roja, centelleos de lentejuelas y canutillos esparcidos en aquellas cosas cansadas como la mujer, exhaustas como si hubiesen llegado al final de largas aventuras, supervivientes, como Rosalio. Los ojos de la mujer, súplica y esperanza, la media sonrisa, herida abierta en mitad de la cara, sus manos le desabrochan la camisa, le arrancan la caja de la mano, lo empujan hacia la cama, los dedos de la mujer buscan caminos para despertarle el cuerpo que parece ausente porque Rosalio está inmerso en el mundo de las palabras, ansioso por ellas, oírlas, decirlas, intercambiárlas con alguien, pero ella no dice nada con su boca, le impone con sus manos febriles, con las piernas delgadas, con el cuerpo escuálido de animal hembra que le entregue su cuerpo duro de animal macho, así, sin palabras, y él hace lo que ella quiere, vencido por el dolor que le retuerce la cara a ella. Entrega su cuerpo pero mantiene despierto el espíritu, intentando escoger las palabras que deseará ofrecer a esta mujer cuando esté dispuesta a escucharlo.

Irene suelta la mano del hombre, cierra la puerta atascada que exclama un largo gemido, parece salir de su pecho, mira la cama, qué bueno sería simplemente tumbarse, dormir, dormir, tal vez soñar, para siempre, tal vez, pero mañana es lunes, el niño, la vieja... la boca de Irene, profesional,
mantiene un remedo de sonrisa, los dedos entrenados encuentran los botones de la camisa y siguen más allá, lo empuja hacia la cama, la mejor forma de vencer de una vez estas enormes ganas de dormir, hacer lo que se tiene que hacer, rápido, si no se quita el vestido, éste no complicará ni exigirá nada, es realmente inocente, se deja llevar, seguro que al final dirá «gracias», parece que no quiere, las manos de Irene, profesionales eficientes, el condón, los movimientos rápidos y ya está, terminado, ahora toca cobrar el dinero, sacarlo de la habitación, lavarse y dormir, dormir, dormir.

Rosalio le ha dejado hacer lo que ha querido y espera lo que ella dirá al final, él tiene tantas palabras y no ha decidido por cuál empezar, espera su primera palabra, «son quince, chico», Rosalio no lo entiende, mira cómo se alisa la falda, observa el suelo, le extiende la mano abierta, pidiendo, ¡es tan pobre aquella mano!, él se arregla el pantalón, la camisa y coge en la suya aquella mano ofrecida, sintiendo pena. «¿Qué pasa, no vas a pagar, eh?», entonces se le aclara el entendimiento y Rosalio sabe lo que es esta mujer y lo que le debe, tiene que pagarle, por eso ha hecho lo que ha hecho, por el dinero que él no tiene, los bolsillos aún pesados por las piedras.

Irene no quiere creer lo que oye, «no tengo nada de dinero», mañana es lunes, no puede llevar nada, nada, nada, siente cómo la indignación le sube por el pecho, le explota en la garganta, ¡ladrón, sinvergüenza, explotador!, levanta las manos frente a la cara para defenderse de los golpes que seguro vendrán, no le importa el dolor, que la pegue, que la mate, ella grita, grita, ¡granuja, ladrón, hijo de puta, quiero mi dinero, mi dinero!, espera el primer golpe, «perdona, mujer, no lo sabía, tú has querido, yo no quería, lo he hecho por ti», la voz dulce, el golpe que no llega, la rabia que se apaga, las ganas de desistir de todo, dormir, dormir, pero mañana es lunes. Ella ve el volumen en los bolsillos, mete las manos y las saca llenas de grava que tira por la ventana, el dinero, ¿dónde está el dinero?, «no hay, no tengo nada, nada, lo siento», Irene ve la caja en el suelo, intenta arrancar el candado, ahí, seguro, está el dinero, ¡dame esa llave de mierda!, sólo entonces repara en la cadena con la llave que él se saca del cuello y le entrega sin resistencia, dentro de
la caja hay un tirachinas, una peonza y libros viejos, muchos, casi redondos de tan gastados que tienen los cantos, las hojas oscuras como las hojas de tabaco que su abuelo enrollaba meciéndose en la hamaca, Irene por un instante vuelve al balcón de la casa vieja y siente el olor del tabaco, se marea, el cansancio, dormir, dormir en la hamaca, pero mañana es lunes, busca entre las páginas de los libros, uno por uno, y no encuentra nada, sólo palabras. ¿Para qué sirven?, palabras, «palabras lleva el mar», decía aquella canción. Quiere rasgar los libros pero sus manos ya no tienen fuerza, quiere romper algo, quebrarlo, descargar la angustia y la rabia, levanta la mano trémula, translúcida como una hoja de papel, queriendo amenazar, se adelanta hacia el hombre que la mira con ojos de espanto y pena, que no la esquiva, no se defiende, extiende los brazos, ofrece el pecho abierto, ¡hace cuánto, cuánto tiempo que Irene no sabe lo que es un pecho donde recostarse!, apoyarse en este pecho duro y suave es como llegar, al fin, a algún lugar suyo, es como volver al inicio donde aún nada se perdió, ni el zagüí, donde ella aún está entera y no tiembla, no tiene rabia y donde aún no hay lunes.

Rosalio siente dolor, ¡tanto dolor por esta mujer!, recuerda aquella ibis, roja, de piernas largas y finas como cañas, que él una vez encontró enredada en las ramas de una jurema, las plumas aún más rubras, teñidas de sangre, que él soltó y que había querido curar pero que, incrédula, arisca, huyó de él para, ¿quién sabe?, sangrar hasta morir, sola, desamparada en aquel lugar deshabitado, tan lejos de las ciénagas de donde vino; pero ésta no, ésta ha caído en su pecho, no huye, Rosalio no la deja, hace con sus brazos una cerca alrededor de ella, la acuna, despacio, y empieza a contar:

Una vez iba solo, caminando por un lugar deshabitado, solamente Dios y yo, por aquel lugar tan lejano, un descampado sin fin, de vegetación seca y rala, iba buscando un lugar con gente viva donde pudiese descansar y entonces, en aquel silencio, oí un gemido tan triste que rasgaba el corazón y vi a una ibis enredada en una jurema, debatiéndose, pobrecita...

Rosalio no sabe ni por qué cuenta esta historia triste, ¿por qué no recordar algo que alegre a la mujer triste?, sólo cuenta, cuenta, despacio,
alargando las palabras, dibujando los detalles y sintiendo que se vuelve más suave el temblor de esa ibis que tiene entre los brazos, interrumpiéndose en sollozos, el pecho de él humedeciéndose.

Cuenta, hombre, cuenta más, aún es pronto para irse, aún ni es de día, mientras dure la noche cuenta, cuenta para que sueñe. Irene pide, ella, que por no querer pedir, nunca, un favor a nadie, las vicisitudes de la vida la trajeron aquí, no tiene nada, a decir verdad ni tiene ya vida. Cuenta de dónde vienes, cuenta, cuenta...

Rosalio recuerda el contrato de trabajo, las alubias que debe a los otros, sabe que tiene que volver al lugar de color gris, pero también le debe a ella y sólo tiene palabras para pagarle. Va buscando en la memoria más cosas que contar, pero la mujer se duerme y durmiendo sonríe, una sonrisa incompleta pero abierta, que no tiene nada que esconder. Rosalio sale sin hacer ruido, sigue el camino de las piedras, va lanzando las que le quedan para reforzar ese hilo que lo puede llevar de vuelta. El corazón, ahora más rojo, le dice que mañana mismo vuelve.
Marina Colasanti was born in the former Italian colony of Eritrea in 1937. As a child, her family moved back to Italy, from where they’ve emigrated to Brazil after the end of World War II. She is one of the most awarded female Brazilian writers, author of about 40 books, including works for children and young adults, short stories, novels, and essays. Her views of places, as well as of women’s issues, are constant themes in her work. She was a columnist and editor of papers and magazines as Jornal do Brazil and Nova, and won the Prêmio Abril de Jornalismo three times. She also won awards as an advertising copywriter. Graduated in Fine Arts, it is she who illustrates most of her books. Marina is also a renowned translator from English, French, and Italian.
Synopsis

“The bombs fall slowly. I don’t know how it is possible, with all that weight. But slowly they fall, or I’ve seen them falling slowly, very slowly. And above my head, coming towards me. It wasn’t me they were after, it wasn’t that family lying on the grass the target of so much ammunition.”

A war scene starts this book and Marina Colasanti’s life. Before an outdoor altar surrounded by soldiers and machine guns, her parents get wed. The groom, in uniform, is about to leave for one more stage of the Italian colonial conquest in Africa. It will be in Africa,
in Asmara, capital of Eritrea, that the writer would be born two years later.

This is not just a book of memoirs, it is a document. Marina, a journalist with a fruitful career in newspapers and magazines, joins her memories with an intense research work to trace, through her family’s saga, a portrait of an era and the conflict that shook the world.

This exciting book that we read like a novel, reveals another side of this author already established in fiction, essays, and poetry.
MI GUERRA AJENA

(Fragmentos contenidos entre las páginas 9 a 33)

Mis padres se casaron bajo la mira de las ametralladoras. Él, de uniforme, con cartucheras en la cintura; ella, muy delgada, de sastre claro y sombrero de niña. La tropa entera formada a su alrededor. Un poco detrás de los novios, los únicos civiles son seis mujeres y un niño, seguramente las dos hermanas de ella, huérfana desde temprano, y sus mejores amigas. Reconozco a mi abuela paterna. Al lado de mi padre, junto al altar, el comandante.

Nadie los estaba obligando, obedecían a las circunstancias. Voluntario una vez más, Manfredo sólo disponía de unos cuantos días de permiso antes de partir a África. No había tiempo para una boda tradicional. La misa de campaña en Piani di Laceno, en la altiplanicie cercada de montañas, era en aquel momento una alternativa romántica, como romántico era el enorme ramo que ella sujetaba, flores silvestres recogidas en las laderas y enviadas a la novia por un destacamento de Alpinos acampado más arriba.

Pasaron la noche de bodas en una tienda de campaña. Era septiembre de 1935.
En el verano de aquel año y todavía en septiembre, barcos que llevaban decenas de millares de oficiales y soldados dejaron Italia rumbo a Mogadiscio, en Somalia, o a Massawa, en Eritrea, las cuales alcanzarían a través del Canal de Suez. Uno de esos barcos llevaba a Manfredo. El *motto* de los camisas negras era: “La vida del héroe comienza después de la muerte.” Pero la vida de mi padre, que era recién casado y no sabía que había dejado embarazada a mi madre –ninguno de los dos lo sabía–, palpitaba más intensamente mientras él, listo para el heroísmo, avanzaba rumbo a la guerra.

En octubre, las tropas italianas que partían de Eritrea y de Somalia penetraron en Etiopía, dando inicio a otra etapa de las Guerras de Conquista. Quinientos mil soldados apoyados por artillería pesada se enfrentaban a tribus locales mal armadas. En diciembre, con la intención de que la toma de la capital, Adís Abeba, se realizara antes del comienzo de la estación de lluvias, Mussolini autorizaba el uso de gases tóxicos y lanzallamas. En mayo, con la caída de Adís, el negus7 Hailé Selassié abandonó el país. El día 9 de mayo de 1936, Mussolini anunciaba: “Italia finalmente tiene su propio imperio. Un imperio fascista, un imperio pacífico, un imperio de civilización y humanidad.” Y el rey Vittorio Emanuele III asumía el título de *Kaesare Ityopia*8.

Siempre me pregunté de dónde venía la pasión guerrera de mi padre. Si de una visión romántica de la guerra, si de mera pasión por la aventura, o si de una violencia interior que sólo afloraba en la batalla. Quienes lo conocieron, como actor o antes de eso, recuerdan al hombre alegre y generoso, de vitalidad desbordante, siempre dispuesto a la fiesta y al amor. Yo nunca lo vi de otra manera.

Con seguridad, ya desbordaba vitalidad a sus dieciséis años, cuando, con la complicidad de su padre, huyó de casa para unirse a los “legionarios”

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7 En lengua abisinia, emperador. Hailé Selassié fue el último de éstos en Etiopía. (N. de la T.)
8 Emperador de Etiopía. (N. de la T.)
que seguirían al poeta Gabriele D’Annunzio en la conquista irredentista\(^9\) de Fiume. Eran más de mil, dispuestos a anexar aquella ciudad que Italia consideraba suya y que luego de la Primera Guerra Mundial le había sido arrebatada por el Tratado de Paz de París. Bajo el lema: “Fiume o muerte”, partieron el día 11 de septiembre de 1919. Otros se sumaron a ellos por el camino. ¿Habrían tenido conocimiento de la carta que D’Annunzio dirigió esa misma mañana a su amigo, el entonces periodista Benito Mussolini?


(…)

Mi hermano Arduino no nació en el Imperio, por lo menos no en su parte africana. En agosto de aquel año de proclamaciones, en la ciudad toscana de Livorno, en casa de su mejor amiga, mi madre dio a luz a su primogénito. Estuvo a punto de morir. Los partos eran aún más peligrosos que las guerras. Manfredo, retenido por el deber y por el uniforme, demoró varios meses en ir a conocer al heredero. Cuando lo hizo, Lisetta ya acunaba a su lindo bebé en Roma, en la \textit{villa} de sus suegros. No fue su única visita; entre una y otra batalla, Manfredo debe haber obtenido algún permiso, hay fotos de él junto al pozo medieval del jardín, y varias veces me contó, en medio de risas, de él y su hermano, aliados como dos niños, gastándole bromas a la joven madre, insegura en aquel ambiente todavía extraño.

Lisetta tenía veintitrés años, y por segunda vez quedó embarazada. Un bebé en el regazo, otro en camino, un marido eventual, ninguna casa que fuera suya, un proyecto de mudanza. Parece sólo una circunstancia, pero

\(^9\) El irredentismo fue un movimiento italiano de reivindicación de territorios. (N. de la T.)
era, más que eso, el establecimiento del modelo familiar. Siempre sería así, la vida en suspenso, de camino, nómada. Y, como en la foto de mi madre aún en Roma y ya de partida hacia Eritrea donde mi padre había escogido vivir, sonriendo abiertamente al futuro, expectante.

Las manos metidas entre las nubes

El médico que me tiró de los pies hacia dentro del mundo murió en un naufragio en la costa africana, devorado por los tiburones. ¿Habría sido en el Mar Rojo? Mi madre me contó la tragedia pero omitió el lugar. No eran de muchos registros, mis padres, no dejaron documentos, fechas, escritos. Hasta mi propio certificado de nacimiento desapareció. Como la vida, los hechos también eran volátiles para ellos. Tendré que servirme casi que únicamente de la memoria. Y, en Asmara, la memoria estaba naciendo conmigo.

Final de la tarde, Lisetta comienza trabajo de parto, unos amigos la llevan al hospital. Manfredo está viendo una pelea de boxeo. Gracias a esa ausencia involuntaria, sé que, además de las fiestas, las recepciones del gobernador, las partidas de caza, los espectáculos, había peleas de boxeo en la colonia. Se trabajaba, también, pero por lo menos en mi casa no era algo tan excitante que mereciera relatos a ser conservados por la descendencia.

El albornoz de mi padre, de lana negra bordada en seda, duerme ahora entre naftalinas, en un baúl de mi cuarto. Él se lo echaba sobre los hombros, como complemento del smoking en noches de gala. Yo lo uso rara vez, como son raras las ocasiones de gala en mi vida cotidiana. El de mi madre no alcancé a usarlo. Era de lana blanca, bordado en hilos de plata, la borla de la capucha pesada como una joya. Se fue con ella, capullo de un cuerpo que dejaba ya todas las fiestas.

Debía ser reconfortante envolverse en aquellos mantos por la noche, cuando el aire se enfriaba en la meseta de Kebessa y la altitud de 2.350 metros pone las estrellas casi al alcance de la mano. El clima fue un factor
determinante para que en 1897 el gobernador italiano trasladara la capital, de Massawa –donde había comenzado la ocupación italiana– a Asmara. En Massawa, muchos años más tarde, íbamos a tomar baños de mar. Apenas se baja la meseta y uno es devorado por un calor infernal. Como dijo a mediados del siglo XIX un oficial de la Primera Expedición Inglesa contra el emperador etíope Teodoro: “Esta tierra es tan caliente que derrite el tuétano de los huesos de las personas.” Pero bajábamos aun así, en carro, por una carretera alucinante, toda curvas, asomada sobre el abismo. Bajábamos a nadar en el Mar Rojo y recuperar nuestra identidad peninsular, bajábamos porque el mar siempre nos llamó. No sé si llegamos a utilizar el ferrocarril que era, con justicia, uno de los orgullos de los colonizadores.

En los años siguientes, Massawa habría de ser destruida más de una vez. Primero, bombardeada por los ingleses durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial y devastada por los alemanes que hundieron sus propios barcos para impedir la entrada al puerto. Después, castigada durante los trece años que la guerrilla independentista de Eritrea intentó arrebatársela a Etiopía. Como si no bastara la destrucción, fue asolada, su base naval demolida y vendida por los ingleses como botín de guerra. Pero Asmara, que se declaró ciudad abierta, sobrevivió intacta.

En Asmara vivíamos en un apartamento, una opción más moderna. Mi padre, juntando entusiasmo y confianza en el régimen, que estimulaba inversiones italianas en la colonia, había comprado dos de una vez, uno de ellos para ser alquilado. Tal vez hasta fuera en el mismo edificio, quizá, en el barrio italiano. Como de costumbre, no sobrevivió registro alguno de la dirección. En las dos únicas fotos que tengo es de noche, mi madre, con el rostro erguido hacia la luz de una gran lámpara de pie, está sentada en un dormitorio, en un extremo de la cama. Su vestido es negro, cerrado, pero el leve drapeado del escote se ilumina con las flores de seda blanca que bajan de su hombro y acarician su garganta. Iba a una fiesta. Hay una cortina de velo que cubre la ventana, un aplique art déco en la pared. Es un cuarto
perfectamente europeo, cuya ventana se podría abrir sobre cualquier calle medieval o renacentista de Italia.

Cuando, en conversaciones, digo que nací en África, sé que el interlocutor me ve casi entre chozas, elefantes a lo lejos, polvo levantado por un jeep, el sol abrasador recortando la silueta de la sabana. África, para los brasileros, es siempre una película de África. Mi África era una ciudad vibrante, divertida, que se modificaba cada día, a medida que ingenieros y arquitectos levantaban las edificaciones encomendadas por Mussolini para transformar Asmara en la Pequeña Roma. Una catedral católica que parece haber venido entera de Italia, una mezquita y una gran iglesia ortodoxa garantizaban el abrigo de la fe. Para acoger el cuerpo y eventualmente alimentar el espíritu, un cine de mil ochocientas sillas, otro de mil doscientas, los bares, los cafés, los restaurantes, las *ville con sus jardines florecidos de buganvillas, las avenidas y calles bordeadas de palmeras y flamboyanes.

A la reina de Saba, que en esa región dio a luz a Menelik I, hijo del rey Salomón, no le gustaría la invasión italiana, pero sin duda se rendiría ante la belleza de la arquitectura, ante la armonía del conjunto urbano que poco a poco crecía bajo la luz cortante y clara de la meseta.

Mis ojos eran oscuros, oscuro era mi cabello, y mi piel estaba morena de sol. Pero no por esas razones en casa me llamaban, de vez en cuando, *faccetta nera*. Ese era el título de la canción que se había convertido casi en un himno, cantada tanto por las tropas durante la invasión como en Italia y, después, en las colonias. Si no me equivoco, incluso llegó a Brasil jocosamente. “*Si mo dall’artopiano guardi il mare, / moretta che sei schiava tra le squiave, / vedrai come in un sogno tante nave / e un tricolore sventolá per te.*” Y el estribillo: “*Faccetta nera / bella abissina / aspetta e spera / già l’Italia s’avvicina. / Quando staremo / vicino a te / noi ti daremo un’antra legge e un antro Re.*” (“Si ahora, desde la meseta miras el mar, / bella morena esclava entre las esclavas, / verás como en un sueño muchos barcos / y una bandera
Carita negra, linda abisinia, aguarda y confía, que Italia se aproxima. Cuando estemos cerca de ti, te daremos otra ley y otro rey.”) Llamarme *faccetta nera* era una identificación jocosa que perduró durante años, yo era la única abisinia de la familia.

Eso de ser abisinia me ha exigido explicaciones toda la vida. Todos se confunden con las denominaciones Abisinia y Etiopía. Y todavía más con la recién nacida Eritrea. En realidad, no hay ninguna diferencia entre las dos primeras, se trata solamente de una superposición histórica. El mismo país se llamaba Abisinia desde la Edad Media hasta el final de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, pasando después a llamarse Etiopía. En cuanto a Eritrea, es un país pequeño y antiquísimo, poblado a lo largo de los siglos por sucesivas oleadas migratorias, entre las cuales se cuentan la del pueblo de Saba, fundador del reino de Aksum, y las de los otomanos y sus vasallos árabes. Eran ellos quienes estaban allí cuando, a finales del siglo XIX, Italia invadió la región y la bautizó Eritrea –de *Mare Erythraeum*, forma latina de Mar Rojo.

La segunda estrofa de la canción explicitaba qué ley era esa que los italianos traerían cuando llegaran junto a la morena “*La nostra legge è schiavitú d’amore…*” (“Nuestra ley es esclavitud de amor…”). Muchos tomaron esa intención legislativa al pie de la letra. Ya en 1935, en Asmara, tres mil quinientos italianos habían producido mil mestizos. Me acuerdo de otra canción que más tarde entoné, porque la letra parecía un juego infantil: “*Ah, Zighipaghi Zighipú, l’italiano non ci stette a pensar su. / Se la prese per la mano, / la condusse poi lontano / sotto un albero laggìù. / Zighipaghi Zighipú*” (“Ah, Zighipaghi Zighipú, el italiano ni siquiera se detuvo a pensar. / La tomó de la mano, / y la llevó lejos, / allá lejos bajo un árbol. / Zighipaghi Zighipú”).

Las dos canciones representan bien el espíritu “*italiani, brava gente*”, con el que los italianos gustaban de verse como colonizadores. Pero una cosa eran los individuos; otra, el régimen. Y al régimen no le gustó *Facceta Nera*. La música popular, que había nacido en dialecto, y que con su éxito
había alcanzado diversas versiones dialectales, contrariaba sus intereses, bien fuera induciendo al mestizaje, bien ignorando el fascismo, que sólo se mencionaba en el último verso. Temiendo que llevada por el entusiasmo musical y por el impulso de los sentidos la África Oriental Italiana se transformara en “un imperio de mulatos”, el régimen sacó una hornada de nuevas leyes. Se vetaron las “relaciones conyugales” entre italianos y nativos, se anularon los matrimonios ya existentes, y se prohibió a los padres italianos reconocer, adoptar o dar su apellido a hijos mestizos.

Nada de eso causó efectos en la canción. Combatida por el poder, Faccetta Nera siguió teniendo éxito y multiplicándose en nuevas grabaciones, mientras a la sombra de árboles distantes muchas parejas abrazadas la cantaban en sordina.

(...)

Los pies mojados de mar

La vida era bella en la colonia, pero vientos cada vez más cargados soplaban desde Europa. En el 38, cuando todavía estábamos en Asmara, el Manifiesto de la Raza se había publicado en Italia, dando inicio a prácticas antisemitas. Era un resultado evidente de la visita hecha por Hitler pocos meses antes. Una de las mejores amigas de mi madre, compañera de universidad, sería llevada con sus dos hijos a un campo de concentración italiano, no penoso como los alemanes, pero campo de todas formas. Sólo ella y, consecuentemente, los niños eran judíos; su marido, ario, siguió libre sirviendo a la patria.

En la primavera del año siguiente, la orden dada por Mussolini de invadir militarmente Albania debe haberles parecido a los italianos de África, casi todos fascistas y todos confiados en el régimen, un acto colonizador más, una simple y casi meritoria ampliación de las fronteras.
Y seguramente se enorgullecieron con la firma de la alianza entre Italia y Alemania, el “Pacto de Acero”.

Sin embargo, en septiembre, mientras mi familia celebraba mi segundo cumpleaños, Alemania agredió a Polonia, y pronto Inglaterra y Francia le declararon la guerra a Alemania. La Segunda Guerra Mundial había comenzado.

Mis padres no tenían cómo desconocer el peligro que la alianza tornaba inminente. Aun así, no tomaron ninguna decisión inmediata. Al año siguiente seguimos en Trípoli, en la casa de altos muros, y el cactus se preparaba, indiferente, para su próxima floración.

En marzo, Mussolini se encontró con Hitler. En abril, Alemania atacó Dinamarca y Noruega, y prosiguió con Bélgica, Holanda, Luxemburgo. Mis padres comenzaron a organizar el regreso a Italia.

En mayo de 1940, mi padre fotografió a Lisseta en una gran terraza al aire libre, un espacio de algún hotel o restaurante. Las mesas metálicas del fondo están vacías, las sillas recostadas. En el rostro de ella, una sonrisa. Mira a lo lejos, tal vez hacia el mar que se entrevé más allá de alguna avenida, tal vez hacia las arcadas de la ciudad que está próxima a dejar. No abandonó su bolso, y seguramente está fresco, porque viste un chal blanco. Es alguien despidiéndose. Una vez más está lista para partir.

Exactamente una semana antes de que Italia le declarara la guerra a Francia, nos paramos los cuatro en el muelle, frente al mar donde un hidroavión nos esperaba. Se había decidido que Manfredo se quedaría en Trípoli, esperando la evolución de la situación y su propia transferencia. El hidroavión era un trimotor, modelo Cant. Sé eso ahora, porque Arduino me lo contó. Para mí era apenas una criatura metálica sin nombre, que ondulaba oscura y mansa sobre las pequeñas olas del puerto. El bote que nos llevaría hasta ella estaba amarrado al muelle con una cuerda.

Sólo Arduino y yo estamos sentados en las bancas de madera, los adultos se demoran en despedidas. Siento el asiento húmedo bajo la
palma de mi mano. Y de repente mi hermano comienza a mecer el bote a propósito, para asustarme. No sabe que está recurriendo al miedo visible para seguir ignorando aquél que lleva oculto en el alma, así como tampoco sabe que está marcando para siempre, con un susto, mi despedida de África.
Ondjaki was born in Luanda in 1977. He completed his degree in Sociology in Lisbon in 2002 with a study on the great Angolan writer Luandino Vieira. A versatile young talent and a most promising writer of the Portuguese language in Africa, he has already had paintings exhibited, given public performances as an actor, as well as published his own poems and novels. Ondjaki’s novel Os da Minha Rua has been awarded the Grande Prémio de Conto Camilo Castelo Branco 2008 by the Portuguese Writers’ Association. He was distinguished as well with the Grinzane for Africa award, in category of young writer.
Good Morning, Comrades
Bom dia Camaradas

ONDJAKI

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Translated by Ana M. García Iglesias

Synopsis

*Good Morning, Comrades* is the loving memory of a childhood in Angola, around 1990. The young narrator, a keen observer, gives an uninhibited and humorous description of the small adventures of everyday life in a city marked by decades of civil war. “Comrade Antonio”, the young narrator asks the loyal African servant, “don’t you think things are better now that the country is free?“ But comrade Antonio has good memories of the old days; a lot of things were better “in the time of the white man”.

But things are slowly improving, much is happening at school, and
at the end of term the beloved Cuban teachers, who are not exactly spoilt by wealth either, will take their leave, since the country will be able to look towards its future by itself.

“Childhood is a former time that will always return”, says the author. He depicts an Angolan childhood marked by all the country’s difficulties, but also by happiness. This is a book that will especially appeal to younger readers.
to Comrade António

to all the Cuban comrades

And you, Angola

“Beneath the moist veil of rage, complaints and humiliations,
I sense your presence, a rosy vapour rising and expelling
the nocturnal darkness.”

Carlos Drummond de Andrade
“You, nostalgic sadness, make the past live again
You reignite extinct happiness.”
Óscar Ribas: *Culturando as Musas*
“But Comrade António, don’t you prefer to live in a free country?”

I liked to ask this question when I came into the kitchen. I’d open the refrigerator and take out the water bottle. Before I could reach for a glass, Comrade António was passing me one. His hands made greasy fingerprints on the sides, but I didn’t have the courage to refuse this gesture. I filled the glass, drank one swallow, two, and waited for his reply.

Comrade António breathed. Then he turned off the tap. He cleaned his hands, busied himself with the stove. Then he said: “Son, in the white man’s time things weren’t like this....”

He smiled. I really wanted to understand that smile. I’d heard incredible stories of bad treatment, bad living conditions, miserable wages and all the rest. But Comrade António liked this sentence in support of the Portuguese and gave me a mysterious smile.

“António, didn’t you work for a Portuguese man?”

“Yes.” He smiled. “He was a Mr. Manager, a good boss, treated me real good....”

“Was that in Bié Province?”

“No. Right here in Luanda. I been here a long time, son.... Even way back before you were born, son.”

Sitting at the table, I waited for him to say something more. Comrade António was doing the kitchen chores. He was smiling, but he remained silent. Every day he had the same smell. Even when he’d bathed; he always
seemed to have those kitchen smells. He took the water bottle, filled it with
boiled water and put it back in the fridge.

“But, António, I still want more water...”

“No, son, that’s enough,” he said. “Otherwise there won’t be any cold
water for lunch and your mother will be upset.”

When he was putting away the water bottle and cleaning the counter,
Comrade António wanted to do his work without me there. I got in the way
of his movement around the kitchen, besides which that space belonged to
him alone. He didn’t like having people around.

“But António.... Don’t you think that everybody should be in charge
of their own country? What were the Portuguese doing here?”

“Hey, son! Back then the city was clean.... It had everything you
needed, nothing was missing.”

“But, António, don’t you see that it didn’t have everything? People
didn’t earn a fair wage. Black people couldn’t be managers, for example....”

“But there was always bread in the store, son. The buses worked
perfectly.” He was just smiling.

“But nobody was free, António.... Don’t you see that?”

“Nobody was free like what? Sure they were free, they could walk
down the street and everything...”

“That’s not what I mean, António.” I got up from my seat. “It wasn’t
Angolans who were running the country, it was the Portuguese... It can’t
be that way.”

Comrade António was just laughing.

He smiled at my words, and seeing me full of passionate feeling,
he said: “What a kid!” Then he opened the door to the yard, sought out
Comrade João, the driver, with his eyes and told him: “This kid’s terrible!”
Comrade João smiled, sitting in the shade of the mango tree.
Comrade João was the ministry driver. Since my father worked in the ministry, he helped with the family’s trips. Sometimes I took advantage of the lift and got a ride to school with him. He was thin and drank a lot so that once in a while he showed up very early in the morning, already drunk, and nobody wanted to ride with him. Comrade António said that he was used to it, but I was afraid. One day he gave me a ride to school and we started to talk.

“João, did you like it when the Portuguese were here?”

“Like what, son?”

“You know, before independence they were the ones who were in charge here. Did you like that time?”

“People say the country was different.... I don’t know....”

“Of course it was different, João, but it’s different today, too. The comrade president is Angolan, it’s Angolans who look after the country, not the Portuguese...”

“That’s the way it is, son...” João liked to laugh too, and afterwards he whistled.

“Did you work with Portuguese people, João?”

“Yes, but I was very young... And I was in the bush with the guerrillas as well....”

“Comrade António likes to say really great things about the Portuguese,” I said to provoke him.

“Comrade António is older,” João said. I didn’t understand very well what he meant.

As we passed some very ugly buildings, I waved to a comrade teacher. João asked me who she was, and I replied: “It’s Teacher María, that’s the complex of the Cuban teachers.”

He dropped me at the school. My classmates were all laughing
because I'd got a lift to school. We gave anybody who got a ride a hard
time, so I knew they were going to make fun of me. But that wasn't all they
were laughing about.

“What is it?” I asked. Murtala was talking about something that had
happened the previous afternoon, with Teacher María. “Teacher María, the
wife of Comrade Teacher Ángel?”

“Yes, that one,” Helder said, laughing. “Then this morning, over in the
classroom, everybody was making a lot of noise and she tried to give a red
mark to Célio and Cláudio...Oh!...They got up in a hurry to make tracks
and the teacher said....” Helder was laughing so hard he couldn't go on. He
was all red. “The teacher said: ‘You get down here,’ or ‘there’ or something!”

“Yeah, and after that?” I was starting to laugh too, it was contagious.

“They threw themselves right down on the floor.”

We all bust ourselves laughing. Bruno and I liked to joke with the
Cuban teachers as well. Since at times they didn't understand Portuguese
very well, we took advantage by speaking quickly or talking nonsense.

“But you still don't know the best part.” Murtala came up to my side.

“What’s that?”

“She was crying and took off home!” Murtala started laughing flat out
as well. “She split just because of that.”

We had math class with Teacher Ángel. When he came in he was
upset or sad. I signalled to Murtala, but we weren't able to laugh. Before
the class started the comrade teacher said that his wife was very sad
because the pupils had been undisciplined, and that a country undergoing
reconstruction needed a lot of discipline. He also talked about Comrade
Che Guevara, he talked about discipline and about how we had to behave
well so that things would go well in our country. As it happened, nobody
complained about Célio or Cláudio, otherwise, with this business of the
revolution they'd have got a red mark.
At recess Petra went to tell Cláudio that they should apologize to Comrade Teacher María because she was really cool, she was Cuban and she was in Angola to help us. But Cláudio didn't want to hear what Petra was saying, and he told her that he'd just followed the teacher’s orders, that she’d told them to “get down here,” and so they threw themselves on the floor.

We liked Teacher Ángel. He was very simple, very humorous. The first day of class he saw Cláudio with a watch on his wrist and asked him if the watch belonged to him. Cláudio laughed and said yes. The Comrade Teacher said in Spanish, “Look, I’ve been working for many years and I still don't have one,” and we were really surprised because almost everybody in our year had a watch. The physics teacher was also surprised when he saw so many calculators in the classroom.

But it wasn't just Teacher Ángel and Teacher María. We liked all the Cuban teachers, because with them classes started to be different. The teachers chose two monitors to help with discipline, which we liked at first because it was a sort of secondary responsibility (after that of class delegate), but later we didn’t like it very much because to be a monitor “it was essential to help the less capable compañeros,” as the comrade teachers said to us in Spanish, and you had to know everything about that subject and you couldn't get less than an A. But the worst part of all was that you had to do homework, because the monitor was the one who checked homework at the beginning of the class. Of course going to the teacher to tell who had done their homework and who hadn’t sometimes led to fights at recess. Paulo could tell you how he got taken away to hospital with a bloody nose.

At the end of the day the comrade principal came to talk to us. We liked it when someone came into the classroom because we had to pay attention and do that little song that most of us took advantage of to shout: “Good afternooooon.... comraaaaade.....principaaaaal!”
Then she told us that we would have a surprise visit from the comrade inspector of the Ministry of Education. She knew it was going to be some day soon and we had to behave well, clean the school, the classroom, the desks, come to school looking “presentable” (I think that’s what she said), and the teachers would explain the rest later.

Nobody said anything, we didn’t even ask a question. Of course we only stood up when the comrade principal said, “All right, until tomorrow,” and that “until tomorrow” wasn’t so offhand because it would be different if she said, “Until next week.”

So we stood up and said really loudly: “Untiiiiiiiillllll...tomorroooowoow...comrraaaade ....principaaaaaal!”
and then I saw that, in a country, the government’s one thing and the people are another.

If, when I woke up, I remembered the pleasure of an early-morning breakfast, I’d wake up in a good mood. Having breakfast early in Luanda – oh yeah! There’s a freshness in the air that’s almost cold and makes you feel like drinking milk with your coffee and lying in wait for the smell of the morning. Sometimes even when my parents were at the table, we were silent. Maybe we were smelling the morning, I don’t know, I don’t know.

Comrade António had the keys to the house, but sometimes I was on the balcony and I’d see him sitting out there in the greenery. My mother had already told him not to come so early, but it seems as though at times the elders don’t sleep much. So he’d stay out on the benches, just sitting there. When he heard movements in the house he’d slowly approach.

“Good morning, son.”

“Good morning, Comrade António.” I waited for him to close the front door. “You were here very early again, António.”

“Yes.... I was just sitting out there, son.” He was smiling. “Is the lady of the house up?”

Comrade António used to ask this question, but I don’t know why. He knew that my mother was always the first one to wake up. Maybe he didn’t even expect an answer, but I only figured this out much later.
“Did you come on the bus today, António?”

“No, son, I walked; it’s cool at this hour.”

“From the Golf neighbourhood all the way here?”

“Twenty minutes, son... Twenty minutes...”

But it wasn’t true. Comrade António liked to say “twenty minutes” for everything. The water just boiled twenty minutes ago, my mother went out twenty minutes ago and lunch would be ready in twenty minutes.

I stayed on the balcony. In the garden there were some slugs which had to be elders because they always woke up early. There were a lot of them. After breakfast, sitting on the balcony like that with the cool breeze, watching the slugs going wherever they were going, made me drowsy again. I even fell asleep.

It was always the sun that woke me up. It was totally impossible on my balcony to work out where it was going. My leg was hot and asleep, I had an annoying itch. I scratched. Afterwards I heard António’s voice coming from the kitchen.

“Were you callin’ me, António?” I went into the kitchen.

“Son, your aunt telephoned, son....”

“What aunt, António?”

“The aunt from Portugal.”

“Oh hell, António...and you didn’t even wake me up... I wanted to talk to her.”

“She wanted to talk to your father, son.” He was smiling.

“So... She wanted to talk to my father, but she would’ve talked to me.... And what did she say?”

“She didn’t say anything, son. She just told me to tell your father she’d called, looks like she’s going to call again around lunch time.”
“But what a time to call, António. I didn’t hear the phone...”

“It wasn’t even twenty minutes ago, son.”

The smell from the kitchen, the whistle of the pot, Comrade António’s movements: everything told me it must be eleven o’clock. I still hadn’t done my math and chemistry homework, and we were supposed to eat lunch at twelve-thirty. I decided I wasn’t going to take a bath because I had physical education in the afternoon. The bath could wait for the evening.

I went upstairs and “did my chores,” as we used to say. My mother had taught me to study the subject first and do the assignment afterwards, but when I didn’t have time, I took a quick look at the material and solved the problems right away. Cláudio, Bruno, and especially Murtala, always did their homework like that, and they said it worked. But Petra was always studying. That girl could drive you crazy, the next day she knew the material cold. When we weren’t sure about something during a test, we always asked her.

My mother arrived. First she’d go to the kitchen to make sure that lunch was on the way, then she’d hang up the keys on the key-holder, then she’d come upstairs to ask me if I’d done my homework and she would go and have a bath. I might be wrong, but that was usually what she did.

“Was it you who spoke to Aunt Dada?” She kissed me on the cheek, went into the bathroom and turned on the tap. (I knew she’d do that!)

“No, I was doin’ my homework... It was Comrade António.”

“But António said you were on the balcony.”

“Yeah, I was doing my homework on the balcony.”

“But I’ve already told you kids that when the phone rings it’s your job to answer it. Don’t make Comrade António leave the kitchen to answer the phone.” The tone of her voice had changed.

“But he did it so quickly, Mum, I didn’t even have time...” She went
into the bathroom. The sound of the water interrupted the conversation. So much the better.

The telephone rang. I ran to answer it, convinced that it was Aunt Dada. I didn’t know her, but I’d spoken to her on the phone many times, which was kind of funny because I only knew her voice. Once she had passed me over to her son, and my sisters and I spent the whole afternoon laughing at the way he talked. I was hardly even able to reply, I almost threw myself on the floor from laughing so hard, until my mother finally had to say that I was in the bathroom suffering from colic. My aunt didn’t make me want to laugh so much because she spoke very slowly, she had what the elders—and Cláudio could never hear me say this—called a “sweet voice.”

But it wasn’t her on the telephone. It was Paula from the National Radio station, who wanted to speak to my mother. I said she was in the bathroom, but she decided to wait. Paula was another person who had a sweet voice, I really liked listening to her voice on the radio, but I was frightened the first time I saw her because I thought someone with a voice like hers would be tiny, and she was tall. When I heard my mother say, “Yes, I’ll ask him if he wants to....,” I suspected it was something to do with me.

“Look, Paula’s going to do a program tomorrow about May Day and she wants to collect testimonies from Young Pioneers. Do you want to go?”

“‘Testimonies’ means going there and talking?” I said, even though I knew what the word meant.

“Yes, you prepare something and tomorrow she’ll come and get you and the two of you’ll make a recording.”

“But it’s for a program?”

“More or less. I think it’s going to run on the news, it’s a message from the children to the workers.”

“So do I have to write an essay, Mum? Aw, that’s a lot of work.”
“No, you don’t have to write an essay because they’re not going to let you read an essay, only a few words....”

“Can you help me?”

“Not with the writing, son.... You write what you want. I can correct the mistakes, but the text has to be your own work.”

“Okay. I want to go to the National Radio studio. Maybe she’ll let me see all their equipment.”

“Yes, maybe, you’ll have to ask her.”

After lunch the “lucky devils” –as my mother said– went to take a siesta. She and I had classes in the afternoon, she because she was a teacher and I because I was a pupil. Sometimes she gave me a lift. I sat in the front, put the car in neutral and turned the key in the ignition. Since I couldn’t do anything else, I sat there imagining what it would be like when I was able to drive – wow! I’d rip along like anything. Whenever I thought this I accelerated a little to hear the noise of the engine and give my imagination a hand. If my mother heard, I’d say: “The car needs to warm up...” A pretty useless excuse because at two in the afternoon in Luanda a car’s only cold if it’s got a load of ice on top of it. “Move over,” my mother said, as she sat down in the driver’s seat.

Later, as we were driving: “Mum?”

“Yes?”

“Is Aunt Dada going to bring presents for everyone?” I asked in disbelief.

“If she can she will...”

“But how many people are there in her family?”

“Her and the three children. Why?” “How’s she going to bring presents for us, when there are five of us, and she also asked what Comrade
António wanted.....? Does her ration card give her the right to that much stuff?”

But we were already at the corner where I got out, and she didn’t have time to answer. She gave me a kiss on the cheek and told me to think about what I was going to say on National Radio on May Day because the recording session was tomorrow.

It was really hot. Some of my classmates stank, which was normal for people who’d come to school on foot. We stood talking outside the classroom, still hoping that the teacher wouldn’t come. It was incredible how we always wanted to believe that we might get a free period every day, because if it depended on us, that was what we wanted. As Teacher Sara said: “It seems that you don’t know that your duty is to study.” Perhaps that was where we got the saying that the pen was a Young Pioneer’s weapon. Or she’d say: “Don’t forget that the school is your second home.” But it was dangerous to say that to Murtala because he’d feel so much at home that he’d doze off in the classroom with the excuse that he was in his bedroom.

The conversation was good. Bruno said, with that face that only he knew how to make and that everybody believed, that there was a group of muggers who were attacking schools. I’d already heard something like this, but I’d thought it was the schools that were farther away, out by the Golf neighbourhood. But Bruno was a guy who was always well informed.

“Hey, it’s the son of my maid who told me. Yesterday he didn’t even go to class, then he came by my house with his mum, and he had these vicious wounds....”

“And so?” somebody said.

“Yo, it was for real, man, like there were forty of them...”

“Forty!?” Cláudio figured this was an exaggeration. Even the Zúa Gang didn’t have that many guys with them when they carried out a raid.

“The Zúa Gang? The Zúas??!” Bruno continued with that face that
was serious only once in a while. “The Zúas are a joke stacked up against Empty Crate.... Look, these guys come in a truck, all dressed in black. They surround the school and wait for the pupils to come out. The people who come out get grabbed right there...And if you get grabbed....”

“Huh...What happens?” Murtala, frightened, had his rat-like eyes gleaming.

“What happens? Everything happens: they steal the backpacks, they cut you, they rape the girls and everything. They’re heavy duty, not even the police go near them, yeah, they’re afraid, too...”

When the class started all the guys were thinking about Empty Crate. Everyone was working out his escape route. For sure Cláudio was going to start to bring his switchblade, Murtala, who was a runner, was going to be in the clear, I was going to be trapped if my glasses fell off when I started running, Bruno too; as for the girls – poor little things! Poor little Romina, as soon as she heard the story, was going to start crying and ask her mother if she could stay home from school for a week; Petra would be afraid too, but she was always going to be more worried about classes. I looked at Bruno: sitting at his desk, he looked restless, sweating and gearing himself up for something. At first I thought he was drawing, but then I smelled the glue. Before the end of the class he asked Petra for the felt-tipped pens. It was terrifying: he’d made a black-painted crate with a ghoulish skull and had written in blood-red letters: Empty Crate Was Here!

In the second hour Teacher Sara explained that the comrade inspector was going to make his surprise visit in the next few days, that they didn’t know exactly when but it would be very soon. She explained everything to us again, how we were supposed to address him, how we weren’t supposed to make noise. She even asked us to come in with our hair combed. Of course this was mainly aimed at Gerson and Bruno, who never combed their hair (Bruno told me he’d combed his hair for the last time when he was seven
years old, but I think this was a fib), and hardly ever bathed, which had to be true because they really smelled, to the point where nobody wanted to sit with them.

Later Teacher Sara bawled out Petra for asking “indiscreet questions.” What happened was that Petra wanted to ask, and even did ask, how it was that the visit of the comrade inspector was going to be a surprise if we already knew he was coming, in spite of not knowing the day, and we already knew the subjects we were going to be asked about and were completely prepared for this surprise.

Petra sometimes did things like this, and afterwards she would be sad because nobody supported her and the teacher had bawled her out. It served her right. If she didn’t try to show everyone what a clever girl she was, she might be a little less of a troublemaker.
Paulo Roberto Pires was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1967. He is an editor and journalist. Author of the two novels *Do amor ausente* (2001) and *If one of us dies* (2011), he is also a professor at the Communications School at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. He writes for the *Folha de S. Paulo* and is editor of *serrote*, a magazine dedicated to essays from the Instituto Moreira Salles, a private institution devoted to arts and culture.
If One of Us Die
Se um de Nós Dois Morrer

PAULO ROBERTO PIRES

Synopsis

Théo is a lawyer that always lived within the confines of literature and was never able to live outside of it. After writing a critically acclaimed novel he suffers from permanent writer’s block. Upon passing away in Rio de Janeiro, he leaves two final instructions to his young wife: the first, spread his ashes over Paris, the literary city par excellence; then immediately find and hand Enrique Vila-Matas a folder with his last writings. Sofía, his wife, goes to the International Literary Festival in Paraty, the FLIP, and there she tries to deliver the manuscripts to the Catalan writer. If One of Us Dies combines letters, narratives and at its core, the manuscripts...
of Théo. About the book, Enrique Vila-Matas says the following: “What Paulo Roberto Pires writes interests me. I read excerpts of the book. How was he able to imagine what really happened to me in Paraty? He said he came up with it and I believe him.”
Sofia, my eternal and faithful love,

I know that you will receive this when you come back from Paris. Or rather I hope you receive this on your return from Paris, and that by this time I would have already fused myself with that ever rich and not so holy land. No, you have not entered a new psychographic dimension despite the evident tackiness. It’s just that I left PrP in charge of, without him knowing about the mission and without giving him enough time to come up with an excuse, delivering this message this posthumous letter to you. Despite not having counted on my friend that much in life, as you well know, perhaps he’ll be able to do me a favor after his death — I think that blame, a feeling practically unknown to him, could validate even more these posthumous wishes. How delightful it is to write “posthumous wishes.”

No, the euros that are enclosed in this letter are not an inheritance — you will receive news about this from Regis, the person in charge of administering my will, another cheap trick found in Hollywood B movies that deal with death, like appalling revelations and the annoying donation of organs, something I strictly prohibited in my last wishes. Forgive the digression, but a monologue, above all of a deceased, has to leave everything clear, making it necessary to interrupt here and there the most strict order and basic principles of objectivity — which in all honesty were never part
of his most esteemed values.

I want you to take a new trip, one of those that undoubtedly took you to Paris. This time around it is likely that you your next destination would be Barcelona, where Enrique Vila-Matas lives. It may be that he’ll be traveling and that you might end up meeting him in some other place. But it is important to call Rodrigo Lacerda on my behalf, his editor, and find a better way to contact him. I don’t think it is necessary to remind you not to mention anything to PrP, but I don’t want to regret anything after my death and it doesn’t hurt to repeat myself: don’t mention one word of this to him, I’m sure by now he has already contacted you, or to any other person.

Since I don’t want you to look like a madwoman, I have to tell you that the main challenge of this encounter is that I’ve never met Enrique, despite calling him by his first name with familiarity. Another parenthesis: I love writing in the past tense like this, already knowing the end of the story. Death, as in fiction, allows this freedom to dispose of time and space, a freedom that I was not able to take advantage of in life and that which I now abuse. Like they teach in those self-help books, it’s never too late to start, right?

Returning to the practical: please go to my office (I think that there still wasn’t enough time to disassemble the house since there wasn’t anyone to do it) and on the “Walter Benjamin” shelf, among those stacks of books that would become a book that never existed, look for a thick and brown rectangular leather folder. You have not seen it since it was exclusively made for me. Inside there are manila and transparent envelopes, some postcards and photographs, some of those notebooks that I used to collect, colored sheets and a letter for Enrique that must be delivered to him separately and sealed.

Everything that is there is a sum of what my life has been in these last few years, fighting against the total inability to complete a second book or
completely getting rid of the impulse —for me destructive — of writing. Everything that is there is what I have recently been able to produce — and by “produce” don’t necessarily think it’s what would be considered literature. What is there, mainly, is a collection of a few images and texts — they are not “originals” in any sense of the word, but merely “texts,” writings that are almost objects and that could deal with anything that you could imagine or like to imagine, although the imagination is not at all my strong suit.

I did not write anything of this specifically for me, for you, or to be ignored yet again by PrP. For some reason that I hope becomes clear in one way or another some day, I would like Enrique to read this or at least receive these papers. I think he — and now, you — needs to know that it was in his books that I found an exact description of my essential pathology: Montano’s Malady, the illness that afflicts all those unaware of the boundaries between the written and the lived, and therefore do not know when they are living or acting, recording what they lived or what they imagined, talking about themselves or about authors they often cite and mention whenever they can.

Actually, what I have — or better said, had — is a mix of Montano’s Malady with “literature of the No,” which Vila-Matas himself also dealt with in one book about writers who at a given time, after having written themselves to stardom, radically renounce literary life. I never understood, honestly, what literary recognition is and its value.

Of Montano, I have indigestion from what I read; of Bartleby, the patron of the “No,” I have the anguish of that which I did not write. But never, in either case, the aura of the genius, the relevant “work.” This mix could be well called the “Vila-Matas syndrome” if I were a doctor dedicated to studying and classifying psycho-literary disorders.

But I do not want, and there shouldn’t be any reason, to dedicate a book or an essay to him — at most, who knows, one of those dry reviews
that I publish in that never ending chain of exchange of favors that is part of the literary world. Perhaps the most correct would write against him, but before you start thinking — and I'm sure you already have — "Here he comes with his paranoia," I just want you to deliver this pile of things to Enrique. Please, do not make photocopies of anything. After a long time I regained the desire to write by hand, each page is a unique specimen and it should remain that way.

On second thought, if you'd like, my Sofia, you and only you can photograph what you well wish, keeping in mind, above everything, that those things came out almost every time from my hand and rarely from my head. But, please, by now I do not have any hesitation in asking you for favors since if you do not do them I won't be there to get frustrated; do not fall into temptation and try publication. To see all of that printed, forgotten in a corner of a bookstore would be, to say the least, incoherent. What I wrote interests myself above anything, and perhaps, who knows, Enrique, collector that he is of literary eccentricities. I also think that the folder could arouse curiosity in you — feel free to rummage through it as you like.

To make your job easier, I outlined an approach in the form of a first email (he reads in Portuguese, I think, since he cites Pessoa all the time, and I could also see here and there that he is in Portugal):

Dear Enrique,

My name is Sofia, I'm a photographer, I live in Rio de Janeiro and I have in my hands a package for you. In fact, I have as a mission that you, who don't know me, accept to meet me in Barcelona or in another place of your preference and receive some papers left by the Brazilian writer Théo A., recently deceased.

You certainly have never heard of him and I say "writer" in order for this letter to make any sense. Théo was a lawyer that published just one novel, Abandono, which took him four years to complete. It was received, not without arrogance or exaggeration, as a revelation, the lightest of the embarrassing
compliments that roused the reviewers and academics on duty — two dissertations were written about his “work” (quotes are necessary). But, after that, nothing more happened, in other words, he was not capable of writing another single line. He continued, however, tied to literature, to the writers and the literary world. But as for writing something good, he was spent. (Would it be better to change this, how do you translate “spent”?)

It seems that only really he expected his own death. It took us, his friends, all by surprise. And to me, his wife (if you also want to change this, you can, even if it facilitates the approach), he left the task of delivering to your hands a folder full of writings which I myself did not know existed until I received the “instructions” letter after his cremation— hoping sincerely to meet you soon, I can explain it all to you in person.

I think this is a summary of what I can explain to you now. Do not be afraid, Théo did not have any ulterior motive of wanting to get published or desiring public praise or credit — that I can assure you. He just really wanted these papers to get you. I say farewell with the hope that you agree to our meeting. I remind you at his insistence that I cannot send you this folder by mail. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if it were to go missing.

Sincerely,
Sofia

I have my doubts here are there on whether you should refer to him by “you” or “sir,” and if it is also really necessary to explain anything at all to Rodrigo. Perhaps the wisest thing to do is to scrap this text and write the way you see fit, as long as it maintains this same line of reasoning.

Don’t worry my love, you will no longer receive these letters which I believe are scary — I would hate to receive messages from beyond the grave, or as it would be more appropriate in my own case, beyond the ashes. Enjoy
the journey, it won’t be so bad to spend a few days in Barcelona, Lisbon or in Buenos Aires. If you don’t mind feeling nostalgic and if your next destiny is Spain stay at the usual place, away from the latest happenings. But unlike your trip to Paris, in this case hotels or other places make no difference. What matters is just finding the recipient.

Kisses,

Théo
Ricardo Lísias was born in São Paulo in 1975. He has published the novels Blanket of Stars (Cobertor de estrelas, Rocco), translated into Spanish and Galician, and Two Squares (Duas praças, Globo), shortlisted for the 2006 Portugal Telecom Prize for Brazilian Literature. He is also the author of the short story collection Anna O and other short novels (Anna O e outras novelas, Globo), a finalist for the 2008 Jabuti Prize. His novel The Book of Mandarins (O livro dos mandarins, Alfaguara) was nominated for the São Paulo Literary Prize. Some of his texts were published in Piauí and the Brazilian Granta magazines and selected for Granta’s issue dedicated to The Best Young Brazilian Novelists.
The Suicide’s Heaven
O Céu dos Suicidas

RICARDO LÍSIAS

Brazilian edition: *Alfaguara Brasil*
Rio de Janeiro, 2012 – 192 pages
Translated by Ángel Gurria-Quintana

Synopsis

The narrator of *The Suicide’s Heaven*, a man in his early thirties, is one of the Brazilian specialists on the subject of collections. His best friend’s suicide provokes a crisis, makes him question his choices, and causes him “to start missing everything”.

A descendant of Lebanese migrants, the narrator ends up travelling to the Middle East while as he researches his grand-uncle’s possible involvement in a terrorist group. World events, and Brazil’s recent history, become the backdrop to his breakdown, as he queries such complex subjects as madness and suicide.
Gradually, readers will discover that the narrator’s greatest concern is with what awaits his friend after committing suicide. According to almost all world religions, he has no right to Paradise, or will suffer an even greater anguish than the one that drove him to kill himself.
I specialise in collections, but gave away my stamps over ten years ago. I have a single watch, and from my grandparents I inherited a small amount of money and nothing else. I don’t keep foreign coins, I don’t have shoeboxes full of postcards and I don’t catalogue mugs, cigarette packs or key rings. I have a toy Pan Am airplane, but a collection worthy of the name would require, at least, a small fleet.

The decision to give up collections and become a specialist was not made consciously. When I entered university, I had already rid myself of the bottle caps and most of the stamps collected over a few years. I got through my entire undergraduate degree without thinking about collections. Every now and then, a lecturer would say that historians love the dust on documents, and that he had himself spent many hours poring over all sorts of collections. In courses on the history of art, some collectors were always referred to. But beyond that, collections did not interest me much at the time.

It wasn’t always like that: during my childhood and adolescence I amassed almost two thousand bottle caps. As for stamps, mandatory for almost anyone who has been obsessed by collecting, I managed to arrange two beautiful albums. I also gathered everything I could find about the football team I liked when I was twelve. In that case, however, I was driven
only by passion, which could never be a key element of a serious collector’s business.

Nowadays, I don’t even watch Brazil’s World Cup games.
As a teenager, I loved arranging my bottle caps. They were all grouped by their country of origin and then, in smaller groups, by the drink from which they originated. I basically divided them into soft drinks, which were plentiful, alcoholic drinks and water bottles.

I was proudest of a series of bottle caps with Arabic characters that I had managed to get through a distant relative. I tried to understand what was written on some of them, but since I couldn’t I was forced to make an exception in my catalogue and was unable even to classify them by country. As for my three Japanese bottle caps, to this day I don’t know if they were from a bottle of water or a soft drink. I never thought they came from beer bottles: a teetotaller gave me the lot.

Twenty-three bottle caps from India were unusual. They were a gift from an aunt who, despite being barely out of her twenties, had suffered an unbearable romantic heartbreak, and after spending a few weeks crying and screaming meaningless words, decided to go find herself in a small town three hours out of New Delhi.

I must have been around fourteen when she went there for the first time. My grandfather tried to maintain some kind of supportive poise and only managed to say over and over that she would change her mind and would come back soon to finish her law degree. The fact that he paid for his disillusioned daughter’s airfare remains a sore point between him and my grandmother to this day. Looking back, I think my aunt was last in Brazil some ten years ago. As far as I know, she hardly calls even at Christmas.
About two years ago, I plucked up the courage to ask for the whereabouts of my disillusioned aunt. My grandmother started crying, my mother ate another spoonful of rice while signalling her disapproval with her left hand, and my uncle, always competing with his younger sister, said disdainfully that she was somewhere between southern Russia, Mongolia and Kazakhstan.

He said she spends her time wandering with a group headed by a monk who claims to be the reincarnation of the spirit that controls every living being’s emotional side. Not only humans’. At that moment, choking with laughter, my sister almost spat out whatever she was chewing on. I had just ruined our Easter lunch.

I don’t find the story funny. I don’t believe that monk exists, of course, but I always liked my aunt. Her brother, the joker, unnerves me a bit. When she first returned, I think in 1990 (I can’t remember the exacts date because, since I started missing everything, I lost the notion of time), I was very impressed by the way in which she gave me the bottle caps she had brought.

For your collection, Ricardo. I can’t forget that phrase: for your collection, Ricardo. She gave me the parcel with a far-away gaze. We were all waiting at the airport. She saw us as soon as the arrivals door opened, waved and walked towards us very slowly. My grandmother started crying. My aunt hugged us one by one. Later, if I’m not mistaken, I was the first to get a gift. For your collection, Ricardo.
For someone who loved riding his bicycle, and always felt very intense affections, her gestures seemed too vague. I examined the bottle caps on the way from the airport to my grandfather’s house, where we would celebrate her visit.
If I’m not mistaken, my disillusioned aunt returned to Brazil eight years later. We were at the century’s end. We didn’t see each other: her visit coincided with a difficult post-graduate examination. I was very focused, and when I finally managed to return to São Paulo she had already left.

I never forgot my mother’s look of desolation as she told me that her sister, who had become a nun, warned that the world would suffer a great catastrophe, if it did not in fact end at the start of the 21st century.

She never returned to Brazil. Always affectionate, during that second visit she left me some more bottle caps. But I was already studying to become a specialist and, with the arrogance inherited from my uncle, I threw them out. To study their origin, as any good collector would do, did not even cross my mind.

Since all of that happened, I’ve come to understand that to feel a longing for the past means, in some ways, to have regrets. I try to remember a few things. Had I not thrown out the bottle caps, for instance, my aunt’s phrase would make sense to me today. For your collection, Ricardo.

But I have no more collections.

Last week I went back to the rubbish bin into which I threw some of my bottle caps, the most valuable ones. The others, I left for the bin collector the following morning. I had no hope of finding them: after all, it’s been almost twenty years. I think that’s right: twenty years. I just looked at the people in the metro station and its environs. And sadly I found nothing that meant anything to me.
My bottle cap collection came to a sad end. The month after I finished secondary school, a little before Christmas, the class got together for a farewell party. It was one of those meetings at which every promises that they will always stay in touch.

I want to see my classmates again. I sought them out on three social networks on the Internet, but since I can’t remember their names, I didn’t find anyone.

At the party, we would start a new phase of our lives. Naturally, plenty of alcoholic beverages would be available. Today things are different, but back then it took us longer to start drinking.

Because the girls would be there, we anticipated that the evening would lead to the experiences we had fantasised about during our school years. For some reason, probably the last shred of my adolescent pride, I thought that taking my bottle caps would put me in a better position to conquer one of them. That was the plan: seduce them with the best part of my collection.

Today I think such pride demonstrates that I truly have a collector’s soul. I will take my bottle caps, the girls will surely be impressed, and I will choose the one with whom to crown the end of my adolescence. I didn’t have the slightest doubt.

It didn’t work.
All this self-indulgence is making me uncomfortable. Before André’s suicide, I had never wanted to look back. Now, I’ve started missing everything. Because I cannot help remembering an enormous number of episodes I lived through, it is inevitable that I should start to weigh them up. And so, I regret many of them.

When it all started, my first reaction was to hate André. I’m ashamed to say it: he had barely been buried and already I cursed him, speaking to myself as I walked down the street. The first crisis happened when I left the police station.

I had to make a statement. As far as I could tell, I was the last person contacted by André. It all went without a hitch. To be honest, I was surprised by the policemen’s politeness. As I was leaving, one of them asked if I knew the legendary Manoel Camassa, a police commissioner who collects coins and election paraphernalia. He even owns several ballot boxes.

After I said goodbye to the lawyer I had hired as a precaution, I began feeling out of breath. The vertigo grew, so I sat down in a square, but a beggar came over and started bothering me. He called me a cry-baby. I think he called me a little cry-baby. I stood up to face him, but my sight darkened with anger and he disappeared. Then I ran away shouting. I must have cursed everyone, but it was certainly André that I cursed the loudest.
I had never shouted so much. I always dealt silently with my problems. I organise and reorganise them in my head, as if they were in a collection, until I find a solution. I react in the same way when making decisions. That graduation party I mentioned is a good case in point. Of course I didn’t finish secondary school in the way I had planned.

I took around two hundred bottle caps. I was careful to wipe them with a cloth beforehand. I was a bit apprehensive about the Japanese specimens: if they stood out, my inability to explain whether they came from water or soft drink bottles might undermine my ability to charm the girls. Not to mention that, in such an environment, it would be disappointing to admit that a teetotaller had given them to me.

I decided I would start by showing them the three bottle caps of Polka, a beer made in the south of Brazil in the 1940s by a German descendent. Later, as far as I was able to investigate, it stopped being an artisanal brew and was bought out by a large conglomerate.

At the party I would add that in various places around the world the international drinks industry gobbled up small and local enterprises, leading to an obvious deterioration in flavour. If I finished my story by saying that the owner of Polka created some sort of beer fest, I was sure to captivate someone.
I captivated no one, of course. An hour into the party everyone started feeling melancholy, and each time I decided to open my little plastic bag with the ten rare bottle caps, people said that perhaps we could get together again in February. When the atmosphere threatened to become too heavy, we shared each other’s news.

One guy would be helping his brother out at a little shop in Canada. Two of the girls had found jobs with a famous stylist and I, the collector, was burning the midnight oil to get into university to study history.

We agreed to leave early, to make the farewell easier. It wasn’t, and to this day I dislike thinking about it.

Slightly drunk, I sat alone on the metro and studied the ten bottle caps all the way home. For your collection, Ricardo. For some reason, I no longer felt proud of my collection.

The carriage was empty, and in my mind the journey took a long time. I gave the best part of my collection to a guy who seemed very sad and was sitting close to me. Perhaps a friend of his had just killed himself. We mustn’t ask about such things.

It wasn’t like that: angry, sad and a little drunk, but excited about the new prospects, brimming with curiosity about what would come my way,
therefore quite confused, I threw the bottle caps into a bin at the metro station near my house. They were no longer a part of my life.
Sérgio Rodrigues is a journalist and a writer, and was a correspondent for Jornal do Brasil in London and a reporter for major outlets in Brazil. He is the author of Todo Prosa blog (www.todoprosa.com.br), about literature, and made his debut as a writer in 2000. In addition to novels and short stories, Sérgio have had his books of essays and humour published. His book *Elza, a garota*, was published in Portugal and will be adapted for the movies.
Synopsis

Sérgio Rodrigues mixes literature and investigation to create a unique and engaging novel. Molina is a journalist that, at age 43, decides to dedicate his life exclusively to being a writer. In search of a story worthy of being told, he meets Xerxes, who tells him about his infatuation for a girl named Elza, in the middle of the Communist Coup, when Luis Carlos Prestes wanted to seize power and was defeated. The love story, however, never got to term. Elza was murdered by her peers of the Communist Party. Her body was found in 1940, buried in the backyard of a simple house in the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Did the Party strangle her without
certainty?

“With a fictional approach, the journalist discovers shady details of one of the key moments of the political history of the country”.

Jornal do Brasil

“Sérgio Rodrigues finished his learning stage before showing himself. Now he doesn't owe anyone anything.”

Book review,
published in Veja magazine
“King Kong was playing in Cinelandia, the old man said, a late Saturday afternoon session. I went to see it by myself, as I often did. I was crazy about movies. I had already seen that one, it was a rerun, but I wasn’t doing anything and thought it a good idea to watch it again and once more try to decipher the prodigious optical tricks that, at the time, we still hadn’t been taught to call special effects. The old man gave yet another grimace, this time accompanied by a hoarse chuckle. Can you imagine, son, he said, a time when King Kong, the first one, starring Fay Wray and that grotesque puppet filmed in stop-motion, stopping more often than motioning, can you imagine a time when King Kong was a technological wonder, a chimera that mesmerized crowds in the dark auditorium? If you can’t, if you do not have such capacity for abstract thinking, I’m afraid you won’t understand much of my story.

Well of course, Molina began to say. But it must have been a rhetorical question, for Xerxes stopped him short, not at all interested in his answer.

To understand, or rather to feel the blast of novelty that little RKO film represented for us, as though you had actually been there, is an intellectual exercise comparable to breathing the air that we breathed in those days – and now, I wonder if you have noticed, I am talking politics again. It is hard to explain this to a person of the twenty-first century, these people who are
always ready to kill or die over a traffic quarrel, but never for their ideas. Oh no. No belief, unless you are a Muslim terrorist perhaps, justifies the loss of anything, let alone life. The passion for a hooliganesque pack of football fans, oh yes! In the name of that, sure, one kills, one disembowels, one dies every Sunday and sometimes even midweek. But ideology, political beliefs, world view? Bah! You are funny, aren’t you? It is hard to explain that world to you – my world – but I’ll give it a try.

(...) Elza didn’t know anything. Nothing at all. Or rather, yes, she knew how to make soap out of ashes, was impeccable at pressing clothes with heavy irons overflowing with coals, not letting the fabric burn or be soiled by the black smoke. She knew a lot of those things that working-class women had to know in her time. She was the daughter of a Light Co. worker, one of eight children, so she told me, and came from a town that used to be called the Manchester Paulista, with a proletarian concentration larger than most big cities’: Sorocaba. But she had no polish, no political culture and little experience of the petty-bourgeois luxuries that, by then, radio and especially cinema had started to implant in everyone’s minds, rich and poor – Gessy Lever, the soap of the stars and all that crap. It was the beginning of the avalanche of products that has now run over everything, and Elza looked at it with curiosity, but without quite getting what was going on. The minimum data was lacking. To begin with, she was illiterate. She loved going to the movies, found Greta Garbo the most beautiful woman on Earth, but confessed to me with the utmost candor that she didn’t understand a word of what was said on the screen. The captions made as much sense to her as newspaper headlines or restaurant menus – and, unfortunately, she wouldn’t live to see the dubbing age. The movies were a petty-bourgeois pleasure anyway, she said, quoting Bangu, a close friend of Miranda’s: a product of the imperialism of the United States of America. But Elza didn’t really care for that kind of stuff, or the fact that she didn’t understand a thing. For months on end, her dreams would
include certain scenes and details: Garbo looking in the mirror, a Claudette Colbert hairdo that she believed was similar to her own. Sometimes she even preferred not to understand what people were saying on the screen, so she could imagine only beautiful things.

Elza was telling me all this as we walked aimlessly through the center of Rio that Saturday evening, after we left the Cavé ice-cream parlor. It was she who took the initiative of entwining her right arm around my left one, a gesture of intimacy that I hadn’t dared to invite, but received as a blessing. I wasn’t afraid any longer. The anticipated rain had not materialized after all, and at one point the leaden cover of the clouds was torn open magically, silently, from top to bottom, right at the position where a nearly perfect full moon was shining on the grey sky. Elza snuggled closer to me, rested her head on my arm and asked me if I could teach her how to read and write, ‘cause Miranda, see, was trying to do that with the greatest patience, for she was a hard-headed moron, but Miranda had left her now, and she had no idea what would become of her life. We had got to the Public Promenade and, amidst the murmur of the waves breaking against the rocks, I heard Elza sniffing. I stroked her bush of unruly hair with my free hand and led her to the nearest seat. Tears running down her face, she smiled sheepishly, saying, I am so silly, don’t you pay heed. Then my heart swelled and when I came to my senses I was drinking Elza’s tears, a young girl’s tears, but no longer Miranda’s girlfriend’s tears. The happiness I felt at that moment told me the future was good, how extremely good the future was. And amid the most memorable kisses of my life, I promised her everything: teaching, loving, and never never never letting anything bad happen to her ever.

Molina said: But it is a love story then!

There was no sarcasm in those words, at least not of the intentional kind. It was a spontaneous remark, driven by surprise and even by a sort of awe. By relief, too: if the old man’s interest in Elza was purely sentimental, he reckoned, his concerns about the political implications of that story could safely be put aside.
Xerxes seemed to come back from a deep trance. He blinked several times and looked at Molina like an entomologist examining a common butterfly, only to confirm his initial impression of dealing with a specimen that was devoid of scientific or aesthetic value.

A love story, he echoed Molina’s words. They all are, son.
Tony Bellotto (São Paulo, 1960) is a guitar player and song writer of the Titãs, one of the most important bands of the history of Brazilian rock. He made his debut in literature in 1995, with a detective novel whose main character, Detective Bellini, has been in the silver screen in *Bellini and the Sphinx*.

Since 1999, Tony hosts the TV show *Afinando a língua* in Canal Futura, which mixes literature with music to talk about the Portuguese language and forms of expression. His books were published in Portugal, Italy, and France.
Synopsis

A mysterious envelope is left under the door of Lobo Detective Agency. Inside, US$ 5,000 and a murder complaint. The victim is attorney Arlindo Galvet, who died during the São Silvestre Marathon, suddenly falling on the ground, with no apparent cause. Torn between his ghostly client, love affairs, and imbroglios with the Chinese mob, Bellini has a difficult task ahead. After chases through Liberdade, the Asian neighborhood of São Paulo, and visits to a paranormal facility, he begins to admit to himself that otherworldly forces can help him solve this seemingly unsolvable crime.
The blacks went by first. Four of them. Despite their speed, they seemed calm and showed no signs of fatigue, only determination. Then came the others. Dozens of them. Whites, blacks, mulattos, the fair and the dark. All young, thin, agile, with slender legs and well-defined musculature. Thud, thud, thud, thud. You could hear the sound of their running shoes on the asphalt. These were the pros.

Then came the amateurs. Hundreds of men of all types and ages. Only those who were really in shape made it up the hill, and they came sweating, exhausted, wheezing. When we saw him coming we pushed our way through the crowd and stood out front. He wore a serious look of conviction. He smiled when he saw us and I noticed that he was surprised. We held out a plastic cup. Slowing down, but not stopping, he accepted our offer. We waited for him to drink the lot. He waved his thanks, threw the crumpled cup on the ground and picked up his stride.

“Give my regards to Cybelle”, I said.

He turned back and looked at me, livid, but went on running, even if somewhat disoriented. Other runners passed.

When he hit the ground in agony, we quickly slipped away.
“In a few moments we will be landing at Guarulhos airport, São Paulo, where our journey will come to its end...”

The French girls were running topless along the beach, their breasts heaving like bells in slow motion.

“Fasten your seatbelts and return your seat-backs to their fully upright positions. Check if your tray tables are locked...”

One of them stopped and stood there, looking at me. She started to slip off her bikini bottom.

“Sir...”

She kicked away her panties with an agile flick of her right leg. The brown hair of her Venus mound gleamed in the sunlight.

“Sir!”

She squeezed her breasts – neither large nor small, just perfect –, rolling one against the other. I noticed the freckles that covered her shoulders and chest. She smiled. Her face was also full of freckles.

“Sir!”

I woke up.

“Your seat-back, please”, said the flight attendant. “We’re landing”. 
The face of the flight attendant, a blonde Japanese girl, was as white as a billiard ball. The plane landed with a dry thump. I looked out the window. The midday sun intensified the desolation of the runway of São Paulo International Airport. The paradisiacal beaches and topless French tourists had most certainly been left behind.

At the Office, Dora Lobo was waiting for me with Paganini at full blast, a menthol cigarillo and incredible red hair. Why is it aging women change their hair color all the time?

“Like my hair?”, she asked.

“I love it”.

“You lost some hair on vacation. Keep going like this and I’ll need to give you a wig for your birthday”.

It now dawned on me why women change their hair color: it’s simply because they’ve still got hair to change. If Freud maintained that women suffer from penis envy, I can assure you we have a chronic case of hair envy.

“So long as it’s a red one”.

Dora didn’t find that funny. She picked up a newspaper page from the table and handed it to me. KENYAN ONE-TWO AT THE SÃO SILVESTRE. The newspaper was dated January 1st. Just under the headline was a photo of two wiry black athletes crossing the finishing line of São Paulo’s traditional year’s-end mini marathon.

“Not again….Those Kenyans are something else”.

“Read this”, she said, pointing to a column at the bottom of the page.

ATHLETE DIES DURING RACE. ARLINDO GALVET, 47, LAWYER, SUFFERED A CARDIAC ARREST AND DIED ON BRIGADEIRO LUÍS ANTÔNIO AVENUE.
“Fool. You just don’t go in for a race like this unless you’re properly prepared. The cemetery’s full of athletes like that”.

I threw the newspaper onto the table. Those hysterical violins were starting to piss me off. Was Dora going deaf or was she leaving the music up that high just to test my patience?

“My vacation was cancelled because of the São Silvestre?”

She nodded. I looked at the news story again.

“Are we working for an insurance company?”

“Nope”.

“So, who are we working for?”

“Dunno”.

Dissimulation had never been one of Dora’s strong points. Her greater virtues were her sincerity and ability to hit the nail straight on the head, without subterfuge or minced words. So apart from being inopportunite, her answer was also irritating.

“What’s going on, Dora?”

“I thought you’d come back from vacation relaxed”.

“I was relaxed. There”.

“That’s the problem with holidays. You invest a heap of money and all the beneficent effects of a month’s rest are lost within the first five minutes back at work. Don’t you worry, this happens to everybody”.

“I’m not worried. I just want to know why I had to rush back here from Porto Seguro”.

“I needed to know what Dr. Galvet died of”.

“Wouldn’t you be better off asking a doctor?”

“I already have. One. No. Two”.

“And what did they say?”
She went over to the record player and turned it off. All was not lost.
“His heart stopped. We still don’t know why. We’re waiting for the results of some tests”.
“And what’s this got to do with me?”
“Someone’s got to help me find out who we’re working for”.

If I said we had been hired by a ghost, no one would believe me. On January 2nd, while the city of São Paulo looked like one huge graveyard thanks to the flight of its inhabitants in search of bucolic landscapes – even though a crowded beach in 40 degree heat and struck by water and beer shortages isn’t really my idea of paradise –, Rita, our secretary, popped by the office to get the mail and came across a strange envelope that had been shoved under the door. What called attention about this envelope was that it had not been posted and the handwriting spelling out the name of the addressee, Dora Lobo, looked like the scrawl of a child or someone who was either semi-literate or had serious motor coordination problems. Without so much as touching the envelope Rita called Dora and told her all about it. Dora, bored stiff of being stuck at home reading books, listening to CDs and watching DVDs, was crazy for some action. Everything she was saying at the end of November that she was so looking forward to doing – resting, reading, going to the movies, visiting relatives – she’d already done and couldn’t wait to get back to work. So a phone call like this, saying that along with the late Christmas cards was a strange envelope left there by someone other than the mail man, was enough to make Dora abandon her incredible collection of CDs and DVDs and go running straight to the Itália building. Fair enough, I must admit that care, distrust, precaution and other synonyms are the order of the day, but nothing justifies Dora asking Rita to leave the room and put on latex gloves (the ones used by the police to gather evidence from the scene of a crime) and, if you don’t mind,
even a surgical mask.

“Of course Bellini. What if it had been a chemical or biological bomb!”

“Why would anyone send you some junk like that?”

“I dunno, we did an investigation for Newlife, remember? It was a North-American insurance company.

“Paranoia”.

“Who’s not paranoid these days!”

“Don’t you think you’re exaggerating just a little?”

“We have dozens of enemies. Someone could have sent me a letter-bomb”.

“I don’t see how latex gloves and a surgical mask could save you from an explosion masterminded by Al Qaeda”.

“Hey, don’t go overboard. And don’t you go thinking I just opened the letter any old way either. I was extremely careful. Above all else, I wanted to preserve the fingerprints of whoever it was had handled the letter”.

“What was in it?”

“Five thousand dollars”.

“That’s all?”

“You think that’s nothing, do ya?”

“That’s not what I meant. There was just money, nothing else?”

“There was a note too”.

Dora opened a drawer and handed me a piece of writing paper with a few lines written in pencil. **DOCTOR ARLINGDO GALVET DID NOT DIE A NATURAL DEATH. IT WAS MURDER. WHO DID IT? IS FIVE THOUSAND ENOUGH TO PAY FOR AN INVESTIGATION? I’LL BE BACK ON THE TENTH.**
“Can I see the envelope?”

She rummaged through the drawer again and showed me a traditional white envelope with a simple “Dora Lobo” written in the same scrawl as the note.

“Besides the money and the note, was there anything else in the envelope?”

“The newspaper page I’ve just shown you, with the story about Dr. Arlindo Galvet’s death”.

I stood there looking at her, not knowing what to say. She opened another envelope, a bigger tan-colored one, and took out two medical reports.

“One’s from the Legal Medical Institute, where the autopsy took place, and the report could not be clearer: cardiac arrest leading to multiple organ failure. Sato did the autopsy. The other is from a Dr. Curi, a private physician. He was the cardiologist that accompanied the autopsy at my request”.

“And?”

“Same conclusion. I’m just waiting for the results of some toxicology exams that should take a couple of days to come out. According to these reports, there is nothing that points to murder. There are no marks on the body other than the light scratches from the fall onto the asphalt”.

I took a look at the reports. I found no contradictions. But then what could you expect from a guy whose medical knowledge is limited to the use of aspirin for hangovers and ice, band-aids and anti-septic for work accidents.

“Oh, Arlindo Galvet had his ID in his shorts’ pocket. So far no family member has come to claim the body. It’s still in the morgue.”

“That’s nothing strange. It’s January 3rd today, there’s nobody in the
city. What’s this?”, I asked, pointing at some scribbles on the envelope.

“I consulted a graphologist, Pacheco from Unicamp. It took some doing though; he was on holiday with the family at the beach in Caraguatatuba. He said that whoever wrote this was probably unfamiliar with our alphabet. Could be Arabian, Russian, Japanese, who knows? Maybe a Greek. Or maybe just semi-literate. Someone who doesn’t usually use our system of writing”.

“Any fingerprints on the envelope?”

“Nothing. Maybe the guy can’t write, but he’s no fool”.

“Not poor, either”.

I went to the window. São Paulo in January is hot and sad. Or maybe I’m just a hopeless melancholic.

“Right then, it seems the case is closed, doesn’t it?”, I said.

“We will only be sure of that after we get the results of the blood and tissue tests, but I’ve got a sneaky feeling about this. Someone who pays out five grand up front is not going to take two medical reports as incontrovertible proof that the man wasn’t murdered”.

The telephone rang, cutting Dora short. She answered it. I looked out the window. Whether the melancholy belonged to me or to São Paulo made little difference. The fact was, Dora was right – money doesn’t just fall from the sky.

“Bellini”. She was looking at me wide-eyed, muffling the mouthpiece of the phone with her hand. “It’s the morgue. We have developments”.
Arlindo Galvet was a lawyer whose lifestyle could easily be confused with that of a monk. Single, childless, friendless, devoted to his work. At least that was according to his secretary, Silvana Queirós, a slightly overweight (and over-aged) lady, with hair she would have liked to be able to call blond, but which years of dyeing had tinged into a dry, discolored nest. She had turned up to claim the body and one of the coroners at the Legal Medical Institute, Dr. Sato – the one who had done the autopsy – called to let us know. I went there straight away.

“I was in São Vicente. I always go there for the holidays. Such a thing! I knew Dr. Arlindo was going to run the São Silvestre – he did so every year. He also ran the New York marathon”.

“Ma’am, would you like some sugar-water?”, asked Sato.

“That would be very kind. Thank you”.

She was sitting in the anteroom of the freezer where the corpses are kept in drawers. She had just come out after identifying the body.

“I was playing rummy with some friends when I saw the news on television”.

One of Sato’s assistants, a kind of gay-looking nurse, came in with a glass of sugar-water. Silvana drank half and gave the glass back to the assistant.
“It’s quite a shock. I don’t understand it; he had such a strong heart. He ran every single day, rain, hail or shine, took regular check-ups, watched what he ate, he didn’t drink and he couldn’t stand cigarette smoke. He wouldn’t let anyone smoke anywhere near him”, she spoke, looking straight at me.

Sato took the opportunity to introduce us.

“Ms. Silvana, this is Dr. Bellini”.

“My condolences”, I said, trying to understand why the hell Sato had conferred me with the title of doctor.

“Doctor, who can believe it? How could such a thing happen?”, she asked.

Doctor. Me!

“He’s not actually a doctor Ma’am, he’s a lawyer”, explained Sato, enjoying his little bit of fun at my expense.

She didn’t bat an eye; she just kept looking at me, firmly. Then it must finally have occurred to her to wonder what I was doing there.

“Are you a police officer, sir?”

“No”.

“An acquaintance of Dr. Arlindo?”

“Ms. Silvana. We have to talk”.

“Talk about what?”

“I’m a private investigator. My name’s Remo Bellini”.

I showed her my card, as the part requires. Sato was looking at me with that round, leery face of his.

“Private investigator?”, she asked, holding the card. “A detective?”

I nodded.
“I’ve never seen a detective before”.

She handed back my card.

“I mean, except for in the movies or on TV”, she added.

“You can keep the card, ma’am”, I insisted. “It’s only natural that you haven’t seen a detective before. Had you ever seen a coroner?”

She looked up at Sato and shook her head.

“Speaking of which, do you by any chance know the difference between a coroner and a butcher?”

It was beyond comprehension that Sato should have asked such a thing at a time like that.

“Do you think we might talk somewhere else?”, asked Silvana, looking towards me.

In the foreground I could see the tall buildings of downtown, with the bungalows and houses of the middle-class neighborhoods behind them, and the irregular constructions of the poor neighborhoods in the distance. In the background, like a wall, were the blue slopes of the Cantareira Mountains. It was a cloudy day and the air-conditioning gave the false impression that we were living in a city with tolerable temperatures. In fact, from the fourteenth floor of the Itália building, the whole city looked tolerable.

“I just don’t understand it, Dr. Arlindo was so healthy...”

Silvana Queirós played it all back for Dora. Having listened to the story of the envelope and its mysterious sender, she had agreed – reluctantly – to come back with me to the office. After the umpteenth time hearing about all the jogging and careful eating, even I was beginning to doubt how such a healthy and virtuous man could have fallen down stone dead on the hot asphalt.
“The doctors assure me that it is quite possible for an apparently healthy man to suffer a heart attack under these conditions. You know, with the heat, the physical effort…”, said Dora.

“But he was so young. He ran the New York marathon every year”.

“Where did he train?”, I asked.

“In Ibirapuera Park. He went there every morning, really early”.

“What intrigues me is the note”, declared Dora, the queen of objectivity.

Once again, there we all were, silently studying those scribbles.

“This can only be some kind of joke, in very bad taste”, said Silvana.

“A bad-taste joke with five thousand dollars inside?”, I retorted.

“You don’t believe that someone might have wanted to kill Dr. Arlindo, do you?”, asked Dora.

“Of course not”.

“If you find it so hard to believe that he had a heart attack, why not consider the hypothesis that it was murder?”

“Murder makes even less sense. You didn’t know Dr. Arlindo. No one could wish death on a man like him. He was a good creature, a generous man. He had no family, he was orphaned very young and was brought up by an uncle in the countryside of Goiás. The uncle was a small farmer and he worked like crazy to send his nephew to study in Brasília, but he died before Arlindo graduated and moved to São Paulo. Dr. Arlindo didn’t date and had no friends. He lived for his work. Nobody kills someone like that”.

“What type of cases did he handle?”, Dora asked.

“Small claims, routine stuff. Divorces, wills, donations, partnerships, bankruptcies… Dr. Arlindo did everything he could to help people resolve their problems”.

“I see. But think, someone must be left with a grudge every now and then, mustn’t they?”

“What do you mean?”

“A divorce, for example. The other spouse, the one not being defended by Dr. Arlindo. Someone could end up disgruntled by the court’s decision, right?”

“Naturally, but when cases were really complicated, like an acrimonious divorce, for example, Dr. Arlindo normally passed them on. He only handled amicable divorces and wills. Just to give you an idea, he never even accepted complicated inventories. He avoided trouble and detested seeing families fighting over money… Look, I’m tired, and I’ve still got to release Dr. Arlindo’s body and make the funeral arrangements. Would you mind if I go now, please?

“Bellini will help you with the arrangements”.

Remo Bellini, the office boy. Thanks Dora.

“If Dr. Bellini would be so kind...”

“It would be my pleasure”, I declared. Long live hypocrisy. “And you don’t have to call me doctor, just Bellini will do”.

“Thank you very much, Bellini”, said the old crow, smiling.

Could it be there was a hint of lasciviousness in that smile? Would Ms. Silvana’s age be all I would have to deal with from then on in? And just what color was her hair anyway?
In the Hole
No Buraco

TONY BELLOTTO

Brazilian edition: Companhia das Letras
São Paulo, 2010 – 256 pages
Translated by Jennifer Sarah

Synopsis

Teo Zanquis is at the beach, in Ipanema, talking to himself. And the story that he tells is his own, the story of a guitar player of a one-hit rock band from the 1980’s, whose albums can only be found in thrift stores in downtown São Paulo. Zanquis’ professional and artistic life has reached its heyday very quickly and, soon afterwards, with the same speed, plunged into oblivion. In In the Hole, Tony Bellotto presents a loner that nears old age without illusions, mulling the antics of the glory days of his youth. But this doesn’t stop Teo from seeking love in the body of a young Korean girl, or strengthen ties with people he would never imagine being friends with when he
was a national semi-rock-idol, like Mrs. Gladys, an elderly and eccentric neighbor from the one-room apartment where he lives.
All of this happened, more or less.
Kurt Vonnegut, *Matadouro 5*

**THE QUESTION OF PUSSIES**

1. "One of my real problems with literature is the question of pussies."

Was that for real? Am I hearing things?

"Pussies spelled with *ie* doesn’t do justice to the noun."

Where am I? On the beach, in Ipanema with my face buried in the sand. Woken from a snooze by intriguing utterances on the Question of Pussies.

"Pussy is spelled with a *y*; uncountable!" the guy assures.

I keep my eyes closed, as if I don’t exist.

"Pussy!" he repeated exalted.

He’s got an accent from Minas Gerais. Goiania maybe. I can just imagine this character, university professor. Or literary critic. Something
ary. Ponytail, little earring, black speedo, white belly, red-rimmed glasses, an I Ching ideogram tattooed on his backside. The type of guy that calls his own ass, his backside, beside eventually tattooing it. Spending the weekend in Rio to ramble on about pussies or pussy, countable or uncountable, on the beach at Ipanema, chatting up some girl—or guy—next to him.

I don’t hear his interlocutor produce an opinion. If there is a way to produce an opinion on the subject.

“Ie doesn’t have the heat, the humidity and the aromas of y,” he insists. “None in pussies. I distrust writers who write pussies.”

My God. Do I need to hear this? I should have stayed in the hostel. But digging a hole in the sand is undoubtedly a dignified way—though a little unimaginative—to reach some sort of depth.

“One must admit, without good pussy, you don’t have literature”, he concluded, like someone squeezing lemon on an oyster. “Without poontang you can’t write a single word. Ha ha ha.”

Poontang? I almost came out of my tomb and challenged that verbal terrorist with the class and arrogance of a Spanish king: Why don’t you shut up?

But, I’m an ex-rock-guitarist; I don’t see why I should bore myself with literature. Not on the beach, anyway. And definitely, not in the state I’m in. I don’t have the energy to leave the catacombs. Opening my eyes would require strength and condemn me to be part of that scene. Was a time before when I was jammed into Asian pussy, all cozy in the heat, in the humidity and the aromas of the y.

And without sand in my shorts.

Voices cover the speech of the gyno-semantic lecturer. I can no longer distinguish the meanings of the words. If they have any. Now he proffers something with ães. Guimarães, I think.
In the background, the sea seems to say, with the timbre of a Hammond organ: Lien…

Oh, Lien. I had forgotten about her while snoozing.

Portuguese sailors from the 15th Century called the Atlantic Ocean, the Frightening Sea. The waves that whisper me her subtly enigmatic name—Lien—don’t sound especially frightening. I assume the real Frightening Sea is contained within the one kilo and four hundred grams—the average weight—of the human brain.

I’m here, nonetheless, a philosophical ostrich with his head buried in the sand.

If you ask me what would be the first thing I would do on getting out of this hole, I would say: Look for Lien.

Li-en: on the tip of the tongue going down in two jumps, first from the roof of the mouth to touch lightly, and on the second, against the teeth. Li-en, I would add, bombastically—parodying Nabokov—perhaps contaminated by the denouncements of the tattooed backside scholar, in an attempt to impress my interlocutor with some out of place erudition.

The problem is: there’s nobody to ask me anything.

I’m alone. At most, someone might ask, what time is it? And I don’t even have a watch. The possibility always exists that some balzaquian, on in years, may recognize me: is that you? The ever eternal estrangement of the forever guitarist of a one hit band. Some expressions just sound better in English. Banda de um sucesso só. Doesn’t work in Portuguese.

I met Lien in one of those used rock-record stores downtown, stronghold of veteran and novice rockers, where I always find something interesting. Lien—daughter of Koreans, clerk at Combat Records record
store in São Paulo, and the age of what could be my youngest daughter—likes to say that her name, in Korean, means water lily. Then she laughed, in all of her piercings, spiked hair, studded collar, t-shirt with the unpronounceable and complete name of an obscure band: lily of the mine field. I love Lien's sense of humor. It’s genuine humor, like everything about her. Lien is a nerd rocker, skilled on Internet navigation. This fascinates me, since I am a pre-Internet mummy.

Sometimes I go by the shops and used record stores in downtown. Despite not having any link to music anymore, I like to shoot the shit with musicians and folks that still appreciate records, preferably old vinyl records, the kind whose cover you admire and whose lyrics you read on the inside cover without the aid of glasses or any other magnifying lenses. Folks who call records, albums and who disagree—at times argue to death—about the ten best rock records of all time. Elvis Presley (the first of Elvis), Sargent Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, Exile on Main Street, Who's next?, Led Zeppelin iv, Are you experienced?, Catch a fire, London calling, Appetite for destruction and Nevermind, for example, and this is not even MY list. It's a hypothetical list, maybe too politically or chronologically correct for my taste. For example: I forgot to include Paranoid, by Black Sabbath and that would be motive enough to start a fatwa against me in the high regions of these downtown rock stores in São Paulo. And not even to mention---heresy of all heresies—the Sex Pistols’, Never Mind the Bullocks.

Just to let you know.

That’s how I met Lien, by chance. I was rummaging through the vinyls at Combat Records, when suddenly I bumped into a Nova Embalagem LP. Or it bumped into me. Finding an LP is a feat, but a Nova Embalagem LP? That verges on the ridiculous. Facing the Brazilian Bands of the 80’s section, I was looking at the record covers mechanically and uninterestedly. There were some rare finds, but for the most part the collection passed for trash. All those ridiculous bands from the 80’s. Strange haircuts, horrific clothes, forced poses, bizarre emulations of English, American and Australian
bands. The horror. But *Nova Embalagem* so perfectly represented all that, I wept. I don’t know what got into me. I took the LP and cried. I know it sounds absurd, but that's what happened. A couple of tears fell on that horrible record cover. As if seeing myself in a mirror after years of not knowing what I looked like and suddenly facing the image of a monster. It was a desperate cry, of terror, a nightmare, but Lien thought it poetic. She came around the counter and offered me a box of tissues and asked “Do you like *Nova Embalagem*?”.

“I hate *Nova Embalagem*. I hate Brazilian rock from the ’80’s!” I answered crying.

That's how I met Lien.
Vanessa Barbara (São Paulo, 1982) is a journalist, translator, and writer. She is also the publisher of the Hortaliça newspaper (www.hortifruti.org), prestigious media outlet that, in 2012 celebrated its ten years of existence. She writes for Piauí magazine, works as a translator and senior proof reader for Companhia das Letras, and is a columnist on Blog da Companhia. She has translated, among other works, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (2011), and Gertrude Stein’s Three Lives (2008). She was guest author at the 6th Feira Literária Internacional de Paraty (FLIP) in 2008. In 2012, she was selected as one of the twenty new promises in Brazilian literature by Granta’s magazine issue dedicated to The Best Young Brazilian Novelists.
Emilio Fraia was born in São Paulo in 1982. He is a literary editor at the publishing house Cosac Naify, where he has worked with authors such as Enrique Vila-Matas, Antonio Tabucchi, Macedonio Fernández, and William Kennedy. As a journalist, he has written for the magazines *piauí* and *Trip*. His novel, *The Summer of Chibo*, co-written with Vanessa Barbara (*O verão do Chibo*, Alfaguara, 2008, English translation excerpted in the TWO LINES anthology *Passageways*, October 2012) was short-listed for the São Paulo Literature Prize. His graphic novel *Blank Field*, illustrated by DW Ribatski, is forthcoming (*Campo em Branco*, Companhia das Letras). He was selected for Granta’s issue dedicated to The Best Young Brazilian Novelists.
The Summer of Chibo
O verão do Chibo

VANESSA BARBARA & EMILIO FRAIA

Brazilian edition: Editora Objetiva/Alfaguara
Rio de Janeiro, 2008 – 115 pages
Translated by Katrina Dodson

Synopsis

In The Summer of Chibo, written in partnership with Emilio Fraia, a boy no more than seven years old, immersed in a very singular universe, describes his adventures during his summer vacation, in the middle of a corn field in the company of his friends. But this is a different summer. Because Chibo, his older brother, mysteriously disappears, and all the other boys seem to do the same.

This is a subtle work, often humorous, other times touching, about the mysteries that surround growing up. It was a finalist in the Prêmio São Paulo de Literatura.
The boys are out there in the cornfield where the shooting begins. Bruno breaks out ahead, his stomach weak from laughing so hard, behind him comes Moptop, who’s always falling into the same potholes; he opens fire with colorful ammunition—I can swear, even from a distance, that the gumdrop blitz claimed the field and pierced the air like confetti. My brother, Chibo, was in the back seat. I was in front, on my knees, with my head hanging out the window.

From the car, I kept sight of Moptop, who couldn’t manage to peg anyone, especially not in the middle of all that corn, and once again the Bulgarian spy would reach the neutral country’s border under a downpour of banana chews. Wounded in the back, possibly, he’d climb the hemp rope up to the tree house and call out you sissy you sissy. Moptop would say it didn’t count because the game wasn’t fun anymore and Her Majesty’s plans were encrypted or Bulgaria didn’t even exist (and he’d be right, for sure). Then he’d burst into the most decadent, overblown tantrum since our preschool days and start beating up on the younger kids. But not on Chibo, of course. My brother was the oldest of all; he’d just turned twelve, was strong, always stuck up for me, and—I looked in the rearview mirror. He
was silent: my words faded away like a station gone off the air. When the
car stopped, I hopped out on one foot, and Chibo, full of lightning, didn’t
move a muscle. He just sat there, distant. I tried to say something but got
the hiccups as I slammed the car door shut (and I know everyone laughs
whenever I start a sentence and then get stuck on a hiccup, cut off by a jolt
that makes me lose my balance), so I kept quiet. I swallowed my breath
and stood watching as the car got smaller and smaller, until it disappeared
along the edge of the cornfield.

On the plantation, Moptop was headed in Bruno’s direction, arms
flapping wildly. Bruno sped up hard (wrists firm), shot some clumps of
vegetation over his shoulder—at that point I was running too, without
really knowing why—and we collided at the midpoint between tree house
and road. Actually, I was almost run over: he flew by me and spun me
around like a turnstile, raising a cloud of dust and a sweltering southern
wind. I coughed and hiccupsed in alternating sequences and had just
managed to open my eyes when (the hiccups stopped) out sprang Moptop
at top speed and, \textit{plop}, knocked me over. The ground was hot enough to fry
your hands on; the plantation was starting to get scorched and would only
get worse, but a huge downpour fell that day, hard enough to hurt your
back, the kind that ends after five minutes and leaves behind a mere trace
of civilizations and a few submerged ants.

Without stopping, Bruno looked toward the sky with his mouth
open and tried to swallow raindrops. He didn’t notice that the dirt was
already slick, and the chances of slipping were as high as our tree house
junk pile, so that he skid, skated, and lost a shoe. He muttered some curse
that I didn’t catch and continued running in sock feet. Just behind him,
Moptop stopped, picked up the artifact and classified it as Exhibit A of the
Prosecution—but he didn’t exactly request the judge’s permission before
swinging the sneaker by its shoelace and launching it into the distance.
\textit{Plop}: an insole and high-top projectile well-aimed at the Bulgarian spy.

Despite the size 5-5 ½ caliber wound in his back, Bruno kept running.
He dragged himself along stumbling, imagining his glory as a national hero. The chase would be shown on TV in slow-motion, and afterward people would cheer for him as he rode down the street on a parade float. He’d show his great-great-great-grandchildren the mark from the sole at family barbecues and tell longwinded war stories, maybe even attend veterans’ reunions and stuff like that.

Bruno would’ve reached the tree house for sure, if it hadn’t been for the intervention of the Great Puddle, the mother of all mud puddles, which appeared all of a sudden while he was looking back. The spy sank all the way in and fell face first. A caramelized Bruno emerged from that mass of muck and saw that it was useless to resist. Two steps away, Moptop’s silhouette was already reminding him of his right to remain silent, reciting the First Amendment off the top of his head and showing him (nonexistent) handcuffs. Two inches away, a dirty, circular piece of metal glinted up at Bruno, possibly a ring. He managed to pocket it without Moptop noticing and was subsequently detained by the authorities and imprisoned in the tree house.

Chibo wasn’t there either when Bruno told us about the dead man—a body on the other side of the wire fence, in a place on the plantation that, from the way he talked, sounded very very far away. He’d been a kind of traitor to the Bulgarian people, a guy who didn’t follow the law and didn’t pay taxes because, well, he was dead after all. It didn’t take long: in the middle of the cornfield, a whirlwind alive with secret circles, entrances and exits, Bruno suggested a game. Kneeling, he spread out the pages of a spiral notebook on the dirt floor (his entire cartography). He calculated distances and provisions, asked each of us to spin around on our own axis in order to throw off the enemy, and, finally, based on preliminary studies of the local geography and position of the clouds, pointed to the narrowest path where the leaves appeared to be stained with rust. That way, he said. His vague yet intensive directions (west corresponded to north and the center was next to
the eastern border) led up to a tree that stood, all alone and very red, near some old persimmon trees, just past a rise where the trail branched off into one, two, three more. Then Moptop decided, just like that, that he’d seen the stiff too and to prove he wasn’t lying, pushed ahead eagerly without any more questions, clearing the way with his arm, gathering vegetation samples—“turn right or keep going straight because it all ends up the same anyway”—and protected his face with his other hand.

We kept silent and walked on, flicking here and there to scare off the weevils that stuck to our legs. Moptop seemed excited and walked quickly: “Now all we have to do is follow the colored lines on Bruno’s maps, go back twenty, thirty steps, and that’s it.” Once in awhile he’d stop short, look back and give some random order (we almost never understood). Ahead of me, Bruno, who was dealing well with these abrupt brakings, kept quiet—maybe he felt a stomachache coming on. I just followed along, in the stern.

The corn trail didn’t seem to lead anywhere, and the vegetation was getting thicker and more stifling. I looked back and noticed that it was closing in again behind us, but I didn’t say anything. I never did. Moptop was bitten all over and looked happy. He stopped to scratch his leg and examine a beetle stuck to his ankle bone. Bruno considered taking advantage of the situation to climb up on his back and shout from on high, “Land ho!” but ended up minding his manners and asked for a boost. In two seconds, the Brunoscope was raised up above the cornfield. He couldn’t find the wire fence or any other landmarks but spotted a clearing at a distance of twenty feet to the starboard side where we could take a break from scratching and examine the maps.

It was a small area covered in crushed leaves that formed some kind of alien symbol from above (according to Moptop). We sat down without keeping watch on the rear or knowing whether the area was mined, just collapsed on the ground and started fanning ourselves. Bruno drew his knees together and sang softly. At this point, he probably had a terrible explanation for everything and got quieter and quieter—then stopped
singing and looked at us, as though it were time to join in the chorus. Moptop lowered his head and confessed that well, actually, he hadn’t really seen the dead body, not with his eyes, you know?, had only heard a story that—Bruno got up and moved ahead: “My turn to lead.” He consulted the map, said that we were going the right way and (just to impress us) pulled from his pocket a ring. “Don’t touch it,” he said, satisfied with the shocked stares of the members of our expedition. “I found it in a puddle last week… It’s a wedding ring.” He paused a few seconds for effect. “The dead guy’s ring.”

Squatting, engulfed by an enormous sun, Bruno shuffled the dried leaves around on the ground. When he saw me, he got up quickly and pretended to be extremely interested in some old twig. Moptop appeared with his hands full of rocks. He distributed the ammo and moved away. We were playing a game of aiming rocks at geckos on a tree, but out of fear, disgust, or pity, Moptop only watched, grimacing at every shot. It didn’t take long for a blow to split one of the geckos down the middle. Moptop squeezed his eyes shut and turned his face away.

The little creature’s two parts tumbled down the trunk. I stood staring at the void that separated its head—its eyes were still very much alive—from its tail. Bruno poked the gecko with a stick: “I wonder if it takes a man this long to die.” I thought about Chibo in the back seat, in all that silence, and thought that yes, someone could begin to die very early on (and take days, hours, or years to stop existing).

Three seconds before the attack, the gecko’s eyes had been two black, bulging, humid dots—those little peanut beetles that get scared whenever we open the jar and make faces at them. I think it had known what was about to happen; it knew there was no use calling for help, and froze there with that hangdog look on its face.
That same day, before dark, Moptop whispered that Bruno had stoned the Dead Guy to death on the orders of the queen of Bulgaria and (even worse) that little twerp hadn’t told us anything. “There, I said it.” Moptop was mad about how we only ever listened to Bruno and never called him on his crap: for example, “This is the stiff’s wedding ring, I’m the one who found it.” And just like that, we’d believe him.

According to Moptop’s recent findings, someone had stolen a nuclear microreactor shaped like a ring (developed by Her Majesty’s official government research lab) and the Bulgarian spy, codename Bruno, had been singled out to recover it and eliminate the double agent, codename Dead Guy. He explained this all with an air of importance and waited for my reaction. He could provide more details, if necessary. He’d been thinking about it all afternoon. I dug at the dirt a little, in silence, but it was almost nighttime already, so I didn’t say anything. Moptop stayed there for awhile, I think.

The wind changed direction.

The next day, sitting in the tree house with the plantation at my feet, I moored my ships. Some were made from paper, others of wood, painted blue, the paint peeling off.

I imagined a miniature Chibo in the hatch of one of those boats; he climbed up, trying out a sailor’s tune, and the beach was right there (I was struggling to secure my ships). My brother went to handle the ropes, calling me captain. “The island is inhabited, captain.” He’d call me captain, and this would bring Chibo back. I stood on the deck of the tree house and made a spyglass with my hand. It was Bruno in the distance. The Bulgarian spy zig-zagged, examining the plantation grounds inch by inch. Then he kicked a few rocks and leaned over something: I was struck by the object’s brilliance; a metal lighter. He picked it up, wiped it on his shirt, put it in his pocket. I took the spyglass away from my face and turned around, looking
for Chibo. But my brother was gone, he’d disappeared, and a larger wave made our ship pull back.

I waved to Bruno, who closed his eyes and cupped his hands, shouting: “The tree house needs a door!” He’d been smiling, I think. I leapt forward, flew down the rope stairs, and jumped on top of him, shouting something random, but Moptop didn’t follow me, nor did I manage to knock Bruno over. He untangled himself from my leg, which stubbornly kept trying to trip him (weak-ling, you-sis-sy), and marched solemnly toward the tree house. I watched the scene from the ground, belly up, having lost the will to live. Bruno climbed the stairs, squatted and faced Moptop, who was looking at his thumb cuticle, at the ceiling, back at his thumb cuticle (it was pretty funny).

Bruno pulled the lighter from his pocket the way police do in dubbed American films, began to play with the flame, and explained the plan:

We’re gonna have to split up. Moptop goes west, and you, toward the red-all-over tree. My area’s the pond. Nobody talks to nobody. Whoever finds anything leaves a message at the tree house and marks the nearest cornstalk with a piece of clothing. Whoever gets captured better keep his mouth shut.

Okay, now let’s make a pact. Any questions?

Bruno flicked the lighter open and told Moptop to put his finger in the flame. It stood waiting. He looked to me for help from up in the tree—his eyes were two humid dots—but I played dead. Whoever’s gonna join the secret service put-your-finger-here, ’cause that seals the deal. “This is a girl’s game,” Moptop objected, hoping that I’d agree, but I didn’t do that either—I kept playing dead, pale against the orange of the ground, ants sprouting from my knees and arms. “So it’s gonna be like that, huh? You’re gonna be against us?”

I don’t remember exactly how it happened, but Moptop said, “Yes,” very softly, so softly that I couldn’t tell whether it was a word or a peep.
Bruno socked the wall. “Get outta here,” he said and stuck his finger in the flame. So this was what it was to be a man.

It was no use insisting, as Moptop did, shouting that the queen of Bulgaria had just arrived, bringing a top-secret report with her, because, door or no door, Bruno would spend the afternoon locked in the tree house, refusing all visitors. I bet he had all the coordinates in his head, the next steps charted out point by point, and nothing’s worse than when everything’s ready and all that’s left is to attack (the anxiety). Tired of shouting, Moptop came over to me—but he preferred the shade because he’s the type that turns pink in the sun. Just like that, from somewhat far away, he pulled a coin from his ear. He performed some finger acrobatics, the coin disappeared, and, “psst!,” he beckoned to me. I rubbed my eyes. “Psst!,” Moptop hissed again and raised his pointer finger to his mouth, signaling for silence. From his pocket he pulled a crayon and a crumpled-up piece of paper. He drew a phone and showed it to me: we had to talk, that’s what it was. He scrawled a bunch of red fruit + a watch showing quarter to eleven = two stick figures. He got up without a sound, shredded the drawings into tiny pieces (he didn’t want to leave any evidence, he’d explain later), and disappeared.

We met up at the set time, at the place where the plantation surrendered, and the persimmon trees were victorious for a moment. Moptop held his hand closed and said, stuttering only once, that we had to stick together until the very end, that Bruno’s maps were wrong, that he felt a knot in his stomach, and that the double agent codename Dead Guy could, in fact, be alive and tracing our steps. He opened his hand and revealed the transmitters, three beta-carotene-type metal polypropylene capsules that he’d found the day before, in a mound of dirt. They were either that or pebbles, he concluded, getting up in my face. I backed away
and backed away and backed away. He reached out his hand so I could see better: “Watch out ’cause they might explode.”

Moptop, his hands all sweaty and his face flushed, had put his shirt on inside out. One day, he’d cut the collar off an old t-shirt because he felt stifled, and no one had complained; over time, he’d started tearing the sleeves off other shirts too and now destroys his entire closet at the beginning of every summer. What Moptop really wanted, I think, was to get a basketball jersey, the kind pierced with little sieve holes. His dream was to dribble past Bruno, fly toward the basket and autograph the youngest kids’ foreheads, but, while picturing it, he’d mess up, put his head into the sleeve, mix up the sides of his shirt—so that I looked at him and said: “Your shirt’s on inside out.” That was all I said. In the backseat, Chibo was breathing hard—my brother hunkered down, his wheels spun in the void, the cables were cut, his wings would free themselves from the wreckage, and we’d all fall. I already knew that we’d lost contact with the base, but I didn’t tell Moptop, who looked anxiously at his inside-out shirt, looked at the three small stones in his hand, looked at me.

Falling, falling, more than 20,000 feet, Moptop inserted the transmitters into his pocket, into the package of gumdrops. It was as if he were archiving the definitive evidence of the case. Through static I heard Bruno repeating: Moptop goes west. My area’s the pond. Nobody talks to nobody. Whoever gets captured better—and he was cut off by a noise, a shrill sound, heavy breathing. Then we started walking, me and Moptop (and it was an odd day), until we split up. He waved back, then kept going, singing softly: “The arm is not an arm, the arm is a head.” I went in the opposite direction, toward the red-all-over tree, “the mouth is not a mouth, the mouth is a bellybutton,” until the sound faded away.
Vítor Ramil was born in Pelotas, Rio Grande do Sul, 1962. Since the eighties, he works as a singer and songwriter, releasing his first record when he was only eighteen. He has released seven albums and his songs were recorded by international artists like Mercedes Sosa and Jorge Dexler.
In one’s way to the Brazilian South, the landscape acquires the weight of a dream. The mist, the prairie, the cold wind: all the elements become stronger as we get closer to Satolep, a city that Vítor Ramil created inspired on Pelotas, his home town. *Satolep* (an anagram of the word Pelotas) begins with a return. On his 30th birthday, the photographer Selbor returns to the city where he was born, the damp and phantasmagoric Satolep. The novel portrays the narrator’s rediscover of his past, where he meets real characters of Pelota’s history, as the writer João Simões Lopes Neto, the poet, journalist and playboy Lobo da Costa and the filmmaker
Francisco Santos, director of one of the first fiction movies realized in Brazil. The narrator himself has a real origin: he was inspired in Clodomiro Carriconde, a photographer that largely retracted the life in Pelotas in the beginning of the twentieth century. Selbor’s images are completed by small texts, snapshots of fog, poetry and hallucination that he found inside a briefcase forgotten by a young man in the train station. He soon discovers that these short reports were based in future pictures that he had yet to take. With all its mystery and passion, these words follow the narrator’s steps through the city, offering a poetic narrative of his history and proving that Selbor and the city which he wanted so much to abandon in his youth are made of the same substance, as two elements intrinsically connected.
I have dispersed myself in time whose order I ignore.

SAINT AUGUSTINE,
Confessions
“I had new visions of Satolep in ruins. Today, it was our house that I saw: collapsed roof and wall; the wrecked north face, the living room, the dining room and the kitchen handed over to the storm; the front door fallen over winding plants among the exposed bricks of the façade. Inscriptions in ink, which I could not read, dirtied the rotten windows. There were no remains of our family.” My brother’s voice came to us from the ruins even though he was there, standing in front of us. Around the table, having breakfast, we listened to him, not without terror, but in silence. “The time to leave has arrived”, he announced. The hat on his head and the traveling bag in his hand dispensed the sentence. My father asked the driver to bring Selbor, the photographer. The driver posed with us, leaning on the balustrade between the pillars on the porch. My visionary brother, my sisters, and I stood very close to each other, in the entrance of the house; my mother and my father, in the lateral window, which would not be there anymore in the future.
I turned up the collar of my overcoat, pulled down the brim of my hat over my eyes and exchanged the premises of the hotel for the ones of the fog. Satolep was properly decorated for my lonely party. Things geometrized by the cold revealed themselves volatile. Rigorous lines at sunlight were, now, absence of contours. To turn thirty was to get lost in the mist while catching sight of the city’s concreture, or was it the contrary? A dog floated behind a sprung cart that was passing. The granite of the curb ran by my side, at times shiny in its humidity, at times dissipated in luminous steam; another dog, made of stone and cloud, a dog from some mythology, condemned to be born and die indefinitely. To be born a stone and to die a cloud? To be born a cloud and to die a stone? Thirty years old. I blew imaginary candles, and my soul trembled in front of me.
I used to see my soul when I was a child, breathing on the June windowpanes to write my name on them. My soul carried my name. Nevertheless, during the long period that goes from the end of those first years to the night of my thirtieth birthday, I had not seen it. While traveling around the world, I had forgotten it. When I wished to see it again, I thought that it would not hold my handwriting anymore, that it would not recognize my digitals. This was another June, another beginning of winter: while the temperature fell in Satolep, I wore myself out in the routine of the fierce heat in the north of Brazil, the extreme opposite in the country. My suitcase, not yet unpacked on the floor of the bedroom, as usual, was heavier than normal, because of the bother of an increasingly sick temporariness that nested itself among my shirts. Being far away is a large telescope for the virtues of the land where the first shirt was worn. The shirts reminded me of Eça de Queirós’ sentence which my father liked to quote. The shirts reminded me of my father. I moved naked in the dimness of the house. I left the bedroom, crossed the corridor, entered the kitchen. My eyes witnessed the infallible and insidious sun heating through the crack in the window the untouched plate with food, forgotten on the table since the previous night, but they said nothing about what they saw in the telescope. I was not sure of what I saw. Dust danced in the cylinder of the sun. My eyes were made of dust. The world burned me. I got some water from the earthenware water filter while my damp feet looked for comfort on the floor cooled by the night. I had left the land of my first shirt behind many years ago and had departed in search of the sun. I had looked for it
far from Satolep, had found it everywhere; I had surrendered myself to it as, when I was a child, naked already, I had kneeled the closest possible to the can of alcohol in flames that warmed the bathroom and there I had kept looking at the rain falling outside on the roof tiles darkened by the humidity, on the gutter holes, on the panes of the pivot window. Now, it was June again, but I avoided the heat of the sun as a slug avoids the salt sprinkled on its way. “Be careful not to knock over the can”, my mother always used to warn me. I peeked at the sidewalk through the shutter, and a bead of sweat ran down the left side of my face. Which unforeseen gesture had spilled the alcohol towards me?
The world burned me. How long had I been in that town? What was it called again? After the heat ceased, would I see dry leaves covering the sidewalk? Would I see a cold wind sweep it afterwards, and then flowers blossom again in the flowerbeds, and then the sun come back in the right amount I would miss it? I asked myself about the seasons in the South, about my own seasons. I thought whether I had had them some day. I, the seasons, and the places have looked the same lately. “I like to renew my wardrobe, to exchange light clothes for winter clothes”, my mother used to say when winter arrived. At the beginning of spring, my father used to remark: “We look like the backyard, losing the humidity spots”. In the dimness of the kitchen, my look seemed to seek consolation in these remote images. Would they be those land virtues of my first shirt in the large telescope? When I was a child, the humidity spots used to take long to vanish. Satolep used to take long to vanish. I feared it would never vanish. To make it vanish, I would leave it behind as if it had never existed. But now, so many years and places later, in the sounds of sprung carts, words, the smell of night-blooming jasmines, some mansions, some nights, indistinct things, there it was again, as something I needed. Satolep had not vanished yet. With it, my fear that it would not vanish. Neither had I, a child, faster than time, vanished yet. There I came, falling down the stairs in the two-story house where I had lived part of my childhood – parts of the two-story house coming to me slowly, coming so slowly, so many parts of
the two-story house, so many screams that belong to the two-story house, so often the two-story house coming to my mind and taking so long to vanish.
The day arrives in white bottles in the houses on Paysandú Street. The wee portions of austral light make it the first place where dawn breaks in Satolep. The Adelo Store has not opened yet, the streetcar has not passed yet, but the containers disposed identically on the granite thresholds already echoed the chirp of the birds, rakes in the flowerbeds, newspaper pages, jammed corners. At this time, nothing nor nobody seems to be behind the façades on Paysandú Street. Nevertheless, the bottled morning stirs subtly on all the stretch of the street because of the children that turn on the rusty springs of the mattresses and the mothers that stomp their alpargatas, hardened by the humidity, on the floor while they walked through the corridors among the dim bedrooms. We, the dwellers on Paysandú Street have got used to the impositions of the first hour. We are not very perceptive. Within us, it is always very early, be the sun at its peak or be it orangish on the hills of the German colony. We are barely seen entering and leaving our houses. Sometimes I ask myself whether we live on the street or whether it is the street that passes within us. When the milkman makes his brief pause on Piratinino de Almeida Square and prepares his sprung cart to change his course and keep on the delivery, the day bottles are not by the door of the houses anymore. While Satolep still dreams of bridges of fog, submerged leather vessels, out of tune pianos on the top of fig trees, we, the dwellers of Paysandú Street, are already sunbathing in our kitchens.
In the dimness of the kitchen, my stare. I needed to vanish, I needed to vanish from there, I needed to vanish from there on. But where to go from there on? Suddenly, I had the impression that I had been living an illusory progression for years. Had I always gone downward and inward when I thought I had gone forward and outward? Had I been falling all the time? Anyway, after having dwelt in houses in a lot of cities and countries, I felt worn out, unable to correspond to my compulsive need for change and find any sense in it. I had reached a limit. This time, I did not know the name of my street; it took me a long time to remember the name of the city I was in. All I knew was that my house was in the North, near the sun, and that, even so, my first shirt was hanging on the line, still humid. Why could the sun not dry it? I slid my hand on the objects which were on the sink cabinet. Nothing was mine. Was it that I had been looking for with my transitive life, that nothing, ever, anytime, should be mine? I, who had wandered around the world after things, who had made it my profession, who had got by with the bread of all things.
Now, there was hunger that things could not satisfy. I have always despised my body, but it was calling my attention to what was happening. In its own way, it said that there was no thereafter. And I had no arguments against my inconsolable eyes, my plentiful sweat, my trembling legs. This humble, extremely humble body, imposed itself on me with unexpected authority, standing indifferently in front of the fruits arranged in the center of the kitchen table – where the cylinder of sun and dust beamed on – as if to warn me that the hunger did not strike me with taste, color, form or name, only with emptiness, emptiness that might be myself; I, pretentious abstraction, it said, pretentious to the point of despising it. My hand has slid on the cabinet telling me about things, about the hunger of all things, about those many things I had learned to contemplate through the windowpanes in our house, that greenhouse of abstractions that our father and our mother kept – she, with her almost immaterial presence, he, with his inexhaustible sermons -, abstractions that sounded imperishable in opposition to the concrete, objective, ruin-prone reality outside, abstractions that entwined with the family as a whole, and with each one of us. I had wanted to confront things to assure my perenniality. They, little by little, assured what was concrete in me. Things were the limit. My hand was already on the suitcase. My body had decided to come back.
When you collected me on the streets, did you, gentlemen, think I was deteriorated by inner reverie? But I was intact, as I am now, destitute of shadows at daylight like the mosaic tiles that had just been laid on the sidewalk in front of the *Caixeiral Club*, where you found me. I recognize that my appearance does not show it. My shoes are shabby, my overcoat is dirty and worn at the elbows. I have been walking in the city canals, and washing my face in the fountain in the *Jardim Central*. I know that my record does not favor me and that the lucidity that allows me to make this assumption is likely to seem a contrivance. You may want to ask for evidence of the integrity I claim. I think it is fair. When my body decided to come back, I reacted similarly. I let my hands close the suitcase, pack my equipment and shut the front door. Afterwards, from the cab window, I only made sure that the house was left behind, in its North, that its façade was being forgotten, that its color faded away among other colors forever. At the port, I regretted having to take a very long and tedious trip by ship, but I thought about the possible benefits of the wait and allowed myself to board. During the trip, I made things even easier by getting busy with memories of old maritime narratives, letting my body recover from the burden I had represented so far. Having disembarked at the port in *Rio Grande*, I was lofty to hide the excitement at being so near Satolep by train, the destination that had once been my origin. And, even though I believed that my 30-year trajectory closed a circle, I tried a reaction: was it inevitable that, geographically, it was also a circle? Was it sensible to come back physically? Indifferent, neither resigned nor fearless, my body headed
straight for the train station, moved by the instinct for moving a spiral, rather than a circle. It believed that, instead of closing, that spiral would raise it to another one. It was the most human hypothesis of all; I did not put up any resistance. But, when we arrived at the station, I faced my willful body and warned it: “I will demand evidence”.

In front of the Palácio Municipal a man looks for a job without noticing that the holes in his shoes show a perfect fit to the lustrous cobblestones; a physician gets confused with the memory of the dead patient in his hands, without turning his face to the statues, the parapets, and the gables which are erected around him through his eyes; a smoker tied to a butt breaks his oath concerning his last cigarette without noticing the scent of soybeans and jasmine in the breeze that brushes his nose; a civil servant who works for the Finance Department in this city, which gives him everything, feels he was deceived; a clockmaker with large steps lets himself be tightened by time and suffers because of it, being unable to learn the lesson taught by the crape myrtles that stray freely through their slow shadows; two young boys transform themselves into balusters, having room to be fast winged sprung cart drivers; two women, one of them scolding a child, find themselves elegant and reserved under ceremonious sunshades being exposed to the mild sun as sinister mushrooms in this warm summerlike period out of season; a priest wearing a large hat feels sorry for the black paper collector who feels sorry for the priest wearing a large hat. Among all these citizens, I, sat on the high curb, am the only one seen as alienated; I, who respectfully wait for the fog and the ruffle of dusk on the birds in order to bless everyone, cocoon by the door of the Palácio and sleep.
The most human hypothesis of all. To survive. A decision that was not within my power. But I could not complain about my condition as a spectator. I faced the train trip boarding my body the way it had faced the trip through the sea boarding a ship of English flag: stretched, swingy and sleepy. The train chugged: keep this way, keep this way, keep this way. And I kept quiet, very quiet. It was my body teaching me survival lessons. Indeed, quietness might have been the most suitable state of mind for that comeback; some kind of quietness that delayed, under observation, the view of a hostile world long acquired in the family greenhouse and gave way to the arguments of life outside, whose dynamics I could never understand. To close the thirty-year circle may be more about resuming the stretch of road I had left behind, rather than covering the stretch that was ahead of me. I would have to get closer to this empty lot from the past step by step. I would need the quietness I could see through the window on the flourishing plains, where light went far and the train traveled without any impediment. As we got closer to the city, the fields became waters that became sky, molding complete smoothness, which involved us and polished the composition. When we reached the iron bridge over the São Gonçalo Channel, the passenger that traveled next to me pointed to the surrounding landscape – clear in its full extent, even though patches of creeping mist were starting to form -, the mirrored surface we would pass by, the regular green of the pasture on the right bank, the pointillism of a small herd, the face and the outline of the buildings standing out against the oriental sky, and said: “Cold geometrizes things”.

I disembarked with the traveling companion’s sentence in my mind. Cold and things: a wish for maturity and a wish for childhood met on the platform at Satolep Station. The gentleman who had provoked that meeting stood in front of me and held out his hand to say goodbye. Before leaving, he asked me whether I knew the city. “It is my first time here”, I answered. I cannot tell you whether it was I or my body that had decided to act that way. Probably both, because, in principle, I would not have said that, but, as soon as I said it, I thought I had told the truth. The man, who spoke impeccable Portuguese despite his strong Spanish accent, came closer and said, with the same naturalness of somebody who tells the time or the name of a street: “If we had traveled purely through the intensity of light and the rigorousness of the landscape, we would be penetrating in its details now. We have disembarked in the station of essential things”. His remarks were the first blossom in the plain of my quietness. “Have you already found a place to stay? Would you like some orientation? I am Cuban but I have often come to Satolep. I know the city well.” It was embarrassing to arrive and find out that I had no courage to go to my parents’ house. Before coming, I feared that the house would never leave me. The vertical clock at the station lounge struck six times: keep this way, keep this way, keep this way. The Cuban, gentle as usual, waited for my answer until my body took the initiative again, showing that it was confident that the city would help me come back. Then I said: “Would you recommend a good hotel?”.
If any sensation that describes the time of my thirty years remains some day, it will be this one: to be in me and around me. I was coming back and saw myself coming back. These days, I am not sure which position was responsible for the rapture and which one was responsible for the circumspection. Nevertheless, I clearly remember this combination on that precise day. My body, which had shown determination and confidence in the city when it was on the arrival platform, could not proceed now that it had to face the restlessness of pedestrians, cars, streetcars, sprung carts, with the smell of coffee and soybeans, with the intact luminosity after so many years. That was when I, the abstraction that despised it, in an inverse reaction, longed for moving forward. Immobilized and hectic at the same time, I stared at the street for a long time until an abrupt and uncontrollable sickness struck me. My knees collapsed and I vomited in a pitiful way. “It is the tiredness of the trip, keep calm”, the Cuban supported me. The square in front of the station opened up generously waiting for a hug.
Zuenir Ventura (Além paraíba, 1931) was a reporter, editor, and editor-in-chief of important media outlets in Brazil, achieving an extraordinary journalistic career. During forty years, he was also a college professor. With inquisitive talent and literary refinement, he is the author of investigative works, essays, and novels. Zuenir won many important awards, and has a column in O Globo newspaper.
In his new book, *Sacred Family*, Zuenir Ventura intertwines memoirs and fiction to create a lyrical and captivating narrative about love that endures time and the loss of innocence. With nostalgia and good humor, the narrator goes on a journey to the past, to the fictional city of Florida, to recount his life among a big family from Rio de Janeiro. “This is a book strongly inspired by my memories, but, so as to not create any problems with still living relatives, I’ve invented many things, changed the names, put a literary spin in many episodes. What I really wanted was to tell a story that represented the hypocrisy of that time”, says
Zuenir about his childhood and teenage years lived in a “typically Nelson Rodrigues’ universe”. With characters and scenes that, the author admits, resemble, in fact, characters from Nelson Rodrigues’ texts, Zuenir recreates with great tenderness the yearnings and tribulations of a family living in the mountains near Rio de Janeiro, from the 1940’s to a time not so long ago.
Chapter 1. The Injection

That night I lost my balance and my innocence. I saw something I shouldn’t have seen and fell to the ground. It was possibly the coldest night of the winter and, on top of that, I really had to pee. I knew I wasn’t supposed to leave my post, but I couldn’t hold it, and the cold only made it worse. I was shivering. I put my hands in my pockets, rubbed my legs together, and tapped my feet, doing everything that I could to keep from peeing my pants.

Auntie Nonoca usually got her injections at the back of a pharmacy, where there was a small exam room reserved for vaccinations and other kinds of basic care. I was supposed to stay at the front door and ask customers to come back in half an hour. *Mr. Canuto is busy giving injections and cannot be of service right now*, was what I was supposed to say. This generally happened between 7 and 8 o’clock, after dinner, but those days my aunt rarely ate dinner.

While her sister, two daughters and I sat at the dinner table, Auntie Nonoca would sit down in front of the mirror on the dressing table in her room and carry out a meticulous ritual. She combed her straight black hair, pulled it up into a lovely bun, and put on blush, which was the only kind
of make-up she used. She would open a round paper box, carefully pull out a little sponge with a pink pompom on top, and powder her cheekbones, leaving a fine almost unnoticeable layer.

“Is it too much?” She would ask invariably.

I ate as quickly as possible in order to catch the tail end of this ceremony, which was fascinating to me. It always ended with my aunt opening a bottle of RoyalBriar extract, neatly wetting the tip of her index finger and massaging the skin behind her ears. On her way out, she would examine her whole body in the mirror, turn to the side, suck in her non-existent stomach, push up her breasts, and bite her lips a few times to make them redder. Then she would grab her long wool coat and say, “let’s go.” I would let my gaze wander over those slightly rebellious curves, which were hugged tightly by a black dress that struggled to hold everything in.

That night I ran down the stairs to be the first one to reach the sidewalk. I waited for my aunt and we left holding hands. When we passed by Mr. Juca’s bar, my aunt figured out what I wanted: a novelty that had just arrived in the city. It was a little yellow box full of candy that wasn’t for sucking or swallowing, but for chewing. No one really understood the point, but everyone wanted to try it.

“Oh the way back I’ll buy some chiclets for you,” she said, trying out the English pronunciation, “but you can’t chew with your mouth open…”

“…or smack my lips,” I completed her sentence and nodded my head. “And what about a pair of longer pants? My legs are really cold.”

“I’ll take care of that tomorrow.”

She had promised to convince her brother, my dad, that his son the “Beanpole” or “Twig,” as they called me, was too tall to wear short pants, especially in that cold. I was 9 years old and spending winter break at Auntie Nonoca’s house, as I usually did. According to her these trips to the pharmacy were for medical treatments. I never knew exactly what she had.
She seemed pretty healthy to me. But then again I never asked.

I liked to go with her because while I kept one eye on the street, watching for anyone that might come in, I kept the other one focused on the glass counter where all of the products were displayed: soap, toothpaste, nail polish, bottles of perfume, and all the medicines. The drugstore was an intoxicating world of colors, images and most importantly, smells. Sometimes I have the impression that all of my memories from that time are made of fragrances. They were implanted in me through my nose – rather than visual, my memories were olfactory.

My aunt used Reuter soap, which was sitting on the counter. The Reuter packaging said something about *that intangible thing called beauty that motivates all women*. I didn’t always understand what the posters said. *A fresh and charming aura for your beauty kit* was written beneath a drawing of three beautiful women who used Elizabeth Arden products. Squibb toothpaste promoted a *splendid sensation that takes over your whole mouth*.

What excited me the most, however, was the claim made by my aunt’s soap, which guaranteed that the women who used it would have a *deliciously elegant cutis*. I didn’t understand the meaning of *cutis*, but every time that I read those three words I felt a slight shiver that made me think of her immediately, the way she smelled when she got out of the shower, the softness of her skin when it touched mine accidentally. The seduction of those vague sensations made me tingle all over.

“Let’s get on with the little prick, shall we Ms. Nonoca?” said the pharmacist after finishing up with his last patient.

“Only if you promise that it won’t hurt, Mr. Canuto.”

There was no reason for them to be laughing. Shots always seemed pretty serious to me. But they were. My aunt was laughing maliciously, in a way I had never seen her before.

“Stay tough out here, OK little Manu,” Mr. Canuto said to me with a
wink. From that moment on I began to hate him. There were two things that I detested: having to wear short pants and people who called me by my nickname. “My name is Manwel, with a W, ManwelAraújo,” I muttered. I was very proud of the spelling even though it was a mistake made by the medical clerk. I still regret the fact that I didn’t retaliate with a curse like the one that I’d once heard my aunt use to refer to Mr. Canuto. During a conversation with Celeste, she had called him *a hairy and disgusting mulatto*.

At that moment, however, I think my sudden dislike for them had more to do with the lewd and sneaky way they were laughing and looking at one another.

Suddenly aware that I was irritated, Mr. Hairy and Disgusting tried to bribe me.

“As soon as that first hair appears on your chin, I’m going to give you a present worth 13 *cruzeiros* and 50 *centavos*, you hear that? 13 *cruzeiros* and 50 *centavos*.”

I already knew he was talking about a new razor, the Gillette Tech. I have to admit that it was a good gift. Even so, the promise did not appease me. He must have taken note of this because he went inside, grabbed something and brought it over to me.

“Take a whiff of this,” he said quietly and persuasively, “you’re going to like it.”

It was a clump of wet gauze. I held it beneath my nose and the smell was truly intoxicating. Immediately I felt a confusing mix of lethargy and euphoria, numbness and stimulation, as if I had left my body and traveled to another sphere of reality. It was so intense that it felt like an eternity before I returned to normal. My heartbeat sped up and my vision blurred. Only later did I find out what that substance was, and by then I had become obsessed with the smell.
Still a little under the influence of that deep breath, I kept my eyes on the door and went behind the counter to pretend I was a pharmacist. I wanted to be a doctor when I grew up, and I used to practice in the drugstore with imaginary patients.

“You have a headache, ma’am? Take Melhoral, which is the best and doesn’t hurt at all!”

I liked to repeat the commercials that I heard on the radio. I knew everything by heart, even though I didn’t understand what it all meant. I had no idea what “PMS” or “menstrual cramps” were but I often parroted the ReguladorGesteria commercials anyways.

“Do you feel moments of sadness, rapid heartbeats, dizziness, feverish headaches, nausea, congestion? Take ReguladorGesteria. Wouldn’t you like to buy a tube of Colgate, the toothpaste that cures bad breath? Perhaps you would prefer eau de toilette called Regina, which has a mild and instantaneous fragrance? If I were you I would switch to using RoyalBriar: *the scent that brings back memories*. It’s what my aunt uses. And how about you sir, would you like to buy Iodalb, to keep your heart young?”

But that evening I could hardly keep my eyes on the counter display. I had to pee so desperately that I left my post at the counter and ran to the bathroom. I couldn’t hold it any longer. Who was likely to come in at that hour anyways? The mist and the fog had emptied out the streets and the “Sweeper” train hadn’t even arrived yet. They called it that because it “swept” everyone into their houses at 9pm.

Like some monster from another era, the machine broke through the fog puffing and letting loose clouds of smoke that got mixed up with the fog. A muffled and frightening noise arrived first. A few minutes after hearing that sound one could see what it was. On these kinds of nights, a thick mist enclosed the city, erasing the clarity and shape of things.

Hitler were terrorizing Europe, the Nazis had sunk another Brazilian ship. It was the seventh sunken ship in 1942. The world was threatening
to go up in flames and we could hear the distant echoes of the war. But Florida, the city of flowers, was sleeping in peace, at least for the moment. “Lead Legs” was the only person who passed by. Completely drunk, he was dragging the swollen limbs that gave him his nickname. If my cousin Emmerson had been with me he would have yelled, “Lead Leeeeeeegggggggs!” And we would have hidden at the response, “Lead Legs your mother, you-son-of-a-bitch!”

Mr. Cantuo’s Drugstore was on 107 Amsterdam Avenue, the city’s main street, and it had two large rolling steel doors. They could be opened with a little spring and then they would stay rolled up at the top of the doorway. It was possible to close them with a pole that had a small hook at the tip. Pulling down the doors made a noise that scared anyone passing by. It sounded like the shots were being fired by a machine gun. To humor me, Mr. Canuto sometimes let me close the doors. As skinny as I was, I had to use all of my body weight to bring down those doors. I felt strong, as strong as the man who stood in the street with an enormous fish on his back. That thick cardboard advertisement for Cod Fish Liver Oil was much taller than I was, but I would get there.

The shelving around the drugstore went all the way up to the ceiling. At the front there were counters for helping customers. In the back there was a packaging area, a heap of papers, a roll of string and the cash register. There were two narrow doors tucked between the shelves. The door on the right went into the exam room and the one on the left went to the bathroom.

These two rooms, the bathroom and the exam room, were separated by a wall that had a small ventilation window at the top. I barely had time to unbutton my pants. What a relief! It was only when the sound of pee splashing against the toilet bowl had subsided that I noticed the strange groaning sounds. At first they were slow and almost whispered, but they began to increase in intensity and frequency. My distress grew in proportion to the accelerating rhythm. The groans sounded like they were
coming from my aunt. It didn’t just sound like her, no listening closely they were definitely her groans. I was almost certain.

“My poor aunt, she must be suffering,” I thought to myself. Despite my youth I knew about shots, they hurt like hell. Anyone who said that it hurt more to get shots in your arm than in your bottom was lying. I preferred to get shots in my arm. I didn’t like lying down with my pants pulled down and letting someone touch my bottom.

The moans continued. Something had to be done. Maybe she needed my help. I put down the lid on the toilet, stacked the trashcan on top and climbed up onto it.

At the time I didn’t understand what I saw, but I would never forget the image. My aunt was knelt down, bent over a narrow uncomfortable bed, a kind of cot. Her skirt was hanging around her shoulders. From where I was I could see her from the side. Her face was resting on her hands. Her eyes were half-closed, and her breaths were heaving. Her body obeyed rhythmic movements and every once in a while she pressed her lips together as if she were holding in a spasm or twinge. Suddenly her body shook with vibrations. It looked like Mr. Canuto was riding on top of her. Was that possible?

I didn’t recognize my aunt with that tense face, making those random and confusing sounds, with her body vibrating, and her rapid and heavy breaths. It wasn’t just that I didn’t know what I was seeing, but I didn’t understand what I felt either. As much as I tried, I couldn’t remember any previous sensation that had felt like that one. I kept on watching without understanding what they were doing, but whatever it was explained why she was groaning. That position must have been very uncomfortable. Was all that really necessary to get a shot? She must have been feeling a lot of pain. She didn’t stop moaning, babbling disjointed things like “ah, ay, like that, more.” But if it was hurting much as her groans suggested, why did she keep asking for “more?”
And Mr. Canudo’s hairy hands? Nope, they weren’t holding any kind of syringe. In fact, they were around Auntie Nonoca’s waist, holding onto her from behind.

Everyone in my family said that when Auntie Nonoca was young she was one of the most beautiful women in the city. Now a widow, she felt it necessary to dress in black and wear her hair pulled back. The clothing and hair-do attempted to make her look older, but without success, and her exaggerated mourning seemed to prolong a pain that she no longer felt. Nothing, however, diminished the beauty of her face or managed to cover the shapely curves of her attractive body.

Despite her 37 years of age and 2 years of widowhood, Auntie Nonoca had smooth skin and no signs of wrinkles. Her eyes were always shiny and brilliant. Her red lips were bare of lipstick and even then they looked painted. Like one of Machado de Assis’ characters who was “40 on paper and 27 in her eyes,” Auntie Nonoca was 27 just from the way that she walked, or perhaps younger. She had a powerful stride that did not get in the way of the subtle and sinuous movements of her backside as she walked. Sometimes in her gaze and voice there was a sensuality that her solemn appearance tried to mask. She had already exceeded the “grieving” period that usually lasts a year. She could be courted now, with good or bad intentions. Until now she had refused any advances, but she had stopped taking flowers to her husband’s grave every 15 days.

I would describe her now as a beautiful and exciting woman, but in the eyes of the times, and principally in my eyes, she was or should have been a venerable, respectable woman.

The fact that she had two daughters who were older than I was, one 15 and the other 14, made me even more uncomfortable. Thinking her almost too preserved, everyone would practically blame her for it, saying things like, “Nonoca hardly looks her age!” A balzaquiana should have an appearance
that corresponds to her age, and according to the rigorous standards of her times Auntie Nonoca was already pretty old. Of course, those days the life expectancy of a Brazilian was just over 42 years.

The pharmacist seemed even more disgusting now. The exertion of those repetitive movements caused a thick repulsive sweat to drip slowly down his bald smooth head. He wasn’t breathing, but panting and making guttural sounds that sounded out of place. This wasn’t an injection, it couldn’t be. But if it wasn’t that, then what was it? If I had lived in Florida with my cousins, who were more experienced, I would have known what this was about. But I lived in BomDestino in Minas Gerais and I spent almost all of my time at the Achieta Academy, where I was a day student. There, Father José guaranteed that the peccata mundi would never reach us. It was until much later that I realized that what I was feeling was the shock of seeing something profane. In that moment, hazy descriptions of martyrs and saints that I learned about in religion class came to my mind. After my mother, Auntie Nonoca was the person who came the closest to my vague notion of what it meant to be saintly. What could I to help my aunt now?

The memory of this event disturbed many of my adolescent nights. The images came back to me caught up in dreams and desires that were mixed with emotions, feelings and, above anything, hormones, therefore causing an internal commotion. Parts of my body that until now had stayed quiet and calm, like my penis, grew anxious and took on new forms, stiffening suddenly. Part of me felt great pleasure in this transformation, but I was also tormented by it. I wanted someone to explain what was happening to me, but I didn’t have the courage to ask anyone. And who was there to ask?

I was so distraught that I slipped and lost my balance. I tumbled over the toilet and fell to the ground with a crash. I had barely gotten up and opened the door by the time that Mr. Canuto and Auntie Nonoca appeared
in front of me. There are few times I’ve felt that much fear in my life. The
two of them threatened me at the same time, bombarding me with “How
disgusting!” and “What are you doing here?” I shouldn’t have done that. I
had committed a terrible sin! I would never set foot in Auntie Nonoca’s
house again, and I could say goodbye to my vacation!

At my aunt’s signal the pharmacist stopped talking. She had the
control. She wanted to conduct the interrogation by herself. That short
mulatto, fat and, as I said before, hairy, wasn’t especially attractive. There
was a certain lustfulness that seemed to escape his thick lips and he had an
unseemly almost obscene gaze, which he directed at the women who came
into his drugstore – and there were many of them. I only became aware
of these observations, however, when I was an adult and had begun to put
together the memories of a few of his former patients at the pharmacy.

“His secret,” one of these women explained to me, full of ulterior
motives, “was that he was always available to tend to the needs of his
patients. He was very attentive and untiring.” Judging from the spectacle
that I witnessed, he had many return visitors. There must have been a
constant commotion in that exam room.

This particular moment, however, with his arms crossed, he appeared
to be an obedient supervisor who was there to make sure that I was
rightfully punished.

“You just can’t do things like this,” my aunt continued to scold me
forcefully. But she had a calm and measured voice, and that scared me more
than if she had been screaming.

I was shaking and I couldn’t manage to say anything. I was silent with
terror. She didn’t understand what I had done, and I didn’t understand why
she was yelling at me.

“Why did you climb up to that window?”
I couldn’t explain that I wanted to save her because I had heard her moaning from pain. I cried because of the fear but also out of shame. Why was she doing this to me?

“You need to swear something to me.”

I nodded my head. I would swear anything. She seemed like she didn’t believe in the power of her own threats. She found it necessary to repeat herself.

“You will swear. You are going to swear to me that you will not tell anyone what you saw here. Nobody. Not even your parents when you go back for school.”

I kept thinking about what I would do if Father José pressured me, like he always did, wanting to hear about a bigger and more complicated sin.

“That is not a sin. Tell me about the other ones. The worst ones. Your bad thoughts and naughty behavior. Come on! You haven’t touched yourself with your hands? You haven’t touched your own body? Tell me the truth. What part of your body did you touch?”

One day he reached his limit when I attempted to satisfy him and responded.

“Now I remember, Father. When nobody was looking I stuck my finger up my nose.”

“Did you put it anywhere else? That’s not a sin, that’s just disgusting. Now get out of here!”

Another student told me to always deny everything. If I didn’t do that then Father José would schedule a meeting in the vestry and make me do whatever I had confessed to doing in front of him. It was a kind of penance. According to the students who had been there longer, Father José didn’t wear any clothing beneath his cassock, not even underwear. One of the games that he played was to pretend that he was a bell, and then he would ask his students to touch his “clapper.”
He would probably make me promise not to tell anyone what I had seen.

Despite being fascinated by her, I was very grateful for Auntie Nonoca. She lined my bed with a waterproof cover in order to protect the mattress, and every morning she came in to take away my wet sheets. She never told anyone, not even her daughters, that I still peed in bed. Knowing that I would die of embarrassment, she even avoided talking to me about.

“You shouldn’t have done what you did,” my aunt began scolding me again.

I wanted to explain that when I got on top of the trashcan I had no idea know what I was going to see. But I couldn’t manage to say anything. Auntie Nonoca crouched down and grabbed my wrists. She lowered her eyes until they were looking directly into mine.

“Look at me,” she ordered.

Mr. Canuto was still standing to the side, completely silent. He glanced over his shoulder a few times to see if anyone had entered the store.

“Look at me. You’re going to swear on your mother. You’re going to swear that you will see her dead if you tell anyone what you saw. Pay attention to me. If you tell anyone, your mother will die and you will go to Hell.”

I loved my mother more than anything in my life. And Hell. As a young boy studying to become a priest, Hell was what I feared most at school.

“Enough!” I wanted to say to my aunt, but I couldn’t manage to say anything. I wanted to calm her down and assure her that I would never tell anyone about this, that she could be sure of it, but I couldn’t manage to say anything. I was only able to nod my head and cry silently while I thought to myself, “Nice going. Why did you have to get involved where it’s none of your business.”
This was the first threat I had ever received in my life, and no other would come to supplant it in power or force. And there was this secret – uncomfortable and heavy. How could I live with it? Carry it with me day and night? Sleep and wake up with those images that provoked such intense and confusing feelings? My aunt’s moans, her rosy and tense face, her bun undone, her eyes half open and half closed, as if she were having trouble seeing. It was the picture of submission, entirely different from the image before me. Auntie Nonoca sat in front of me completely recomposed, her face fearsome, her gaze completely transformed, now threatening.

Terrified, I knew it wasn’t necessary to swear in order to carry that secret with me forever. I wouldn’t tell anyone, unless I told Emmerson, who was my best friend. Only later, when I had stopped peeing in bed, or rather, when my aunt could no longer say that she changed my sheets every morning. That was her secret against me. A tacit agreement established between us: I wouldn’t say anything about what I knew and she would lie whenever anyone asked if I still peed in bed. That way, when it came to quarreling, my brothers couldn’t call me a “bed-wetter.”
Thank you for reading!
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