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# 10 OF 30

New Spanish  
Narrative

Between the ages of thirty and forty, Borges published *A Universal History of Infamy* and Cortázar published *Bestiary*, the short story collections that inaugurated each writer's respective literary oeuvre. García Márquez wrote his major novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* before he was forty. And Vargas Llosa, whose precocity as a novelist allowed him to produce some of his most important works in his twenties, published the monumental *Conversation in the Cathedral* at just thirty-three years old.

The age at which a writer reaches his or her literary maturity matters little, given that there are plenty of cases that contrast with the above. In the end, what matters is how a book lasts and its capacity to move us. But the decade between thirty and forty is a period during which many authors have written their most emblematic works, or left evidence of an excellence that is revealed more fully later on, works in which one detects hints of the talent yet to come.

We're convinced that a large number of Spanish writers of this generation are making valuable contributions, and thus, we have launched the **10 of 30** program.

The program consists of samples from ten writers between the ages of thirty and forty, and confirms both the quality and the variety of their work. Though we didn't intend to make a definitive generational selection—there could have well been ten authors other than those presented here—we formed a selection committee charged with choosing them, and we're convinced they are good representatives of their time. This committee, sponsored by the Cultural and Scientific Relations Administration of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), was comprised of Luisgé

Martín, Laura Revuelta, Ernesto Pérez Zúñiga, Cristina Sánchez Andrade, and Javier Serena, and the selected authors are: Inés Martín Rodrigo, Cristina Morales, Miguel Barrero, Almudena Sánchez, Pablo Herrán, Aroa Moreno, Natalia Cerezo, Marina Perezagua, Inma López Silva, and Alejandro Morellón.

The criteria for selection were clear: born between 1978 and 1989 with at least one published work of fiction. *10 of 30* has another aim, which is to aid in the internationalization of these writers via two avenues: on the one hand, bringing the authors themselves to our cultural centers in the Americas, and on the other, promoting the translation of their work. To that end, we will use this publication—which includes an introduction, text, and interview translated into English—to urge our cultural affairs counselors to disseminate it among publishing houses, encourage translation, and if published, invite the writers to present their work overseas.

We believe that if their appearance has been good news for readers of Spanish, who have found interesting stylistic and formal approaches in their work, it is also good news for readers of other languages.

This is our intention for launching *10 of 30*: the hope that their literature, which has garnered attention in Spain, moves beyond our borders as well.

Miguel Albero



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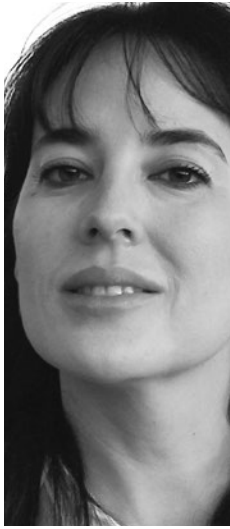
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Martín Rodrigo**

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# Marina Perezagua

Sevilla, 1978

Holds a degree in Art History from the Universidad de Sevilla. She taught Spanish and Latin American language, literature, history and film at SUNY, where she completed her PhD in Literature. After a long period in France, where she worked at the Instituto Cervantes in Lyon, she returned to New York, where she taught for several years at New York University and where she now lives permanently. Her work has been published in various anthologies and literary magazines, such as *Renacimiento*, *Carátula*, *Sibila*, *Ñ*, *Quimera*, *Granta*, and *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*. She is the author of two short story collections, *Criaturas abisales* (Deep Sea Creatures)(Los Libros del Lince, 2011) and *Leche* (Milk)(Los Libros del Lince, 2013). She has also published two novels, *Yoro* (Los Libros del Lince, 2015) and *Don Quijote de Manhattan* (Los libros del Lince, 2016). Her work has been translated into nine languages and *Yoro* was awarded the Sor Juana Prize in 2016. Her forthcoming novel *Seis formas de morir en Texas* (Six Ways to Die in Texas) will be published in August 2019.

## **When and why did you begin to write?**

I started writing around the age of seven, but I mainly wrote song lyrics that I tried to put to music during my years in the conservatory.

## **Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

Eroticism, the role that genetics play in our lives, the burden of family legacies (genetic), racism, incest, the sea as a place of ethical dissolution and honesty, death as the opposite of life (dismantling the dogma of death

as part of life), species extinction, and generally any theme that fits within the realm of speculative fiction, as well as social commentary.

**Who are some of your favorite writers? Some of your early influences?**

I was undoubtedly influenced by folktales, like the *Cuentos al amor de la lumbre* anthology, or the Brothers Grimm, those sad stories our grandmothers told us. And the folk ballads my mother sang to me. Then, there was Kafka, and some Japanese writers like Yukio Mishima, when I was a teenager. The next big step was getting to know the field of Latin American literature.

**As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

A tendency toward the social, but adhering to fiction as closely as possible. Reality is a stimulant, but what I enjoy is making up stories.

**In which time and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

In the future, without a doubt. I would like to have experienced other lives, other landscapes, other ways of thinking or creating.

**If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

My new novel titled *Seis formas de morir en Texas* (Six Ways to Die in Texas) comes out in a few months. It's based on particular events in US history that—to my mind—are in direct dialogue with the policies that we consider violations of human rights. In this case, there is a dialectic between US and Chinese policy. I'm also starting to outline a collection of stories with very diverse themes.

## **HIM**

### **From Leche (Milk)**

The fact that it's him, though physically unrecognizable, neutralizes my senses. When it's someone else, I move away from the unpleasant smell, the deformation, the sounds of suffering. But when I care for him, in the same bed where we placed him the day they brought him here, he doesn't make me sick and if his skin could take it, I would kiss his whole body. But right now, the little skin left intact is as delicate as the skin of those silver insects that live in the damp and come apart at the slightest touch. I clean flecks of it off the thermometer, off the tiny spoon I use to feed him soup. Off his eyelashes that collect the particles sloughing from his lids like scales.

And yet, he's alive. Almost more importantly, he's here. He is here. That's what I tell myself every morning on this couch, before I open my eyes and look at him a few meters away. Him. It doesn't matter what comes next, the agony, the death. The worst—months of searching, waiting for news, a tormented soul—is over. And so when Arturo warned me that he was unrecognizable and asked whether I was prepared to see him, I didn't fear the horror that the neighbors saw and which forced them to look away sometimes as they helped us get him into bed.

When they all had left, Arturo and I stood before him. We didn't speak. Arturo took a few steps back to leave the room, and from the doorway turned to say: You're just missing his dentures. I forgot them. I'll bring them this week.

Like others, he lost his teeth in an explosion and used a prosthesis. Already three weeks have passed since Arturo told me he would bring them, but he hasn't come yet. It doesn't matter. He doesn't need them. His stomach can't support the weight of food.

I haven't dusted in a long time. I see it on the furniture, floating in the ray of light filtering in from the window. I want to taste it. I open my mouth to let it in, to see what it tastes like, if it provides any nourishment. His mouth is half-open and I'd like it if this powder of dog hair, mud from shoes, fly wings, could supply him with nutrients. But this dust doesn't taste like anything. It has no scent, no flavor. It can only be seen.

The life left in him is so weak that I don't dare move when I'm near him. I don't want the sound of my steps to interrupt his breathing, which consists of continuous whistling, a whistle in F-flat, if it were a note played on an instrument. And so in the morning I ready everything I will need to spend the rest of the day in this chair, facing him, the one-stringed violin. I don't know if he sleeps and wakes normally. The sound persists at night, though it's no longer a violin but a piano with just one key.

Apart from his whistling, there is only silence. Since they brought him, there's even silence in the courtyard. The neighbors seem to have caught my same caution and move as little as possible. We all walk on tiptoe. I think they imagine themselves in my place. Yesterday, the allies brought the young woman from 2B. I haven't seen her, but they told me she is recognizable.

The doctor has come twice in three weeks. I know he comes more for me than for him. He touches my forehead, looks at my pupils, brings me some bread. He is sorry but medicine hasn't made it across the border. He instructs me on how clean him. But he will not live, he assures me.

Soon, I forget the anguish of my search for him. His presence is no longer enough consolation. Now, I also want him to live. Pain in the present is always worse than the pain of the past; it's still young, in its period of development. My pain has adolescent bones, and it's growing. I would rather the uncertainty of when I couldn't find him to the evidence of seeing him like this. I start to take refuge in doubt. Doubt hurts less than hope. But I look at him and it all becomes real again. His weight is real. His temperature is real. His fever doesn't break. Placed in him, the thermometer is a tool for measuring death. I stop using it. I want to know as little as possible.

He doesn't like when it's time to clean him. The awareness that something makes him uncomfortable is a big step. Maybe he's tried before, but only today I realized that even though he cannot move or make a sound, he communicates by releasing a particular smell—very intense—that spreads through the room like mushroom spores. When he knows I'm about to clean him, he smells. He smells every time he doesn't like something. I don't let myself be intimidated by that smell and I pull back the rags.

I don't know how long I'll be able to consider him a man. It doesn't seem like a debate between life or death, but between death and something else. And so when I see that the rags are wet, that they contain something like my urine or feces, I say to myself: he's still human. I celebrate his excretions as an act of living.

I take care of his mouth after every meal. I wrap my finger in a cloth and slide it over all the membranes, carefully

cleaning his tongue, his gums. I pass over the depressions where his teeth used to be. I stimulate his saliva. I take out my finger every two or three seconds so he can breathe, and continue. I palpate his canker sores, smaller every day. He shrinks when I go over one with the cloth. Don't healing wounds shrink, too? I'm pleased.

The days pass regardless of my own needs. Before, I lived to find him. I dissolved once he arrived. I only know I've gotten up because I'm not lying down. I know I've done my hair because two bobby pins hold it back. I know that I've eaten because there are remnants of food in the trash. But I don't know what else happens when I'm apart from him. I live in him. I'm the bacteria that grows on a dying man. The vulture that lives only for carrion, oblivious to flight.

They appeared today, out of nowhere. I inspected him closely yesterday and didn't see them. Dark ulcers sprinkled over his body. Like footprints in silt, the last stroll of death's throes. They smell like standing water, like frog. When he breathes continuously through his mouth, a film forms and covers the back of his throat. Like the skin on the inside of an egg. I pull on it and it comes out whole. Dissolves between my nails. He was naked when they brought him, and I haven't wanted to cover him in case it would hurt. His skin is too big for his bones. Even so, he seems to be tolerating the broth better because I've gone from giving him five spoonfuls to giving him seven. Seven spoonfuls that interrupt his whistling when he swallows. And what's more, his pulse has changed. When I held his wrist before, I didn't feel individual beats, but rather a sort of continuous flow, uncountable as a fistful of water. As if his heart were being liquefied. Now I can differentiate one beat from another, and even though there are too many, they can be counted.

I have never believed the doctor's diagnosis. He tries to apply his knowledge history to a body wounded by a new evil. Pits are filling with bodies like this, but there are stories of cases in which someone has recovered, too. Things that first begin to look like people, then later make the leap to being distinguishable as a man or a woman. He hasn't yet found his form, but he's started to have an appetite, a sudden hunger. When I put the spoon in his mouth, he doesn't want to release it. He grips it between his toothless gums. His jaw moves. His first movement. Now I need his teeth. Tomorrow I'll look for Arturo.

Yesterday, the whistling began to ease. When I noticed, I became afraid. Since I first saw his thin, translucent body, I fear any weight loss, even the weight of sound. In a moment of confusion, I provoked him. I needed to make him uncomfortable to see him respond again. He doesn't seem to like the light, so I pulled back the curtains. The sun hit him full in the face and he released his smell in reproach.

Hope is reborn. I embrace it. I regain faith in the thermometer. His fever, in effect, has come down. They let Arturo know. He'll come this evening. He'll see for himself. Although nothing appears to have changed, his appetite must surely mean improvement. I'm preparing the first food that he will chew in months. I cook, thinking about the sound he'll make when he bites. Him. Not only is he here. He will live. He will chew.

His recovery is imminent. I'm cold, he has said. His voice sounded so foreign that at first I doubted that it came from him. I immediately covered him with a sheet. His skin appears to bear the weight, and he grips it with his nail-less fingers as if gripping much more than a piece of cloth. He's fighting. He's hungry and cold. Astonished, I observe the birth of my husband.

Arturo hasn't been able to come, but a neighbor brought me his teeth. They're wrapped in a handkerchief. I unwrap them. I want to clean them before I put them in. I leave the food on the stove and rinse his teeth beneath a stream of water. One of them is gold: he wanted to keep it to mimic the lost original, knocked out when he was very young.

Dinner is ready. I cool a spoonful to try it. I don't remember the last time I cooked with any enthusiasm. My hands shake as I ladle the food into a bowl. I choose a small portion with a lot of broth, because I don't yet know if he'll be able to chew. The solid food breaks the surface of the liquid, and the sound of solidity is musical. I want to be in the world of solids, far from one note on a violin, the invisible wind of his whistling. I touch the chair. Sit. Set the bowl next to him. The food is still too hot. Steaming. I take the dentures out of the pocket of my dress to put them in.

It's very hard for me to get his mouth open. I don't know if he has enough strength to resist, or if his jaw is tight for another reason. I speak to him calmly, masking my excitement. I think about how with the teeth in his mouth, his face will emerge again. Virile, impeccable. A piece of the puzzle, making sense of a picture. But it doesn't fit. This puzzle piece is just one of two thousand pieces of homogenous blue sky. His jawbone hasn't deteriorated, but the teeth don't manage to fit. An explanation surfaces in my brain, but it's too atrocious. I discard it. I try to calm myself, not succumb to anxiety. I look at the piece again. It is clearly the same one. Instantly, the explanation returns to my head. Sharp, unequivocal, horror: it isn't him. The man I have nursed for seven weeks is not my man. I uncover the one in the bed. I scream. Grab the hot bowl. Dump it on his chest. Dinner scalds his wounds. I run to look for my



real man again. The search, again. I feel nausea. And hate. I rush down the stairs, fall. Get up. I've hurt my ankle. I see the long road.

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# Almudena Sánchez

Mallorca, 1985

Is a journalist with a Masters degree in Creative Writing. *La acústica de los iglús* (Sounds Inside an Iglloo) (Caballo de Troya, 2016) is her first collection of stories, now in its 8<sup>th</sup> edition. Her debut also earned her a place as a finalist for the Ojo Crítico and Setenil awards. She has been a frequent contributor of reviews and interviews to national magazines such as *Tales Literary*, *Oculto Lit*, and *Ámbito Cultural*. She was included in *Bajo 30, antología de nuevos narradores españoles* (Under 30: An Anthology of New Spanish Fiction Writers) (Salto de Página, 2013) and *Doce relatos maestros* (Twelve Master Stories) (La Navaja Suiza, 2018).

## **When and why did you begin to write?**

I started writing seriously when I was about twenty years old. Although, even as a child, everything was always words, stories, ideas. Sometimes I think that childhood filled with longing taught me more than all the failed, naive texts I've erased from my laptop.

## **Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

I'm most interested in themes of adolescence, death, illness, the illogical, loneliness, dream states with a touch of the poetic or phantasmagoric.

## **Who are some of your favorite writers? Some of your early influences?**

Some of my favorite writers are Clarice Lispector, Joy Williams, Felisberto Hernández, Sara Mesa, Virginia Woolf, Marina Tsvetaeva. When I first started writing, I was most influenced by Cortázar, Kafka, Bernhard, Salinger, Chekov.

**As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

I'm very interested in the hybridization of genres, how autobiography can be mixed with philosophy, or the essay with poetry, to give two examples. The blending of the colloquial with the formal language, as well. In terms of theme, I drawn to the sensory, physical and emotional fits that precede and go beyond thinking, human behavior, its relationship with nature and the feeling of unease over being alive in an absurd world.

**In which time and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

I like writing right now, in Spain.

**If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

At the moment, I'm working on a confessional book about something that happened to me in 2018.

## WEAKNESSES

(Excerpt from *Doce relatos maestros*)

The literature thing was my boyfriend Blas's idea. My name is actually Lorna Garrido and I live on a narrow street in Madrid. It's so narrow that one day my neighbor lent me her hair dryer through the window. Sometimes I dream that I can't get out the front door. That there's a wall. I dream about brick walls, cement walls. Last night, I dreamt about the Berlin Wall.

As I was saying, Blas convinced me to sign up for a writing class. I searched online until I found the best school in Spain. You could read the instructors' bios, which confirmed that they had all published more than two novels.

"You don't need a degree or anything, you know? It's easy—just tell your life story or the stuff about the walls, if you want. You'll meet some great storytellers, in any case."

I had a strange relationship with literature ever since I was young. I liked to get inside books. When I did this, I didn't open the door for the mailman or answer urgent phone calls. I believed in them too much, that was the problem. I told their stories as if they had happened to me. I couldn't tell what was real and what was made up. My optic nerve got inflamed: I read intensely, dislocated my wrist turning

the pages, underlined with lipstick. Anybody could tell the difference between my books and someone else's. Mine were an eyesore. I gave them evaluations: *unbeatably good*. I quit reading with the same intensity, still young. I felt unsatisfied. I gave away my books. *The Catcher in the Rye, Lolita, Helena, or the Sea in Summer, The Year of Magical Thinking*. Some of them I hid. *Mrs. Dalloway, The Master and Margarita, Sweet Days of Discipline*. One day I was caught reading in the elevator. I rode up and down, up and down, for two hours until a technician got me out. Well, I'm actually not sure if I read that or made it up.

I could walk to the writing school. There was just one obstacle: on the way, I had to pass through a 130-foot tunnel full of mud, graffiti, needles, a fingerless glove, firecrackers, bloody glass, a bat, and damp things. And that wasn't worst part, even though my hands always ended up getting sticky. I accidentally got people's jackets dirty outside the tunnel. A woman punched me once because I touched her shoulder pads.

The darkness was what was most distressing. I bought a pair of sneakers with light-up soles so I could walk in peace and avoid excrement. My boyfriend Blas laughed at me. *You're phosphorescent*, he said.

The writing school was in the center of Madrid. You entered through a rear courtyard with artificial flowers and a sign that read:

*The Garden of the Forking Paths*

There were birds, too, with bits of bread in their beaks. When I arrived in my new sneakers, they got scared and started to caw or whatever they do. They dropped the bread and it looked like it was snowing. The name of the school was *Absalom, Absalom!*

The receptionist was named Macarena and she registered me for two courses: one on technique and one on inspiration. Then she put her hair up in an intricate bun with two bobby pins and a pen. My forms got covered in hair.

I stood staring at her: doing your hair disorders your DNA. For a moment, she reminded me of Amy Winehouse.

“Anything else, Lorna? An olive, perhaps?”

I got out of there. The birds were still scared and Blas was waiting for me outside, excited. I hadn’t seen him so happy in months. We’d been together seven years, adding on anniversaries without much interest. Our relationship obeyed the rules of mathematics.

The sex dried up first. Once, it had been like eating a piece of fruit in one bite, choking on saliva, out of your mind, screaming at your liver and your sternum, dying of pleasure, absorbing it, spilling it. Back then, I used to walk around with damp legs and shiny lips. I carried an extra pair of panties in my bag and the grass was good for lying down together, or the sand or the weeds or the rug or the front seat of the rusted car or the slides at the park in Valdebebas. I would say to him *again* and he’d say *yes* and then I’d repeat *again* and he’d answer *yes* and then everything would fill with a polluted smell that was just ours. We didn’t open the windows after sex. Now the bed smells like sunscreen.

Blas and I strolled along the sidewalk on Gran Vía. It was September: families, single people, students, all back from vacation. The buildings spit out warmed, recycled air. I tried to explain my experience at *Absalom, Absalom!*, but someone was always interrupting, stepping between us or crushing us into a corner.

“I’m saying that I start tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“With Regina Katmandú, the writer.”

\*\*\*

Regina Katmandú was a cult writer. She wrote with Stabilo Boss highlighters and kept her manuscripts in a plastic folder. She had abandoned her physical body in order to cultivate her mind. Thinking, she became thin. Only her eyes saved her from disappearing completely. The thinner she got, the bigger those Arctic blue eyes. They took over the classroom; there were mirrors on the walls and her eyes were everywhere. Sometimes a gigantic eyelash would fall onto the table and I would quickly wipe it away with the sleeve of my sweater. The floor was covered in eyelashes, now that I think about it. Looking at her, I thought: she wouldn't be afraid to walk through a tunnel; her eyes give off light. She had been a finalist for many awards, but hadn't won any. Sometimes she was asked about it in interviews. And she answered firmly.

“Literary prizes are an invention of the modern world. Who won awards in their time? Kafka? Emily Dickinson? I prefer to be in the camp of Mr. K and Dickinson than with that bunch of useless literary athletes.”

There were three of us in class: Renata, Yin, and me. The others had attended Regina's classes from the beginning. We read, we listened. My story was about a relationship in decay. I wanted to make it clear that they were only weakened, they weren't broken or separated. My idea consisted in comparing a relationship crisis to toxic waste:

*There's nothing left between Luis and Laura.*

*Laura takes out the trash every night to clear her head, clutching a bag leaking a liquid that could be castor oil. If someone passes Laura on the street, they get away from her. Nobody likes to walk near a sad woman with a bag of trash. A sardine head sticks out from one of the tears in the plastic.*



*Laura takes more than two hours to go back home, where Luis waits for her, miserable and huddled next to a radiator. All the dumpsters were full, she says to Luis, so he'll relax. That's why she was gone for hours and why she's smoking. She doesn't want Luis to think that she'd rather throw out the garbage than have dinner with him. Their relationship would collapse.*

*With so much taking out the trash, Laura has made friends with the garbage man: Ron de las Heras. They talk about beauty. Ron tells Laura that the trip to the landfill is long and torturous. He has to go and drop off tons of shit each week. Shit, he confesses, sticks together and accumulates. It's like it has learned to embrace itself: ashes with bones and fishbones with dust mites. That's what makes shit.*

*Ron tells Laura sincerely how one lives in shit. It's not something he's proud of, but he feels comfortable with her. The sky is heavier in the mountains. The sky is always heavy. You need anti-nausea pills and perfumed handkerchiefs to make it to the landfill without getting sick. As a result, Laura, surprised, asks him: "What is the exact distance between civilization and waste?"*

Regina didn't let me finish the piece. She preferred to silence me and state her case.

"Lorna Garrido, pay attention. These are your weaknesses."

1. Poor taste.
2. Tragic sensitivity.
3. Repressed emotion.
4. Certain existential confusion.

\*\*\*

I wrote my weaknesses down in a notebook. The receptionist, Macarena (and her blackberry bun), explained that Regina Katmandú's classes were like that: they were about fixing problems in general, since Regina believed that a writer's mistakes weren't technical, but rather psychological or moral. One first had to improve the person in order to improve their writing. A simple question of style: mannequins in ruins.

"You don't know how hard it is to sign people up for her classes, she said. Regina wants artists. She doesn't like newbies."

Until then, Renata and Yin were the only students that had lasted more than a year under Regina's strict gaze. Consequently, they hadn't spoken in months. They showed up, paid, and left.

After the conversation with Macarena and the Bun—that's what I had nicknamed her—it was harder than ever for me to walk through the tunnel. I sat on the curb for two hours. My light-up sneakers went crazy, the flash stuck to the ceiling, there wasn't any cell service. Every five minutes I got up and moved my legs without noting any progress. I wondered if I would ever get home. I had to write. I would fill sheets of paper with ink. I would transform all my weaknesses into treasures from the beyond. Regina would read me tomorrow. I had important problems to solve: the relationship between Ron de las Heras and Laura. They were in my story. And they shouted at me.

Also shouting at me for real were two kids who came into the tunnel with their adrenaline and meaty sweat, unfreezing me. They asked for a cigarette and, in exchange, helped me get out.

It could have been a hallucination, but looking back I remember bumping into my mother. She squinted at me from a distance. Like an eagle. She was on one side of the tunnel. She hung back and examined me, barely blinking, and yelled: "Laura! Laura Galindo!" or "Goddamned Lorna Garrido!" I can't be sure. What I wanted above all was to rest and write at

the same time. What if my story predicted my future? What if I was writing a new *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka?

*One morning, after anxious dreams, Lorna Garrido woke to find herself turned into a monstrous insect.*

I had fantasized about that sentence a lot. Which insect would I be? Winged, medium sized, antennae, poisonous, maybe. If Gregor Samsa was a cockroach or a beetle, then that bug was already taken. I thought I'd be a caterpillar, one that gives you a rash, broken eggs in my womb. Or I wouldn't have any womb at all. I'd be a hairy insect that no one would go near, not even the bravest of children. Not even a mole tunneling underground, blind.

I was wasting time. How could I possibly talk about this metaphysical occurrence to Blas, who had prepared me a slice of *tortilla* and waited for me for hours, on that our seven year, two month, two day anniversary, with a glass of wine and short, occasional kisses that tasted of nothing at all.

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One's problems mutate after an emotional hangover. In other words, they've already happened, so they're new problems. For example, now I knew that my mother lived in the tunnel. We hadn't had a relationship in years. We'd distanced ourselves because I didn't want to have children and didn't know how to settle the issue. My voice was hoarse and I had let her know: "I don't like kids and I especially don't like girls with their little bows."

Once, I smoked a cigar in front of her. A big, fat Cuban, sitting in tan orthopedic chair with my legs apart. It gave off an enormous cloud of smoke, twisting in the air and turning her face white. My mother started to cough and threatened to

call the police. I asked her that day: “Do you really think that a mother who smokes cigars could take good care of a child?”

After our argument, I wrote her a letter that made clear my exhaustion, the horribleness of our fights, the bitter wrinkles left on our faces from so much hating each other. She took the letter and a photo of me dressed up for my first communion and slammed the door. The door hasn’t closed right since that day and cold air gets in.

It was a difficult time because I was just a twenty-year-old kid with a ridiculous degree: Journalism, unfinished. What was there for me to do with a useless major for well-informed types? I started working as an usher in an adult movie theater. I cannot describe what I found on the seats after the movie. The best part of the day was shutting off the lights. How many times have I tripped the fuse and been a solitary shadow?

Growing up is hitting the on/off switch.

My writing wasn’t going well. I couldn’t focus at home. The neighbor lady shook out a dirty sheet on the balcony and scolded the air:

“And just who is going to clean the chorizo grease off the couch cushion?”

Blas watched me over my shoulder.

*Ron suggests that Laura visit the landfill with him. An unusual kind of date, like taking someone to a museum. They can go when she feels free, and confident.*

*Laura is curious about what the landscape will be like: if it will be full of puddles or dry, like a desert. If there will be butane tanks, mounted animals, a Christmas box with a half-eaten cheese inside. Before she gets ahead of herself, Laura warns Ron that she’s sensitive to accumulations.*

*They remind me of my room when I was a little girl: big and messy. A space for toys and the rest filled with grown-up stuff. My*

*drawings next to a vacuum cleaner. If my parents bought a box of nails or a coffeemaker and it didn't fit in the dining room or the office, they left it in my room. My room was never a child's paradise. It was storage.*

*Ron tells Laura the truth: in the landfill there are plagues of flies and vultures with furious eyes. It's possible they'll even step on rats. Did she know that rats have four digits on their front paws and five on the back ones?*

Blas—like Regina—interrupts me. “I don't like this Ron character. He's a psychopath in disguise.”

Those evenings, I tried to convince Blas that Ron de las Heras didn't exist, even though he had curly hair and a nice smile. He was a fictional character. A poetic garbage collector.

“Can you imagine a garbage man saving your life? Put yourself in that place: you go to throw out the trash and it's the best part of your day. The black of night, a solitary star struggling to shine, and a great philosophical conversation about grease and humanity. Doesn't that sound moving to you? If you come with me to the tunnel someday you'll see the build up of gross shit . . .”

“You don't have to go on about it, Lorna.”

Blas was insecure and spied on me. I wrote new sentences in the story—which I Was going to call “The Filths”—and he'd come over to the computer, authoritative. There was nothing I could do but stop writing. It was obvious he didn't like my plot; he made faces like he'd just lost a game. Like when I didn't remember our anniversary.

“How long have we been together today?”

“Seven years, two months, and three days.”

“Look at that, you remember.”

“Of course I remember!”

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The second class with Regina Katmandú was less chilly. I'd even describe it as close. We sat together, whereas before a large section of table had separated us. We were finally able to look each other in the eye. She read my piece and didn't think it was bad: she thought a visit to the landfill sounded unsettling. She explained that I had built a powerfully fragile story that could be destroyed in a single moment of distraction.

"Words are like human relationships. They break. Explode. Burn. Die. They turn against you. They flee. They shake. And you write in spite of it, with cuts on your fingers, gritting your teeth; you write against a gravitational force that consists only of emulating the great works of literature. Can you add anything to *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf other than a cheap version of yourself? One must seek the devastation one carries inside, the spiritual shocks that dissolve in the body and can't be felt but suddenly appear, materialized, rough as a blow from a bull. How badly do you want to finish your story, Lorna Garrido?"

That's when Regina grew tired of explaining. She sank down in her chair and her eyes turned dark, half-closed. She took out her thermal water spray and shook it with gusto.

"It's hotter here than in Macondo."

She was still worried about my weaknesses. She got up, growled, paced the classroom. Her doctor had ordered her to exercise her legs.

"Lorna Garrido, your weaknesses."

1. A sickly tension.
2. Sensationalism.
3. Suicidal thoughts.
4. Grayish tone.

“What do you mean by grayish tone?”

I wasn't making progress and my body was begging me to quit the class. To stop writing. To say goodbye to Regina and her grandiose eyes. Forget the tunnel, Ron de Heras, and his landfill of love. But Regina hugged me. She hugged me for a while. And this made me feel a little more valuable. My residual spaces held up but she was turning soft, becoming one of those human pillows that some people can be. Sensitive people, I mean.

“I recommend acupuncture for your sickly tension. That's how I published my first book: stretches of confinement and acupuncture.”

Regina was a great admirer of Marguerite Duras. She wanted to be like her, her long struggle, and spent weeks at home, alone and forgotten with a bottle of wine.

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I started acupuncture the next day. I barely saw Blas now and we had a huge argument because we both wanted to take out the trash. He threw it in my face that I was looking for my true north.

“You know what's the north? Half-broken, pointy icebergs floating aimlessly. Is that what you want? You want to personify the North Pole? I know that you're waiting for midnight. I see you get anxious. Checking your watch, setting your alarm for when the garbage truck comes. Before, you used to stay with me on the couch and we would fall asleep, touching each other and being tired, don't you remember? What a shame, Lorna Garrido. You've really changed.”

Acupuncture was very calming. I went to a clinic on the outskirts of the city because the ones in the center were very

expensive. They asked if I had problems with clotting, fear of needles, thrombosis, or high blood pressure. I told them no, that the only thing I had was a feeling of overflow.

I repeated it slowly: *overflow*.

It was obvious the acupuncturists didn't want to delve into my mental state. According to them, my anxiety fell within the median. In contrast, I looked at my reflection in the polished floor and saw one of those girls that pray a lot and get old quickly.

It was embarrassing to bring up all of my weaknesses: poor taste, tragic sensitivity, repressed emotions, existential confusion, sickly tension, and sensationalism. Oh, and my suicidal thoughts and grayish tone. Where to begin?

It didn't matter. They only wanted to stick me.

They had me there for thirty minutes, lying in front of a mirror with the needles inserted. I liked feeling shot full of holes, immobile. I felt the pricks all over my body. I was alone in the room and although they had firmly forbidden me to touch anything, I started to move the needles around and stick them in deeper. Enormous relief. Much better than regular acupuncture. I liked pushing the needles into my ankles best. If I just did it at home, I could save myself the trip to the clinic.

I thanked them and said the sessions had been satisfactory. I wouldn't be back again.

In the sewing shop in my neighborhood, I bought pins, scissors, and a thimble.

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My life became routine. In some ways, I liked it. I'd been through so many hard times that now I only had to stick pins



in myself to get over the pain. A pin for each weakness. They even helped me walk through the tunnel. If I thought of my mother, I stuck three pins in my chest. If I argued with Blas, I stuck five in my arm. And if Regina listed more weaknesses in my story (*I'm not talking about your story, these are in your heart!*), I cut myself with the scissors. A gash on my belly. Writing hurt and here were the scars, puffy and scattered. I wasn't going for a particular aesthetic, no pictures drawn on the skin. Just a comforting stab. Thanks to the needles, I had almost finished my story.

*Laura asks Ron if the rats bite. He answers that they might. And adds: we will be two intense, living beings among so much dead garbage. And then he tells her a secret, he gets close to her ear and whispers: you know what you won't ever forget? The silence. You don't hear a thing, because the vultures, the rats, and even the lice are at their own business. You'll hear the crunch of the trash underfoot. You'll hear your breathing and you'll see it for the first time: black as misfortune. Another fact about me: a few months ago, I did a lady a favor. She had thrown the urn with her mother's ashes in the dumpster by accident. And I went looking for them in the landfill. An urn with the image of Superman. I returned it to her. You can't imagine her happiness.*

Regina Katmandú was of the opinion that my story was slowing down. Ron and Laura's conversations were too long, and Luis, the boyfriend, hadn't shown up for pages. The fact was that it still had its defects, but Regina's attitude toward me had changed. Lately, she held my hand as I read. A bony, cold energy—like from a cemetery—ran through me.

Renata and Yin, the students that joined us in class, had been relegated to the side and Regina didn't give them a single compassionate glance. She latched onto me and her eyes grew

to such a degree that I thought of the painting by Magritte, *The False Mirror*. A great eye, the sky contained in the iris.

For a minute, I thought I was inside an eye and not a classroom. And that the retina, the iris, the lens, all formed part of that imperious building named *Absalom, Absalom!*

I think that was the class when Regina suggested to Renata and Yin that they could go. Away from literature, away from her artistic dictates.

The next class would be private. Just us. They called it a *tutorial*. Very specific and advanced.

“Lorna Garrido, your weakness is your orphanhood.”

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I was slowly losing my fear of the tunnel. It wasn't that long, to be honest. I exaggerated when I said 130 feet. It was only thirty feet and my mother was there, watering climbing vines with an old hose. I was about to tell her about new automatic irrigation systems, but I couldn't do it, in the end. When I was little, I could watch a sprinkler for hours. She'd never know it, but I was a great lover of sprinklers: the noise, the curtain of water, the prospect of the summer, a gush of youthful coolness.

To cure myself of orphanhood, I had to stick myself with twelve pins and three wooden splinters I found in a doorjamb. At least now I didn't have a never-ending list of weaknesses. Everything was summed up in just the one. I could barely move and pus and blood the color of raspberries spurted from my ankles and groin. I was soiling the bed where at one point the sex had been great.

Blas was resting in the other room. He saw me and was shaken, but didn't make a big scene.

I told him right off the bat that it was a personalized acupuncture treatment. It would be absurd to get worked up. I was fine. When hadn't I been fine? Had he ever seen me in shock? Helpless? Overwhelmed? Misunderstood? Abandoned?

I was just Lorna Garrido and I lived on a narrow street in Madrid.

It took me hours to recover. I kept bleeding. I had to use bandaids and alcohol, something I had carefully avoided: I wanted to be strong, without accessories.

*Laura and Ron make their way to the landfill in a van. Why is the lettering in English? "CLEANING SERVICES." She intuits that she'll have to say goodbye to fruit trees, to the saturated hue of the Manzanares river, and everything that shines, in general. She doesn't know Ron. It's possible they'll decide to stay there a month, a year, who knows. Maybe they'll build a cabin out of jars of tomato sauce. When one arrives somewhere new, one has to let in the mystery, and proclaim it. Ron, for his part, looks enraptured. She had sworn that she would let herself go, give in, because her whole life had been a scrap of metal, an insult. If hers could be called "a life," then let God come down and see it. But why was she complaining now, on her way to filth's very center, with a man she loved or seemed very much to love?*

After the pin episode, Blas went to stay with his friend Marcelo. He lived in La Moraleja and had a guestroom. Friends of ours had fought with their partners and passed through there and had all returned home thinner, their faces oxygenated, since Marcelo of La Moraleja was a vegetarian and didn't drink alcohol. It was like going on a boring natural therapy retreat.

"I prefer it over fighting with you about the trash and sleeping on a blood-stained mattress."

During those days of divorce and loneliness, I wrote seven pages in one sitting while sticking myself with needles. I bought some hypodermic ones inspired by a snake's fangs: long and made of stainless steel. I had started putting them in my face. There was another kind, too, for diabetes. They were hard to find. The pharmacist wouldn't give them to me until I made up a sister, Pamela Garrido, who was unconscious and needed them urgently. Those needles gave me a subterranean shiver and the tremors.

*We'll arrive at midnight, Ron explained to Laura. It might sound stupid, but the landfill bathed in moonlight looks like a lake. We'll be swans and you can kick around the junk you find on the path. Objects don't feel pain, nausea, swelling, depression, jaundice, unlike human beings, who only know how to inflict and receive pain, inflict and receive. Last month I climbed to the top of a palm tree. From up high I saw a tourist cleaning himself over and over. Disinfectant, antiseptic. But the biggest germ in the world is a freshly-showered human dropping lobster into a pot of boiling water.*

I finished my story as Blas was packing his suitcase. He was leaving me for good. He didn't accept my pleas or let me follow him down the hallway.

"Hand me that clock in the glass case."

He barely gave me time to ask about Marcelo.

"How's Marcelo of La Moraleja? Still growing wild nettle?"

Blas wasn't in the mood for chatting.

"This was a difficult decision. How many years would it be today, if we were still together?"

For the first time, I had no idea how long I had been with Blas. I felt free. And a little like a writer. And braver than ever. I

was moved. I called Regina Katmandú. She didn't answer. I left a message on her machine. I thought about sending her postcard with a picture of Marguerite Duras. I was going print it out myself. There's a very nice photo of her with her mother and they're both smiling a little. Were we not part of the same family now? *Tres vite dans ma vie il a ete trop tarde*. I would buy her a very literary bottle of wine called *Monólogo* that I had seen in an organic food store and together we could drink it slowly by the light of a streetlamp.

I decided then to leave the house through the narrow door, run down the sidewalk, stop and stand in front of the first dumpster on the corner. Someone had thrown away dried flowers and a screwdriver. I reflected on the relationship between the two objects. Blas was like a screwdriver, with his head and his adjustment system. And was I a dried flower? A monstrous insect? An overwrought woman afraid of tunnels?

Mechanics and nature had been together a number of years.

Maybe it was the rancid smell, but I got dizzy and had to lean against the rim of the dumpster. And amid the stench of reality and smoke of dreams, I remembered a sentence that had hounded me since childhood.

"Don't get so close to the trash, Lorna. One of these days, you're going to fall in."





# Pablo Herrán

Mallorca, 1986

Is author of the novel *Manuel Bergman* (Dos Bigotes, 2017). He was named Mestre en Gai Saber (Master in the Art of Poetry) on his native island of Mallorca, after winning the traditional award for Catalan poetry *Els Jocs Florals* three years in a row. At twenty-one, he studied Film in New York, where he also worked as a scriptwriter, director, and film editor. He founded his own film festival based around themes of immigration, which he organized for five years. He also belonged to a collective of Spanish artists in New York organized by the El Centro Español society. He lived in the United States for eight years. His short stories have appeared in both national and international publications. He has contributed articles to a variety of magazines and translated an autobiography of the American photographer Weegee into Spanish. Currently, he lives between Madrid and Barcelona, where he writes for various media outlets including *Vice*, *Shangay*, and *Gehitu Magazine*.

## When and why did you begin to write?

I wouldn't know when to say that I started writing. I surprised even myself a few years ago when I was clearing out boxes from my old room and found a notebook full of "stories" I had written as a child. I've always liked telling stories out loud, in writing, through images. As a writer and a reader, I'm of the opinion that the transmission of ideas, experiences, and feelings is an absolutely necessary activity for a person's mental health.

**Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

I'm more interested in characters than in themes. When a character starts to interest me, I explore the particular world around him or her and that's where I find the themes to develop. I'm always looking for current characters that live life differently from the norm, those that can't escape our notice because they see things another way.

**Who are some of your favorite writers? Some of your early influences?**

*Nada* by Carmen Laforet was the first novel that I stayed up the whole night to finish. Later, I became obsessed with Carson McCullers, John Fante, and Bashevis Singer. Without a doubt, those writers introduced me to the kind of writing I find most attractive.

**As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

I have the sense that today's writers want to synthesize as much as possible without losing literary quality as a result. No one is writing the biblical volumes of old, which seems like a logical tendency for our times. I think some recent books have been written so simply, so plainly, that they're brilliant.

**In which time and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

It sounds cliché, but I would like to have been a writer in a place as full of stories as New York, but before the city became the showcase it is now.

**If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

I've finished a second novel called *Mientras pudimos* (While We Could). It's a spin-off of *Manuel Bergman*. One of the minor characters from the first novel becomes the protagonist of the second. Despite that commonality, their stories are completely different.



## MANUEL BERGMAN

(Excerpt from the novel *Manuel Bergman*)

I heard him open the door but I pretended to be asleep. Mila was a few yards to my right. His voice sounded close. A normal voice, youthful, male. Nothing special. Two hands that felt enormous when he touched me, gripping my shoulders and giving me a little shake.

“Nice to meet you, Jorge. Lus’ka told me that you have to get up early to go somewhere. It’s after ten . . . Do you have time for breakfast?”

The charm of his black eyes hadn’t been the work of the photographer. They were his, real. Exactly like in his photos. This guy was no longer just a picture on paper.

“Hi, Zhenia,” I managed to get out.

“You have to eat,” he insisted, releasing my shoulders and leaving the room.

Mila sat on the windowsill. She looked out on Central Park, a mug in her hands. The sunlight fell on her perpendicularly, illuminating half her body and leaving the other side in shadow. I sat up against the pillows and she turned toward me. The light on her face shifted.

“I only drink coffee in the morning,” she said. “I can’t eat a bite of anything solid for an hour and a half after I wake up. At least.”

She kept her eyes on me as I gathered up my clothes, piled against the back of a chair. She studied every inch of my body. Once I had dressed, she made an unenthusiastic gesture of approval, like she was giving me a six out of ten.

"I'm always really hungry when I wake up," I said, more conscious than ever of my skinny stomach.

"I keep telling Luk'sa that she needs to make more of an effort," Zhenia said from the kitchen. "I'm sure that if she ate in the morning, she wouldn't spend the rest of the day eating like a cow."

He wore track pants and a low cut, sleeveless V-neck T-shirt which almost left his torso exposed. A smooth, hairless torso, and a nipple as brown as a chestnut. It didn't surprise me that Mila hadn't given higher marks to my underwear-clad appearance, living with this strapping tower of a man. His muscles flexed in various voluminous shapes as he opened and closed cupboards, drawers, the fridge . . . I even noted a powerful pectoral contraction as he poured cereal into a bowl.

"Who's Luk'sa?" I asked.

"Me," Mila said. She looked like she was falling asleep next to the window. "That's what he calls me." Even though Zhenia had also said that she ate like a cow, she was bursting with pride over her nickname.

"You know, Jorge? Only people who wake up hungry will devour the world. I can tell immediately if someone doesn't eat breakfast. They drag their bad mood around with them. Skipping breakfast causes depression and lack of concentration, did you know? People don't take breakfast seriously and then they slit their wrists. You have to start the day with a good dose of sugar and vitamin C. Do you like blueberries?"

"Yes."

“That’s perfect!”

The Belarusian sat beside me so he could watch me consume the cereal apparently required not to slit one’s wrists.

“So. What’s your story?” he asked.

I didn’t know where to begin. The starting point is arbitrary when you don’t have a story.

“He broke up with his boyfriend,” Mila answered for me.

I shot her a furious look. It wasn’t very respectful to reveal the confidences of the night before.

“That’s perfect!” Zhenia celebrated.

I wasn’t sure why blueberries and my break up were equally “perfect” issues, but I shook the hand he held out to me in congratulation anyway. Mila clapped from the windowsill. They were overjoyed.

“New York is not a city for falling in love. You’ll have your chance when you move somewhere else. I’m sure you didn’t come here to get a boyfriend. Why did you come?”

“To be a screenwriter.”

“Obviously,” said Mila, “with a face like that . . .”

Zhenia looked at his roommate mockingly.

“He said screenwriter, Luk’sa, not actor. Dummy.”

It was obvious that no one had ever explained the difference between these two professions to this girl. She looked at me like I had suddenly become a complete stranger.

“I can tell that you were born to be a screenwriter, Jorge,” Zhenia said, his eyes half-closed.

“How can you tell?” I was skeptical.

“By your eyelids. Intelligence is reflected in the shape of the eyelid over the eye. I bet you have a lot to say. You are a smart guy,” he stopped to scrutinize my eyelids, his head tilted to the side, as if he needed to check his assertion from

another angle. “But now you are in the jungle and here, in addition to being smart, you need to be smarter than the rest.” He stiffened his neck. “You have to fight to move up, like trees when they grow all close together, one on top of the other. No one deserves to live in a ghetto like the one you were living in when that crazy woman threw you out. And definitely not a brilliant screenwriter like you, Jorge. Do you know who Dostoyevsky is?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what Dostoyevsky said about where we live?”

“No.”

“Only in great houses are great ideas cultivated.”

The voice that had sounded common when I first heard it had started to give me another feeling. Now that I was awake, the voice had form and temperature, like you could hold it in your hands. First there was the Belarusian girl who couldn't have cared less about my situation, then Mila, whose head was a mess, and now here was Zhenia, the third Belarusian in the story of my life. A Belarusian *par excellence*: his warm, full voice as persuasive as a magic flute.

“Look around you. Better than that shithole in Brooklyn, isn't it?”

He leaned back, balancing on the back legs of his chair until I answered.

“Yes.”

“I'm an artist, too. Like you. Do you know the worst thing that can happen to an artist?”

“No.”

“Becoming a waiter. We artists need time like we need water. New York restaurants are cemeteries of wasted talent. Would you like to hear my story?”

“Yes.”

“I came to New York four years ago with less than two thousand dollars saved . . .” he paused a few seconds before revealing the ending. “Now I pay four thousand a month in rent.” He slapped his hand down on the table, then stood up and turned around, as if that said it all.

“Do you want to know how I got here?”

I was starting to suspect that what Zhenia really liked was getting monosyllabic responses.

“He already knows,” Mila jumped in. “I told him last night.”

He told her to be quiet. Apparently he wasn’t referring to his occupation.

“This book,” he told me, reaching for one of the two books in Belarusian stacked on his nightstand. He lay down on the bed, his legs kicking in the air. “Here is everything you need to find what you’re looking for, Jorge.”

He stuck his fingers between the pages and opened to a section highlighted in yellow. He read me the passage slowly, translating each word carefully.

“Talent, perseverance, and an ironclad will to triumph are the ingredients necessary to achieve success. This recipe was followed by the great men and women who weren’t content to follow the majority, the herd. What set these people apart from the crowd is that they had the courage to start, and once they were on their way, they never gave up.”

I had the impression that this new acquaintance knew more about me than I’d had the chance to tell him. I looked at him with a mixture of admiration and shock.

“How old are you?” he inquired when he finished reading.

“Twenty-four.”

“You don’t have much time left. Nobody wants a twenty-four year old dick if they can have one that’s twenty-three. After twenty-five, forget it. Too late to start.”

I was silent. Had he said *dick*?

“You just need to go where the dirty old men with money go and tell them that you miss mommy and daddy,” he explained. “There are many who would be willing to pay your rent in Midtown in exchange for a little pity and a lot of excitement.”

“They love when I dress up like Pocahontas,” Mila added.

“That’s the secret,” he concluded, tapping his pointer finger against his temple. “You have to be smarter than the rest. Not everyone makes it to the top.”

Zhenia wasn’t interested in wasting time and I had already wasted plenty of it. But still, he was talking about prostitution and getting a place in Manhattan and I was thinking about movie scripts and making a living from writing. He was talking about reality and I was talking about fiction. He was making the case for becoming a gigolo and it was all starting to sound wonderful.

“What if one of the old guys gets violent?” I proposed.

“We’re constantly surrounded by people that could surprise us. What if Sveta had been a serial killer? What if Luk’sa and I are crazy?”

My thoughts exactly.

“You guys aren’t worried about going . . . nuts?”

I recognized their complicity in the instinct to look at one another, to reaffirm their subjective discretion, to stick together in this whole scheme of a life they’d set up high on 58<sup>th</sup>.

“Why would we wind up crazy?” he said, defensive. “You think you don’t pimp yourself out, Jorge? We start

selling ourselves the moment we accept the rules of this shitty world. What?” he asked, sensing my judgment. “We don’t sell drugs or guns. We offer beauty and youth. What’s so bad about that? Believe me, half of the people in New York have done the same thing. And the other half hasn’t because they’re ugly.”

The darkness of his eyes was having a hypnotizing effect.

“It’s twenty to eleven, honey,” Mila warned me. “Where did you say you had to be so early?”

I couldn’t think of where I had to go, but in her interjection I recognized my mother telling me to skedaddle. The nipple that escaped from the loose fabric of Zhenia’s T-shirt and his sweet and sour voice were devouring the last remnants of my good sense.

“Shit! I’m not going to make it! I have to be there at eleven!”

Mila followed me to the entryway. The palm of her hand landed on my back and my heart skipped a beat.

“Take these keys with you,” she said. “We might not be here in the afternoon.”

There was much too much city in this part of the city. It was unbearable. I crossed Madison Square Park as quickly as I could in the direction of the Village, where the sky is nearer to the ground and one doesn’t lose their head so easily. At Fifth and 12th I stopped and looked to the top of the tall gothic tower, its columns climbing the building’s face and ending in a point. I was already late and sweating profusely, but I had arrived in a safe place at last. I felt calm as soon as I stepped onto the stone path that led to the Village Presbyterian Church.

“The service has already started,” the man at the main door whispered. “If you don’t mind, take the stairs to the mezzanine.”

I would be able to recognize Fabio's curls among thousands of heads of hair, especially somewhere predominated by graying and baldness. I sat in the pew closest to the balcony railing and looked for him. Despite his recent interest in Bible reading, my ex-boyfriend's tropical curls clearly hadn't shown up in church that Sunday morning.

The organ sounded three deep notes and a tremendous chorus of at least twenty-five people erupted from nowhere. When the music stopped and the pastor climbed into the pulpit, I sank down onto the wooden seat, my arms crossed. From where I sat in the side nave, I sensed that I could guess the common denominator for those gathered there: the search for relief in the dogma of faith. We had weak, romantic minds. We sought, in some form or another, the security of everlasting love. But Fabio wasn't there and God hadn't been for years, either.

The little shelf compartments crowded with Bibles and hymnbooks also contained pencils and stacks of offering envelopes. I rested an envelope on the hard cover of a Bible. My words were ready to tumble headfirst onto paper.

*A small plane is suspended in the air. It doesn't rise, it doesn't fall, doesn't come or go. It stays right where it is, as if pinned with a thumbtack.*

One of the few other people in the nave approached me from behind and touched my shoulder. I turned to him, anxious to return to my piece of paper. A black man built like a brick house offered me his hand.

"Jorge." I introduced myself, convinced he had the wrong person.

"Peace be with you."



As soon as my hand was free, I got back to filling the envelope.

*Inside the plane there is a pilot and two adventurers. I say adventurers because they dared each other to go skydiving and they have reached the point of no return. The pilot has been holding for the jump for several minutes now. Both figures step to the edge. They're somewhat nervous. To be honest, they've never been more terrified.*

*They're a couple. It's impossible to tell them apart at the moment because they're wearing the same jumpsuit and the same helmet, they're both thin, they wear more or less the same size. One of them is me, by the way. The one on the left, or the right. No way to tell.*

*"One, two, and . . ."*

*They jump before three. They've skipped a number.*

*They choose to be together, even in the immensity of the sky. They goof off, posing in the air, weightless. They laugh at their jowls rippling in the wind. They shout "Geronimo!" and have fun doing the dumb, typical things people do when they're in the air and everything seems easy, light, eternal. They feel the rush on their faces. Adrenaline. They're birds. They look at each other. Hold hands. They're in love. Birds in love. Parakeets. Peace doves. Peacocks. Pura vida. But watch it now: they think they're flying but they're not, they're falling. Plummeting. The ground—cement, rock, glass—is getting closer. Their pleasure is vanishing by the moment and they must prepare for the landing. They must let go of each other and be attentive now.*

*They don't have a choice: they let go and pay attention.*

*The process should be easy and the pilot explained it three times before take-off. Each backpack contains two parachutes. The main parachute opens with the rings on the chest harness.*

*There's an emergency parachute, as well—just in case—which is activated by the rings near the armpits. Pull, and the parachute comes out of the backpack and inflates. That's it.*

*One of them—of us—is frozen. He's already pulled the rings on both the harness and at the armpits but neither parachute has opened. Once he accepts that this unbelievable thing is happening, he starts to panic. It's an inevitably discreet panic, because with those helmets on it's impossible to make out their expressions. The individual with the faulty parachute throws himself onto his partner's back. He holds him tightly. He wants to ask for help, but it's hard to articulate when in shock. He wants to tell him that he loves him, too, that he wants to marry him, that he has been happy with him, and that he's about to die in a brutal, absurd accident. The individual with the functioning parachute doesn't understand what's happening and just tries get the other off his back. He wants to tell him to quit playing around, to go away, what the hell is he doing, asshole, son of a bitch. With his partner on his back he can't open his parachute either. The pressure from his body blocks it. He's dragging him down to his death.*

*Impact is unavoidable. They can make out the shape and color of the rocks below.*

*They pass through the most contaminated swath of sky in a hellish embrace. From the mountaintops, from the city's tallest skyscrapers, their final wishes can be heard:*

*“Save meeeeeeeeeee!”*

*“Let me gooooooooooo!”*

I crumpled the envelope in my fist and hid it in my pocket. I had seen him. It was him. As if my words had conjured him there. He was walking so soundlessly that God himself wouldn't notice he had arrived a half hour late.

He still hadn't seen me, though he was barely a foot and a half away. I had run in terror from 58th to 12th to find him, and now that he was in front of me, I just wanted to hide.

“Hey, Fabio.”

Astonished, he whispered: “Jorge . . .”

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# Natàlia Cerezo

Barcelona, 1985

I was born in Castellar del Vallés, a small town not far from Barcelona, right in the middle of the 80s. I grew up wanting to travel and read. Since I read everything I could get my hands on, I started to study Translation and Interpretation, which allowed me to spend a year in both Copenhagen and Taipei. When I finished at university, I moved to Barcelona into a sixth floor walk-up with a huge terrace from which I could see an inch sea. Five years later, I moved back to my hometown with my cat and my partner. I published my first book of stories, *En las ciudades escondidas* (In Hidden Cities) (Rata 2018), which won the Ojo Crítico for Fiction that year. In addition to reading and writing, I like cats, sharks, and Spanish omelets.

## **When and why did you begin to write?**

I don't remember. I think I was always writing, ever since I was little. I do remember one of the first things I wrote, by hand on horrible graph paper. They were stories my grandmother told me.

## **Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

I don't think much about theme when I sit down to write. I'm more interested in the feeling I want to transmit and the story that will help me achieve it.

## **Who are some of your favorite writers? Some of your early influences?**

I have many: Katherine Mansfield, Alice Munro, Mercè Rodoreda, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Carson McCullers, James Salter...

**As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

I'm not up on innovations and trends at all. There are so many good things to read, from last year or 500 years ago, that I feel like I'll never have time to read it all. This is such an unpleasant feeling that I just go with the flow and choose what I like, because of the author, the book itself, even the edition.

**In which time and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

In the 20th century in the US or Canada, partying with Dorothy Parker in New York or cut off by snow in some remote Canadian village.

**If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

I'm always writing stories, but I'm not working on anything in particular. The last thing I wrote is in "quarantine" (I always let the stories breathe a bit and don't re-read them for at least a few months, so see if they're any good), so they're not ready to show to anyone.

## **HOW CAN THIS MAN BE MY FATHER?**

**(Story from *Las ciudades escondidas*)**

Winter. A clear day. We were hauling a shipment of something really far, up north. I don't remember what. Papa put his things in the cab and checked that all was in order before we set off. I watched from the passenger seat as he rooted around in the engine, staining his shirt with grease. Then he got a hose and sprayed down the truck. He had named it, like a boat: faded blue letters stuck on the inside of his door.

Papa drove all day and we only stopped to eat a couple of sandwiches at a rest stop. The ground had been left untended, with patches of neglected, brown grass. We ate quickly at a cold stone table and threw the tinfoil and orange peels in the empty trash bin.

The truck vibrated and roared and Papa was quiet. He drove with his eyes on the highway and his hands tight on the wheel. The sun was setting and the hills and fields turned violet. Our headlights lit the road and the passing cars. One had its interior light on, and inside a woman was looking at a map. She had it spread open, taking up almost the entire windshield. She was tracing a route with her finger and showed something to the driver. I saw them

for just a moment. Then the light went out and the car sped off.

We stopped at a truck stop to spend the night. Crossing the parking lot, we passed by trucks and people shouting in the direction of the restaurant's colorful lights. Papa walked ahead, his head bowed, his stride long and hurried.

We sat at the bar and Papa shook hands with the waiter, a big man who made us a hot dinner and gave us a piece of cake on the house. They chatted a long while and I did the crossword in a newspaper someone had left behind.

Other truckers saw us on our way back and greeted Papa and gave him little slaps on the back. They asked me if I was his daughter. I said yes and stuck out my hand. Papa held me by the shoulders and it hurt a little.

We got the truck ready for the night. We covered the bunk mattresses with flowered sheets and wool blankets. Papa turned on the overhead light and cracked the windows and said he was going to get a coffee and would be right back. He left with a slam of the door and I heard him walk away.

I put on my pajamas behind the curtain that divided the cab in half and turned off the light. I climbed up on the top bunk and covered myself with the blanket. I heard rough voices, growls, creaks, horns beeping. A strong smell of gasoline. I couldn't stay still. I tossed and turned, lay on my back and grabbed my knees. The blanket was itchy and I kicked it off the bed. I thought about the summer Papa brought me with him in the truck. It had been very warm. I rode with my arm out the window the whole day, making waves against the furious, hot wind of the highway and got sunburned. Papa took a bottle of lotion from under his seat and spread it on me gently. He told me that with a sunburned arm I was *a real trucker now* and we laughed. We spent the night at a rest stop with no streetlights, lost in darkness. Papa shut off all the lights in the truck and took two folding chairs from



the cab. We ate a light dinner, just sandwiches and fruit, and we looked at the stars and Papa told me his stories and adventures, like when he found a fox in northern France or when it rained so much that the road became a river and he started to float and didn't spend a single cent on gas.

It had gotten little cold. I grabbed the blanket from the floor and saw an insect on the ceiling. It was hanging upside down, moving its wings, before it started to fly around, buzzing. I thought maybe it had hidden in the truck since the summer and would die in the cold if it flew outside now. I closed the windows. Every time I was about to fall asleep, it struck the glass or buzzed past my ear and woke me up, until I didn't hear it anymore.

Papa came back at daybreak. I woke to the smell of hot coffee and the sound of the engine turning over. I opened one eye and saw him through the gap in the curtain. He drank from a steaming thermos that fogged the windshield, like breath.

I sat up and pulled back the curtain. We were on the highway, grey in the dawn light. I sat in the passenger seat in my pajamas and Papa handed me a croissant in a paper bag and a cup of hot chocolate.

We passed through enormous fields and reached the cold northern forests. We left the highway and took a narrow, winding road. The asphalt was damp and the trees were tall and leafy. An opaque twilight trailed us the whole day, and then suddenly, the sky was dark.

Rain was falling when we got to the border. There was a long line of cars waiting, thousands of red lights, and Papa told me to go to sleep. The rain tapped on the roof and cold air blew through the open window and stirred the curtain. I covered myself with the blanket, and when I woke again, we had started to move.

We stopped at a gas station for breakfast. Papa had been driving all night, like he had done many times before, but that

day he said he needed a nap. He yawned, got in the bottom bunk, and fell asleep.

I finished eating and sat there, not knowing what to do. Outside, it was still raining. Papa snored and tossed in his dreams. I couldn't find an umbrella under the driver's seat, but there was a raincoat, much too big for me.

I jumped out of the truck and into a puddle, soaking my shoes and the hems of my pants. The water was cold and dirty, muddy, and the rain dripped from my hood and wet my nose and bangs. We must have been close to the border, because there were lots of trucks from different countries. They looked like sleeping beasts and I tiptoed past them. I looked at the license plates and into the cabs. Most of them were empty, but in some a driver slept or read over papers or smoked.

There was a little white shack with a few gas pumps and a shop. I walked behind it and found a grassy meadow leading to a cliff from which you could see the whole valley, covered in mist. I spent a while there. I lay down in the grass on my stomach and stuck my head out over the edge. The whiteness of the fog was blinding, so thick I could have plucked it like a piece of cotton. It lifted slightly, cloaking the twisted trees on the cliff side and touching my face. I closed my eyes for a moment. A cool hand on my forehead during a feverish night.

When I opened my eyes, everything was white and it was still raining and I went back, guided by the sounds of the trucks in the parking lot. I passed close by the hut, where a group of truckers stood under the tin roof, keeping out of the rain.

"Hey, you there!" one of them shouted, a big man, hairy as a lion, stepping out from the fog. "Aren't you Marc's daughter?"

I stopped and said yes.

"I thought so. I'm Aitor. I see your dad a lot on the road. You probably don't remember, but we met a few summers ago. You were a really bright little kid. How old are you now?"

“Fourteen.”

“Time flies. My kids are more or less the same age.” The man lit a cigar and I watched as he rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. Out there in the rain, he was looking at me the same way everybody had looked at us since the end of the summer, when Mama left. “I heard you’re keeping him company for a few days. You like traveling with him?”

I nodded and tied the cord on my hood tighter. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

“I have to go, Papa’s waiting.”

“We might see each other up ahead, if we’re doing the same route. Tell him I said hello.”

I ran back. I had trouble finding the truck in all the fog. Finally, I saw its shiny white snout. Papa opened the passenger side for me and I climbed into the cab, holding my socks and shoes so I didn’t get the floor dirty. Papa asked me where I had been and I told him I had gone to explore and that Aitor said hello. He nodded and turned on the heat. I took off the rain jacket and once I had gotten changed, and we started to drive. In the rearview mirror, I saw that the trucker-lion pulling up to pass us.

He honked twice and Papa answered, raising his arm out the window.

The forest seemed to never end. The trees were narrow and very close together and the road rose and fell, a constant flux. We made our way slowly, the truck snoring like a sleeping bear. Sometimes a squirrel ran out in front of us, leaving little tracks in the snow on the side of the road and racing up the trees dripping slush.

We stopped at a gas station in a small village. There we ran into Aitor, smoking and leaning against his truck. He was taking the same road, heading north with an urgent shipment of plastic flowers.

We had dinner in the bar next to the gas station. It started to snow when they brought the soup and by the main course it was piling up against the window. It could ice over during the night, the waiter warned. Aitor ate the last two bites of his stew and said he couldn't risk getting stuck and that he would leave right then. He would cross the forest that same night and sleep the next day at an inn on the other side, where they knew him.

He left without dessert. Papa watched him disappear behind the curtain of snow and asked if I felt up to doing the same.

I said yes. Papa asked them to fill his thermos with coffee and we left.

Our headlights lit up the road and the snowflakes as they flew, pushed around by the wind like ashes. We could hardly see. Dry tree branches scraped the roof. The windshield wipers rose and fell with the *tick tock* of a clock and Papa gripped the steering wheel. Every now and then, he took a swig from the thermos and the coffee's warmth spread through cab.

I wondered if he was used to this: the road at midnight, lit only by headlights, coffee keeping him awake, eyes red with exhaustion. Maybe one night, I thought as I gripped my seatbelt and the truck roared like a motorboat on a dark lake, maybe one night he stopped to sleep, thinking it wouldn't snow, and woke up blanketed in it, the truck entombed, the cargo frozen. We'd only gone for three hot, sunny days on that other trip, doing a run not far from home. The truck was a little newer then, the letters on the side of the door hadn't faded. And when we got home, Mama was waiting for us.

Papa stopped on the road shoulder clear of snow and asked me to help him put on the chains. He spread the chains on the ground while I held the flashlight, then I directed him as he backed up over them before fastening them on.

We drove very slowly. Papa didn't take his eyes from the road and his coffee went cold. The forest shone in the light of the high beams and the snow fell, silent like us, like the rest of the world.

I saw the rose for just an instant, red as a coal in the middle of the road. We drove over it, burying it in the snow.

"Did you see that? It looked like a flower..."

Papa shrugged. "Sure it was nothing."

But flowers kept appearing: roses, magnolias, lilacs, and orchids, like a wedding, bright and stiff, half-covered in snow.

I didn't notice at first that Papa had braked and the truck was skidding. I covered my head with my hands and the belt jerked against my chest, leaving me breathless.

The truck came to a stop and Papa got out and ran through the snow. I saw Aitor's truck, overturned. His cargo scattered along road, the plastic flowers, false spring.

I don't know how long I stayed in the truck. I saw Papa reach the cab, now upside-down. The sound of the engine, the wind, a frightened voice, sharp and broken. Papa shouting, or Aitor, calling for help.

That voice drove me outside. The wind numbed my face and forced my eyes half-shut. I crossed the road toward the darkened cab. The windshield was broken, the body smashed in. Snow blocked the windows and there was a trail of red and a little ways away, two bodies. I turned away when I saw them, my hands at my mouth, a stifled scream. The headlights were blinding. I closed my eyes.

I heard another voice, then. A calm, serious voice—a voice I knew. Papa. Papa was speaking to me.

"Nora, stay calm. Get the blankets and the first aid kit."

My heart in my throat, I brought the first aid kit and all the blankets, scarves, shawls, and sweaters I could find. Walking back, I stepped in a black puddle of melted snow which spread

across the asphalt and reached Papa's hands, stained red as he pressed on Aitor's leg. He had taken off his sweater and was making a tourniquet with his shirt and a stick. He grabbed the blankets and the clothes and covered Aitor carefully, wrapping his head in my scarf.

"I'll be right back," he said. He put his sweater back on. "Stay with him and talk."

He ran to our truck and I heard the cough of the radio. The hazard lights flashed on and I saw him take out the safety signals and put on a reflective vest before disappearing into the darkness.

"Someone will come soon," I said.

I knelt beside Aitor. His eyes were open, but he didn't move or speak. Papa had covered him so well that I could only sense his breathing from the condensation he exhaled. He looked blurry and yellow in the blinking lights. His face was cut and swollen. Snowflakes fell on his forehead and eyelashes. I took a cotton ball from the kit and cleaned them slowly, barely touching him, until the melted snow slipped down his cheeks.

He was shaking. The scarf was coming loose and he had stuck a rigid hand out from under the blankets. I covered him up again, took off my jacket and wrapped it around him. I lay down next to him and held him until he stopped shaking. The asphalt was freezing, but the snow felt almost warm. I covered us, like a mother. I felt the distant beat of Aitor's heart; he shuddered and I held him tighter and told him everything, about those days with Papa, the kilometers we'd done, the things we'd seen.

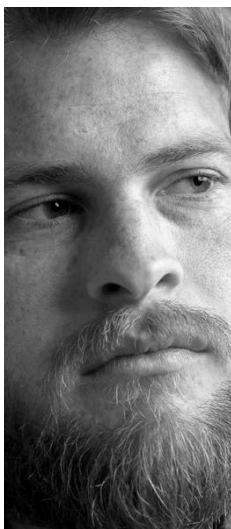
I held him and talked. Papa was coming, weighted down with boxes. Our eyes met and it was like we were seeing each other after a very long time. He tipped out the boxes, blanketing us in flowers. They fluttered with Aitor's faint breath, like they

were alive, and tickled our noses. They smelled like our closet at home. Papa emptied every last one of boxes and sat down next to us. He took my hand and squeezed it hard.

“Everything is going to be okay.”







# Alejandro Morellón

Madrid, 1985

Grew up on the island of Mallorca where he learned to read, walk, and count to one hundred. He has published the short story collections *La noche en que caemos* (The Night We Fell) (Eolas, 2013), winner of the 2012 Monteleón Foundation Prize, and *El estado natural de las cosas* (The Natural State of Things) (Caballo de Troya, 2016), winner of the 2017 Gabriel García Márquez Hispanic American Prize. He currently resides in Madrid.

## **When and why did you begin to write?**

I started writing in grade school. On one of my first language exams, for example, I wrote a rap for my friend's birthday instead of answering the questions. I failed, obviously. In the beginning I wrote because it was fun to do and later because doing it revealed other aspects of reality to me. Words were a way to read to the world.

## **Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

Exile and otherness, enigma, fragments, the terribleness of fate.

## **Who are some of your favorite writers? Some of your early influences?**

In the beginning, there was Poe, Mary Shelley, Kafka. Later, Dino Buzzato, then Italo Calvino, then Angela Carter, then José Donoso, Clarice Lispector, Antoine Volodine, George Saunders, Armonia Somers.

**As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

I see trends in non-fiction and autofiction, but I personally prefer to read fiction, whatever that may mean, sometimes labels can be castrating. I'm thinking about books by Rita Indiana, Rodrigo M. Tizano, Mariana Enriquez, Rubén M. Giráldez, Mónica Ojeda, Eduardo Ruiz Sosa, Liliana Colanzi, for example.

**In which time and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

The Italian Renaissance.

**If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

My first novel, *Caballo sea la noche* (Horse Be the Night), will be published by Candaya in late 2019. It's a book about a place where schizophrenic and the oneiric meet, a place that gives shelter to people who have wanted to flee, hideout, shut themselves away from society.

## TA I

### Story from *La noche en que caemos* (The Night We Fell)

Her water breaks at dawn. He doesn't know how to drive, so they call a taxi. It's raining, not hard but enough so that the streets look blurred and slippery through the windshield. A fine layer of grease dissolves in the water and runs down the window. This doesn't seem like a good sign; nothing has since they got out of bed. They still sense the chill night air and the absence of light on their street, exactly twenty-four minutes from the hospital.

They did a dry run a few weeks ago, to make sure they had everything ready. He had gathered what they would need for the hospital: toothbrush, basket, pajamas, the slippers someone had given her for labor and which she hadn't wanted to wear beforehand. We did everything right, they looked at each other and seemed to say. Later, in bed, she touched the flannel slippers she still hadn't worn.

"For when Guillermo is born."

But when the day arrived, the real day, nothing went as planned from beginning. That's the way it is, nothing one can do. First, she had been dreaming about swim class when her water broke and as a consequence her body hadn't responded until well into the morning. Then, the taxi that showed up

outside their apartment didn't inspire any confidence: an old car, faded paintjob, ancient stickers on the windows, a missing rim, neither of the sideview mirrors turned outward.

"Which company did you call, Jaime?"

"Get in, honey, you don't want to have the baby in the street."

"This car is a piece of junk," she whispers to herself as they walk toward it. "It's even missing part of 'taxi.'"

He looks and sees that, in effect, the X has peeled off. The sign now reads TA I. Thirty-two minutes later, it occurs to her to check the time.

"Hey, are we far?" she asks.

"Just about there."

They barely hear the cabbie's metallic, whistling voice over the music coming the speakers, a Machín tape the man has been listening to for who knows how long.

"Jaime," she whispers to her husband. "This isn't the way to the hospital."

He squeezes her fingers tightly to calm her as he shakes himself awake. He doesn't move, except to twist his mouth and speak quietly:

"He's a cab driver, hon, he knows the shortest way."

She's about to reproach him—*no way, it doesn't take this long to get there*—but before she speaks, the first strong contractions begin.

"Sweetie, are you ok" he says, squeezing her hand a little harder.

"I just want to get to the hospital."

"Can't you go a little faster?" the husband says to the driver.

"Just three or four streets to go," the cabbie replies, his face impassive. One could almost say, if it wasn't too strange, that he imitated the voice of the singer

The car turns, turns again, goes down one, two, three, different streets. Her pain intensifies.

“For the love of God! Where are we?”

Her eyes are open wide, her mouth contorts, she clutches her husband with a hot hand, dripping sweat. Fog forms on the windows. The husband sweats through his shirt.

“We’ll be right there, ma’am. Just two streets away.”

“Jaime, I want to get out of this fucking taxi.”

“Don’t get angry. He’s just doing his job. It’s got to be the traffic.”

But there isn’t any traffic. He’s puzzled, too: he thinks he may have heard a strange inflection in the driver’s voice, the slight hint of Cuban music in his speech. Even so, he doesn’t do anything. He looks out the window and tells himself that any minute now they’ll see the Emergency Room entrance and he can become a father and he will learn how to drive and he will never have to call a taxi again.

“Oh, my God...”

“What? What’s wrong, honey? Is it bad?”

“The slippers ... we forgot the slippers,” she says.

“Don’t worry about that right now.”

“No. No. You forgot the slippers.”

“I’ll get you new ones . . .”

“You don’t get it, you don’t get it at all. I want *those* slippers, they were so nice...”

And then she crumbles, cries as her face cracks with pain.

“Breathe, breathe,” the husband says, looking furtively at the driver.

He appears to be smiling. His mustache is really very black. Could he have possibly turned up the music? The maracas explode and he hears more percussion: the drums, bongos.

“The music...”

“You like it ¿eh?”

“Actually, I was going to ask you to turn it down a little. She’d be more comfortable.”

“Machín is a *bolero* icon,” the cabbie answers, completely ignoring his request. “Did you know he died twelve days before Elvis Presley? You know that song, ‘El Manisero’?”

“No, but...”

“I’ll put it on for you now.”

“Excuse me, we want to get to the hospital as soon as possible and...”

He can’t finish his sentence because the sound of a trumpet reverberates throughout the inside of the car and now she shouts in pain.

“The baby’s coming, Jaime! Tell that asshole to get going or I’m going to report him!”

In response, the driver hums “El Manisero” and even takes the liberty of releasing the wheel and pretending to shake the maracas. The faded old car makes two turns, takes a roundabout, curves to the left, and merges onto the highway. *Maniiiiiiiiii...*

“Faster this way,” he says, but they don’t hear him, neither one.

She doesn’t hear because she’s pushing with all her strength and the only thing she hears is the ringing in her ears. He doesn’t hear because he’s fixated on the fragile, gelatinous shape that’s emerging from between his wife’s legs. I suppose that must be a child, he thinks to himself. Gross.

And then: push, push, push a little more; grimace of pain, insults, damp hair on her forehead, *drivefastermotherfucker*, legs in the air, clawing fingers and the husband yells, too, because he doesn’t know what to do with the thing that spills out onto the upholstery. Machín’s voice in the background.

The driver is a little stocky, with greying hair and uneven sideburns and that mustache, so remarkable, rather full and very black. The cabbie concentrates on driving and doesn’t notice, or pretends not to notice, that the husband—the new father—is observing him. He studies him in the side of the

rearview mirror. He's not angry, he doesn't hate him. At the moment, he doesn't even feel like saying a word. He only feels deeply confused and doesn't know what to make of that man, so unlike anyone he has met. His wife is half-asleep. She stopped bleeding an hour and a half before and is against the door, her face pressed to the window. On her knees, on his knees, is their son, wrapped in a towel and placed in the crack between their legs. He, too, sleeps peacefully.

But nothing is going like it's supposed to, he thinks. We're supposed to be in the hospital, in a room with a white floor and white walls, surrounded by people in white coats who would have washed their hands before they touched anything and would be congratulating us on our beautiful little boy. We're supposed to be receiving family, and hugging each other. My wife is supposed to be in a bed with clean, aseptic sheets, damp towels, and sweet-faced nurses. She is supposed to be holding Guillermo smiling with her whole face, and me at her side, looking at them both, marveling at the miracle of creation. But I'm here, looking at this driver's mustache, watching his face in the rearview mirror when he's not looking.

There is no sign of the hospital in the hours that follow. The car keeps moving, the driver's hands turn the wheel to the left, to the right, sometimes he brakes at a light, they stop. But they don't get out. The music keeps playing. The child cries. They don't get out.

The months of breastfeeding are difficult. The mother barely sleeps, the father has trouble getting comfortable, his neck and back are sore. Once in a while, they stop at a gas station and the driver—who they've discovered is named Ataulfo—brings everything the baby needs, filling the taxi's trunk with jars of baby food, milk, clothing, even a little rattle he saw in a mall. Go on, shake it like this, like a maraca.

Neither knows what to say. They hardly think about their house, or their life before. They just ask: where to now? And the cabbie simply shrugs. We'll see along the way, he says. The husband and wife take turns caring for the child. Often, while one changes diapers, the other sits in the passenger seat to keep Ataulfo company.

"Don't you ever get tired of listening to Machín?" Jaime asks.

"No sir, he's the very best."

Sometimes, the cabbie tells them some anecdote about the singer, or when he saw him in this or that concert.

"Machín is the greatest," he usually repeats.

And so, when the child talks for the first time, his parents aren't surprised that his first recognizable sound is *machínnn*. Little more than a babble, but they understand. And they look proudly at Ataulfo, who smiles, satisfied.

The cabbie drives and the parents dedicate themselves to caring for the child: they divide the tasks of hygiene, feeding, and education. The father speaks to him of the world outside, the things beyond the car windows, places they might arrive. But they don't arrive anywhere.

Guillermo loses his first tooth in the taxi, says his first bad words, celebrates his first birthday, learns his first songs. All by Machín, of course. He also listens to his parents talk about movies, about the people they knew in their old lives, about all that is found outside, and he learns and begins to think for himself. And one day, he asks the big question.

"Papá, Mamá, everyone you talk about is outside, and I've seen it through the window, too. They do things out there, they make movies and issue verdicts, and perform plays and wait in line at the fish shop—why are we always in the taxi?"

The intensity and logic of the question makes them—the father and the mother—look at each other, alarmed. In their



eyes, something like *ok, the time has come*. Even Ataulfo slows down. The mother stares at the mat between her feet, trying to make out the answer in the breadcrumbs and lint. The father pretends to busy himself with something he sees from the window. After a few minutes of silence, the boy looks at Ataulfo, puzzled.

“Well, you see, son . . .” the father begins.

“Your father doesn’t know how to drive..”

But Ataulfo interrupts.

“Look, kid, you remember what I showed you with the rattle when you were little? Remember the rhythm? Yeah, check it out.”

The song is on full blast, the maracas blast across the windshield, across the backseat, envelope everything in hertzian waves, the elegant violence of Latin beats. The parents twist in their seats a bit, unable to stay still, and look sideways at Guillermo. Guillermo is quiet. His earlier worries silenced, his fingers dance to the rhythm of the music. He is quiet, and forgets.

Guillermo no longer has a child’s voice. He wants to ride up front, asks Ataulfo to let him smoke when his parents are asleep in the back. One day when they’re stopped at a crosswalk, a girl more or less his age, with blonde hair and a paint-splattered backpack, crosses in front of the car. Guillermo leans back in his seat. Ataulfo asks:

“You liked her, right? The girl.”

Guillermo doesn’t even answer. He’s too busy following her with his eyes, watching as she walks a few more feet and gets on a bus.

“What’s it like to ride a bus, Ataulfo?”

“Don’t know, man. I’m a cab driver.”

The next day, when the parents ask about their next destination, Ataulfo limits himself to saying:

“We’re going somewhere we passed yesterday. Somewhere that Guillermo liked.”

Over several weeks they return to the same crosswalk, at the same time, when school lets out. They coincide with the girl on a few occasions; eventually, she notices the taxi’s constant presence, and—one day—comes over.

“Hey, we can bring you home if you want,” Guillermo says.

The parents are surprised by their son’s nerve. The girl tucks her hair behind her ears in response and gets in.

“You guys always take a taxi, right?” her voice is the stiff, forced voice of puberty, but Guillermo likes it. “I’ve seen you a few times.”

Joanna asks a lot of questions nn the beginning. Why are you always in here? Why don’t you go to school? What kind of music is this? Are we almost to my house?

“We’ll be there in a minute,” Ataulfo always answers. After the first couple of days, Joanna stops asking.

Time passes and Guillermo and Joanna like each other in the singular way that two young bodies want to like each other. Neither one knows much about sex, but they know enough. Some things Joanna has heard at school, and some Guillermo has gotten out of Ataulfo. They practice. Their first kiss, the first time she touches his penis, the first time he buries his finger in her vagina, always in the back of the taxi, beside the mother or the father, and only when everyone is asleep. Everyone except Ataulfo: the driver has never looked sleepy or tired. He has never stopped driving.

And so, hidden the shadow of the backseat, Guillermo sets his rhythm by his parents’ snores and enters Joanna’s enthusiastic, enjoyable body with an energy and insistence so inherent to teenage desire that when the parents are sometimes woken, he doesn’t even stop his thrusts. One time, just the once, their determination is so great that Guillermo forgets to pull out when he comes.

Nine months later, it happens again.

“Is there a hospital nearby, Ataulfo?” Guillermo’s mother, the future grandmother, asks.

“Just up two blocks. We’ll be right there.”

She nods in agreement and gratitude, as if neither she nor the others knew the hypothetical nature of his words. The shouting again, the upholstery mucked up by blood and placenta, father encouraging son who consoles the suffering mother, opening, more opening, maracas, the final chorus. Two babies are born, a boy and girl, over their parents’ knees and under the constant vigilance of their grandparents and Ataulfo at the wheel. The babies grow and start to climb into every corner of the taxi. Their hands grab at every object they come across and their bodies fill out, stretch, expand over the seats and take up space. Then, when they’d repeated many times how big and heavy the babies had become, the father, or rather, the new-grandfather Jaime, speaks:

“Listen, Guillermo, I’m going to go,” he says from the passenger seat.

Guillermo sits in back, but Jaime is really addressing his wife, sitting just behind him. When he spoke, he hadn’t dared to look her in the eye.

“What’s that, Papá?” Guillermo shifts little Gloria to his other leg.

“I’ve been talking with Ataulfo about the space.” The cabbie drives, unfazed. “See, there’s a lot of us for one taxi. They could take Ataulfo’s license away, and even though he hasn’t said anything, I know he’s worried. And this is how it should be: the family has grown, space is getting scarce. These little ones are going to get bigger, and you’ll want them to have a place to study, to play and be comfortable.

“You can’t be serious,” Guillermo says, looking at his mother, who has silently started to cry. “You’re my father, my

children's grandfather . . ." He holds up Gloria. "They can't grow up without their grandfather, I can't grow up without you."

"But you have grown up, son."

The grandfather reaches out his hand and pinches Gloria's cheek affectionately, then rests his hand gently on that of his wife, still crying, her eyes closed.

"I love you, darling, you've made me very happy. I'm sorry I never learned how to drive. Goodbye, Ataulfo, it's been a pleasure," he says at last, and opens the car door and throws himself out.

He rolls across the asphalt, lost in the cluster of cars and pedestrians, disappearing in the contaminated smoke of the streets. He can see his family inside the taxi, looking out at him from the back seat. He tries to capture the instant their faces surface in the rear window: his son, his daughter-in-law, his two grandchildren, Gloria and Antonio. And up front, the mustachioed figure of the cabbie. Then he looks at his wife. All those years by my side, he thinks. Before the taxi vanishes in the distance, he has time to observe the old car with its faded paint job and the sign with the worn off X.

Antonio and Gloria suffer from breakouts of acne, make bets on who can spot the most license plates with palindromes, and fight over who gets to sit up front.

"We said it was my turn on Tuesdays, didn't we, Ataulfo?" Antonio argues, his teenage voice cracking.

At thirteen he is taller than his father Guillermo, according to his grandmother. And he has his grandfather's temper. Sometimes, when grandfather Jaime is mentioned, something compels his grandmother and father to look back, as if they could still see his body thrown on the ground.

"Here's what we'll do," Ataulfo says. "Whoever guesses the name of the next song gets to ride in front."

They love to play this game. They prick up their ears and lean towards the tapedeck. They have to pay attention because they both know every song and it's a question of just a second or two, depending on whether they hear a drum or a maraca first, before one of them guesses.

The grandmother is riding in the passenger seat.

"Ataulfo, listen," she says. "The greatest moments of my life, from the birth of my son to my grandchildren, have happened here, inside your taxi. I will always be grateful to you for being such a good driver. You know why they named my grandson Antonio, don't you?"

Guillermo is asleep. He doesn't see his mother open the door and fall out sideways, crossing herself first. The next song starts and this time Gloria, whose breasts are just starting to develop, names it first. She quickly takes her grandmother's place. The seat is still warm.

"Where's grandma gone, Ataulfo?"

"It was time for her to get out of the taxi."

The car veers to the right, to the left, changing lanes, travels down narrow streets and broad avenues, takes roundabouts, stops at lights, and obeys each and every traffic rule. There were five of them again, now. Ataulfo wouldn't lose his license.

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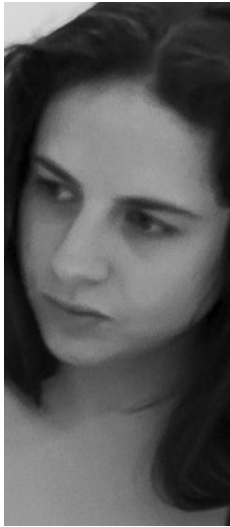
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# Cristina Morales

Granada, 1985

Is the author of the Herralde Prize-winning *Lectura fácil* (Easy Reading) (Anagrama, 2018), *Terroristas modernos* (Modern Terrorists) (Candaya, 2017), *Malas palabras* (Bad Words) (Lumen, 2015), and *Los combatientes* (The Combatants) (Caballo de Troya, 2013), which won the 2012 INJUVE Prize for Fiction and was a finalist for the Festival du Premier Roman de Chambéry for the best novel published in Spain in 2013. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies and literary magazines. She has been awarded several fellowships, including the Monserrat Roig Writing Fellowship (2017), the Han Nefkens Fellowship (2015), and the Antonio Gala Foundation's Young Creators Fellowship (2007). She holds a degree in Law and Political Science with a concentration in International Relations. Currently, she is an artist-in-residency at the Fábrica de Creación La Caldera in Barcelona, where she is a member of the Iniciativa Sexual Femenina contemporary dance company.

## **When and why did you begin to write?**

I've been writing with the awareness of performing a creative act since I was very young, since I was in school, for two reasons: I really enjoyed doing it and my parents were extremely strict about my grades.

## **Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

Language and narrative imposed by power (economic, cultural, political) in opposition to language and narrative born of my experience and that of my equals, who don't have power and don't want it.

**Who are some of your favorite writers? Some of your early influences?**

My favorite authors aren't necessarily those that influenced me in the beginning. The ones that have that in common include Bonilla, Ivá, Marsé, Fonollosa. They've never left me. When I was young, I devoured Woolf, Céline, Tabucchi, Millás, Neuman, Medel, Gottfried Benn, Cortázar, Umbral, Torrente Ballester, and Böll. Now, I devour Bolaño, María Galindo, Marta Sanz, Gallardo y Mediavilla, Antonio Orejudo, Angélica Liddell, Elvira Navarro, Max Besora, and Borja Bagunyà.

**As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

I'm interested in literature that carries language's possibilities to the extreme and desacralizes the literary act. A creative literature made with its raw material: language, taking that to mean the institution of power that represents and which we would do well to free ourselves from. It's not just the field of fiction; comics, poetry, theater, and essays are our allies. That's what was done in *Trapologia* by Max Besora and Borja Bagunyà, and Rubén Martín Giráldez's *Magistral*, or Sanz's *No tan incendiario*, and what Orejudo did in *Los cinco y yo*, and Angélica Liddell in *¿Qué haré yo con esta espada?*

**In which time and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

I would like to have been illiterate in the caves at Atapuerca and paint buffalo.

**If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

I'm currently working on a dance piece called *Catalina*, in which I dance and I choreograph as a member of the Iniciativa Sexual Femenina dance company. We premiered the piece in Barcelona in January 2019 and are currently on tour.



## **EASY READING**

**(Excerpt from the novel *Lectura fácil*)**

I have sliding doors installed in my temples. They shut vertically, like the automatic ticket gates for the metro, and close off my face. Picture them like two hands, playing peek-a-boo with a baby. Where's mommy? Where is she? Heeeeeere she is! And on "here," the hands open and the baby bursts out laughing. The sliding doors in my temples aren't made of hands, but a smooth material, tough and transparent, and finished with a strip of rubber that provides a cushioned opening and closing and an airtight seal. They are those metro gates, in effect. And though you can see perfectly well what's happening on the other side, the gates are tall and slippery enough that you can't jump them or crawl under. The same with my automatic doors: when they close, a hard, clear mask covers my face. I can see and be seen and it looks like there's nothing between me and the outside, but in reality information no longer flows from one side to the other and only the basic stimuli for survival pass through. To get around the metro gates, you have to climb up on the part of the machine that punches the tickets, acts as the cog, and separates each set of gates from the adjacent pair. That, or buy a ticket, obviously.

Sometimes my doors aren't a hard, clear mask, but a store window through which I look at something I can't buy, or

through which I'm looked at, desired for purchase by someone else. When I say my doors, I don't mean it figuratively. I'm trying to be absolutely literal, to explain a mechanism. When I was young, I didn't understand song lyrics because they were thick with euphemisms, metaphors, ellipses, disgusting rhetoric, disgusting predetermined signifiers of meaning in which "woman against woman"—*mujer contra mujer*—doesn't mean two women fighting but two women fucking. How twisted, how subliminal and foul. They could have said *woman WITH woman*. . . But no: the least obvious meaning possible is that we're talking about two chicks eating pussy.

My doors aren't a metaphor for anything, nothing I use to allude to a psychological barrier isolating me from the world. My doors are visible. There's a retractable hinge in each of my temples. A slotted track runs from my temples to my jaw and opens so each door can slide in and out. When deactivated, the doors are stored behind my face, each occupying the reverse side of one half: half a forehead, an eye, half a septum, one nostril, one cheek, half a mouth, half a chin.

They were most recently activated the day before yesterday, during a contemporary dance class. The instructor danced six or seven short, pleasant seconds for herself and then went through the routine a little more slowly, so we could memorize and copy it. She hit play again and stood up in front of the mirror so we could follow. I can follow her easily when she goes slow. I do the moves with a second or two delay, the time I need to watch her from the corner of my eye and remember what comes next, but I do them roundly and intensely, which is very satisfying and makes me feel like a good dancer. I am a good dancer. But this time, the instructor felt more like dancing than teaching how to dance and I couldn't keep up. She counted out *five-six-seven-eight* and took off, hair blowing in a breeze of her own making, calling out over the music, without slowing her steps. Retractable hinges

trigger, polyurethane sheets slide from the back to the front of the face, cleanly and silently, and seal shut. I no longer dance but stumble grudgingly. I do some of the steps halfway, skip others. I copy the lead dancers to see if I can catch up and finally, I stop. The others keep dancing. I lean against the wall and watch them. It looks like I'm paying attention, trying to get the routine down, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. I'm not breaking that tired old ball of string—the dance—down into a series of steps. I'm not clinging to the end so I don't get lost in its labyrinth of directions. What I *am* doing is playing with that ball of string like a little cat, concentrating on the quality of my classmates' bodies and clothing.

Among the seven or eight women is one male student. He's a man, but above all he is a *macho* and constantly demonstrates his maleness before the group of women. He walks around in washed-out colors, badly shaven, long hair, always ready with a word for any community or culture. A fascist, in other words. For me, *male* and *fascist* are synonyms. He dances with effort—he's a block of wood. This last part isn't his fault, not at all, just like I shouldn't be blamed for my doors, which all the women sensed and therefore left me alone. But the *macho* pretended not to see them and when the number ended, he came over to point out where I'd made a mistake and offered to correct me. His head is wooden, too, and this he can be blamed for. Yeah, yeah, ok, ok, I answered, not moving from where I stood. You can always ask me if you have any questions, he concludes with a smile. Mother of Christ it's a good thing my sliding doors were closed when that macho-ness hit me, buffered by the complete disinterest in my surroundings. This is a clear example of when my doors are a storefront and I'm on untouchable display.

It wasn't that I couldn't follow the dance routine, it's that I didn't want to. I didn't feel like dancing in step with seven strange women and one male, I didn't feel like getting the dancer-turned-

instructor-in-a-community-cultural-center off on her dreams of being a choreographer and I didn't feel like pretending we were a professional dance company when we're really a group of girls in an adult daycare, and this having the will to *not* do something? People don't get it.

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Maybe I was worse off under the totalitarianism of the state, but fuck this totalitarianism of the market, my cousin says. She sobbed today in the PAH<sup>1</sup> meeting when she found out that you had to earn at least 1,025 euros a month to have access to a subsidized “social” apartment. Don't cry, Marga, I say, handing her a tissue. Take comfort in the fact that the market has a woman's name now: it's the totalitarianism of Mercadona<sup>2</sup>, where the security camera are over the employees' heads instead of in the aisles, which means we can swipe deodorant and pads and even get condoms out of their boxes with the stickers that beep and leave with it all in our pockets. I've been telling Margarita she should start using the menstrual cup so she can stop stealing pads and tampons and have space in her bag for other things—honey, for example, or *colacoa*, which is really expensive. She says the menstrual cup costs thirty euros and she doesn't have thirty euros and that they don't carry it in the supermarket, just in the pharmacy, and it's super hard to steal from pharmacies, where they do keep the security cameras on the customers and the doors *ding* every time someone comes in or out. I tried to get a menstrual cup for another friend for her

<sup>1</sup> *Plataforma de los afectados de la hipoteca*, an association and social movement in favor of the right to decent housing, formed in February 2009 in Barcelona and currently operating throughout Spain.

<sup>2</sup> Spanish supermarket chain

birthday and it's true that I couldn't find anywhere to steal one, not even El Corte Inglés, and I have my qualms about the pharmacies. But what about one where the pharmacist is really old, when it's nighttime and he's on call? You should stop stealing condoms and go on the pill, she tells me, because the time it takes to open the forty pieces of plastic on the boxes makes you look really obvious. No way, shot full of hormones, systematically medicalized, just to give the *macho* the pleasure of not pulling out. I don't know how the fuck the pill is supposed to be liberating. Dermatologists prescribe it so girls can get rid of their pimples, because teenage acne is obviously a disease and it has nothing to do with being prettier, no, or about being a semen warehouse, either. Oh, it's all about the health of our teenage girls, don't I know it. And you can't sleep around without condoms, Marga, because of STDS. Oh okay, so *those* are diseases? she responds. Oh, are they not? I say. But AIDS doesn't even exist, Nati, what are you talking about. Not even one percent of the population. There are more suicides in Spain than AIDS diagnoses. But I don't fuck Spanish guys, Marga, because they're all a bunch of fascists. Shit, you're such a reactionary. And you're a hippie, why don't you go and cut that tangled mess already?

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In another contemporary dance class at the Barceloneta Adult Daycare (BADDAY), a different instructor told us to take off our socks. We were going to do some turns and she wanted to make sure we wouldn't slip. Everyone took off their socks but me. I had a blister that was healing on the big toe of my right foot. The dance instructor repeated the disguised command. It was disguised for two reasons: one, because she didn't say "Take off your socks" but rather "We take off our socks." In other words, she didn't give the

command but pronounced its result, saving herself the unpopular act of stating a verb in the imperative. And two, it was disguised because she didn't address the otherness that we students represent with respect to her, the teacher, in any class, be it dance or administrative law. She said "We take off our socks" and not "You all take off your socks," including herself in that otherness and thereby eliminating it, creating a false "we" in which the instructor and students are confused.

She repeated the disguised command by re-disguising it: I was the only person in the room with socks on, but instead of saying "*You* take off your socks," she repeated the collective "*We* take off our socks." So, in addition to disguising the imperative and the plural *you*, she disguised the fact that a single, solitary student was disobeying her. If several people had been wearing socks, the instructor would have understood that there was some reason that led them to behave differently—nevermind that they were the minority—and she would have tolerated that difference. The cause for insubordination in a minority can even become respectable. This is not the case for an individual. Everyone looked at everybody else's naked feet. I'm nearsighted and have to take off my glasses to dance, so I can't confirm with one hundred percent certainty whether or not all the eyes then turned to my feet in their socks. But luckily my sliding doors are graduated—2.25 diopters in the right panel and 3.10 in the left—and ready to clearly spot the fascism they equip me against.

After two failed commands in disguise, the Swedish instructor Tina Johanes reached the conclusion that—in addition to being nearsighted—I must be deaf or non Spanish-speaking. Moved by human compassion, she pressed play and as the other students practiced their pirouettes, she came over, interrupted my clumsy turn, and spoke to me, this time using the correct verbal subject.

"Are you ok?"

"Me?"

“Do you understand Spanish?”

“I do, yeah.”

“But you didn’t take off your socks.”

“I have a cut on my foot.”

“Ah okokok” she said, stepping back and showing me the palms of her hands in a sign of apology, conflict avoidance, absence of weapons stashed in her tights.

No pirouetting now, or anything else. Now, just the constant confirmation of where I find myself, who the others are, who Tina Johanes is, and who I am. To hell with the illusion that I’m here learning how to dance. To hell with the four euros an hour the class costs me with the discount for being unemployed. I could have spent the four euros on a roundtrip train ride to the rehearsal room at the Universidad Autónoma, where I dance alone, mambo, naked, badly. Four euros I could spend on four beers on a bar terrace owned by Chinese people, four euros that would either kick off a party or toss me hopelessy in bed without the space to think about death.

I’m in the Barceloneta Adult Daycare (BADDAY). The rest of the class are Podemos or CUP voters<sup>3</sup>. Tina Johanes is an authority figure. I’m a *bastardista* but with a Bovarist past, and because of this shit legacy I still think about death, and so I’m dead already.

But can’t you just jump the gates at the train station to go to the Autónoma? That’s really risky, it’s a long trip and my nerves are fried after twelve stops on alert for the guy who checks the tickets, my stomach twists in knots and it makes me want to shit, twelve stops I have to spend relieving the cramps. I start letting out silent farts, squeezing my butt so they don’t make any noise, balancing in the seat on my sit bones, embarrassed by the smell. Sometimes I’ve gotten to the Autónoma with shit in my panties. It’s easier to hold it after letting some out, but then you’ve still got six stops with that

<sup>3</sup> Podemos and Candidatura d’Unitat Popular are left of center political parties in Spain

little lick of shit on your ass. Aren't there bathrooms on the train? No. The Generalitat's short distance trains don't have bathrooms. You need to pee, shit, and fuck before you get on. The trains run directly by RENFE and the Interior Ministry have bathrooms. You can get laid between Cádiz and Jerez, which is the same distance from Barcelona to the Universidad Autónoma. We can conclude, therefore, that the lack of train bathrooms is another mechanism of repression, and that—in terms of bathrooms and trains—the Generalitat is more totalitarian than the Spanish state.

Go ahead and say it, Angelita, I can read your mind and I want you to say it: Tina Johanes asked you to take off your socks for your own good (Angelita didn't say Tina Johanes, she said "the teacher"). So you wouldn't slip. So you wouldn't fall and hurt yourself. So you could dance better. The same with that guy from the other class when you sat out on the routine (she didn't say routine, she said "dance"). You're so dramatic. You're incapable of any degree of empathy (she didn't say it like that, she said: "You don't know how to put yourself in anyone else's place and you're selfish"). You paid for dance lessons; in other words, you paid to receive orders (she didn't say it like that, either, she said: "You signed up for dance classes and what's the point of signing up for dance classes if you don't want to learn the steps"). You (and this she said just so) want it both ways, Nati, and on top of that you're kind of *españolista*. That's what I wanted to get at, Angelita! That's the dress I want to wear out tonight! Thank you, thank you, thank you! (She's offended by this because I call her by her original name in Spanish and not by her newly-christened Catalan name—Àngels—and I use the diminutive to boot). People forgive your reactionism, Nati, because you're not bad-looking (which was actually: "You act like a spoiled child and no one says anything because you're cute"). If you were slighty or entirely unattractive, they'd consider you resentful and you'd be a pariah (or: "If you were old or ugly or fat they'd be sorry for you and wouldn't pay you any attention"). You're wrong, I



answer. You're totally wrong. A girl that's decently good-looking—I'm not even talking about someone who is actually pretty or really hot—doesn't get the right to be radical. Why is she complaining, when she's so pretty? How can she possibly not be happy with life, since she's pretty? How can she possibly spew those frogs and snakes from her mouth, as ugly as that is in a woman who isn't ugly? How dare she condemn my catcalls or whistles when all I'm doing is complimenting the bitch? The other rejection of a pretty woman's radicalism is what you just said yourself: they can criticize because they're pretty, they dare to do it because they're pretty, and because they're pretty, because they make pretty packaging for the opposition, their criticism sticks and gets heard. Careful with this. This is shit that both you and I have to carry right now, Angelita. It's what the hippie girls accept, the ones that put flowers in their hair and look like top models and are always younger than twenty-five and show their tits in Congress and the Vatican and should call themselves Semen instead of Femen because of the wet dreams they give the patriarchies they target.

I love getting tipsy with Ángela because even though you can't really tell from the outside, inside we both go at full speed, we're super talkative, her stutter gets more obvious and we exclude the rest of the thin gathering, which is almost always made up of the same people: Ángela, Marga, and me. Sometimes my half-sister Patricia shows up with some friend of hers—they're Semen girls—or some guy, I don't know if they're *macho* or not because they aren't even Spanish and I've never spoken to them for more than fifteen minutes because what they are is bohemian, and that's even more unbearable than Semen girls, their natural companions in radical activism. But the only time my half-sister showed her tiny tits in public, nipples like egg yolks stuck on her flat pecs, was at the request of the female box-office attendant at a pornoterrorist show, who told her if she flashed them she'd get in for free.

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# Inma López Silva

Santiago de Compostela, 1978

Is a writer and theater critic. She holds a doctoral degree in Philology from la Universidad de Santiago and is a graduate of Theater Studies at the Sorbonne. She is a columnist for *La Voz de Galicia* and a novelist, principally. Her debut novel *Neve en abril* (Snow in April) was published in 1996, followed by the collection of stories titled *Rosas, corvos e cancións* (Rosas, Crows, and Songs) (2000); in 2012, she returned to the short fiction form with *Tinta* (Ink). She has been recognized by readers and critics alike for her novels, which include *Concubinas* (Concubines) (Xerais Novel Award 2002), *No quieiro ser Doris Day* (I Don't Want to Be Doris Day) (2006), and *Memoria de cidades sin luz* (Memoir of a City Without Lights) (Blanco Amor Award 2008; Arcebispo San Clemente Award; and the Association of Writers in Galician Award). Additionally, she has published a travel book, *New York, New York* (2007), and a diary-essay about motherhood called *Maternosofía* (2014). She published her most recent novel, *Los días iguales de cuando fuimos malas* (Back When We Were Bad), in 2017 and the feminist essay *Lámame señora, pero trátame como a un señor* (Call Me "Ms." But Treat Me Like a "Mr.") in 2018.

## When and why did you begin to write?

I started to feel like a writer at the age of seventeen, when I published my first novel. I've always written, perhaps out of compulsion, need, a way of creating order.

### **Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

One of them is the passage of time, especially as it relates to our absent-minded repetitions, which have led me to talk about maturity, too. Another constant in my work is a reflection on female identity; that's how I've gotten to a central theme in almost everything I've written: freedom and it's relationship to evil. I think that literature must pull the mind to places everyday life doesn't reach, and from consider the contradictions that seem to our common ground. Lastly, there is a part of my work which is written from my perspective, about me (*New York, New York, Maternosofía*), in which my travels and my radical feminism, above all, appear. I'm comfortable with writing that's sometimes essay (my recent work, *Llámame señora, pero trátame como a un señor*) as well as in fiction that has its doubts about itself (*Los días iguales de cuando fuimos malas*), a border space that allows me to propose my own truths.

### **Who are some of your favorite writers? Some of your early influences?**

As a Galician writer, I always come back to my early reading: Álvaro Cunqueiro, Rosalía de Castro, Xohana Torres, Suso de Toro, and Manuel Rivas. As a woman of the theater, Shakespeare, always (that way with irony . . .), Beckett (no-logic), and Camus (simplicity). To learn about narrative effect, Northamerican literature: Auster, Munro, Atwood, and DeLillo.

### **As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

I'm interested in how writers delve in narrative structures that superimpose the past and the present. Also, young writers that are replacing the vision of traditional themes. And everything that is done in marginal spaces.

### **In which time and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

France. The 60s.

### **If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

For the last four years, I have been writing about truth and falsehood rooted in a specific event: a sexual assault within a family. I'm about to finish this novel and it will be called, I think, *Una tormenta de nubes blancas* (A Storm of White Clouds).

## DRESSED LIKE THE SEA

Excerpt from the novel

*Los días iguales de cuando fuimos malas*  
(Back When We Were Bad)

—*Mamá.*

That's how it started. That's how it always starts. Somebody says *mamá* and one isn't who she thought she was anymore. Margot has avoided that word for so long that she's even forgotten herself. But it's true, as well, that no one ever came to call her *mamá* before she got the letter and until the Sunday the blonde-haired, green-eyed man appeared in the visitors' room, anxious to apply that universal word to her. *Mamá.*

Margot has always thought that if he were to reappear some day, she would recognize her son instinctively. Everyone says that's how it is, so she assumed it would be the same for her. She often fantasized about it on her morning walks in the cool autumn air of Vigo. About being in a crowd, a *feria*, for example, and feeling a sort of earthly, ancestral pull until her eyes met those of the man who is undoubtedly her son. She would be able to recognize him among millions of blonde, green-eyed gypsies, an imaginary plate of lentils in his hand. That's what the prodigal son is all about. But when Margot entered the visitors' room shaking like a leaf, she had to be told that tall, strapping, Viking-esque man with blonde

hair and green eyes that she had taken for the Albanian-Kosovar brother of some locked up mercenary was actually her son. After her initial shock, his smile did give him away, and in an effort to make herself feel better, Margot thought that—despite everything—she would recognize his smile in the midst of the Apocalypse itself. “*Mamá,*” he said, the man who’d been given a new name when he was just a week old. And he smiled again, nervous as well. Margot sat down, thinking how the glass between them for that first meeting was a good idea. She tried to smile at him, too, but was sure that any expression she could make would ring false. And she didn’t know what to do with her hands, either.

She had dressed carefully so that the marks of her rough living wouldn’t show. Long sleeves so her son wouldn’t see the scars from the needles, at first, then the IVs. A black turtleneck sweater to hide her wrinkled neck, the skin ravaged by alcohol. Someone had lent her a pair of ballet flats and a green pencil skirt that took years off and brought Margot back to her real age: a woman who would still be young, in other circumstances. She had applied her make-up painstakingly, as if she were going for a *vis a vis* with Isabel. Deep down, she’d always wanted her son to believe that she had lived a life radically different from the one they had yoked her with the day they left her half-dead in front of the hospital, where she’d later be only half-saved.

With Isabel dead and her mother completely gutted by fear, Margot has always thought that she would be alone forever, and even questioned whether she should bother with the prison furloughs when they began to grant them to her. But suddenly, everything changed. She had her doubts, did she ever. And she still wasn’t sure if she’d regret stepping forward and answering to that name, in the end.

*Mamá.*

Yes, she's nervous about the furlough, because it was ages since she set foot in her house in Barrio del Cura. During breakfast, she thinks about her unusual desire to carefully clean the collection of porcelain teapots. She'd normally be loathe to do it, taking them all down from their shelves, dusting them one by one, washing some with soap and hot water because the dust sticks inside and be impossible to get off. But she hasn't done it in months, and Margot starts to think that to be in her own house, cleaning, is the greatest expression of freedom there is. She wants to see her Moulin Rouge and showgirl posters again, too, and that picture of the Metro in Montmartre, and all of Paris that she has there in her house, on that morning when surely she will smell the salt of the inlet, with the Cíes islands on the horizon in the distance. Her son will find her taste in decorating strange. Maybe she'll tell him how, once a trip to Paris had been ruled out forever, those corners of house helped her realize that no city is as perfect as we imagine as little girls.

Margot's house had also surprised her mother, one of the rare afternoons they took refuge there. "It doesn't look like it would be so tidy, from the outside," she said. Her mother, who had always kept the trailer spotless, in spite of the *horror vacui* of crocheted tablecloths, little ceramic figurines, pillows embroidered in cross stitch, and the superhero quilts that for several seasons had experienced a certain amount of success at the *feria*. "I've always said that you could have gone to school, Rebeca. A design course would be a good fit," she said, full of reason.

It's been years since Margot thought about going back to school, or about earning a living at anything other than her profession, which she is simply good at. She still has time to work ahead of her, if jail doesn't hurt her chances that much more. Clients grow used to you and if you disappear

for too long, they look for someone else, just like a regular relationship. Margot hopes that when she answers the door and invites her son inside, the aroma of a good stew in the kitchen, he won't start suggesting that she go back to school, or start a home décor business or any of that stuff. No, that won't happen. Mothers do that, not children.

During his last visit to the prison, they planned that he would go to see Margot at her house in Barrio del Cura on her next furlough. That week begins today, and on Saturday they'll come for lunch, he and his wife. If they say a word to anyone, it's off, Margot insisted. Despite being raised where he was raised, her son doesn't really understand gypsy exile. It's possible that he's partly right and Margot exaggerates, after so many years. But she hasn't forgotten the pain of the beating nor her mother's final, terrified phone call. Exile is for life, honey. But with his new role as a university graduate in Sociology who knows the theory but had only imagined the practice until he found out about his mother, he still wants to believe that Margot no longer has reason to be afraid.

"*Mamá,*" he said from behind the glass. Margot stayed quiet because she couldn't believe what she was hearing and seeing, the man sitting there in front of her, curiosity in his eyes. He looked absolutely foreign. *Mamá,* is it true what your mother told me? Of course it is. By that point, Margot couldn't stop crying. On the other side the glass like it was Alice's mirror, the tears ran down her face, washing away the mascara and pressed powder in a tsunami, rivulets running through her blush, the taste of salt reaching her mouth. She had been too optimistic, making herself up like that. Tears in the visiting room don't just happen in the movies. "I don't want you to tell me anything else," he said. He knew enough to understand, and to be able to start the life he'd decided on.



“I don’t know how I did it, *mamá*, but I did it. I got another year of school out of *papá*, year after year, and here I am. I left there a long time ago, left all that.” At that moment, Margot thought how there were many ways to be a gypsy, and she’d end up with the bad one. But it makes her very happy, an inexplicable joy and deep pride, that her son has found away to get the good.

The first time they met, Margot swore she wouldn’t cry or show the least bit of interest in Isaac, but she’s not one for keeping oaths. She couldn’t help the crying, and with regard to Isaac, it was her curiosity that did her in. Or maybe she was driven to ask about him by the intuition that if her son was there, then divine justice must have gotten to Isaac and his gang.

“I’m only going to ask you this once and I will never bring it up again, I promise. Do you know anything about your father?”

Nothing interesting. No punishments. No disgrace. Not even a petty crime that would land him in jail. No illness, loss of a spouse, nothing unpleasant. It was a bitter confirmation that Isaac and his cronies had triumphed, and this hurt her in a way few things could hurt a drug-addicted whore and thief who has known the pain of living without freedom since she was just a kid on death’s door. And so Margot turned the page and understood that life, when it writes itself, knows nothing of justice.

Truthfully, Margot is grateful that her mother has brought them together. It’s been her only courageous act. This blonde, green-eyed child is evidence that things can change, but the lives of Isaac and his people, of her mother and father, her cousins, aunts and uncles, and even herself leave her in a grotesque torpor that burns like an acid intended to prove that she was born condemned to bitterness no matter what.

Margot's mother had the wherewithal to realize that a blond, green-eyed gypsy would have had it rough in his own way, growing up where he did. A small punishment for his father, and clearly a genetic stroke of luck that drove him, from a young age, to cling to the idea of another way of life.

"One that respects women," her son went on to tell her, explaining over the course of the hour how he'd come to study, live in a nice housing development, and pass on selling underwear at the *ferias* except for some weekends, in a jam. "If you make it through grade school and start to understand the world, you realize it isn't impossible to be like them."

"Like who?"

"Like the *payos*, who else? It's not that I don't want to be *gitano*, I'm really proud of what I am, *mamá*, I'm sorry. But things aren't black and white, like *papá* thinks. But why am I telling you that?"

"You don't have to apologize. We are what we are. It's not like we invented crime, you know."

But the truth is that Margot has thought many times—still thinks now—about what it would be like if she weren't a gypsy and if she weren't a woman. If she were Isaac instead of Rebeca. If they didn't take her out of school to marry her off and have kids so young. Margot is well aware that her son has gotten leeway for being a man, and for the first time in her life, sitting there with the glass between them, Margot is happy she bore a son and not a daughter. If this son of hers were a girl, they would've beat her to death the same day they almost killed Rebeca. If this son were a girl, he wouldn't be here, telling her about a life so different from the one they'd imagined for him back when they expected to be a happy family. If he had been a girl, maybe they wouldn't have imagined a life at all.

As she packs a small backpack with clothes for her first furlough, Margot plans out her days of freedom. She has to go see her friends, of course, they're her family, or at least they were up until now. She'll see them first. One of them has her keys, anyway. Then she has to go to the grocery store, and plan lunch with her son. She likes imagining how she'll set the table: the flowers on the tablecloth, the good china she hasn't used since better times with Isabel, the glasses for the wine she'll buy because she wants to toast with an optimism she hasn't felt in a long, long time.

And of course, tomorrow she'll get up early and walk through the streets. She'll go down Torrecedeira to the canneries, and she wants to have breakfast in the Copa Dorada beforehand, a croissant with a *café con leche* and fresh orange juice. It's been ages since she's had a fresh-baked croissant. Then she'll walk down Rúa da Paz and at the end she'll take a peek at her sidewalk on Jacinto Benavente, where she'll return one day because it's hers and because it's what she wants to do, how she wants to make her money, without any foolish shame. But she won't want to go there tomorrow. She'll walk a bit farther toward the ocean and look at the boats docked in the harbor, making out the houses on Cangas and Cape Home in the distance. Hopefully it won't rain. Then she'll head left toward Bouzas, passing the shipyards with their cranes and the big boats with their shiny windows, and go up Atlántida until Alcabre and there, just before the empty beach at Samil, she'll sit on the grass beneath a pine tree and spend a long time breathing that sea air, listening to the waves graze the sand, looking at the Cíes on the horizon, above all, feeling that yes, she can make it out of jail alive this time, too. She'll stay there the rest of the morning. If she could, she'd stay there the rest of her life.

But she'll have to go back at some point. A stop at the salon for a trim and a wax, a drink with an old friend, and

she'll want to go to bed early, enjoy the big mattress and waking up without alarms or curfews. Margot has almost forgotten silence. And she wants to keep the afternoon free to go to Pereiró with some flowers for Isabel's grave and kneel beside the tall cypress and once again imagine the life she could have had and that prison stole.

She zips the backpack and thinks about the Writer. What if she runs into her? Margot has planned a very normal routine for her furlough. She's planned to go where normal residents of Vigo normally go during normal times. She very well could run into the Writer. That said, she doesn't know why but she thinks the Writer lives in a different Vigo than she does, no matter how hard she tries to visit the places she imagines the rest of the people in the city going. If she runs into her, maybe it's best to pretend that they don't know each other.

When the Writer gave her the backpack, Margot had assumed it was better that they didn't see each other again.

"They're going to bring me a big suitcase that will fit everything. I'm sure you'll get more use out of it than me," the Writer said, and gave her a hug. Margot thanked her for the thought and asked her what she would do then.

"Well, what I did before, I hope, although of course nothing is going to be the same."

What was it the Writer did before? She never did dare to ask. In fact, Margot senses that the Writer didn't have a *before* they met or an *after*, either. As if she were a product of Margot's own imagination, or as if everything in the Writer's life actually depended on Margot's existence or nonexistence. If Margot doesn't imagine her, maybe there is no Writer under the Vigo sky they supposedly share. If Margot doesn't wonder about her, it's impossible for them to meet. But Margot would ask her to write her son's story, if she could. That was one worth telling.

Some inmates hate the Writer for getting out so fast, but Margot always knew she wasn't cut out for prison, no matter how serious her crime had been. Her lawyers had convinced the judge of the same thing when she was handed such a short sentence; apparently, the sentencing judge took it upon himself to let her go with minimal security and the possibility of parole. She's probably just lucky, but it's also true that someone like her didn't belong in jail. Jail makes sense for someone like Margot, or for Sister Mercedes—who was a danger to the public—or even for Valentina, who, unlike the Writer, found she was cut out for delinquency and could adjust to jail life precisely because being a prisoner suited her, despite her present sadness and bad luck.

But wouldn't you know, it's only Margot left now. They've all gotten out, one way or another, but Margot has stayed behind like always. Right now, with the Writer's bag on her back and no one to say goodbye to, she's even more aware of her loneliness. Somehow or other, all the farewells have gotten ahead of her, beyond her control. First the Writer, with her indefinable, self-possession, waving with a sort of regal "*hasta siempre*" that lent her an even nobler air. This puts a smile on Margot's face because she knows that's what other inmates see when they look at a woman who committed a crime because she had no choice but never actually considers prison her place. The fact is, she got out, and Margot doesn't think she'll ever see her again.

Then it was Sister Mercedes and her scandalous suicide, so unsettling for so many: the prison chaplain, who had trouble explaining why a nun would take her own life; the warden, already too fed up with the increase in the suicide rate for the peaceable girls in the women's ward to kick off now; Xabier, who believes it is a social worker's job to see these deaths coming; and the poor bureaucrat on duty who,

once again, had to inform the administration and write the incident report.

She lies when the subject comes up. She doesn't want to admit that she has thought about killing herself many times, but that the methods available in prison have always seemed vulgar or too difficult. If she were to do it, Margot would take advantage of a furlough like the one she's about to have. She would go to the beach at Coruxo, remove her shoes, take off her clothes slowly, and walk in toward the Cíes, until the water covered her body and entered her airways. Like that woman Alfonsina in the song she overheard the Writer arguing about with one of the Colombians. Actually, Alfonsina apparently hadn't waded slowly into the sea like in the lyrics, the Writer said, she threw herself off a cliff. But Margot would walk slowly, careful not to float so she could *lie down lulled by the sea snails' song*, that's how it went, the song she was able to hear one day. And yes, she too would carry all of her loneliness, so the ancient voice of wind and salt could crush her soul. She had come up with a good plan, but she's happy now that she missed out on death. In any case, she still really likes the song.

She heard "mamá" and it no longer made sense to walk into the Vigo sea. Margot didn't know when she responded whether or not it her loneliness would be cured, but it gave her hope. One can survive on hope.

Maybe that's why she smiles condescendingly now, thinking of Sister Mercedes. Margot would never kill herself in jail. One must do something like that in complete freedom, in an immense, happy, open place, if possible, with the Cíes islands at the end of the journey. Of course, Sister Mercedes had always been a prisoner of herself and of the crime that even she never understood. When Margot heard what had happened, right after saying goodbye to the Writer, she felt

relieved for Laura, who always struggled with suicides and their messiness. Laura, who had also left. Margot thinks that Laura hadn't wanted to accept the beautiful, distant past they shared, but it doesn't bother her now, in any case. She still likes her, but there's something inside that woman that was scarier than being a whore and a gypsy and a thief. Maybe it's the legacy of her fortune-teller grandmother, but Margot felt something hidden when they said goodbye, as if Laura were really two people in one. You obviously didn't need supernatural powers to see how Laura suffered. She might have fled to a different unit, but Margot has the feeling that if she's fleeing herself, she won't get far.

Margot knows that nothing will be the same when she gets back from furlough. The ghost of Sister Mercedes may still wander the prison there in La Lama, and Laura could come back any day now from vacation, and Margot hasn't even had time to miss Valentina. But when she returns, there will be nothing left from before. Jail time is like that, and Margot—who has plenty of experience—knows it well. She'll come back and suddenly prison will be a succession of identical days, and at the same time, it will be a different place to live in a similar way, since she'll have new and companions. She knows it will be hard to get used to not having Valentina follow her around, but it's also true that she has had time to accept the fact of her leaving. Ultimately, Margot is glad she got the transfer not only because it's what Valentina wanted and what little Daniel needs, but hopefully the distance will put some common sense into Valentina's relationship with David. With a little luck, they won't fight the separation with a clever maneuver: they'll try to get married, have another child, anything they can do to be reunited. But for the moment, they've been separated, and Valentina will have to concentrate on making up for lost time with Daniel. And

then, time would tell. There's a chance that the big, pretty girl Margot almost fell in love with could be saved from life as a criminal, and Daniel from life as a motherless child.

Valentina was despondent when Sister Mercedes died. Unlike Margot, she doesn't she understand suicide nor will she ever, and she imagined that the nun suffered some terrible tragedy, unknown to them all. Margot always thought Valentina had seen too many *telenovelas*, but the truth is that when she insisted on mourning the sister's death, she made sure they all grieved with a little respect for someone who hadn't really been respected at all. She might have been the worst criminal among them, but they had all done bad things, in short, and that didn't mean they deserved to die without some kind of memorial.

She carries almost nothing in the Writer's backpack. Margot crosses the cellblock lightly, accompanied by an official. No one is there to bid her farewell. The goodbyes were said in another time, another life, in a jail that had existed before the letter and the visit. *Mamá*. Before they open the last gate with its metallic squeal and smell of the street, Margot thinks about tomorrow. She thinks about the sea, and about her street corner, about the porcelain waiting to be cleaned, and about the grocery store, but most of all she thinks about the sand and the beach, about breathing and looking at the *Islas Cíes*, and the horizon beyond. *Mañana*. Tomorrow.

For a moment, the sunlight blinds her. She hadn't remembered what it was like, this place she had come and gone from more than one. "See you next week," she says, smiling shyly at the official who stays behind the gate. He returns her smile. And as she prepares herself to step out and look for a taxi, she sees him, standing next to a navy blue SVU, arms crossed and smiling. Her son waves to make sure she has seen him.



*“Mamá!”*

In the time it takes for her to smile as broadly as she can, Margot thinks about the magic of words, the simple difference of two letters between *mamá* and *mañana*.

N J Y Z  
E K E C  
A B . I Z A  
L X X H  
R T f  
d f y  
s E K C  
L g h W  
u C f  
Z d G k  
e

o q A \* L X X H  
s U . w u \* Z d G k  
e r \* j , ; & s E K C  
v c \* N d G k  
x e

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l  
.

\*



# Miguel Barrero

Oviedo, 1980

His published novels include *Espejo* (Mirror) (KRK Ediciones, 2005), winner of the Young Asturias prize, *La vuelta a casa* (The Return Home) (KRK Ediciones, 2007), *Los últimos días de Michi Panero* (Michi Panero's Last Days) (DVD Ediciones, 2008), winner of the Juan Pablo Forner prize, *La existencia de Dios* (The Existence of God) (Trea, 2012), *Camposanto en Collioure* (Churchyard in Collioure) (Trea, 2015), winner of the Antonio Machado Foundation Prize for International Literature, and *El rinocerante y el poeta* (The Rhinoceros and the Poet) (Alianza, 2017). He has also published a book of travel essays titled *Las tierras del fin de mundo* (Lands at the End of the Earth) (Trea, 2016) and the nonfiction *La tinta del calamar* (Squid Ink) (Trea, 2016), winner of the Rodolfo Walsh prize. His short fiction has appeared in the anthologies *Tripulantes* (Crewmen) (Eclipsados, 2006) and *Náufragos en San Borondón* (Castaways on San Borondón) (Baile del Sol, 2012). He also directed the documentary *La estancia vacía* (The Empty Room) (2007), managed the culture magazine *El Súmmum*, and is a member of the *El Cuaderno* editorial team. In 2011, he received the María Elvira Muñiz Award for the Promotion of Reading. He has contributed to newspapers like *El País*, *El Mundo*, *El Comercio*, and *La Voz de Asturias* and in publications such as *Qué Leer*, *Librújula*, *Jot Down*, *Culturamas* and the cultural supplement of the *La Vanguardia* newspaper. He currently writes a weekly column for the digital culture magazine *Zenda*.

## When and why did you begin to write?

I don't have a clear answer for any of these questions. With regard to when, I remember writing as a child, though I couldn't say what. In terms of why, I suppose it was a logical consequence of being a child who read a lot. In

time, I've come to suspect that I write to make believe that I'm capable of explaining the world to myself.

**Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

If there is an element present in all my books, perhaps in some more than others, it's the theme of identity, in all its forms (individual, generational, cultural, political, national, etc.), as well as the problems or misrepresentations that occasionally—or perhaps always—occur in its construction.

**Who are some of your favorite writers? Your early influences?**

There are three writers I've read and enjoyed since I was a teenager. One of them, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, is no longer living, but I still follow Antonio Muñoz Molina and Javier Marías closely. Nevertheless, my literary education also owes much to Goscinny of Little Nicholas, the Elvira Lindo of Manolito Gafotas, and certain books by Roald Dahl and Carmen Martín Gaité. García Márquez, Rulfo, Cortázar, and Onetti, maybe the most. And Cervantes, of course, who turned out to be the biggest discovery.

**As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

I don't believe that literary innovations are valuable in and of themselves. Actually, I don't even think that there are innovations that weren't at least presaged in the classics, at least with regard to the novel. I appreciate good books, those in which form and content work to give the text its own recognizable meaning.

**In which time and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

I've never thought about that, because I believe that in the end, a writer is always the child of his or her time, so I can't even be sure that I would have been a writer in another period. Perhaps I would have liked to be Montaigne, not because he invented a literary genre but because I have always envied his tower and his library.

**If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

I have several ideas and a few of them are moving forward, sometimes with exasperating slowness. They all have to do, in one way or another, with the question of who we are and where we come from, and consequently, where we can go. Nothing original, obviously: that's what literature has always been about.

**THE RHINOCEROS AND THE POET**  
(Excerpt from the novel *El rinocerante y el poeta*)

He arrived at Rúa Garrett and inspected the inside of A Brasileira. There was an empty table in the back, almost at the end of the bar, and moreover, in the hustle and bustle of the café he recognized several waiters he'd grown used to seeing in recent years. He entered with an expansive smile on his face and was in excellent spirits when from behind the bar one of the managers greeted him by name. Señor Espinosa, it's been so long, how are you, sir? We weren't expecting you. Good evening, Alberto, even university professors can be unpredictable, you see. You, sir, are always welcome. When he heard this, Espinosa thought that perhaps he hadn't made himself understood. Will you be having dinner? Yes, he answered, walking past without stopping. I'll take a table over here. Someone will be right over to see what you'll have to drink, sir, make yourself comfortable. Espinosa sat down and decided that to yield to the demands of gluttony—which always got the better of him in these Portuguese lands—and choose the salt cod sampler would be very rash indeed. He chose to repress his craving instead, and when the waiter came to take note of his order, asked for nothing but steak, salad, and a glass of wine. I'm very well off here, he thought,

satisfied to find himself in Lisbon, where he could feel like the cosmopolitan he was not. Espinosa, who refused to accept the opinion deeply rooted among those who knew him best—that he was an odd duck terrified of novelty and whose irrational love for the Portuguese capital was the consequence of some poorly aired obsession (one joke went so far as to suggest the possibility of an unresolved necrophilia)—was convinced that city was very much like him, that it possessed an essence identical to that of his own person. He believed, consequently, that not only did he identify with Lisbon, but that Lisbon returned the sentiment and identified with him, the same way it had identified long ago with Pessoa himself, who hadn't abandoned her to create his monumental, never-surpassed body of work to which, of course, nothing else could compare. Espinosa dedicated himself to enjoying the steak and salad and drank the wine with the languidness he felt the occasion deserved; there, in his Lisbon, although he didn't know the length of his stay, nor its exact *raison d'être*. He would read the letter again in his hotel room, he told himself, filled with optimism as he thought again how simply being there constituted a sufficient motive for happiness. Let's see what the good Gonçalves has to say tomorrow. As Espinosa sipped the last of his wine, Alberto abandoned his place behind the bar and approached the table. Señor Espinosa, your favorite table has become available and I thought, since the weather is so nice, that perhaps you would like to have your coffee outside. An excellent idea, Alberto, you certainly do know what I like. Bring me a glass of port, as well. It's a worthy occasion.

Was it? Espinosa thought so. He thought he deserved many things he had never dared to enjoy and that Lisbon was worth the crowds, suffocating heat, and inconveniences of traveling in high season. He sat at the table, upon which the

black waiter—surely one of the many young people who came to Portugal as immigrants from the old colonies, and who Espinosa had seen wandering the city during his visits for years—had left a small, makeshift sign indicating the table was reserved and that no one should be brave enough to try to take it, undoubtedly to avoid its invasion by the people who stood to the side and waited stoically to take a picture with the statue of the divine poet. People certainly like waiting in lines these days, Espinosa joked with the waiter as he sat down. You can't imagine, sir, the boy responded, at least it lets up at night. There are only a few here now, if you can believe it. The fuss they made this very afternoon! Espinosa thought that in that exact moment he was the luckiest man on Earth. He was in his favorite city. Soon they would bring him a *café con leche* and a glass of port, and at his side, practically elbow to elbow, sat Fernando Pessoa himself, smiling and addressing him in the language they both so loved. These people are mad, don't you think, Espinosa my friend? Without a doubt, don Fernando. Think about it, who among them have read my poems? My prose? Would a single person recognize the names Ricardo Reis, Bernardo Soares, Álvaro de Campos? I don't think so, *maestro*, these are not times for poetry. They never have been, Espinosa my friend, not for poetry nor for art in general. Art, poetry, only make sense as resistance: their opposition to forces of nature, to objective factors; therein lies their greatness. Objective factors? Fernando, my friend, you sound like a Marxist! Espinosa celebrated his own joke with a smile. Nothing could be further from my intention, dear Espinosa, excuse the expression. Look at these people before us, waiting their turn to take a photograph with me, these men and women, these girls and boys that position themselves at my side, sitting or squatting, wait for the photographer to shoot, and then go

back to their affairs, pleased to have been immortalized with what they believe to be one of the city's—the country's—not-to-be-missed landmarks. Obviously none of them—or, if we are optimistic, only a few—really know who I am, and it's possible that not one of the people waiting in line over the course of a day could recite a single one of my verses from memory, not even one of the easiest, the first ones I wrote, that famous quatrain in which I told my mother I would go with her to South Africa. I'm right, aren't I? You're right, you're right, responded Espinosa, taking a quick sip of coffee, cooled now by time and the refreshing—though still quite warm—air of the street. Now, Pessoa continued, am I really in a position to ask these people to read me? Am I in a position to demand that they know my poems, these people living in such hostile times, so inclement, so cruel, so prone to contempt and betrayal of the arts? What do you think, dear Espinosa? Times have never been easy, don Fernando, Espinosa responded, trying to overcome the shy pessimism in which the words of his incommensurable interlocutor threatened to submerge him. They weren't easy for you and they won't be for any of the great geniuses of universal literature. History is forever tumultuous, ongoing: we can not free ourselves from it. And yet we write, Pessoa interrupted him, we write as if there were nothing more important than filling our pages, as if the secret salvation of the world resided in this life we pawn. Deep down we know it isn't so, it never was, we only wrote to conquer death, to give ourselves hope that we could create something to outlast us, to endow ourselves with a divine nature we won't ever possess, but of which we like to feel worthy. In this frame of mind, the world doesn't matter one bit, let it rot, what we want is for our neighbors, our fellow citizens, our compatriots, to know us and praise us because we ourselves have settled into the



fiction that we perform a useful function for the country when, in reality, we do nothing but satisfy our own basic vanity. Do you understand? Yes, yes, of course, Espinosa agreed, and waited for Pessoa to say more, but the poet's lips had sealed the moment a Nordic-looking young woman approached and sat on his knees, settling herself between the professor and his favorite poet. Espinosa noticed the girl's thighs, pink and fleshy in shorts that left almost the whole of her leg exposed, and when he considered this in relation to the reaction he'd had before the salesgirl in the stationary store on Rua Áurea, he became sincerely alarmed by such fits of lust, which he didn't know whether to attribute to age or the potentially beneficial effect the city of Lisbon itself had on his libido. The rhinoceros has returned to the city, he said to himself quickly under his breath, not comprehending why his mind insisted on returning to the story of that poor beast. Pessoa had made reference to his South African childhood; was he not, deep down, another Indian rhinoceros? An animal strengthened by his experience, who squandered his potential in Lisbon and then died discretely, leaving behind a trail for all of posterity? Had he not also disembarked in Portugal with an entire court of fabulous creatures that would set the coordinates for a particular cultural phenomenology? Espinosa drained the glass of port that had been left with the coffee and thought that it wasn't at all absurd to assert that of all Fernando Pessoa's creations, the most novel had been his heteronyms, those characters condemned to linger in an ambiguous nebula, emerging only when deemed by their creator. On January 13, 1935, he wrote a letter to Adolfo Casais Monteiro in which he revealed that his first heteronym was Chevalier de Pas, a poet of works unknown, who was born in the heat of the family's move to number 104 of the Lisbon street São Marçal after the death of their patriarch.

A few years later, Espinosa recalled, he conceived of Alexander Search, with whom he would write during his stay at Durban High School, followed by Charles Robert Anon and H.M.F. Lecher. A fertile breeding ground. The necessary antecedents for what was to come later: at least seventy-two different names offering shelter and alibi, names that only received token fame in some cases and in others came to comprise a microcosm that justified itself, to the point where, at times, a reader couldn't help but reasonably wonder whether these creatures of Pessoa's imagination weren't actually more real than Pessoa himself. How could one deny the reality of Alberto Caeiro, a farmer with hardly any education whose own father recognized him as a master, who preached a philosophy whose principles were based precisely in the absence of a philosophical system. How to cross off as inexistent one who affirmed that existence is valuable in and of itself, that the subterfuge of imprecise, unnecessary explanations surrounding it is unnecessary, because people and things are and nothing more, they are. And how to ignore a biography like that of Álvaro de Campos, the engineer who evolved from decadentism to futurism and on to nihilism, and gave the Portuguese language what Espinosa considered its most important poem, one of those texts called to rise above time and consciousnesses, to overcome its own stigmas and limitations. How to strip a Bernardo Soares of his idiosyncracies, a Soares to whom we owe a book full of misgiving and brimming with literature, with what moral authority can we make his talent conditional on someone else, someone who preferred sacrificing his own name in favor of others and cede them the praise bestowed on his own work. Of them all, Espinosa felt a special predilection for Ricardo Reis, not because his work struck him as the most deserving, but because of the strange happenstance he

suffered when his life was left unfinished, when Pessoa left no testimony of the place or year of his death. Poor Reis, thought Espinosa with sincere pity, doomed to wander eternally through literature's limbos, the result of the early death of the man who gave him life. Perhaps he survived still, somewhere in Brasil, waiting for someone to put the period on his biography orphaned of its closing parenthesis, waiting for the place and the year that would inevitably bring his journey to a close. Yet, despite this slight and easily excused incongruence, how to decide who was, among the heteronyms, the most authentic, the most similar to their creator, given that Pessoa hadn't lived long enough to classify them or leave reliable clues regarding his intentions. And, at the same time, how to avoid wondering whether the heteronyms weren't the real actors, and Pessoa the imaginary being. Espinosa shook his head and smiled, amused at his adulation, which was in some ways a variation on an old text he'd written years before, in which he came to the conclusion that with respect to the overwhelming legacy of the poet and his heteronyms, it was completely impossible to explain one without the others, to split one of the abundant parts from a whole that was almost inapprehensible, despite its apparent simplicity. He knew this well, given that he had dedicated—and continued to dedicate—his life to studying the enormous body of work of a poet that had lived life as a *Don Nobody* before posterity discovered all he had done with his days. A strange destiny, yes, that of Pessoa's heteronyms, forever condemned to being or not being in virtue of the will or whim of their maker. And such surprise for those that found themselves in the position of having to face a heteronym's unexpected presence. There was a well-known episode—Espinosa always enjoyed recalling it—of Pessoa arriving several hours late to a meeting he had arranged with José Régio, and excusing himself before his

displeased interlocutor with the assertion that the man before him was not in fact Fernando Pessoa, business correspondent, but Álvaro de Campos, who spoke in circles convincing him that he, de Campos, had been sent to beg Régio's pardon for standing him up, since Pessoa was involuntarily (but not gravely, it appeared) indisposed. Also well known was the story of Ophélia Quieroz, a young woman of nineteen with whom Pessoa carried on a peculiar courtship in 1919. They were together for the course of a year and maintained an epistolary relationship that deteriorated slowly and stopped offering any guarantees on the part of the poet, who wrote in one of his last letters:

*My entire life revolves around my literary work, good or bad, however it is, however it could be. Anybody close to me must convince themselves that this is how I am, that demanding an ordinary man's feelings from me—feelings I do consider worthy, by the way—is like demanding that I have blond hair and blue eyes.*

Perhaps Pessoa had been one of those people charged with constructing his own myth, erecting himself as a symbol through identities that were more robust and stable than his own, so common and weak in the eyes of his contemporaries. Perhaps he thought that his next of kin had an intimate obligation to accept this eventuality and live with it and consider his needs a binding requirement for eternity. But this was represented nothing more than one of the daydreams of a person who tended, if anything, toward losing himself in the thicket of his consciousness and imagination. *I know not what tomorrow will bring.* His last line, found after he had taken his final breath in the hospital São Luís dos Franceses, where before he died he asked for his glasses and clamored for his

heteronyms. Perhaps on that morning, Espinosa ruminated, Pessoa was less concerned for himself than for his creatures, obliged for all time to suffer an orphanhood they hadn't foreseen and before which they would never be able to answer. Not only did they not die with Pessoa, but upon his passing their own lives began in earnest; they became the symbol of the creator who was, at the same time, erected as an emblem of all that had produced them. A fluke of abstract transfiguration that rendered one impossible without the others, a viceversa, and transformed what were, in the beginning, the everyday rambles through Lisbon of a faded wage-earner fond of liquor into a series of hidden keys that would contain the enigma of an exceptional nature only revealed in posterity.

W P D G C B R S M V O P  
D C B R S M V O P  
G B R S M V O P  
O P N r H N L Y  
X n H N L Y  
W G H N L Y  
K H N L Y  
R a r L  
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# Aroa Moreno

Madrid, 1981

Studied Journalism at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, with a concentration in International and Southern Regions. She is the author of *La hija del comunista* (The Communist's Daughter) (Caballo de Troya, 2017), which won the Ojo Crítico Award for Fiction that year. She has published two collections of poetry, *Veinte años sin lápices nuevos* (Twenty Years With No New Pencils) (Alumbra, 2009) and *Jet lag* (Baile del Sol, 2016). She is also the author of biographies of Frida Kahlo, *Viva la vida* (Long Live Life) and Federico García Lorca, *La valiente alegría* (Brave Joy) (both by Difusión, 2011). She contributes a weekly column to the digital newspaper *infoLibre*.

## **When and why did you begin to write?**

I started to write almost as soon as I could hold a pencil to paper. I have thousands of notebooks in boxes. I don't know how to explain why it all started. It was something intuitive, a kind of childhood rebelliousness, to play with words, impossibilities, create alternate spaces different from my reality where I could make whatever I wanted happen.

## **Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

As a reader, I like books that tell the story of the margins, that shine a light on dark places. Theme doesn't carry as much weight with me as the honesty of the narrator does, that's what hooks me. Even if they're imperfect books, sometimes. As a writer, at the moment I'm working with themes such as identity and uprooting and the small histories that have been buried by History with a capital H.

**Who are some of your favorite writers? Some of your early influences?**

This could be a never-ending list. Many writers have traveled with me throughout my life, they've changed over time, influences transform. When I first started writing, really noticing and paying attention to what others did, I was well-served by Latin American writers. Even today, I really enjoy what my contemporaries are writing on the other side of the ocean.

**As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

I'm interested in books that create new ways to tell our story through language. That are made to question. And—though I don't know if I could do it—the trend of autobiographical fiction is developing in an interesting way. The ways in which life lends itself as fictional material. I'm not really able to write about myself in fiction, it gets away from me right away and the free-flying form the words take on makes me suffer.

**In which time and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

I like being a writer in the here and now: a few decades ago and I wouldn't have been allowed it, as a woman I would have been relegated to the private sphere.

**If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

I'm working on a new novel. I've just barely cleared away the weeds and found a clear path. It will have some things in common with my first book, but it will be narrated in another way. A new goal. I also have a lot of research ahead of me.



**THE COMMUNIST'S DAUGHTER**  
(Excerpt from the novel *La hija del comunista*)

Katia Ziegler uncaps the pen she has used to sign every important document in her life. The one she brought to her wedding, in the seventies. All those strange faces in the church pews. She remembers him smiling whole time, but not the features of his face, as if it had been erased in the distant past and only the simple fact of his smile was left. A single image from that time, a photograph: his back against the silver car, hands in his pockets, the lock of blond hair over his left eye.

October. Outside, the rain falls, a deflated cascade clapping slowly on the roofs. The same rain that used to leave them without electricity, and the reason her father kept matches and candles in the drawers. But later he'd gotten hold of a flashlight: a replica of the ones the police use, he said. The girls played with it at night, and it was never handy when the lights went out. The rainwater would unleash the smell of the garden. Then, out the window, a narrow horizon. Suddenly, a neighbor, a tidy courtyard, a maintenance worker. In the beginning, she took a photograph of the trees every month, watching them change color as she fixed coffee. Of the rain, she also remembers the cold muzzle of that brown horse on the ground and soaked to the bone. Rings of water that met, and

disappeared. One October, like this, she planted a hundred bulbs, spread over the entire yard. The grass raised the red clay of the pavement. All of that is behind now, asleep. Until the heat starts to close in, and it will all burst yellow again.

October. The month of the revolution.

After the rains came the winter.

When it falls, snow doesn't make a sound.

## THE EAST

### 1

Everyone Likes to Dance the Lipsi

*Berlin, 1956*

The evening that Papa didn't arrive home in time to light the stove was the coldest day of the whole winter. Mama went down to the basement and brought up the sack filled with coal and sticks. The logs were wet. Coal again, that man is oblivious, she said, the sack in her arms. Martina and I liked to dig down among the coals, especially the softer kind. Sometimes, when Mama wasn't looking, we rubbed two pieces together until our fingers were filthy and the chunks of coal shone jet-black.

It had been dark for hours when Papa came in. What happened here? he said. You tell me, Mama answered. The small space that served as the living room, kitchen, and our bedroom was filled with smoke. Papa grabbed my hands and saw my small fingers covered in soot. He rubbed his rough fingertips against mine and squeezed hard.

We always spoke with Mama in Spanish and in German with Papa. We didn't ask ourselves why. Papa learned his German in the factory, in Dresden, but he never managed to speak it quite correctly. He sat with Martina and I while

we did our assignments and learned, little by little, about proper declension, placing the verb at the end, hopeless: how will I know what they're trying to say if I don't know the verb, if I don't know what's happening until they finish speaking? In time, he grew used to the language, and though he always made himself understood, I never was able to really understand everything he said. Papa's German. This language, so many letters one after the other, it's inhuman, he would complain. Mama refused to learn, and though Papa filled the house with little pieces of paper with the names of things—*Fenster, Topf, Bett, Ofen*—she never put a sentence together. She communicated with signs, a few words. *Kartoffeln*, a kilo, taking off her glove, waving her finger in the shopkeeper's face while Martina and I fell on the floor, laughing. Have daughters and you'll see, she'd say, they'll laugh at you, too.

The soup simmered over the fire, the murmur of the radio stirred the air. Papa came out from the room where he and Mama had been talking for some time. She went in the bathroom, and when she came out, I knew she had been crying. It's the steam, she said. And stirred the pot, the bitter stench of cabbage blending with smoke.

I don't want cabbage, it's slimy.

Well, it's what we have.

But we ate it yesterday, too.

Martina, I would like to roast you a leg of lamb, but there aren't lambs here because it's too cold.

Papa, isn't it true that lambs don't get cold because they have wool?

For the love of God, Manuel, turn that off.

The radio was playing the nightly broadcast of the Lipsi, the prudish music the Government used to combat rock and roll. *Heute tanzen alle jungen Leute Im Lipsi-Schritt, nur noch im Lipsi-Schritt. Alle hat der Takt sofort gefallen. Sie tanzen*

*mit, im Lipsi-Schritt.* Papa turned up the volume and swayed around the room, moving his shoulders, his arms at his hips, little steps, to the right, to the left, forward and back, his eyes half-closed, smiling. He stood behind our mother and untied her apron. Mama turned, I'm not in the mood, but she couldn't free herself from his arms. Come, *mujer*. Pretend it's a *copla*.

They danced until the end of the song. Martina and I watched them in astonishment—pens poised over our papers—something that began to feel like warmth in our bodies and a stain of blue ink spreading between the lines. That's enough, Mama said, enough of this circus, let's eat.

Papa stuck his fingers in the water and pulled out an almost transparent piece cabbage. Do you girls know what this is? A slice of *jamón serrano*. Delicious, Katia. Do you want some? Yes. And you, Martina? No. What is *jamón serrano*? Papa ignored her. Sure? Well, then.

That yellow house. Once I peeled away the wallpaper under the bed and found eight different layers, at least. As if every person who'd lived in that fourth floor garret wanted to leave their mark, fix their life there, and the next had wanted to cover it up, paper over paper. To reach our staircase, you had to cross the interior courtyard: a small, anarchic forest. They ought to paint the walls, Mama would say, it looks like the war's still on. The building was gray on the outside. All the buildings were gray back then, gray and peeling, skeletons wearing a dirty dress. But I had no memory of any house but that one, where it was always cold. Papa introduced us to the neighbors, and as we climbed the stairs we stopped on each landing and could see the people in the building across the way. We made a game of monitoring their routines: Frau Zengerle, always staring at a pot of water, Ekaterina reading by the window. When Herr Schmidt died, we knew right away,

the day he wasn't at his window, the tiny glasses slipping down his nose, waving. Something has happened, Papa said. Later, they told us that while we looked at his window through the chestnut trees, Herr Schmidt—who never wanted to set foot outside again after the second war, living off the solidarity of the neighbor ladies who brought him food—was already on the floor, fast asleep forever.

In the early days, we woke to the sweet smell of the bakery downstairs; the pipe from the oven ran up along the corner of the building and ended just below our window. The bakery closed in 1962, with almost all the other businesses on our street. We had very little. In the living room, a dark wooden table and four chairs; an uneven, unstable shelf—not to be touched—that held our four plates and four glasses; Papa's books; a narrow bed; a sofa. In the bathroom, a hairbrush that held a trace of cologne, a thin bar of soap, and Papa's shaving things. In the morning, when I was young, I would sit on the toilet seat, feet dangling, and watch him daub his face with the little brush. He would turn around and say: who am I? A fat gnome! and he'd crouch down and rub his nose against mine, smearing it white. The smell of must. Mama had washed the green tiles with boric acid when we first moved in and stripped the shine. Even uglier now, she said. But clean, Papa answered. Then there was our parents' room: the bed, under which we were forbidden to look, the two stacked boxes that made a nightstand that Mama covered with a little piece of embroidered cloth, and a wardrobe. And the two possessions we took care of like they were living things: the radio and the stove. Our winters depended on the proper maintenance of each.

The only window facing outside looked out over a razed block. This was war, it destroys everything, said Papa, who often stood in front of the glass pane, silent, like he wanted to see beyond the snow, beyond the only tree left standing, the

night. The war was a ghost, a white stain. It was something that happened a long time before and which I couldn't quite imagine—even though we all breathed its detonated air and children still played in the trenches. I hope you never know war, Mama would say. Not my daughters, and Papa would tell her to be quiet, change the subject.

We drank the soup in little sips, holding our hands over the bowl. Papa blew on his spoon, whistling. Our mother boiled linden leaves, burned her right wrist straining the tea. Papa rushed to the bathroom, spread toothpaste on her skin. And he held her hand to his lips for a long time, looking at her, as my mother raised her face to the ceiling covered in stains.

For the first time that night—the coldest in 1956—I heard the sound two bodies make when they press together on a bed. In the darkness of the house, the dried red flowers from the first of May lingered in their glass vase.

### 3

#### The Blood of Sardines *Berlin, 1961*

The last time I crossed the city—both sides, that is—Mama had sent me out for food. Go now, before it gets dark. She wrote out an address on a piece of paper. A Spanish last name. Go, and tell him to give you what's ours. Don't open it—put it in with the fish, inside the paper. But don't open it. Remember everything I say, Katia. We had fish every few months, and to get it, you had to go to the West.

I left the house and went straight to wait in line at the produce stand on the Bersarinstraße to collect our weekly ration of eggs. It would have been better to collect them on

my way back, but I was lucky and only had to wait half an hour. I didn't feel like speaking to anyone. I had a long walk ahead of me. Why me, Mama? Who else should I ask? Your sister? Should I go myself? Who would work in my place? You? And who . . .? I held out the ration card for the shopkeeper to count the members of our family: a photograph—two girls with long braids, dressed alike, and a couple, still young; he smiled, she did not—and underneath, a red stamp that left no doubt: exiles. They gave me four small, cold eggs. With my gloved fingers, I picked off a few stuck feathers and bits of filth. I looked at one of the shells, clean now, for some time: it would be so easy to crush, the egg white would drip from my hand, clear, viscous, to the ground. I kept still and tightened my hand around the egg very carefully until a woman, waiting her turn, tapped my elbow. I took the scarf from my hair and made a little cloth nest, protecting them inside the bag.

I crossed the skeleton of the Bersarinplatz with its mountains of rubble, though the intersections had been cleared. Once a week, we secondary school students worked to clean the streets, students and the *Trümmerfrauen*, the war widows that scoured Germany's ruins, collecting bricks to build the country anew. The streets were clean but rocks still slept in piles, the remains of a city my family hadn't known. Our work consisted of removing cement from bricks. With miniature pick axes, we cleaned the remnants of Nazi Germany for the Government.

I walked more than a half an hour to the river Spree. I went over the geography lessons I had memorized, and crossed the river over Oberbaumbrücke, leaving the black water behind. I'd made this trip several times with Mama. We had walked quickly from the border, pursued by no one; yet she pulled me by the hand, hers in mine, gripping me tightly, as if I were about to fall at any moment. I'm visiting family,

she had told the soldier. I took the same route and entered the Kreuzberg market. Don't stop, Mama said, don't stop to look at the stands, but that day I stood very still in front of a fruit seller: suddenly, I felt I knew the taste of an orange on my tongue, liquid and sweet. I looked for the fish stand and asked for four sardines. The fishmonger held a few sheets of western newspaper and placed the four fish in his hand. Do you mind not . . .? I said. Ah, yes. The man looked at me over the fish and understood that returning to our Berlin with western newspaper would only bring me trouble. He took out some plain brown paper and wrapped them up. That's won't hold, I thought.

In my pocket, I carried the paper with the address. In cursive, with sloping letters spaced apart, Mama had written "Requena." I crossed several streets and found the building. Through the large door of wood and glass, I could see the black and white checked floor of the entryway. I rang the bell and they opened without a word. I climbed more than a hundred stairs with the sardines in the bag hanging from my arm. The door to the apartment was open. Hello? This way—are you Isabel's daughter? Yes, Katia. Well then, Katia, this is for you. Careful crossing.

Requena, or whatever that man was really named—small eyes, brilliantined hair—handed me an envelope. On it was an address I didn't recognize, somewhere in West Berlin. Nothing on the back. No return address. All right? Did you want something else? No, sir. I left and started to walk back home. On the Köpernickler straÙe, a large group shouted at a few soldiers pulling a wire fence across the asphalt. I stood with them, but could hardly see. Where's that smell coming from? A man turned to me. The fish had soaked through the paper; liquid was accumulating in the bottom of the bag. I started to run. When I reached the checkpoint, a policeman from our side



stopped me: what do you have in there? Nothing. It's dripping blood, take it out. Between his feet and mine, four red drops.

The guard took the bag and unwrapped the paper. Four cadavers, their eyes open, protruding in the sun low over the Spree. What's this? Fish, I said. Please, I thought, please just keep it, but don't take the envelope. The policeman stuck his hand in again and tugged on the scarf. He undid the little nest and the four eggs fell to the ground. Don't cross for this again, he said. Thank you, sir, yes.

I ran as best I could until I was well past Waeschauer straÙe. Then I sat in the median, among the trees, and checked that the letter was still hidden in the paper with the sardines. It was stained with blood, wet and pulpy. I wiped the envelope on my socks and blew on it, dry, dry, come on.

It wasn't until I reached home, three hours after I'd left, when I remembered the eggs. Mama opened the door, gave me a kiss, and stuck out her hand. She didn't remember, either.

It's a letter from your aunt. I've been waiting for a month.

Who is Requena, Mama?

He gets our letters in the West. If he didn't take them, they'd never arrive, coming from Spain.

Because they're Fascists?

Oh, *hija*, don't talk that way. And not a word about this, to anyone.

Papa and Martina came home a little later. Mama kissed him on the mouth. She was smiling, at last. News? he asked. Come, she said. And they shut themselves in their room. When he came out, Papa lit a cigarette. I remember his figure silhouetted against the window, while Mama prepared the sardines. She pressed down on their heads and pulled toward the tail, ripping out the guts like she'd done it many times before. Then, the shiny scales crackled over the heat, filling the room with their heavy smell. No one opened the windows.

Several days after Mama received the news of the birth of her first nephew, and just a few streets from our house, they raised the wall. To stop our country being bled dry, the radio announced. The fishmonger, the bright red of entrails spilled on ice, the stall with its stacked fruit, and the person who received letters from our family were left on what was from then on always known as “the other side.”

It wasn't until many years later that I finally understood the human machinery set in motion to allow those letters to reach our house.

And with the bricks salvaged by school children and widows, they built the Stalinalee—erected its statue overnight—and all the rest.

7

*The Beginning of the Other Thing*  
*Berlin, 1970*

My name then. The woman I was. Just a sheath of skin and the contents of twenty years. Memory, the faculty that allows us to keep and remember events of the past: code, store, access. It moves in our unconscious like a tide, revealing by the light of night the sandy bed below the water; the seabed like a body throwing off the covers while sleeping. I read once that there are two types of memory: memories of big events, and memories of the tiny details of what we experience. It's electricity that runs between emotion and memory: brain, neurons, flash. A natural intricacy: the greater the emotion, the easier to remember the event. Emotion is the filter, and the tide. It is the revolution. The crispness of a memory is linked to the impression it left; a chemical waterfall is unleashed simultaneously, a movement both unstoppable and addictive.

The end of critical judgment. Dilated pupils, a small animal hiding from the State.

I've lost my big memories from then, from those days when we first met. There was no calculus for the possible consequences. Guilt or survival. I never knew. What was Papa doing then, how much had Martina grown, what was Mama's life like, while I wandered through a clandestine Berlin? I came home and acted normally but was different, an immense secret inside. I didn't talk. I just got into bed and recorded, recorded inside what had happened. Outside: the streets, the shops, the wall, the university; inside: the smell of supper, Mama and Papa's graying hair, a visit from a friend. Nothing of their unhappiness or anxiety. Nothing of the Party or those under surveillance, of the disappeared, the note with four sentences from Spain that arrived in the letterbox, the opened envelope, did she cry, Mama? It's as if something hindered me, made me dense, slow. Only that second kind of memory is left, all the small occurrences: the sun setting against the bridge, the Bösebrücke, slicing everything in two, or the sound of the silence in between each song on the Elvis cassette he gave me; everything from that morning on, the morning I left the Sybille café and he came after me. It was November and in the beginning, fear, ignorance. I walked a few feet. I stopped and he stopped. I crossed the street and entered Friedrichshain, with him behind. I went into a bookstore, leafed through a book of grammar, put it down, opened a book by Neruda, the Chilean communist. I read something by chance: I haven't forgotten those lines, I read them in silence a hundred times before closing the book and looking up. *Otras veces calcáreas cordilleras interrumpieron mi camino.* The pages still between my fingers, I looked at him. He faced me, on the other side of the table full of books. For the first time, I paid attention to his face. Closed my eyes. Who was he? Did we know each

other? Was he from the university? The small, clear eyes. Straight hair, very tall, a bird-man. He wore an open jacket, two brown stripes running from his shoulders to his chest. That's the image. He raised his eyebrows and smiled. What? I thought it, then: he wasn't from the East. He wasn't from the East and he was from the other side. A tourist, a student, why had he followed me? Always a few steps behind, crossing the street, matching my pace, staying back but not bothering to hide his pursuit. And then, we were standing in front of one another, it was the moment, or what was it, more than an impulse? What do you want? Nothing, he answered, to meet you. Me? To meet me? Why? You seemed interesting, he said. I seemed interesting? The books were witness to those words, our first conversation. The image of Papa over my shoulder, shush, Katia, don't speak to him, he's with the other side, he's not your people, what do you think he's looking for, a wife? Don't be stupid, child. But there was something else, something lacking intelligence, obviously—a hurricane, a hazard, something strange that compelled me to answer him. A chain of unforeseen reactions. I smiled at him, but said that I had no interest in knowing him. And I turned. My pulse, a drum under my red coat, under that red corduroy coat, under the houndstooth dress and under my skin, heart and lungs expanding, a reflex. We left the bookstore together, without speaking, our arms brushing now and then as we walked, but not a single word more, looking straight ahead, not a single glance except at the sneakers he wore, blue, two white stripes on the side, worn out from walking, but where? We stopped at a traffic light, heart and lungs swelling inside, we stopped on the bridge, two red and white silhouettes, we crossed no man's land until we reached the door to the patio of our building, elbows against my body, not a word. The trees in the courtyard twisted with winter, and above, the light in the

window where Mama and Papa were, and Martina, perhaps. Just here, I said. And he laughed, turned, and walked away. Before I went inside, I went over the steps, the series of events, the decision and its arbitrariness: Herr Tonnemacher, the university, the walk, the coffee left abandoned in the Sybille and all the rest. That night, the night of the day I met him, I could hardly sleep. I tossed in bed, made up a story: this won't end well, don't play. And I tried to forget our encounter, how absurd it had been.

Then Christmas came, my last Christmas in Berlin. Papa brought home a turkey. It's coming undone, Mama said, I can't sew skin this tight. And it must have cost you a fortune. I smashed together walnuts, dried plums, and a little cheese that wound up melted on the oven sheet. The four of us ate, like always, the dry turkey, such a shame, Mama said, the burnt stuffing. Don't worry, *mujer*, at least we have this, and Papa opened a bottle of beer and poured a little into each of our glasses. Then, happy new year, and 1971 entered our lives just like that, full stop.

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# Inés Martín Rodrigo

Madrid, 1983

Holds a degree in Journalism from the Universidad Complutense in Madrid. She works for the Culture section of the newspaper *ABC*, where she coordinates the Books segment, and regularly contributes to the *ABC Cultural* supplement. She has been a jury member for literary awards such as the Ojo Crítico for Fiction, Jáen Novel prize, Dos Passos First Novel prize, the Carmen Martín Gaité Award, etc. She is a contributor to Fundación Telefónica, Acción Cultural Española, Casa de América, and Hay Festival, among other cultural institutions. She has published the novel *Azules son las horas* (Blue Are the Hours) (Espasa, 2016), which tells the story of the life of Sofía Casanova, a Galician writer, poet, and journalist who interviewed Trotsky in 1917. Her short story "Naufragio" appeared in the anthology *El cuaderno caníbal* (The Cannibal Notebook) (Pálido Fuego, 2017), an homage to the work of the film directors Isaki Lacuesta and Manuel Martín Cuenca. Her short story "Salto al vacío" was included in the June 2016 special issue of *ABC Cultural* dedicated to the 125th anniversary of the magazine *Blanco y Negro*. She is the author of the essay "*David Foster Wallace, el genio que no supo divertirse*" which appears in the book *David Foster Wallace: Portátil* (Literatura Random House, 2016). She is also author of the prologue to the Spanish edition Virginia Wolfe's diaries, *El diario de Virginia Woolf. Vol. I (1915-1919)* (Tres Hermanas, 2017).

## When and why did you begin to write?

Though I don't remember the exact moment, I'd say that I started writing when reading became an almost obsessive daily habit. I would have been

about eight, and when I got home from school I would continue the essays and dictations they gave us for homework with my own imagination. That was the beginning. When I left the study of Medicine for Journalism, writing was my refuge. It still is.

**Which themes are you concerned with in your work?**

Life, as Gil de Biedma wrote, is serious. With all its edges, its nooks and crannies.

**Who are some of your favorite writers? Some of your early influences?**

I'm not embarrassed to say that Isabel Allende opened my eyes to serious reading (beyond *Treasure Island* and other fantasies and childhood classics), and with the passage of time and weight of the years, Joan Didion and Alice Munro became my favorite writers, as a reader and a writer.

**As a fiction writer, which innovations or novelties have you come across in books published in the last few years? Which trends do you find most interesting?**

I don't believe in trends, and in even less in what's fashionable. I believe in the ability to tell a story. And if an author has that, I'm hooked. I prefer the traditional novel to the experimental, which been entertaining readers for centuries, regardless of its origin.

**In which period and place would you have liked to be a writer?**

Here and now (it's all we have).

**If you're working on something at the moment, could you give us an idea of what you're writing?**

I'm writing my second novel. A story about the adventure of being alive . . . like every story, in the end. I don't like to give away the plot of something I'm working on; not out of superstition or anything like that, just simple shyness: I prefer to keep it in my imagination for now, I wouldn't want it to disappear.



## **BLUE ARE THE HOURS**

**(Excerpt from the novel *Azules son las horas*)**

Poznan (Poland), January 1, 1958

Death waits for me. I'm not afraid. Not anymore. It's time to go. God wants me at his side, and my child Yadviga calls: "Mother, mother! Why did you let me die?" Her words resound in my conscience more than ever before, deprived as I am of sight, but not the bitter memories the terrible, unchangeable, searing past. I haven't left bed for days. My daughter, Halita, comes very early every morning and feels my forehead. She thinks I'm sleeping deeply. I've felt her bring her head to my chest to confirm I'm still breathing. She doesn't know that every night I pray to God that I'll soon stop.

Yes, I have lived enough. I don't want to cause her more pain; not her, or anyone. I'm ninety-six years old, blind, and so far from my homeland that I no longer even sense it. My Spain! Poor Spain! I couldn't return to rest eternally by my barefoot Carmelites, in my Galicia, *mi tierraña*. Lately, I'm assailed by nostalgia. I began to suffer terrible attacks of dry coughing a week ago. My son-in-law called for the doctor, who came to Kozięgłowy. The good doctor greeted me fondly, and after taking my hand, had me lie back. He knew, immediately, that I was in grave condition. He left the bedroom to speak with my daughter

on the landing. I couldn't hear what he told her, but no one knows better than the sick person whether or not they should harbor hope. The night before, as I sat up in bed in an attempt to breathe better, I coughed hard and knew that it was pneumonia that tormented me. The chill of my beloved Poland has invaded me, my bones, forever now, and will carry me away. Halita returned to my room after seeing Doctor Piotr out and could not contain her tears. She hugged me, inconsolable, and I rocked her like when she was a little girl in Marín, the breeze of the Galician *riás* blowing in from the balcony. Since then, she has not left my side. She brings up bowls of warm broth, the pinenut pastries I like so much and can be found only in the Poznan market, milk with honey . . . But I have no appetite. My stomach sealed shut the day the tremors began.

I've tried to get up some mornings, take my cane from the table and look out the balcony. I memorized the scene outside many years ago: the radiant white of the snowy mountains, the fertile fields spreading their mantle beyond the boundary of geographic borders. Oh, borders! Bitter borders! Arbitrary lines drawn by those with no regard for their fellow man! May God forgive them, may He overlook their stone hearts incapable of feeling the pain in another's flesh. I don't want to be overcome with bitterness, but there are so many memories—some of them so painful—that I would prefer to have lost my memory instead of my sight. If I could be blind to the past! And yet, I remember everything, sharp, as if it happened yesterday. Sometimes I burst into tears over nothing—apparently over nothing—since the only company I keep in my room are the books I was able to save in Warsaw. Only yesterday, as the downstairs buzzed with the din befitting the last day of the year, I heard footsteps climbing the stairs. It was Karul, my grandson. He came to read to me from *Poesías*, my first book of poems, like he does every day. It overwhelms me, hearing the lines I wrote almost a century ago,

but he takes my hand to ease my embarrassment. Yesterday, he found me crying, almost breathless, immersed in childish, hiccupping sobs.

What's wrong, *babunita*?"

How to explain to him, at thirty years old, that some grief has no remedy and it's best to let it be, let it go as it came, without warning. We spent the afternoon together, and as night was falling, my son-in-law helped me downstairs for dinner with my family. My last New Year's Eve. I know it. I know it is to be. I know God wants it this way. We toasted and laughed like we haven't in a long time, the shortages and struggles of so many years forgotten. The coughing returned at midnight, and the tremors with it. My granddaughter Sofia helped me back to my room. "*Dulces sueños, princesa del amor hermoso,*" she whispered. She kissed me and left. It must have been Sofía who left the image of the Sacred Heart on my bed, the one I always keep with me. I've had it since my grandmother Isabel gave it to me in Almeiras, one sunny morning in June 1871.

"Always carry this close to your heart, Sofitiña."

"What is it, *abuela*?"

"It's the Sacred Heart, a treasure that will always protect you, wherever you are. Life is very long, my child, and God doesn't want you to suffer as many misfortunes as your mother. My poor daughter . . ."

"But *mamá* is happy. She has you, and *abuelo*, and she has us. I take care of my siblings and she takes care of all of us. We're a good family."

"*Ay*, the family. If only your mother had never met that bastard. Don't make me say more, I'll get a loose tongue and your mother will be angry with me. Come, help me with the washing up."

*Abuela* Isabel couldn't help but resent my father, the "bastard." I was only ten years old then, but I knew very well that her

words, a blend of anger and reason, referred to him. My parents had met in La Coruña when they were very young. Had they fallen in love too quickly? Perhaps. My maternal grandparents certainly never looked well upon that match, no matter how head over heels my mother was for the young man of letters. My father had flirted with literature since his youth and felt the pull of politics and intellectual circles early on; my grandparents correctly intuited that this didn't favor him as the best prospect for the faithful husband and father they'd dreamed of for their daughter. Still, my mother—as stubborn as I am—persisted in her desire and soon I came into the world, before they had even married. Illegitimate daughter, unplanned, unwanted? I don't doubt the love my parents had for each other. It was clear from the way they looked each other and all of my memories confirm the passion that brought them together. The wedding, such as it was, came almost two years after I was born, with me playing the unintended role of little maid of honor in my parents' marriage ceremony, one January morning in 1863.

For at least two years, we tried to be a family, living in La Coruña. But my father's unyielding desire, fanned by a close friendship with a politician, José Elduayen, brought about ruin and the end of my parents' marriage. My father met Elduayen at a literary salon at his home in Vigo. That night, Elduayen began to fill my father's head with ideas that would soon draw him far from home. He spoke to my father of his ambitions within the Conservative Party, of which he was an active member and which had won him a seat in Congress that let him escape to Madrid periodically, leaving his wife—his second wife—behind in Galicia.

“You must come with me to Madrid, young man. I see a bright future for you. Your gifts as a conversationalist will open the doors to any office, even royal ones.”

“Do you believe that? But I've never even left Galicia . . .”

“Of course I believe it. Your own frontiers lie far beyond this poor, cantankerous country. Come with me on my next trip and I’ll introduce you to important people, people that will take you out of that Casanova hovel. What a resentful bunch, pretending to be humble. They’re nobodies. If I told you the origins of their supposedly noble lineage . . .”

According to the gossip, Elduayen was frequently found in disreputable company in the capital, though his reputation as a womanizer and cheat didn’t tarnish his career as a politician. In him my father saw the masculine example that had always been missing in his home, and didn’t suspect that his eagerness to emulate Elduayen’s comportment and enjoy his social position would take him from what he loved most, forever. I’ll ever lose that memory of him leaving the house early one morning, like a ghost, a bag of clothes on his shoulder, thin and tired.

“What are you doing here, Sofia? Go back to bed with your siblings.”

“*Papá . . .*”

I could barely utter another word. Slight and small at hardly four years old, I still saw the world of adults with the distance and innocence of a child. My father took my hand and clutched me to him. I breathed in his smell. Tobacco and sweat.

“Don’t forget me, Sofia. Don’t forget your father,” he sobbed.

He left home without a backward glance. A complicit silence established itself between my mother and grandparents. They didn’t speak of him. The passing days weighed heavily as we waited for time, immutable, to wipe away our memories, until nothing was left of my father in our young minds. But fate always holds another card, a play that will beat you every time.

“Rosa, you have a letter.”

The grimace on my grandfather’s naturally serious face suggested a greater worry than usual. We had been in Almeiras

the whole summer, carefree as the season, no longer thinking of the empty chair in the house in La Coruña.

“What’s wrong, *padre*, what is it? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“No, not a ghost, but something like it. I was taking care of some business in Coruña this morning and I went to the post office. Genaro, the postman, had left me a note at Manuel’s bar, asking me to come and pick up a notification that had arrived from Madrid.”

“And what is it? Just tell me, please. I don’t know what to think.”

I see my mother—who knew her own father well—sitting on the terrace as evening fell, panicking and shaking him as she tried to grab the letter.

“Vicente’s ship has gone down.”

“What do you mean, gone down?”

“Apparently he left Cádiz a week ago. There was a storm, and the ship sank.”

“Vicente is dead?”

“That’s the problem: his name doesn’t appear on the crew list.”

Despite the family’s tacit agreement not to speak of—and certainly not to try to remember—my father’s departure, my grandfather Juan had followed his trail to Madrid. He was still in contact with the high society of the period, or what was left of it, and tried to find out what had become of him. He knew that he had left La Coruña behind Elduayen and had tried to win the confidence of some no-good, insubstantial politician. As young as I was, I do remember that my father didn’t drink or chase women, but he was very fond of gambling, and my mother had experienced more than a few unpleasant surprises when he arrived home in the middle of the night, having lost twenty-five *pesetas* in some game. According to what my grandfather

revealed that evening, this pastime had landed him in trouble in Madrid on more than one occasion. Once, in order to avoid paying a debt, he hid for several days in the home of a good friend of the family, Patricio Aguirre de Tejada. Don Patricio, patient and good-hearted, didn't know what to do, and tried to contact my grandfather to inform him of the situation and ask his advice, since my father was still legally his son-in-law, in the end. And so my grandfather had news of my father, though he had said nothing to either my mother or my grandmother. His answer was firm: Make him leave, don't protect him any longer, Patricio. He's made his own luck, and only God knows what his fate will be. I only hope it will be far, far from my daughter and grandchildren.

Don Patricio fulfilled my grandfather's wishes and told my father he had to go, that they were expecting a visit from his wife's relatives from Burdeos and needed the guest room for two weeks, at minimum. Oppressed by his situation and without so much as a crust of bread or a roof over his head, my father left Madrid for Cádiz with the intention of enlisting on the first ship bound for America. Once in the port, he struck up a good friendship with the boatswain on *La Dolores*, who introduced him to the captain and secured him passage to embark with the crew.

"He's not there, Rosa. His name doesn't appear anywhere."

"But if Don Patricio said he was aboard . . . then he was aboard! Even if he didn't pay the passage in full, they might have made room for him, I don't know, with the servants?"

"*Hija*, he's not there. Not there. You can't declare someone dead if there is no official report of his death."

"My God! My God! Even dead this man won't leave me in peace! What did I see in him, *padre*? Tell me, what did I see?"

My mother threw herself into her father's arms, broken and inconsolable. And so she became a widow, without having been one. We never heard anything else about my father, and his

absence marked my entire childhood. One morning, at the end of that summer of 1867, I overheard my grandmother speaking with a neighbor in the garden at the country house in Almeiras.

“I’ll tell you, Herminia. He did not expect that ship to go down.”

“And what did he want, then?”

“He wanted to disappear any way he could, pretend to be someone else, pretend to be dead. Anything he could do to start a new life, far from his wife and children.

“Do you believe he is capable of that, Isabel?”

“That, and much more.”

My grandmother was convinced that my father had lied when he let his intention to set off for America be known, in an attempt to put an imaginary ocean between his new life and his family, without leaving Spain. Almost ninety years later, I still don’t know what happened to him. I resisted my grandmother’s version for decades and spoke of the subject only a few times with my mother, mostly because of the pain it caused her. I don’t doubt now that my father was selfish and put his own happiness above his family, never worrying about what could happen to his children and certainly not about the woman who was still his wife, and who had no legal recourse in the face of her husband’s absence. In spite of all that, until we had to abandon Warsaw, I kept a poem that he wrote soon after I was born:

*A pure, luminous star was born  
in the Galician sky so bright  
much to her loving parents’ delight*

Years passed and we still lived in the country house in Almeiras, far from the bustle of the city, protected from the neighbors’ unkind whispers. My mother, gifted with an uncommon fortitude the likes of which I have never seen in



anyone else, supported us by exporting eggs from La Coruña to England, although my grandparents helped and we never lacked for anything. It's strange. I don't remember that time with sadness, in spite of everything. My childhood was a happy one. I was a happy child. I only remember with certain heaviness the day that my grandfather signed off on the sale of the house in Almeiras.

"Are you certain you want to sell it, *padre*?"

"I am. This place is becoming too small for the children. Sofia is thirteen already and surely you must see to her future. Haven't you seen how she reads? How she looks at everything? She's hungry for knowledge. Coruña is not the city for them. And look at you: mired in your own tragedy. Do you want to sell eggs for the rest of your life?"

"Of course not, *padre*, but Madrid . . . it's so far. What will become of us there?"

"What will be will be. Your mother and I will live with you. You won't go alone. And Don Patricio waits for us there. It's the best for all."

My grandmother nodded, unconvincingly, as he made his arguments. Despite the time they had spent in America, they considered themselves Galician and loved their homeland. But, more important than land, race, and nationalism, was their love for their daughter, whose suffering they saw worsen after my father's "death." A mother on her own with three children was no young man's dream, and much less so in rural Galicia at the end of nineteenth century. Madrid would be different: new surroundings without the same emotional hindrances, where they could write a new story for the Casanovas. I watched without saying a word, trying to fix every corner of our house in my memory. Though I didn't know it then, that May afternoon in 1874 I would start to bid farewell to my beloved Galicia, where I would only return on few occasions, never enough.

