Marko Pogačar

Latinoamericana
or
1000 Words of Spanish

Translated by Mirza Purić

Every person in this book is an actual person.
Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely concidental.

THE NUDE BOLÍVAR

Seven Secretaries of Death

Janis was named after Janis Joplin. To this day, her father plays blues gigs every weekend in bars in the districts of Las Mercedes and La Castellana, where one can still find the odd foreigner, some podgy Gringo, drunk and crazy. During the week he works at the cable factory, and when he comes home, after two hours of breaking through the traffic on out-of-the-way suburban roads, he's too tired: his fingers cramp so much he doesn't even think about the guitar. As a teenager, Janis used to sing back vocals, till the ship leaned so much that everything started sliding off the deck, including young girls. She was grounded, and that was the end of her stint with Los Caimanes Voladores. The house, to be fair, wasn't much safer. The family lives in Petare, one of world's biggest slums, with the population count of a smallish European country. In a manner of speaking, they belong to the elite inhabitants of the district, that solid scab of brick, sheet metal and plastic sheeting which encrusts the city's knee. Elite – as in prostitution, restaurants or death squads – means that at least one member of the family is gainfully employed, the lights are on (when there's no power outage) and they have clean water in the house (when it decides to come back on), and Janis studies at a public university. We met a thousand

words ago, in a blind spot of language ; I was in the Americas for the first time, and I wondered if that was obvious.

Life in Caracas is turning into a nightmare, faster every day, she writes. And it's hard for us Europeans to imagine a nightmare in the tropics. The average temperature is twenty-two degrees Celsius year-round, palm and mango trees stroke the stuffy air, the smell of hot salsa and arepas spreads from the gardens of small bars, somewhere high up parrots hold council. This is where the film is interrupted, the roll runs out and the machine spins on and on, clicking away emptily. All that remains of the oil-fuelled prosperity of the fifties and sixties are the memories of those old enough to remember, distant, wizened dotards terrified by the emptiness of the pharmacy shelves. The golden era of Chavismo, when I met both Janis and the city, is also a thing of the past. Although the oil-based economy was thoroughly abused and ill-conceived, the trampled down, disenfranchised majority have certainly benefited tangibly from it. Still, the revolution, in many ways akin to the Yugoslav one, thaws away cracked by interventionism and domestic reaction. Today, Caracas is the most dangerous city on the planet not engulfed in war, with a murder rate not much lower than that in Mogadishu. Considerate corpses turned to stone, curmudgeonly ones rotted away tirelessly. Life was a burglarised kiosk. Crocodiles had come, bitten and locked their jaws, like flying caimans from a fairytale that hijack your dream and you can't fall asleep anymore.

On the grass of Parque del Este we devour those terrifying, Gulliverian hot-dogs, oversized like everything else in this cramped, restless world. The vendor-bike man piles up so much pickles, fried onions, lettuce, mustard and tears on top of them that the sausage and the bun can only be accessed in a deductive fashion. It's early beer season. Local reggae music smoulders in the air; Janis knows the lyrics and hums along between bites. She talks about the sloth. It's must've been ten years since Father found him, stunned, at the end of the row of houses, a car had probably hit him. They nursed him for months, that half-blind, foul-smelling animal, till he was able to hang upside down unaided from the satellite dish mounting pole. When they carried him back to the jungle, a pack of children cried themselves into spasms, as if walking behind a coffin. In addition to this story, his praises were also sung in a slow, minor-key song by Los Caimanes Voladores. Like the sloth, the song was called Juanito.

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His name remains lost in the black volcanic sand. There are probably no diggers searching for gold nuggets of memory that would be able to pan it now from the heaving waters of Laguna de Apoyo. The rest, however, I remember well, because the overripe mango that momentarily froze in the air like a world deprived of time, did not land on my head after all.

As I child I believed that ornithology was just an abbreviated, human-friendly version of otorhinolaryngology, a branch of medicine I encountered regularly at the time. Birds? Their only purpose was to be caged, shot at from catapults, rumoured to be lassoed for dinner by this or that neighbour as the story may require, or to be caught, slyly, craftily, by coating a branch with glue. Thus trapped and useless, they're stuck by their vanquisher into those cages again. The one whose name I've forgotten made a living as a birdwatcher. At least that's the way one might explain it to a child. He was unable, he said, to take his eyes off them. To him, the sky wasn't a blue sheet of emptiness, but an uninterrupted, round-the-clock concert of a philharmonic of hummingbirds, toucans, house swallows and resplendent quetzals, a regular evening assembly of a parrot parliament, and endless palette of plumage, as motley and colourful as a naive painter's dream. Now in his thirties, he grew up in Granada, one of the oldest cities in Central

America, some 30 kilometres away. The difference between Managua, home to the institute of ornithology, and Granada, home to his family, the place from which he climbs up here into the eye of the extinct volcano, his permanent exploration post, is a creaky, rotting-from-the-inside-out metaphor of the difference between the "old" and the "new" world. On Saturday, 23 December 1972, at 12:29 local time, the capital was hit by an earthquake, never to recover completely. Managua today looks like a bag of Monopoly houses strewn randomly all over the jungle, with the odd hotel, bank or shopping centre stretching skywards. Granada, tucked between the mass of the still active Mombacho and Lake Nicaragua has retained its colonial architecture. These two views are nothing but two faces of the same exploitation project whose machetes cut into the gold, the coffee and the tobacco as much as they cut into the flesh itself. The former doesn't try to hide the punishment meted out by the evil white god. The latter, reminiscent of a death mask, has been spruced up in a series of botched cosmetic surgeries.

We chase beers with sugar cane aguardientes, home distilled by his father. Birdwatching, unfortunately, can be tedious, especially when there aren't any exciting birds to watch, when they fall asleep, die out or simply don't turn up. Passions gradually melt away, especially when they grow into a job. His father was a Sandinista guerrillero. On the day Somoza was toppled he unfurled, with his own hands, the flag of the revolution on the National Assembly. Today, fourteen of them – four generations – live in a house with an open garden with iguanas loitering about. Four children swinging in hammocks are his. Their great-grandfather watches them. Riveted to the pram, he is suffocating in the smoke of his cheap Casino King Size cigarettes which he never ceases to blow, like a steam locomotive, the kind that used to bring adventurers into Granada – some of them soaked in madness, like Kinski in *Fitzcarraldo* – and take them out of the city rich or dead. The most persistent ones stayed, desiccated in the red soil loosened and crushed into fine, gunpowder-like dust by mahogany roots. The relative humidity is enormous. Carne mechada, enchiladas and black beans on the table. When he recounts how a rotten mango fruit crashed down on a drunken me somewhere up on the dark lakeside beaches, and I leapt up thinking someone was shooting, the four kids and the grandfather laugh with their toothless mouths. The father, a retired guerrillero, keeps his silence. Night falls on Nicaragua.

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"Are we really cursed?", asks Manolo, squeezing the thick neck of his rifle.

"And if so, who is the cosmic bastard who put the curse on us?", he says, although this echoes like the translation of a line of dialogue from a novel by Vila-Matas.

"It's possible, after all, if the curse is strong enough, if it's so thoroughgoing it splits the ground and makes one's teeth fall out, it's possible then that we're talking about a benefactor here, a blessing given without much thought", he says. But his mouth isn't moving, Manolo is completely mum as he squeezes the cold gun barrel, and his soliloquy echoes only in my sweaty head blasted by gusts of wind as cold as the gun. We gaze towards Puno, where the line steamboat Yavari is at anchor beneath the slopes sprinkled with agave trees and a forest of brick houses, rather than towards the grey offing of Lake Titicaca drowned in thick fog, the offing one had better be silent about.

To me, Manolo is an Indio. From his perspective, of course, the matter looks different. When I ask him what that conquistador, rapier-truncated word means to him, he shrugs. "Doesn't mean anything. May mean a man. A man who doesn't want to die", says Manolo as he stumbles, tries to catch his balance on the island withes soaked in lake water. He spends most nights over in Puno, with his wife, although it happens now and again that he sleeps here, on this particle of land cobbled together from

flotsam, reeds and wire he grew up on. Every day except Sunday he took a motor boat to attend school in town. Every Saturday morning he travelled half an hour to the El Puerto Adventist Church, a house of worship reminiscent of a fire station which the red assault vehicles abandoned leaving the whole community dependent on fire prevention measures, a divine supervisory authority responsible for raging soul fires.

On the islet, one of the largest among the forty similar islands making up the Uros archipelago, he sells sandwiches and trinkets to tourists who stop there on their way to the island of Taquile or Isla del Sol. Sometimes, in front of his mother's wattle house, he conducts a motley choir which, for a few sols, sings to those same tourists hymns in praise of the Saviour in Quechua, a mystical, secret language for me, but not, of course, for the Saviour, who is one absolutely polyglot of a saviour. And hopelessly touching, like people who say "no!" to dogs.

The gun Manolo shifts from one hand to the other is a mere shell of a gun, a skeleton not worthy of a burial. His grandfather put it together half a century ago, hammering a nail into a trigger, whittling a piece of yellow-painted wood washed ashore into the stock. It was intended for hunting the Atitlán grebe, an animal that looked like it was made up by Josef Švejk to be featured in his zoology magazine. Today it mostly serves for Manolo to squeeze its windpipe with his fingers covered with fish scales as his gaze wanders the long-deteriorated inside of the barrel, a region inhabited even longer by raw darkness.

When I ask what god means to him, the one he still rushes to worship every Saturday across the biggest navigable lake on the continent, the lake whose freshwater lies four thousand metres above the seawater, Manolo shrugs again.

"Means nothing. Means a man who refuses to die. It could be that god is one of your Indios", he says and smiles.

"Yes, god is an immortal Indio."

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It's night above American cities, bee-hives twinkling like a stellar jungle beneath the Southern Cross which glows in the darkness like an incandescent hammer and is itself nothing but a sum of celestial bodies above the cities, celestial bodies swaying slightly, as if someone soft and distant were breathing up there. That someone knows the history of burning flocks. That someone sees a bird as it falls. That unreal someone.

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H. bears the most famous Colombian surname. To this day, most people smell in it blood and arson, its sonic footprint are short bursts of gunfire, its postcards those fleeing hippos driven insane on their retaliatory rampage through the callas and carreras of Medellín. But, for the inhabitants of the poorest barrios that tumble down the hillsides like an avalanche of Lego pieces, it sounds close, homely, perhaps fatherly. Often they will call him *Hermano*, whisper *El Presidente*. H. never had to live the reality of the poor neighbourhoods, the everyday life of most of her fellow citizens. Until her twenties, she'd only seen favellas through the tinted car windows. She met her relative only a few times. She had just turned ten in the week when he was fatally shot, and Medellín, adorned with a bloody sash, triumphantly took the title

of the world's murder capital. He gave her a birthday present, a plush, life-sized Siberian tiger cub. The beast, somewhat dusty, still purrs, forgotten in the cage of her room.

Since the hatchets were buried, situation in the city has calmed down. The cartels and the guerrilla are peaceful now, which means they wage war with other means. Lorryloads of mostly foreign money have been have been pumped into infrastructure, institutions and community development, with the government only in partial control. Pupils in white uniforms. Overground Metro line, students gushing out of it. Culture centres, rainbow flags and lingering Christmas tinsel fluttering on their fronts, sounds of melodrama echoing from the roofs, from the screens as grey as a heart, couples crumpling up in the courtyards. *Guantanamera*. José Martí and the American torture facility in the bay where the woman the song is about hails from are equally far from those wise, powerful bodies. Rhythm slides down the drum heads and unplastered facades, like a bullet it stops and nestles itself in the middle of an inextricable skein of nerves where it grows exuberantly, proliferates like living flesh.

Not far from Botero's Bird – a metal sculpture turned into a shrapnel bomb with twenty kilos of explosive that exploded during a music festival in 1995 killing thirty and wounding over two hundred, a pile of blossomed steel still standing there in memory of the dead – trade is conducted in the cramped space in the shade of the railway tracks. Rancid life roars from the low stalls and vendor carts: fly-bespittled tins of dulce de leche, dried armadillos sprawled out on the fresh fruit. More exotic merchandise, merchandise loose and dangerous, hops like circus fleas from pocket to pocket; you may try it, as if fresh cheese, off a key or a knife blade. I need a deodorant to tame the sweat ripening under my shirt. I want those small bananas, to wolf them down as I wait for H. Taunting starts. I don't pay attention, I swallow bananas instead and I try to puff up a bit, like a blunthead pufferfish, a fish whose name must be a piss-take. I'm suddenly happy to be tall and balding, with a fresh haircut, for a second I'm larger than myself, like a balloon with a picture of Reagan on it. However, the enemy hasn't been fooled. A few dodgy characters get up and head towards the blunthead, now puffed out. I leap to my feet and flee into the crowd.

When I finally meet H. again, it's early, sticky dusk. We get onto the cable car which picks people up from the riverside, where Pablo's misfortunate hippos met their end, and takes them up the slopes down which runs the glowing city. Below, in the thick pell-mell, in the dark realm of myth, S. and M. follow us on motorcycles. When all four of us meet again on the hilltop, at the city's rim, a spectacle bursts down below. Millions of lights aflicker, as if to compete with the sky, as if there was nothing worth abandoning.

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Don Pablo, they would say.
El Patrón, El Rey, El Mágico, they would say, gazing at the floor or the tips of their shoes; *El Pablito*, begged those who had once been close to him, those who had wronged him somehow, both looking deep into the heart of the earth, lifting their gaze briefly, only to avert it in the next moment, burnt by his eyes. Those taller and those shorter than him, those known to him and those unknown alike, they all knew they were speaking for their life.
El Padrino, *El Señor*, *El Zar*, they'd say with their heads hung, when he still breathed.
Swine, they said when he died.

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Raymond is a poet. He was born in Chile ten years, give or take a day, after that first, fateful, now unjustly forgotten, dishonoured September 11, when a bullet from a Kalashnikov – a gift from Fidel Castro – decided to fall asleep in Allende, and Chile sunk into twenty years of dictatorship. His father was a short story writer who fled from the junta in mid eighties following problems with the secret police, first to Panama, then – as Raymond was entering his teens – finally settled down in Costa Rica. Right after that he died in a bizarre, somewhat cinematic climbing accident. Raymond was named after Carver. The silver lining, he says, was that the old man had had him and snuffed it before he managed to read Bolaño. I'm sure he would've liked him, he says, he would've gone bonkers for crazy Bolaño, even more than for Carver, and my name would've been Roberto. Nothing wrong with that name, on the contrary – my wife's name is Roberta. But, wouldn't that be retarded, Roberto and Roberta, like in an incredible, maniacal children's film. No, it's a good job the old man had me when he did, and not a day later, says Raymond, Roberto manqué.

We're sitting in La Teta Negra bar, central San José, a boozer that, judging by the clientele, could've been called La Tinta Negra or La Tita Negra, but its actual name suits it best: black tit, with black milk of daybreak dripping from it, drop by drop, as the night passes. We suck on bottles of Imperial and chase them with pisco, a Peruvian spirit distilled several times over. The better part of the Tit's patrons live by the pen, journalist's pen mostly. Raymond, too, patches up his budget with articles, mainly in the culture section of the English-language paper *The Tico Times*. Fortunately he still doesn't resemble the duo at the adjacent table, two veterans still manning the post: underhaired, overweight, wearing fishing vests and moustaches yellow from cigarette smoke – an unmistakable, hyperrealistic portrait of seasoned newsroom cats, recognisable all over the planet. The chatter on Avenida Central, the street vendors' hawking, the punctured exhausts of motorbikes, the musicians butchering a standard unknown to me, the birds, the thousands of loudspeakers supplying the scene with a dancy atmosphere, all these things withdraw following the metronome of the minute hand. This super-human bundle of noise, as loose as the smoke, is then transferred inside, to the bars and enclosed beer gardens, along with the people. The city contracts and expands all around, like an anemone or a deep-sea predatory sponge driven insane by the tiny organisms getting stuck in its pores, its folds which are nothing but teeth, fangs. It's as humid as on the sea bottom and the tropical night strikes from all sides, the monster of a night, a night larger than itself. Peanut hulls crunch underboot, a dull march is playing on the radio. The waiter keeps repeating something I don't understand.

When he has a few drinks, Raymond calls me El Poeta, and I respond in kind, because that sounds nice in Spanish. After a few more drinks, Raymond likes to go on and on about the Latin American essence and the Latin American curse, about the idea of home, homeland, and homelessness as destiny. What am I, he asks? I left my native country when I was two. I started school in Panama, but there's nothing there except that stupid channel. I grew up right here, in Costa Rica. A few thousand kilometres away. Same language. I've left the continent only once, I went to Paris, to see Baudelaire's grave. What am I then, tell me, asks Roberto manqué, focused on a hidden point lost in the grease-stained calendar of the forgotten year 2008. You, Ray, are a poet, and a bit of a fool. A drunken fool, if I may add, shouts the waiter, pushing a CD into the player. His personal Jesus, as vast as guilt, suddenly teeters about the room.

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B. sharpens knives. In his part of Barranco, steep winding steps descend to the ocean, to the beach where life settles into a sandy crypt, a grey mosaic above which green, surfing, basilisk-like Lazaruses try at once to get up, get on their fragile boards and walk on the water, all in one biblically fell swoop. In the middle of the neighbourhood rises the church Ermita de Barranco, also a postcard of life and death at once. Not an ordinary mantra about afterlife, at that, but rather a quite tangible image, an icon metaphorically becoming of the church, generally speaking. Its yellow facade with two steeplets and a heavy wooden door, everything that can be seen from the ground, has been refurbished and shines in its luxuriousness. The roof, a barrel-like boat made of wood and adobe under the sky's direct watch, has caved in, broken, dusty and stripped bare, akin to the ribcage of a sun-bleached buffalo. Like priests, stout vultures perch on the beams in their frocks of black plumes. The soundtrack of the scene comprises, along with the hiss of waves and surreally unpleasant incantations of the birds, a barely audible but persistent *skh, skh, skh*: the sound of time passing sleeplessly, the sound of a blade pressed against a hard stone.

B. sharpens knives but that's – possibly – hard to believe, as there's nothing sinister to it. The job he's been doing over the last sixty years involves bringing metal dulled with use to a state of exemplary honedness. How those silent tools came to lose their initial quality is outside of B.'s area of interest. Just like their sharp future which is at the same time quite certain and wholly uncertain, that piece of information belongs to the sphere of professional discretion. B. has four children. All four were raised on this swarf, says B., as he presses the treadle with his foot. The treadle moves the belt, the belt spins the wheel, sticky and rough under the fingertips, like a tongue. A ginger cat is lolling about in the circular lee which moves slightly as the grinding wheel spins. I slurp icy Cristal as the sun's savage signet sears its signature into the asphalt of the Ayacucho street and the skin of my sweltering skull, and I listen to the story of the children of the blade.

Ana, the oldest, was born under general Pérez Godoy's junta, when subversive machettes were furtively sharpened for an extra sol in the darkness of hallways and back gardens. If we consider the average price of tools and cutlery, as well as the Southerners' proverbial thriftiness, we arrive at a thesis about a golden era of grinding, one justified many times over by Ana's childhood. She grew up in a nice house in the district of La Victoria, in a side-street domed by acacias and palm trees, and she studied at a public university. She buried her first husband after his car disappeared in the waters of the Urubamba under mysterious circumstances. With her second husband she runs a real estate agency called Last Respects and has a seat in Arequipa. It's a respectable business indeed: she sells burial plots. Ana has always been B.'s pet.

Her sister Raquel came unexpectedly, more than ten years after Ana. Camila had been with her in their mother's belly the whole time, which B. and his wife learnt only when an unexpected foot presented itself to those present after the previous two had left the blind sarcophagus that is the mother. Camila has always – possibly because of this – walked with her head in the clouds. Finally, less than a year later, Jorge came into the world as the last child. B. had a habit of seeing the first three children as one in a way, like some six-handed Eastern deity, Kali or, possibly, Vasudharu, B. couldn't say with certainty. All this happened under left-wing general Juan Velasco Alvarado's Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces. Opportunities for knife sharpeners were shrinking; after all, cheap and durable yet banally ordinary steel from the United States was increasingly available. Suddenly, somewhere in the sky, an air-raid siren resounded. My bottle of Cristal toppled and rolled under B.'s feet. The priests darted off the roofs, the cat disappeared in the thicket, Lima's skin crawled. Apparently, a story that was never started is a story that cannot be finished.

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A forest is a curious beast. It covers the slopes spread out far below us like hair takes a face by surprise and overgrows the topography of that gateway of the throat into which the tongue dips like a subterranean river. Forests are persistently burnt. They are just as persistently cut down. Forests are cleared, thinned and wiped out for coffee to sprout in their place and render man forever sleepless and insane. But no, the conspiracy against the terror of wakefulness state has succeeded. Listen: it's hissing in the monkey's ears. The rustling guerrilla of slumber rises.

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Amadeo was not yet ten when they started to address him as *maricón*, or, at times, *marica*, for short. Word about this matter, rather inconvenient for him at first, went round quickly, Pererira is a small town, at least compared to Bogota. What Amadeo did back then to earn the less than prestigious label was little and nothing: he preferred French skipping to shooting at strays from a catapult, felt a bit too passionately about playing dominoes, and on two occasions turned up at the school costume party dressed as a woman. The first time as his own mother, the second as sister Amorena María Nevia de la Soledad, the catechism instructor from their parish.

Before his teenage years it was all in every sense by and large innocent. Then he learnt what being a *marica* actually entailed, and accepted the role with open arms. First beatings came. One hot, stuffy monsoon night he ran into a group of local youths at the Olaya Herrera park as he was trying to hide in the shadow of the dilapidated railways station, under the balcony which threatened to collapse. Passenger trains in Colombia stopped running when the National Rail Company was liquidated in the mid-nineties, and now the country is dotted with abandoned skeletons of the network, as needless as the tooth he lost that night. It was harder the second time. Everything happened in the town centre, it was barely evening. He was sitting with a group of friends on the plinth of the Nude Bolívar at Plaza de Bolívar, a monument as slick and livid as a bruise, as taut as a phallus, as the night, a South American night which mounted the whole continent like Simón José Antonio de la Santísima Trinidad Bolívar mounted his icy steed, slowly descended onto the heads of the beautiful, white-hot faggots of Pereira. A group of thugs, armed with brass knuckles and batons, beautiful, hard batons Amadeo himself would want deep up his arsehole under different circumstances, appeared with clear intentions, and the consequences was just as clearly felt in the morning.

This time his father found out. Amadeo Senior was rather old. He'd been running a bar known as El Rincón Clásico, near Avenida del Río, for over forty years. At the bar, A. Senior (whose real name was actually Mario) incessantly spun classic records on two well-oiled Technics turntables. In addition to the obvious classics, his selection included classical jazz and tango records, even the odd chanson that only a Frenchman could write (at least back then). At first, Mario was surprised at the news. Then, a few days later, he had a dream of his son, his last child, named after the great, awesome Mozart, in a lavish crinoline from the turn of the century, spinning and spinning to the 3/3 beat of a waltz he was sure was best attributed to Strauss. At that moment the music changes: the dress is now more colourful, his movements faster, more passionate. Mario doesn't hesitate. As the room echoes with the demonic sounds of the divine Piazzolla he takes his son's hand and spins with ease, switching between lead and follow. Then he startles awake in sweat and calls out: Amadeo, Amadeo, Amadeo, but nobody hears him. He stops shouting, turns the light on, washes his face, goes down to the bar and lifts the window bars. That's when I see him.

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“I imagined that night as the intro scene from *The Night of the Iguana*”, he says.

“Although I’ve never seen it, the film. I imagined that sequence. I saw a huge lizard speeding across the scorched earth. He then stopped for a second, listened, and caught a fly in mid-air with his sticky tongue. It was night for the fly, from that moment on to eternity, which is where the title of the film comes from. Yes, at first I was aware that something was off in terms of logic, but I assumed that iguana, too, would end up under a car tyre, or a knife or a boot. We all end up under something sooner or later, don’t we?” he says.

“And then the day came, as days do, like Amadeus in that German song, and that’s really how it was, only everything happened even faster, really awfully fast. We were sitting on the monument, this same monument you and I are sitting on now, and the night came cold and hot at the same time, as hot as the blood of all the young faggots of Pereira, and we were suddenly drenched in our own blood as if in coffee.”

“We were terribly awake”, he says. “Awake, but at the same time somehow finally asleep. That’s all there is to say.”

CURVAS PELIGROSAS

I

Awake in Cancún

I dreamt that I promised someone, on my own, or by someone else's deathbed, that one day, when the rains subside and light clouds press down like verbs on the cryptic sentences of trees, I would by any and all means go to Cancún instead of Comala. The vow was given in a convulsion, and it was an immeasurable relief to see the moment when that intense, silent disquiet in the muscles – my own or someone else's – was swept away by the almost gentle silence of death. I declare: all the days of the one who has just departed wouldn't suffice to describe properly the horror of Cancún, the dead city. That expanse, the barren field of stupidity, glass and dreams, waking dreams of being, if only for a second, someone you're not, someone tanned, in Speedos. The vast, false expansiveness of that cold horror was drumming in my temples when I was shaken awake from my nightmare by an announcement addressed, beyond any doubt, to us, passengers on the flight to Cancún, crumpled up in a low-budget airline Boeing. Although it was the middle of January, plumes of hot air rose from the sand and asphalt obscuring the atmosphere, refracting the rays of the day's last sun, making the scene unpleasantly pink. Down below the belly of the aircraft stretched hot, cramped beds of resorts, apartment blocks, massage and nail spas and beach and rooftop bars intersected by vertical rows of hotels whose windows reflected the boring sunset, prolonging and multiplying it infinitely, it seemed. I wanted a glass of water, but there wasn't one to be had. I wanted to fall asleep again, immediately.

There, deep in the rear, in the part of the city where busses with people escaping the place depart from, from which the ocean and all that it washes ashore seems indescribably alien, I stood leaning on the reception desk, talking to Inés. Before her, I knew only two women with that name. The first, who certainly had a gypsy tint to her tan – something that in my earliest childhood stopped me by some incomprehensible magic from saying *no* to her – disappeared from my everyday life before I turned seven after which I met her only sporadically, only to forget her almost completely in the end. The second was, and remains, the Tenth Muse, the Mexican phoenix, a poet's word embodied in the feather-light, contagious body of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the wondrous daughter of the Baroque, the Baroque in whose essence also lies something quite obviously Gypsy. Between me and Inés, a front desk clerk at a motel that smelt of chloroform and bed bugs, lay the wakefulness of continents, one night that never happened, that chafes like a stone in your shoe but at the same time attracts you like a magnet. Camouflaged in the aroma of coffee and tacos, from the kitchen came the promise of a future, while the present, that which still hasn't been claimed by the rusty vice of the past, undeniably carried the sweaty, elusive smell of Inés.

The latter, *my real Inés*, could say little to nothing about the matter. She'd never been to Comala, and had no desire to go. Not even after her relative Ramón got married there on Día de la Constitución two years ago. "He married a stingy Comala piece of rubbish, as stingy as only Comalans can be. They've got only heat, goats and rock in abundance," she says, and as far as she's concerned he would've done better to stay here, at the edge of Yucátan and the world, home with his mother. Noon was approaching, the sun in its zenith peeled the pale plastering off the walls coat by coat, and the omnipresent, powerful, whiter and whiter light made the very thought of sleeping presumptuous. I bought a copy of *La Crónica de Hoy*, wiped the sweat off my forehead with a handkerchief and half-whispered the last thing Inés said to me: "Forget that stupid Comala, they marry their cousins, they say people over there are prone to growing a tail because of that."

I boarded a red ADO bus to Tulum.

Eclipse in Tulum

Some places reek of misfortune. Some misfortunes, however, quite certainly bear, like a brand in the skin, the distinct smell of a place, a smell that is almost visible. There are places whose blooming carcasses radiate the pulse of entertainment, a plague oppressing mankind by imitating the questionable quality known as life, demystified in all kinds of medical textbooks, yet still elusive. Cities and towns, especially those whose night is tacked to the sky with studs arranged in the shape of the Southern Cross, are commonly given away by a blend of all those qualities in all possible combinations and ratios, some even stratified by time, pointing to an unreal *before*, whilst the smell itself, with its strong sleepless hands taps out, like an insane telegraphist, a quite certain *later*. Tulum, needless to say, was obviously one of those places.

A town in the state of Quintana Roo, one of the last ones abandoned, no sooner than they were built, by Mayas running from the burning sword of Juan Díaz of Seville, an evil white god tremulous from rum and gold. I arrived there for 170 pesos on a red bus in which they played canción ranchera. Soft, feathery, yet penetrating voice of Vicente Fernández Gómez, king of ranchero music better known by his nickname Chente, issued forth from below his shoe-polish-black moustache, ricocheting off the portraits of saints pasted to the wind screen, orbiting, like a drunken pendulum round the Saviour's nude body, which in turn orbited the rear-view mirror in concentric circles, grazing the driver's spiky top slathered with grease, finally to nestle, like a lucky stray bullet, in the creaky station door. The door opened straight to Avenida Tulum, a street that looked like it had fallen out of a film about a much more colourful and really quite tame Wild West. I opened the newspapers on the penultimate page and scanned it for weather – a small, bright yellow sun printed in bold fully matched the one in the sky. The lunar calendar, however, showed a complete, irrevocable eclipse that night.

The city of Mayas, on the edge of the modern-day city, a field of decaying palaces, indescribable houses, and temples whose steps once flowed with hot blood, was also dead, but in a different, more literal way. Yet, the wind still lived there in the crowns of the palm trees, and the nation of iguanas held court, calm as if they were sipping coffee in a cantina on Calle Mercurio or walking in the Dos Aguas park, in the heart of a story about a downfall. Bavarian tourists with sunburnt backs were thumbing through pulp novels and dipping slices of green mango in salt, megalithic stone blocks crumbled under the sun's sledge hammer into unexpected, quite Catholic powder. The temple of frescoes was behind my back as my eyes, blurred by an excess of light, were getting used to the excess of the ocean. I undressed, because it's better to be naked when you're close to death, and dived under the turquoise surface.

Down in the gentle depths swam giant rays, colourful fish and turtles hatched in my father's days, in happier times, gentler on turtles and people alike. In addition to the turns and pirouettes of the airborne Nijinsky in *The Rite of Spring* or *The Afternoon of a Faun,* the gracious swaying of a ray was reminiscent of Butler Yeats's slow, rolling lines peppered with some good old Góngora: *Among School Children* meets, and is sodomised by, possibly to death, the timeless *Solitudes,* in a dark corner. In the subtext tremored a whiff of Angelus Silesius's mysticism. The turtles moved through the blue in a less terrifying manner, more akin to a slowly stumbling four-stroke engine. Their telegraphic lurching summoned the verses of postal worker August Stramm, confronted with Popa's equally brief, albeit much more abstract descriptions of animals. I named each ray and turtle Pedro, after my long-sought father.

When I emerged, the evening was already there. Still alive, the yellow wheel of the moon illuminated the rot of Tulum, and was barked at by the street dogs. At a bar called Apelido I ordered a double Pelotón de la Muerte and a pint of warm Victoria, then almost immediately another mezcal and more Victoria. Quite obviously, the original night was rising up in the sky, a night in which the light loses its last tangible stronghold, a darkness which would certainly come someday, more heavily armed this

time. The black shadow of the planet conquered inch by inch until there was nothing but a realist portrait of the future hanging in an oval frame in the middle of the Tulum sky like a coal apple. “If only there was a lift to take us up there! The moon is a dance floor where clumsy, lost poets of Europe try to dance salsa!”, said Lotte, a Dutch woman with sea snail shells round her ankles, hopping in place to a techno beat. “Let’s go!”, she said without thinking, oblivious to the fact that the eclipse was becoming permanent, that every lift, one way or the other, took you to the execution site in the end.

Palenque, Both Alive and Dead

About myself I was able to say little and nothing, although I, quite understandably, had had frequent encounters with myself. All of that fit into one slim paragraph: I was a bearded balding man about to turn thirty-five, a bit Greek nose, tall and hard of hearing, determined to write and uproot himself as thoroughly as possible, and – the following phrase is to be understood in completely and radically ideological terms – to leave his home and his element. I was wearing short jeans, trainers whose foredecks were drilled into by thumbnails affected by an advanced case of athlete’s foot, and a shirt made of a lighter shade of denim, studded with mother-of-pearl buttons, whose sleeves I normally kept rolled up high, but I unrolled them, and took off my counterfeit Ray Bans with too dark lenses, as the deceptive Mexican night neared. I was a dandy and in thrall of a vice or a passion which we’d better not talk about at the moment. Crumpled up from the twelve-hour bus ride and utterly devoid of any thought, that is how I arrived in Palenque.

It wasn’t yet dawn, and the moon’s watermark was still visible in the designated corner of the sky. Under a hospital neon light, the bus station kiosk employee poured an American portion of sugar into my Americano, as the few passengers curled up in the plastic chairs or sleep-walked with their eyes stuck to a digital display. The dream wasn’t completely over, the waking hours hadn’t quite started. “There,” I said to myself, not really sure what *there* referred to. “There,” I repeated into my chin, for I was one of those terrified, god-forsaken people, people who say *there* to themselves. An obese woman in a floral-pattern dress greedily licked the stamp, and with a look of indescribable disgust on her face handed the postcard over to the thick postal darkness.

“Seems like it’ll never dawn here”, she said. The final syllables still echoed in the lifeless hall as a tanned, tattooed hand effortlessly lifted an oversized rucksack. “Let’s go find some breakfast”, she said, and that for a second seemed less hopeless that endless resignation, an ethos that had completely taken me over of late, compressed into that reticent word. Ten minutes later, pushers of psychoactive mushrooms distributed their merchandise posing as mariachi bands and Lotería Nacional sandwich-men, as Palenque slowly woke up to soapy water in the beer gardens of early-opening cafes, and dogs lazily stretched their limbs hobbling towards the first bones of the day tossed to them. Like shadows, moustachioed men with large melancholy eyes roamed the streets. We shared a portion of huevos rancheros and Hannah, a waitress from Canada, decided, reassured by a cliché I uttered, to spill before me, over coffee and a few glasses of fresh-pressed juice, her entire New Brunswick life, all of its sweat and snow and tears, the sum of all tears of that cold continent.

Here, from these winding streets, these neatly trimmed tree crowns – one indescribable monument to the planet and Hannah’s soft sobs – starts the living Palenque and its death, its silent death anthem. There is no Hannah there, no thick mycelial madness, no place for a *there*. The jungle is strewn with pyramids, observatories for forgotten stars, thrones overgrown with weeds, temples of blood and time. A crystalline mountain river meanders through the scene carrying untranslatable words, sighs that

sound as if they came from Remedios Varo's paintings, soaring from the mouths of Lola Cueto's dolls. It's all too big, too lost, it's all too dead. Yet, the accurate Mayan calendars still tick away in the background somewhere, like jungle clocks. Roots bite into the flesh of stone. And, down the catacombs, as if Indiana Jones were slowly sinking into deep sleep, deranged flocks of sheep rushed headlong. I've named every sheep and every raven Pedro, after my father, who I must've been getting dangerously close to now. "There", I said into my chin looking at a Predator figurine that from the profile looked like Donald Trump. "There", I repeated, when I reached the very top, when everything below me, as far as the eye could see, looked like it was on fire.

San Cristóbal de las Casas, Slowly Sinking

I advanced southwards. With Tabasco behind my back and Guatemalan jungle to the left of my left kidney, I dripped down the map of Mexico, as I always do when I'm going south, with a vivid sense of descent, although I was actually ascending all the time. I felt like a renegade cursor on a synoptic chart forecasting the end of time, I shivered like a needle of a drug addict's compass. The bare highlands of Chiapas, grey and brown rocks and groves of cactuses like battalions of massive penises rampant stuck from the other side of the glass to the skin of my cheek pressed close to the window of a white van with the sign Bienvenidos a Tulum. The whole region looked like an oversized pin cushion, and I like a holey sock. The driver's bald crown bobbed before my eyes for hours like a Will-o'-the-Wisp. I named him Pedro, and abandoned myself to the vice of sleep.

The wind rolled tins and fresh cigarette butts across a dusty car park on the other side of Mirador, the sound of heels on fine gravel carried the scattered rhythm of shakers, and the squeal of tyres took on the role of the first violin in a satanic salsa orchestra. For twenty pesos the taxi driver took me to a hostel in the district of 5 de Mayo, not to be mixed up with the eponymous, much more upscale street of colonial villas and lavish gardens. The consolation prize was the fact that spring had always been my favourite season, the time when nature awakens and bonfires are lit on the Feast of St John, like in Gypsy songs or Wordsworth's and Amy Lowell's poems. All of that barely protected me from the brisk night in the mountains. I put on everything I had and lay in the back till daybreak counting the hundreds of road humps which the van, wriggling along the meandering roads through villages whose names I've forgotten, sent to an unknown Zapatista hell that night. I bade myself a good morning as soon as it dawned. "Mornin'", replied Paul readily, as if someone had sent him to my rescue.

Born in Berlin in 1946, he rose from a pile of rubble like a skinny phoenix suckling along with smoke that went up from the craters of allied bombs, five-tonne steel sows with messages like *die pigs* and *here you go, Krauts* scrawled on the slick steel. His mother never told him, she merely hinted once without looking him in the eye, but Paul was the result of the biggest mass rape campaign in the history of mankind, a consequence of one of several thousands of childbirths that marked, with a scream, a defeat and a broadly understood victory. He accredited his love for classical music and his proneness to a *typically Slavic melancholia* to his father, a Russian soldier of unknown rank and origin. He learnt a hundred Russian words online, and he sometimes plays the Soviet anthem on YouTube and cries soundlessly. I had to admit to myself that I, too, shed the occasional tear when I hear odes to a distant, long-lost freedom. At the same time I had to talk Paul out of the idea he had for the two of us to sob Slavically together, here in this garden, for all eternity. Since 1948, after all, he had lived mostly in America, initially, for years, at a military base. The last seven years he'd been spending in a room in this same hostel on Calle Honduras, opposite the barber shop San Francisco and the First Emmanuel Church

of the Nazarene, reading doorstops with onion skin pages left there by the visitors, and preparing to return to Nürnberg, *home*, to be closer to his multiplying relatives scattered across the German desert. I don't know if he'll finally realise that there is nothing to return, just like there is nothing to folk wisdom. The following night, before we parted, he hugged me, patted me on the shoulder and whispered in my ear *счастливого пути,* making sure I catch his weary smell.

At that moment the bloody sunset above San Cristóbal was already dimming out, like a young revolution slowly fading away. However, all that fades has got to have shined at least once, repeated Subcomandante Marcos, Delegado Cero, as he patrolled one of the nearby autonomous villages before bedtime. There, behind the silent forest of my ribs, a vast church that was sinking into ever thicker darkness still watched over the town, a church whose interior was illuminated with neon and decorated with plastic flowers, the seat of a black Jesus reminiscent of a black transvestite prince. But, no darkness is as dark as the darkness of the church. No theology is a liberation theology.

Oaxaca, or: on tiredness

"Ohohohoho!", guffawed Pedro P., the driver of a red ADO bus which squeled when it braked, twisting with one hand a moustache reminiscent of Emiliano Zapata's, only lightly holding the steering wheel with the other. "Ohohohoho", he repeated, somewhat more quietly this time, when the vehicle stopped dead in its tracks, as if petrified after a collision with Maedusa's gaze, in front of four equally startled schoolgirls wrapped in short white and deep blue coats who'd just decided to cross the road. I thought to myself and myself only, without any particular reason: Neon. It's the neon that devours icy darkness from the heavens, neon is the only thing that can save us. Then I continued, still mum, to update the catalogue of my dreams, trying hard, at all costs, to stay awake, at least till next nightfall.

The song "Dr. Psiquiatra" by Gloria Trevi spread from the glaring plasma TV in the corner – *bo bo bom*. Proper Mexican music, funny, intelligent, and, above all, passionate – *bobobobo bom bom bo bom* – miles above those epic, saccharine Peruvian sagas about condors, or the feeble-minded reggeaton ditties that shake the dance floors of continents, from Puerto Rico to Tierra del Fuego. In spite of the catchy melodies and beats that set the hips on fire, eye-lids, like blinds on shop windows after closing time or bars on prison windows, rolled down inexorably over the dark windows of the soul.

In the seductive yet temporary darkness, a review of one-minute pieces played out on the temporarily set up screen of slow, heavy blinks, a film journal of sorts depicting the last two sleepless days. The first roll contained a seemingly endless ride across mountains, slow tumbling over highlands reminiscent of the surface of the moon overgrown in cactuses resembling organ pipes and yucca trees that looked like burning bushes, with the idea of end, embodied in eagles and plump vultures, similar to death in *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, watched over everything. The second contained obscure night scenes. Police check-points, pat-downs conducted by pimply lads with rifles, pissing at an indeterminate hour in the dessert swept by a hot wind akin to the Alpine föhn and lifted storm clouds of dust. Sellers of turquoise sleeping bags, mosquitoes the size of a coin in noxious cantina toilets, the spitefulness of the wasteland as lavish as the sum of everything that is at the same time ongoing and has already transpired on *Terra Nostra*, a victorious skull cramping, like in the accursed Leopoldo Méndez's illustrations. The third roll was quite abstract, as it dealt mostly with unimportant details from Mexico's bloody history – unpredictable yet fully expected deaths of men, roosters, snakes, dogs and other animals that were evidently much less interesting in the filmmaker's eyes.

I checked in at a small, family-run hotel named Casa Carmen, or Casa Cristina or, possibly, Casa Catarina, and unwrapped the still-hot tacos I'd bought, wrapped in aluminium foil, at the taco shop opposite. The city pulsed everywhere around me like a heavy veal heart. Colonial cathedrals sprayed the Baroque of plague and small pox, torn posters advertised badly paid jobs in catering and services, salsa bars lured patrons with stage lights and the chatter of percussions, and the tattooed hipster waiters from expensive chocolateries slowly melted bars of pure cocoa. As night approached, the streets around the main square became louder and louder, and Plaza de Zócalo came to life properly. Like in a kaleidoscope in the shape of a trumpet mute, a kaleidoscope inserted into the mouth of a trumpet of the Apocalypse, entertainers of all sorts scurried about on the cobblestones, fire eaters and drunken jugglers, a shower of mariachi bands and elderly couples dancing salsa in the shadow of the chess boards, and above all of that neon, endless neon in the sky reflected by the few low clouds.

Pa' todo mal... mezcal y pa' todo bien... tambien! stood above the bar at a small inn by Mercado La Cosecha, and I decided to take that as my motto; desiccate my awakeness and pin it down like a rare insect to an upholstered cork board. After a series of bars filled with similar patrons with similar intentions, on my way home – to Casa Carmen or Cristina or, quite possibly, Catarina – I stumbled, as if upon a lost Comala, upon New Babylon. Sticky rumba was playing inside, in the semi-darkness. Maricas on a date were cuddling over flickering candles, patrons were ordering cocktails with names like Oaxacan Slushie, Marrakesh Express and Mezcal Paloma, while a gringo, who resembled a man I hadn't seen in years, was putting his hands up the skirts of tipsy girls. A girl in a too warm poncho, possibly tipsy herself, was writing lines and lines of neat text with a fountain pen, and from the door frame, watching over all of that were three melancholy Mexican poets drinking warm Victorias, long-haired poets in dark denim, chubby although relatively young, out of whose back pockets and leather bags slung across the shoulder poked paperbacks with crumpled pages, in short, three of those lost men who cannot be anything else but melancholy Mexican poets in the heart of a Saturday night lost in the vast archive of the world's wasted Saturdays, and I concluded that one could only love them. I lifted up my glass, and immediately lowered my forehead onto the dirty table.

Neon, I thought. Only neon can save us, I thought and instantly forgot the whole thing. I only knew that everything was terrifying, and that only memory, the closest and most similar off all things in existence to a dream, could guarantee the words, the intangible secret reality from the attic of our night, their meaning.

II

From nowhere, from the other side of the rusty fence of metal boards welded together, like a postcard from another world and another time, sounds of a string quartet rehearsing, a performance abruptly interrupted after a few minutes for a deep, acousmatic voice to issue an undismissable two-word warning to the viola; just like that, flat and without an exclamation mark, but with a streak of refined despair: *La viola*. The melody which immediately continues to spread through invisible openings is a melancholy one, heavy and sweet, possibly glazed bitter on the edges, like a bandoneon piece by Piazzolla, or a Carlos Gardel song rearranged for an autumn film by Bergman. All of that, the whole hovering sonic image, belongs to an authentically narrow backstreet not far from the vegetable market in Oaxaca in the eponymous federal state, a few hours' drive away. Now, for no reason it seems, it rings in my inner ear as I descend the steps of the Morelos station, metro line B, steps that lead straight to the dusty heart of Colonia Morelos, a neighbourhood "poor since Aztec times".

My delayed miniature for strings was promply replaced by the roar of Avenida Congreso de la Unión blended with hard hip-hop whose lyrics I couldn't follow. I carried hunger under my armpit and days of built-up fatigue plunged suddenly headfirst into the nightmare of Distrito Federal. Like everyone else, I carried the virus of death, seeking at the same time a layman's diagnosis, an antidote and a shrine for it. I had waking dreams mostly, on my feet, because sleep meant loss of precious time which was sedimenting on forgotten, written-off calendars as if on a final bed chart in which the entries stop abruptly and irrevocably.

The station square was filled with fruit, veg and household item vendors. Their stalls, on the other side of a tract of road graffitied with oversized, naive portrats of politicians, artists and athletes, were engulfed by the torrent of the flea market, and all around, on cardboard boxes, poly sheets or the pissed asphalt between the stalls sat, lay or stuttered a multitude of drunk, drugged and deranged. It was six in the afternoon and dusk was slowly curling up under the sole, tremulous figures with faces shaded by visors and greasy hats shouted *¡Hola, gringo!*, or rattled something incomprehensible. I didn't respond.

With my eyes firmly fixed on the eyes of Nelson Mandela and then the eyes of wrestler Alejandro Muñoz Moreno, better known as Blue Demon, I bought four oranges and drummed on the fence of a residential complex built in red brick, fortified with crushed glass and locks of barbed wire. In the corner of the front yard an elderly lady was roasting beef offal. Colourful lights left there from Christmass switched on and off to a deadly, hysterical staccato of an orchestra only they could hear, stretched over a bed of equally colourful flowers that looked like tulips. From a slick-haired bloke in a sleeveless vest in a knicknack shop by the entrance steps I bought soap, a bottle of water, and beer, then I bolted the door with a *¡Viva AMLO!* in the colours of the Mexican flag behind me. The acronym for Andrés Manuel López Obrador flashed for a second like spring and the promise of the future. Down the avenue, alluringly, spoiling the plans of passers-by and dogs, crawled the smell of burnt flesh.

*

In daytime, when they're broken down by the penetrating whiteness of light, some things look different indeed, lighter, alive in their own way that was previously hidden by a patina of darkness and reduced to a rumour, as if the light with its well-known sorcery could translate a wholly fatalistic script into a much more optimistic film. The picture of misery remains, however, unchanged.

In the cacophony made up of noon bells, street vendors' shouting, roosters' crowing and the hiccoughy traffic of Avenida del Trabajo, I dip churros into a cup of filter coffee, while all around me the typhoon of the Tepito market sweeps the ground. Everything that one such divine hoover could pick up and then drop back down randomly to be offered for sale is here, where the omnipotence paradox looks different: can god buy something he decided isn't for sale? That despot who exists as much as Donald Trump's parting, an absence given away by a shower of alleged traces of its presence. Plastic rosaries swinging at eye level. Display counters with tacos glowing blessed by Our Lady of the Neon. Under the stands, the mute dogs of Santería lie sleeping.

J. and I trudge along the hot roads, waiting for J. to finally join us. We kick cans and spit on the floor to feel the resistance of our own bodies, we try to leave the impression of tough but at the same time laid-back guys. We choose the people whose eyes we'd meet, though we know we don't stand a chance. Streets perpendicular to Avenida del Trabajo look like neatly stretched white lines. Untill you stick your nose in one of them, it's impossible to tell which one is flour, and which one hides speedball and rat poison. J. is a biochemist, and I myself have a penchant for chemical compounds: instead of the hubbub of children kicking balls and the silence of the old men playing cards in the shade of Mexican cypresses, we turn into a street of nameless solvents, glue, crack, heroin and cheap alcohol, in which morning looks like an eclipse at noon. We pretend it's none of our business. From a wall ready to be knocked down we read, syllable by syllable, a graffiti about poetry, freedom and sodomites (possibly a mistranslation), as two tattooed proficient Spanish speakers (possibly the authors of the text at hand) get up from an air mattress and head towards us. One of the translators is named Jorge, as in Luis Borges, the other José, as in Lezama Lima. Although all the characters in this chapter, obviously, have the same initials, which opens up the space for a potentially interesting identitety play, we opt for a conventional story and hurry home without waiting for the end of the verse, to check if J. is finally awake.

But there is no escaping death. Puffing, we turn the first corner, from where we can discern the solacing, spray-painted concrete of the line B. A mural with the masked face of Rodolfo Guzmán Huerta, who earned his famous nickname El Santo in close combat, grows in our eyes when our path is blocked by a massive glass sarcophagus, the altar and the home of Nuestra Señora de la Santa Muerte, Our Lady

of the Holy Death. Candles, plastic flowers, paper lanterns, count-out rhymes and icons inject new life into the brittle yellowness of the bone, the teeth of the skull seem to be snarling: rosebud, rosebud. The veil is shaking from the thud of steps. Pigeons shit on the glass. Quite strangely, unfathomably, no person living or dead – in this chapter, as in all of Comala – is named Pedro tonight.

*

J. & J. and I are sitting under the glowing sign of the hotel Hidalgo, on the outer rim of the gentle desert of boredom, peeling pumpkin seeds. The burning neon of letters intertwines and blends with the redness of the eastern sky, a reflection of a hundred years old revolution which, understood as an active principle, still smoulders above the Porphyrian seccession style of the Palacio de Correos and its dazzling, Escheresque staircases, as well as the winged dome of the Palacio de Bellas Artes. A saxophonist on the corner reminds one of a young Garry Mulligan, or someone who has swallowed Mulligan who now blows from the bottom of a vast, dark belly, as if from a tomb, or the body of a whale. The birds flocking above the dome bear an incredible resemblance to swallows.

I dreamt that J. was a character ins Sam Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, one that doesn't appear at all in the final cut, or, for that matter, in the script itself. In my dream J. was part of a conspiracy between a villain known as El Jefe and Terese, his daughter, while the head which, like John the Baptist's, was to appear bare on a silver platter was mine. There are dreams better and dreams worse than us, but most people, it seems, are forever imprisoned in their worst dream. Proust says we love only that which we do not possess completely, but the head resisted that appeasing logic: it insisted on remaining, as a pre-condition for that love, whole. This morning, upon waking, I was utterly unable to say with certainty which one of the two Js it was.

I told them that as we moved from the seeds to boiled maize on the cob. The two of them couldn't agree which one would be better suited for the role, and they made a series of (mostly legitimate) objections considering the context of Proust's thought and the way in which the dream was dreamt. By that time we were already climbing, up Ignacio Allende street, towards Plaza Garibaldi, thinking about swapping elotes for pulque or beer. That night, Mexico truly seemed a land of metamorphoses.

At Plaza Garibaldi Square some mariachi bands were striking up their corridos, while others, in preparation for making their own contribution to the general cacophony, tuned their instruments or lolled about under the trees making sure not to soil or crumple their uniforms reminiscent of melodeons. Ice-cream summarily melted in the hands of children, homeless people and alcoholics sprawled about on greasy cardboard sheets along the edge of the square. J. & J. and I opened our cans of beer. We could hear the familiar, soothing hiss, as if something were boiling in the belly of the can. A minute later, two special police officers, armed with tear gas and long guns, kindly offered to put us away for thirty six hours, or skin us alive for drinking in public pursuant to some insane fines list. We started negotiations. The officers – possibly Juan and Jesús – negotiated like the Sphinx: we looked, smelt, and above all spoke like a reliable European cajero automático. As I was taking a thick wad of pesos in the negotiated amount of about 90 US dollars to the back yard of the bar Salón Tenampa, I was thinking about the head that was once Trotsky's. In the famous incident which took place, in the summer of 1940, in a house with red walls half an hour by metro, that head, owing to the perfidious political reaction and the pointy tip of an ice pick, unfortunately failed to remain whole. In the light of that thought, in a state similar to something which may be considered wakefulness, I now believe Proust was right.

We ran into a nameless bar to have the most expensive beer in our finite lives, thankful to the Mexican jail system and their law enforcement agencies on their temporary absence. Victory seemed distant, the enemy untouchable, but we knew it couldn't be that way.

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Two days later, at the pulquería Pakaly, whose rear exit the shadow of the aerial on the roof of Torre Latinoamericana points towards on the summer solstice, in low voices that melt down into a whisper we plan a march on Coyoacán. In addition to the famous Blue House of the Kahlo/Rivera couple, there is the above-mentioned Red House, where Stalin's swine Mercader, in one imprecise stroke managed to open a sizeable hole in the nape of Leon Trotsky, while the blood that was gushing forth from the opening at an incredible rate drew a quite abstract map of the free world on the white floor tiles, a fluid map the colour of dark cherry. A young poet and door-to-door salesman Roberto was to be our guide, and we made detailed preparations, amongst other things, by thoroughly studying Rivera's murals in the garden of Palacio Nacional for hours on end. We paid special attention to the monumental *History of Mexico*, which, according to certain obscure interpretations of Trotskyist kaballah, pointed to a slew of potential executioners, although it was completed five years before the incident. The list included a failed assassin, Iosif Grigulevich, Stalin's ambassador to Yugoslavia, who, due to the paranoia and plot twists of the cold war, had also been tasked with killing Tito.

The walls of Pakaly were covered with framed photographs of heroes of Mexican wrestling, first and foremost Blue Demon, El Santo, Mil Máscaras and Gory Guerrera, and painted with the portraits of relatives – distant and close, animal and human – of Calavera Catrina, step-daughter of the daemonic engraver José Guadalupe Posada, as well as dozens of varicoloured sugar skulls of all sizes. Fat drunks with arse cleavages and punks with pierced noses lazily lifted their eyes when Roberto came in, impeccably dressed. R. was one of the younger members of the inner core of an organisation known as Círculo de Poesía, which could be described, briefly and quite accurately, as a poetry cartel. Círculo comprises a poetry publishing house, a poetry festival, a literary magazine and a circle, as well as a distribution network – a department Roberto headed sovereignly, hopping from one Mexican town or village to another in his van stickered with the organisation's symbols. We popped by the José Martí centre to pick up some kind of a package, then spent an hour breaking through the horror of the traffic towards the former colonial satellite village long ago swallowed up by the hot animal of the city. Roberto talks about silence, about violence and those other cartels, about the longest Mexican night whose bottom looks like the bottom of a bath tub where our lives now spin and twirl like a skein of belly-button hair. In his vocabulary, the name Andrés Manuel López Obrador stands for hope as of recently. Hope is in high demand, and the book is among the best selling in the country at the moment.

Not far from the central square, a square green and pleasantly, extravagantly restless, we eat pizza topped with cicadas and talk about words that weave the invisible yet omnipresent filling of the world, a mysterious stuffing that lends the world the taste of adventure and unpredictability, making it at once similar to a headless holiday turkey. This finely woven cloth is its cradle, its shirt and its shroud, but, like in the fairy tale about the new clothes, the world-emperor has in fact been naked before our eyes the whole time. When one catches it fortuitously, one ought to wring its neck immediately, lest it slip, slick and greasy, out of one's hands, like a wrestler wriggles out of clinch, or a pig about to be stuck unexpectedly outwits the man slaughtering it. In codes broken long ago we talk about Benedetti, Vallejo, Paz at a push, about fences and masks, about the cold, distant planet Pizarnik. We sit in expectation of

something – anything – to happen, in silent pursuit of an event, something that could metastasise into a literary text. At last we realise our mistake. Late afternoon light lands on the terror of the happening, and this mild, soft light becomes its devastating Termidor: the only relevant and absolutely necessary happening in a literary text is the happening of literature itself. We sit, until from the darkest depths of our own night, a night that *is* us, an indescribable choir burst into a cicada death song.

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"Santiago de Chile is the most boring city in the Americas! At least in Latin America. At least for me. But, what's the use of entertainment for others, entertainment that meets other people's criteria that must be awful?", says Renata, as we swallow Peruvian ceviche and octopus of unknown origins in a restaurant not far from the hipster bar Bósforo. "It's dangerous over in Guatemala – the moment the sun goes down, I put a blow-up doll on the passenger seat to fool the highway robbers", she says, "it's dangerous, but at least you don't die of bloody boredom. My kingdom for a good robbery – provided, of course, you get robbed by some interesting people – I sometimes catch myself thinking", she says and orders another round of drinks. I've heard similar stories about the streets of Guatemala City from my friend the poet Francisco Nájera, a wild professor who started his career as a manual labourer in the Bronx in the first half of the sixties, after he'd left those streets behind for a while. He spoke a bit of English, a bit of Spanish, in an impeccably flowing language fugue, as the shadow of a washed-out city grew before my eyes. This story, however, is neither about Chile, nor is it about Guatemala, although it's impossible to separate it from these two places.

I met Renata for the first time over ten thousand kilometres from here, at a time when she worked for an unusual, semi-secret agency whose business I never understood completely. Now she works in education in some other boring, faraway city where she lives, although this could be just a cover. I was thinking about that after we'd moved to Bósforo, an elongated place with a single toilet, lit by dim, gambling-room light that was spreading from low-hanging lamps like lazy fog. In that intrepid cloud, just as in all of Mexico, for that matter, the patrons seemed at the same time alive and thoroughly dead. I suddenly thought it was quite possible that somehow I'd managed, unknowingly, with my eyes shut and my heart open, to reach Comala.

I was startled out of this sweet fantasy by the sound of a familiar language. It sprayed round the narrow room in a polyphony, which now didn't seem like a fugue but rather an organum lost in the darkness of the world, whose soft yet discernible cantus firmus was made up of the whispers of a choir of slaughtered chickens. Seven people at the adjacent table from all over Yugoslavia, from Niš to Metković to Drniš, came to celebrate a friend's marriage and visit the Aztec empire. After all, are our customs, our kingdoms, our churches and wars, our arsons and human sacrifices one iota different from the Aztec ones, whose cruelty, inscribed in stone, we seek to feel the silent shivers of fear and be at the same time anointed by a sweet *mise en abyme* of progress? That's what I was thinking about as we were having round after round of tequila and mezcal, spirits that don't substantially differ from rakia. After all, the same agave trees that bear the fruits whose fermented pulp the holy fiery water is distilled from grow on the slopes of Vis, an island barely discernible on the map though larger than itself, an island that swelled up in my memory like an inflamed liver, an island where I'd met Renata for the second time.

Then we walked aimlessly down the streets of Colonia Doctores for days, waiting for something to happen under the boarded-up windows and unplastered walls, something that would wound but not kill us; down the streets of the northern and southern part of Colonia Roma, whose villas, past their

prime, blossomed again filled with beautiful people and new money, immersed into the tidy yet unbridled green of the long boulevards; down the slow streets of La Condesa, which flowed – in lasting memory of countess María Magdalena Dávalos de Bracamontes y Orozco – in parallel with our lives carrying a fallacious seed of sorrow, a seed that, quite possibly, could've been gutted with a straight razor and burnt round the next corner. Making our way through rivers of the undead in a slow slalom, for days we refused to notice a rock I'd been stumbling on the whole time, a rock hewn into a monument, opened into heavy, wind-proof pages of a book.

So I stood in front of that book, thin in its paper form, in stone as thick as a Bible, only much bigger, of course, for that was a book about the real, about life and death at the same time, about the here and the now, the then, and the who knows when, in one same perishable body, godless flesh above which night was falling forever. I stood before that cross-eyed Pedro Páramo reduced to a promise and planted near Avenida Hidalgo, as if I were a monument to something myself, thinking about a house that didn't exist, about a faraway home that disappears and returns unexpectedly, like the clatter of a freight train. I felt all of Mexico pulsing around me like a huge, dried out comma, wondering if anything here could ever birth a full stop.