

*word for word*

*parola per parola*

*palavra por palavra*

*wort für wort*

*palabra por palabra*

*mot pour mot*

*2020*

*word for word*

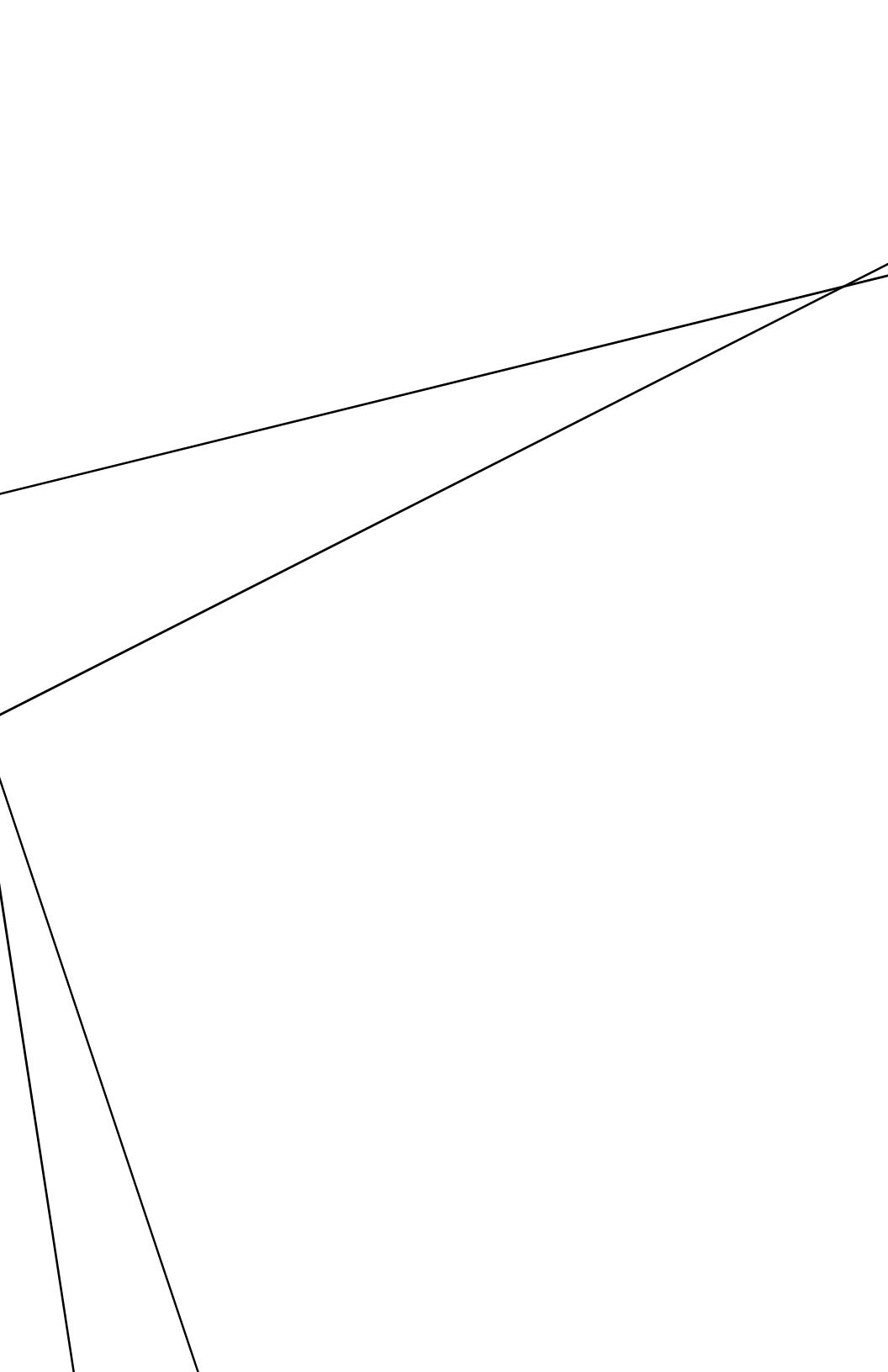
*parola per parola*

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Columbia University School of the Arts  
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Columbia University School of the Arts  
Scuola Holden

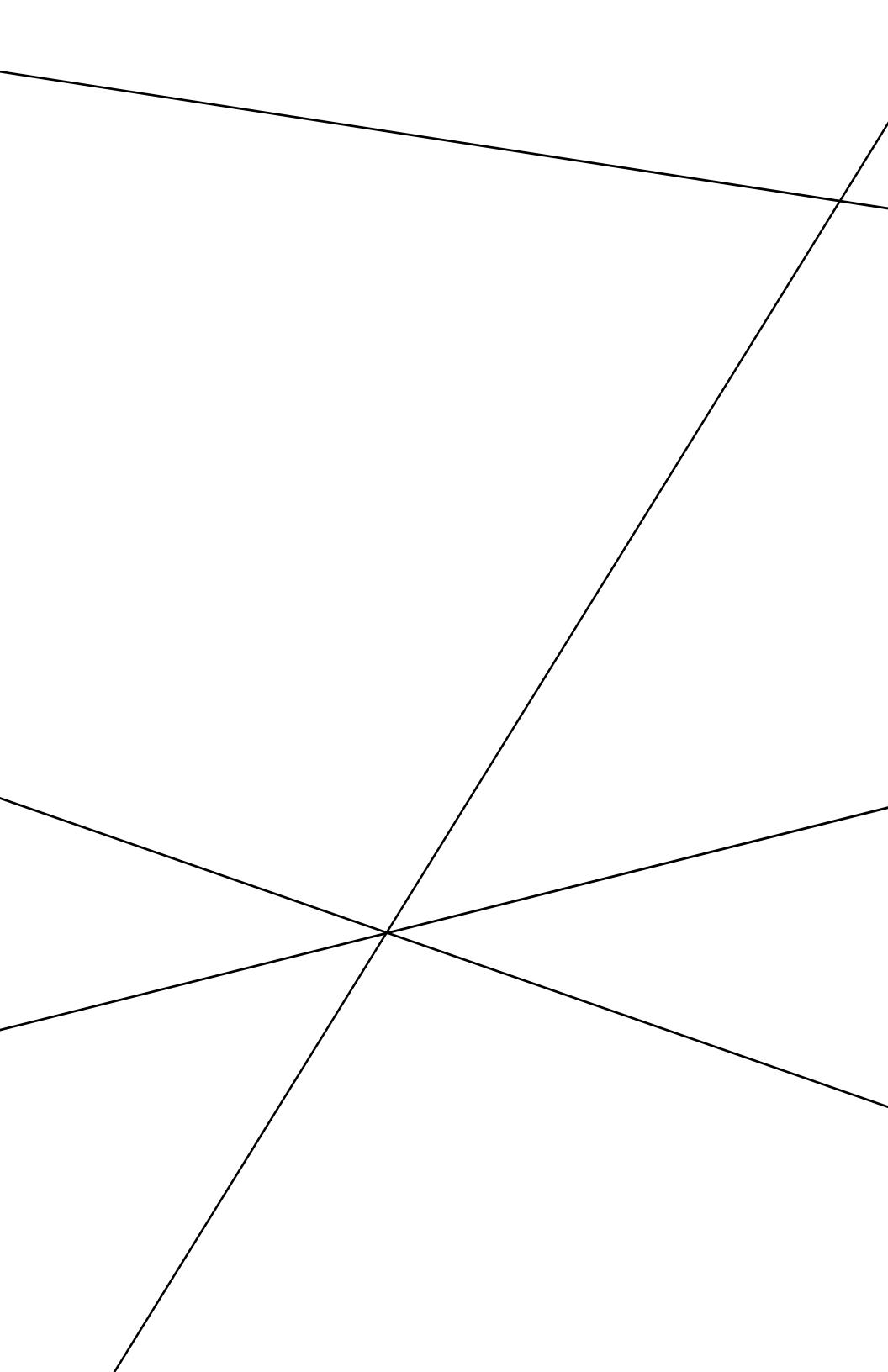
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Columbia University School of the Arts  
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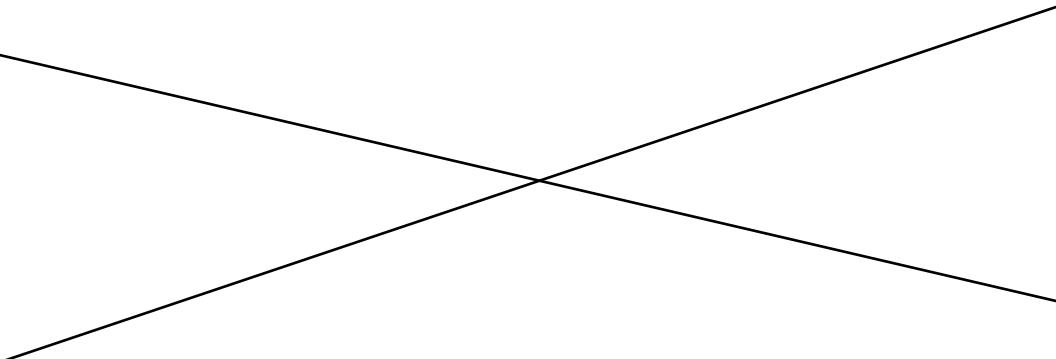
# foreword

Word for Word is an exchange program that was conceived in 2011 by Professor Binnie Kirshenbaum, then Chair of the Writing Program at Columbia University’s School of the Arts. The exchange was created in the belief that when writers engage in the art of literary translation, collaborating on translations of each other’s work, the experience broadens and enriches their linguistic imaginations.

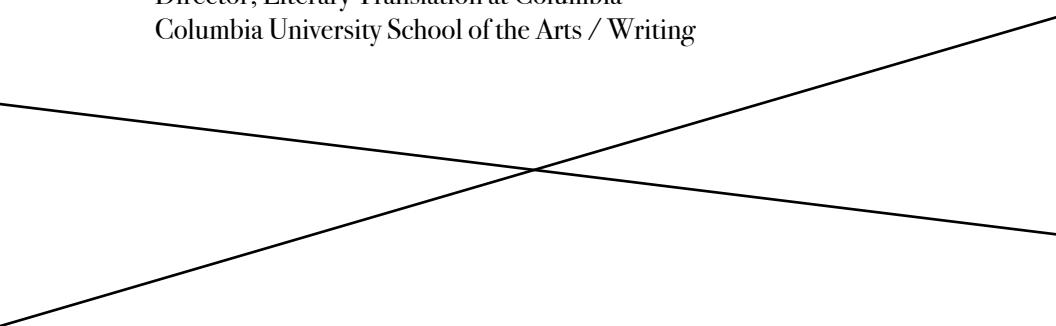
Since 2011, the Writing Program has conducted travel-based exchanges in partnership with the Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig in Leipzig, Germany; Scuola Holden in Turin, Italy; the Institut Ramon Llull and Universitat Pompeu FabraIDEC in Barcelona, Catalonia (Spain); the Columbia Global Center | Middle East in Amman, Jordan; Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C.; and the University of the Arts Helsinki in Helsinki, Finland.

In 2016, the Word for Word program expanded to include a collaborative translation workshop that pairs Writing Program students with partners at two of these same institutions—the Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig and Scuola Holden—as well as new ones: Université Paris 8 in Paris, France; Universidad Diego Portales in Santiago, Chile; and the Instituto Vera Cruz in São Paulo, Brazil. These workshop-based partnerships offer participants the chance to expand their horizons via personal and literary exchange and collaboration, establishing a new model for cross-cultural engagement.

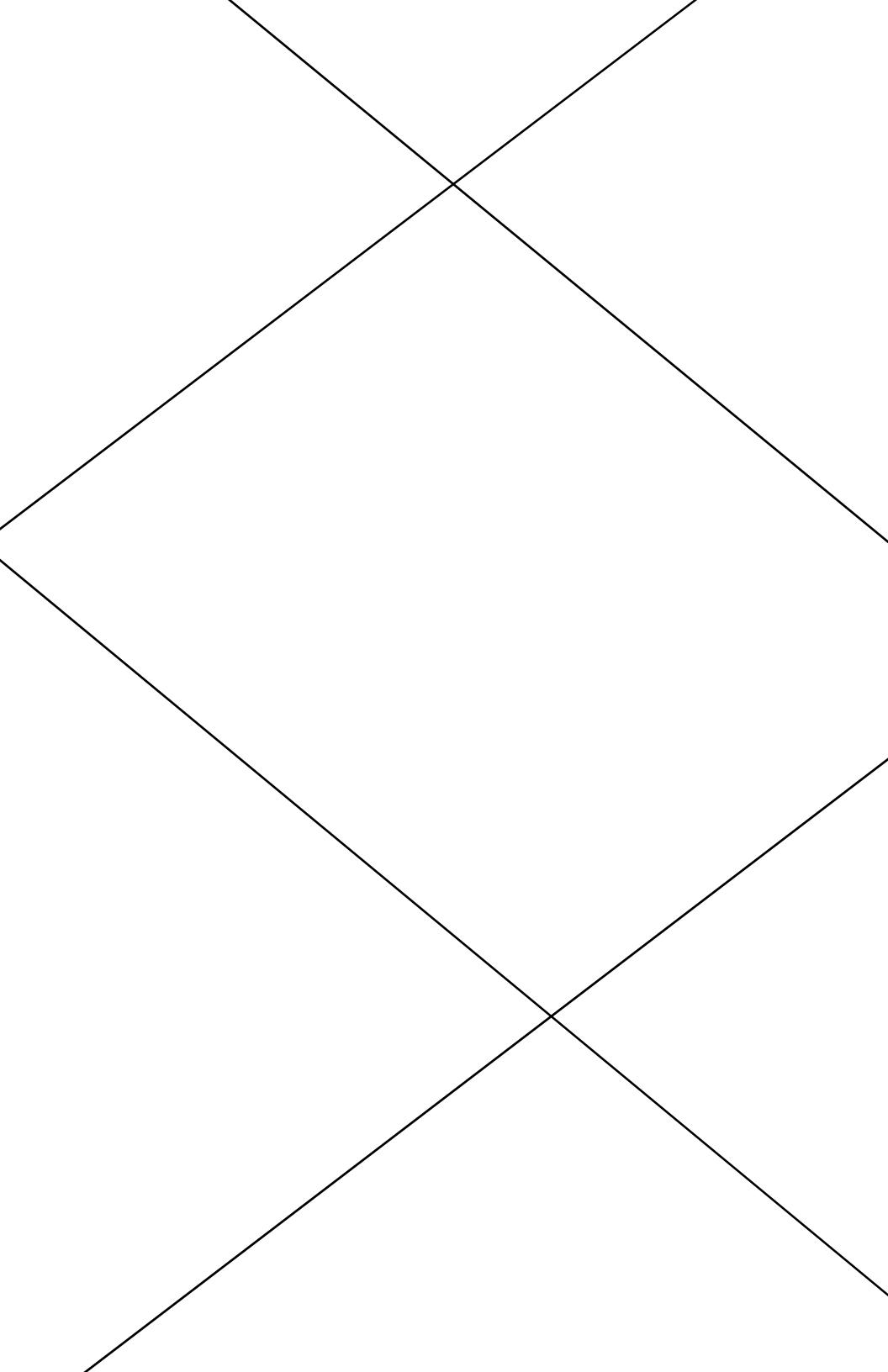
The present volume offers selections from works (originals and translations) written by members of the Spring 2020 Word for Word Workshop at Columbia’s School of the Arts and their French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish language partners in Paris, Leipzig, Turin, São Paulo, and Santiago.

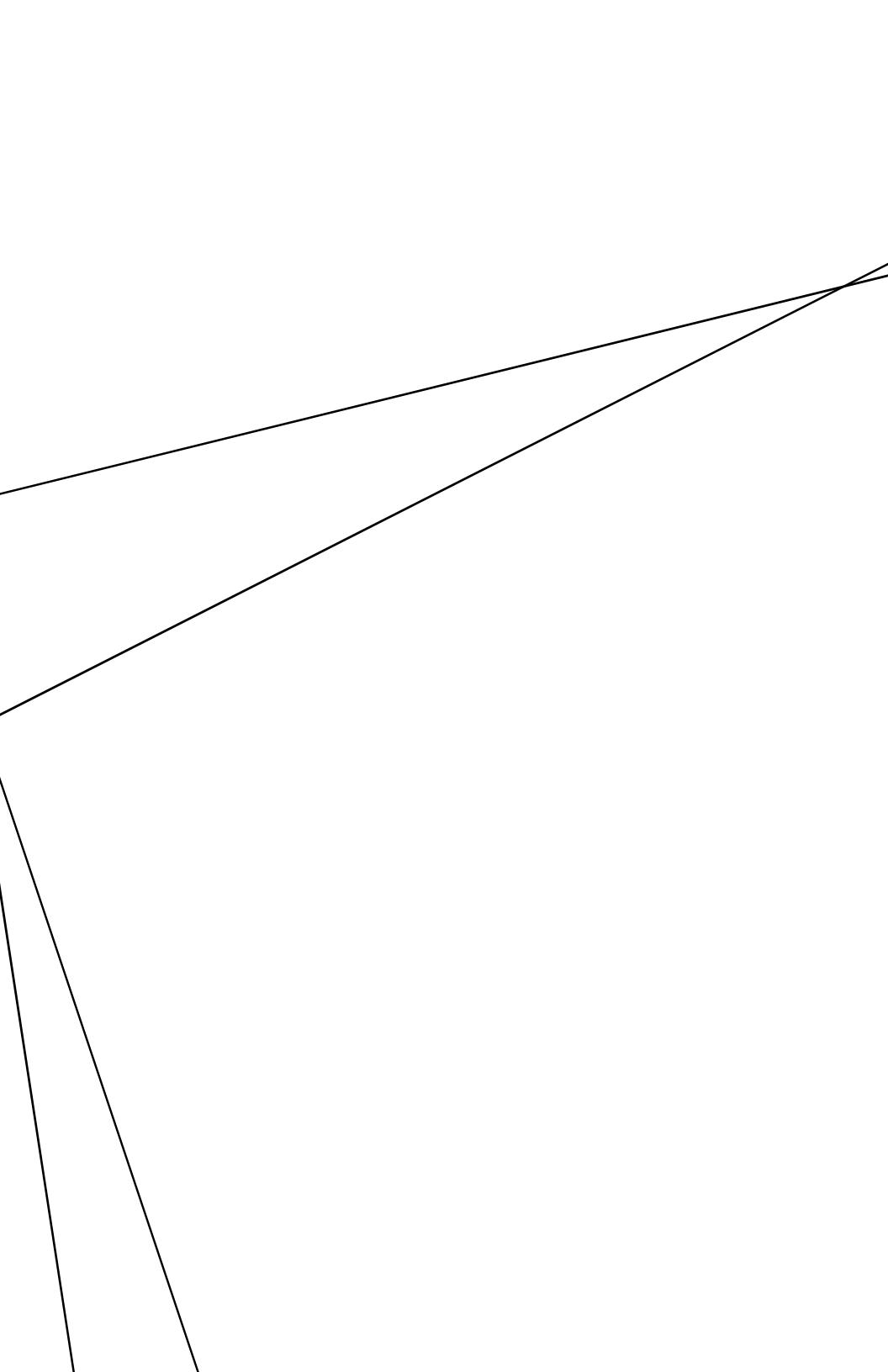


This eighth in our series of Word for Word anthologies collects the work of twenty-four exceptionally talented writers, presented here in tribute to all the ways in which artistic exchange can build bridges between peoples and cultures. This year has been full of challenges, not least because of the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced the Word for Word Workshop (led by Katrina Dodson) to complete its work online. So we are particularly grateful for the opportunity this project gave us to forge new relationships and artistic collaborations around the world. Singly and together, these twenty-four new literary voices offer suggestions for how to reach across the borders that divide us and strive for a global community based not on political or economic interests but on human connection.



Susan Bernofsky  
Director, Literary Translation at Columbia  
Columbia University School of the Arts / Writing





*word for word / mot pour mot*  
Columbia University School of the Arts  
Université Paris 8

## Translator's Foreword

Holiday est un texte où s'entrelacent trois voix dans un même présent. Chacune de ces femmes, mère, fille, sœur, témoigne de préoccupations diverses tout en étant traversée par les mêmes problématiques : celle de l'absence, du déracinement et de la différence.

Dans mon travail de traduction j'ai porté une attention particulière aux résonances entre les trois narrations, notamment dans les non-dits qui séparent ces trois femmes tout en les réunissant. L'une des particularités de l'écriture de Rona est de jouer avec la maîtrise de la langue de ses personnages pour rendre compte de leurs personnalités et de leurs voix propres. Elle marque les spontanéités et les erreurs de ces trois femmes, en donnant ainsi accès à leur intérriorité. J'ai voulu conserver en français ces traits d'une langue non parfaitement maîtrisée pour Caro-Ann, la mère. J'ai également choisi, respectant en cela le texte source, de ne pas traduire les mots et expressions en Illocano. L'étrangeté de ces mots inconnus résonne avec les sentiments des personnages, pris entre le souvenir de leur existence aux Philippines et leur avenir à construire aux États-Unis. Leur statut d'immigrées aux États-Unis se devait d'être immédiatement entendu. Pour marquer l'appartenance du texte à un imaginaire américain j'ai donc choisi de conserver le titre en anglais.

J'ai été très sensible à la manière dont le registre de langue et la construction des phrases devenaient les témoins non pas uniquement d'un choix stylistique, mais portaient aussi la trace de l'histoire de ces femmes, rendaient sensible leur parcours, et venaient enrichir le sens du texte à travers sa structure.



# **RONA FIGEUROA**

## **HOLIDAY**

### **ROLLO**

*Mama, I'm gay.* Now would be a good time to tell her. We're alone. Should I say it casually, in Ilocano? Or sit up and be serious, speak in English, like at a job interview? The ocean sounds good with the guitar. What if I pretend I'm just singing lyrics? *Please forgive me/I like girls.* Say it when she gives me food: *I love longanisa, mama, but I don't like bototo.* Oh my gosh, no.

“Why are you laughing?”

Mommy was looking at me. I sat up and pushed my hood back. I wasn't cold but I shivered.

*Mama, promise you won't get mad. Her name is...Mama, my teachers told me something when we were still in the Philippines...*

“Here, anak.” The paper plate barely folded with only three chicken nuggets and one longanisa.

“Can I have some rice?”

“I thought you're not supposed to eat that?”

Going to school and working at the same time helped me.

**traduit de l'anglais par  
MATHILDE RECOING**

**HOLIDAY**

**ROLLO**

*Maman, je suis gay.* Maintenant serait un bon moment pour lui dire. On est seules. Faut-il le dire mine de rien ? en Ilocano ? Ou bien m’asseoir sérieusement, parler anglais, comme à un entretien d’embauche ? Le son de l’océan s’accorde à la guitare. Et si je faisais juste semblant de chanter des paroles ? *Pardonne-moi s’il te plaît / J’aime les filles.* Le dire quand elle me donne à manger : *J’aime les longanisa, maman, mais pas les bototos. Oh mon dieu, non.*

« Pourquoi tu ris ? »

Maman me regardait. Je me suis redressée et j’ai repoussé ma capuche. Je n’avais pas froid mais j’ai frissonné.

*Maman, promets de ne pas te fâcher. Elle s’appelle..., Mam’, mes profs m’ont dit quelque chose quand on était encore aux Philippines....*

« Tiens, anak. » L’assiette en carton est à peine pliée avec seulement trois nuggets et une longanisa.

« Mam’, je peux avoir du riz ? »

« Je croyais que tu ne devais pas en manger ? »

Too busy to think, too busy to sleep, so no time to dream. she crashes. Or an earthquake happens, the bridge breaks and mommy's car falls into the Bay. I wake up and I can't sleep again until the sun comes, when I hear the house alarm beep off and mommy's footsteps downstairs.

The doctor taught me some strategies to avoid over-eating like *Brush your teeth BEFORE you eat*, which doesn't work if I start watching Netflix or have lots of homework. I have my own strategy: *Skype with Leilani*. I can't believe she likes me when I'm fat. Oops, I'm not supposed to say that. Overweight. Stress eating, the doctor says.

I started thinking about Papa being gone. I barely remember his face but I can still picture him walking around the Laoag house in a white tee shirt and underwear. If something happens to our mom, what are we going to do?

Mommy added a golfball of rice. I turned the guitar upside down to lay the plate on it, flattened my palm to roll the longanisa over the white lump, pressed hard to smear the oils, making the white as dirty as possible, then huddled my fingertips to scoop just the rice into my mouth. I made kissy sounds as my lips plucked the individual grains still stuck to my fingers. Ma sarap! I miss it so much! I swished my puwit side to side and felt the sand yield. Waving my hands in the air made me look

Ça m'a aidée d'aller à l'école et de travailler en même temps. Trop occupée pour penser, trop occupée pour dormir, donc pas le temps pour les rêves. Au début de l'été, les cauchemars sont revenus. C'est le milieu de la nuit, la pluie est torrentielle, maman va au travail en voiture quand elle tombe en panne. Là arrive un tremblement de terre, le pont se brise et la voiture de maman tombe dans la baie. Je me réveille et je ne me rendors pas jusqu'au lever du soleil, jusqu'à entendre le bip de l'alarme de la maison s'éteindre et les pas de maman en bas.

Le médecin m'a donné quelques stratégies pour m'empêcher de trop manger comme *Lave-toi les dents AVANT de manger*, ce qui ne fonctionne pas si je commence à regarder Netflix ou que j'ai beaucoup de devoirs. J'ai ma propre stratégie : *Skyper Leilani*. J'arrive pas à croire qu'elle m'aime alors que je suis grosse. Oups, je ne suis pas censée dire ça. En surpoids. Je mange compulsivement, d'après le médecin.

J'ai commencé à penser à la mort de Papa. Je me souviens à peine de son visage mais je peux encore le voir se promener dans la maison de Laoag en tee-shirt blanc et en sous-vêtements. Si quelque chose arrive à maman, qu'est-ce que nous allons faire ?

Maman a ajouté une boulette de riz. J'ai retourné la guitare pour poser l'assiette dessus, aplati ma paume pour rouler la longanisa sur la pâte blanche, appuyant pour l'imprégnier de gras, rendant le blanc aussi sale que possible, puis j'ai pressé mes doigts pour ramasser tout le riz dans ma bouche. J'ai fait des bruits de baisers sonores tandis que ma bouche arrachait les grains traînards toujours collés à mes doigts. Ma sarap ! Ça m'avait tellement manqué ! J'ai balancé mes fesses d'un bord à l'autre et senti le sol mou céder, mon siège s'y enfonçant. En agitant mes mains j'avais l'air d'appeler à l'aide,

like I was calling for help, but I was dancing.

Mommy laughed, “Rice makes you so happy.”

I bit my lower lip and felt my forehead tense. Now is the moment. My hands gripped the guitar. I closed my eyes.

“Mama, can you read what I’m thinking?”

“You’re hungry?”

“Mama, is Uncle gay?” She paused and I paused and it was like the waves and the wind paused to hear my next question which would have been, “Mama, do you know I am?”

But she stood up. Without looking at me she said, “I don’t know. Probably.”

My sister came running back, shivering in her new bikini, but dry.

“Did you even go in the water?”

“It’s so cold! I only touch the foam with my toes.”

“Scaredy cat,” I grumbled.

“Mama, I’m hungry!”

Mommy put down her food to attend the princess who stretched out on the sand. She tilted her face up to the

mais je dansais.

Maman a ri, « Le riz te rend vraiment heureuse. »

J'ai mordu ma lèvre inférieure et senti mon front tendu. C'est le moment. Mes mains se sont agrippées à la guitare. J'ai fermé les yeux.

« Mam', tu peux voir ce à quoi je pense ? »

« Tu as faim ? »

J'ai rouvert les yeux en expirant, « Mam', tonton est gay ? » Elle s'est arrêtée et je me suis arrêtée et c'était comme si les vagues et le vent s'étaient arrêtés pour entendre ma prochaine question qui serait, « Mam', tu sais que je le suis ? »

Mais elle a bougé. Elle a préparé une autre assiette. Sans me regarder, elle a dit : « Je ne sais pas. Probablement. »

On a toutes les deux levé les yeux pour voir ma sœur revenir en courant, sneakers en main, sèche mais frissonnant dans son bikini.

« Est-ce que tu es allée dans l'eau ? »

« Elle est trop froide ! J'ai seulement touché l'écume avec mes orteils. »

« Chat peureux. » Je grommelle.

« Maman, j'ai faim ! »

Maman a posé sa nourriture pour s'occuper de la princesse alors qu'elle posait ses nouvelles chaussures sur la couverture tout en s'étirant dans le sable. Elle

clouds as if the sun was there. My sister has changed a lot since we first moved to the United States. She speaks a lot more English, she doesn't follow me around so much, and her boobs have gotten so big, I don't recognize her from far away.

“What is the topic of the day?” She sounded like an American CEO.

“I was asking if Uncle's gay.” I said in Ilocano, making me sound more emotional than I wanted.

Lexi looked at me, then mommy, then rolled onto her stomach and ducked her head.

“Anak, cover yourself or you'll catch cold.”

Mommy handed my sister a plate with double the rice and chicken that was on mine.

“I dare you to go all the way under the water,” I said in English.

“You first!”

I stood up. The guitar banged a chord and the plate flew away with the wind.

“Aureliana!” scolded my mom.

“Are you really going ‘te?”

“You'll get sick, anak.”

a incliné sa tête vers les nuages comme s'il y avait du soleil. Ma sœur a beaucoup changé depuis notre première installation aux États-Unis. Elle parle beaucoup mieux anglais, elle ne me suit plus à la trace, et ses seins sont devenus si gros, je la reconnaissais à peine quand je la vois de loin.

« C'est quoi le thème du jour ? » Elle avait l'air d'un PDG américain.

« Je demandais si tonton était gay. » Je l'ai dit en Ilocano, ce qui m'a donné l'air beaucoup plus émotive que je l'aurais voulu.

Lexi m'a regardée, puis maman, puis s'est roulée sur le ventre et a baissé la tête.

« Anak, couvre-toi, tu vas attraper froid. »

Maman a tendu à ma sœur une assiette avec le double de riz et de poulet qu'il y avait dans la mienne.

« Je te défie de mettre la tête sous l'eau » J'ai dit en anglais.

« Toi d'abord, ate ! »

Je me suis levée. Le vent a fait s'envoler l'assiette et une corde de la guitare a pété.

« Anak ! » a grondé ma mère.

Je suis contente qu'elles se soient inquiétées.

« Tu vas dans l'eau, 'te ? »

« Aureliana, tu vas attraper froid. »

I'm glad they were worried. I kicked the sand as I walked away, spraying the ground like my feet were grenades.

When mommy worked in China and left Lexi and me behind in Laoag, I didn't mind. I used to stay out late with my friends. Sometimes I wouldn't come home. None of the Titas watching over us stopped me. Or were afraid to. Me and my friends would walk by the river at night, sometimes stay awake to watch the sunrise. I can't believe how different my life is now. Nothing is allowed here, not in San Francisco with my grandparents and not in the suburb with Tita Lola. So many dirty weirdos in San Francisco. They seem drunk and angry and sometimes even look my age. When I think people are being friendly because they're smiling and madaldal, I'll look to see who they're talking to but no one's there. If you ignore them, sometimes they throw something. Even though Tita Lola lives in a regular neighborhood away from San Francisco, she makes us bar the front door and turn on the alarm. Locked inside Tita Lola's house, there are more rules. We can't use the microphone for karaoke, we can't use the downstairs TV, we can't do our homework on the dining table, we can't use the downstairs bathroom, we can't even hang our own pictures in our rooms. It's like we're in prison. I thought this was the land of the free?

Cold! But it tickles when the wave pulls away and leaves a hard sand. The tiny shells become alive, then disappear into small holes. Every bitch is beautiful. Every beeeeeach. Nice beach. Good beach. Stay! Go! Bitch. Beeeach. It was hard to say it before, but Tita Jess made us practice like three hundred times. Sometimes I say it

J'ai shooté dans le sable en m'éloignant, donnant des coups dans le sol comme si mes pieds étaient des grenades.

Quand maman travaillait en Chine et nous a laissées derrière à Laoag avec Lexi, j'avais l'habitude de rester dehors tard avec mes amis. Il m'arrivait de ne pas rentrer à la maison. Aucune des tatas qui veillaient sur nous ne m'en ont empêchée. Ou étaient même inquiètes. Avec mes amis, on marchait la nuit le long du fleuve, parfois on restait éveillé pour voir le soleil se lever. Ici rien n'est permis, pas plus qu'à San Francisco chez mes grands-parents ou dans la banlieue avec tata Lola. Tellement de gens crades et cinglés à San Francisco. Ils ont l'air saouls et en colères, parfois même à mon âge. Quand je crois que quelqu'un a l'air sympa parce qu'il sourit, d'un coup il parle à un autre qui n'est pas là, ou se met à vomir. À Forster City, tata Lola nous fait fermer la porte extérieure et activer l'alarme, même si ça n'est pas dangereux. Enfermé à l'intérieur de la maison de tata Lola, il y a encore d'autres règles. On n'a pas le droit d'utiliser le micro pour faire des karaokés, on n'a pas le droit d'utiliser la télévision du rez-de-chaussé, on ne peut pas faire nos devoirs sur la table à manger, on ne peut pas utiliser la salle de bain du bas, on n'a même pas le droit d'accrocher nos propres photos dans nos chambres. C'est comme si on était revenu à l'époque où on est arrivé en Amérique. On se croirait en prison. Moi qui croyais que c'était le pays des hommes libres.

Fraîche ! Mais ça chatouille quand l'eau s'éloigne et laisse le sable dur. Les minuscules coquillages prennent vie, puis disparaissent dans des petits trous. Toutes les *bitches* sont belles. Toutes les *beeeaches* sont belles. Je dois avoir l'air drôle à caresser l'eau comme si c'était un chien. Gentille *beach*. Bonne *beach*. Pas bouger ! Debout ! *Bitch*. *Beeeach*. Avant c'était difficile à dire, mais tata Jess nous a fait pratiquer environ 300 fois. Parfois je me trompe

wrong on purpose.

I didn't tell Tita Jess that I got accepted to Music School. I didn't tell anyone except Lexi that I applied. *What are you going to be when you grow up?* Everyone always asks that. What if I say *Work at Safeway*? My co-workers are cool. Why do I have to be anything? Why do I even have to say I'm gay? I heard that people who don't know what to do join the military. Why not? Sige, water, here goes.

### CARO-ANN

Hala, there goes the little one copying the big one, and now they want me to join.

“Loco-loco!” It's too cold to take off my sweatshirt.

Is that a surfer or a seal? My gosh, even old men surf! They're not afraid of sharks? There's an American couple and their big dog. There's an American woman walking alone. In the Philippines there are always large families, we always have a party on the bitch, holiday or no. A single woman or a couple are always part of a big group. Over there, someone is always catching crab and sharing. Everyone are always cooking and eating, even with strangers—not walking alone. Here, nobody is part of a big group. Even the three of us are just the three

exprès<sup>1</sup>.

Je n'ai pas dit à tata Jess que j'avais été acceptée dans une école de musique. Je n'ai dit à personne à part Lexi que j'avais postulé. *Qu'est-ce que tu veux faire quand tu seras grande ?* Et si je disais *Travailler au Monoprix* ? Ici les gens sont gentils. Pourquoi est-ce qu'il faudrait que je sois quelque chose ? Pourquoi même devrais-je dire que je suis gay ? Mes amis disent que les gens qui ne savent pas quoi faire s'engagent dans l'armée. Peut-être que je ferai ça pour pouvoir partir d'ici. Bon, je suis prête à entrer dans l'eau. Ouh ! J'ai peur !

### CARO-ANN

Oh non ! Voilà la petite se met à copier la grande, et maintenant, elles veulent je les rejoins.

« Loco-loco ! », il fait trop froid pour j'enlève mon pull.

Là c'est un surfeur ou un phoque ? Mon dieu ! Même les vieux surfent ! Ils ont pas peur des requins ? Il y a un couple d'Américains et leur gros chien. Il y a une femme américaine qui marche seule. Aux Philippines, on est toujours une grande famille, on fait toujours la fête sur la plage<sup>2</sup>, vacances ou non. Une femme seule ou un couple fait toujours partie d'un grand groupe. Il y a toujours quelqu'un qui attrape des crabes et les partage. On est toujours en train cuisiner et manger, même avec des étrangers, mais pas nous promener seuls. Ici, personne fait partie d'un groupe. Même nous trois on est que

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<sup>1</sup>Jeu de langue intraduisible, car Rollo s'amuse avec le mot beach (plage) qui mal prononcé sonnera comme bitch (salope).

<sup>2</sup>Ici, Caro-Ann prononce mentalement bitch au lieu de beach

of us. My parents are probably just watching TV. I feel guilty for not inviting them. I'm becoming American.

“Mama come! It’s not cold after fifteen minutes.”

They are both rolling in the water, covered in sand, squealing like piglets, especially the fat one. Rollo stood up and open her arms, “Mama, come, I’ll keep you warm in my embrace.”

In her wet tee shirt and shorts, she look like one of those zombies from that show she like.

“Maniwala ako diyan!” I pretended to be scared, but really I want to try a walk. It’s rare to have relax time. If I had more time I could use that OK Cupid my cousin was teaching me. She found her husband there, a nice man, American. But men don’t want a woman with children. I did look a little bit and they were all ugly. She said there was more men than women in San Francisco and my chances would be good, smart ones who work with computer. But I don’t know if that’s my type. Maybe I’ll try again later.

Alexandra will be dating soon. I’m worried because she’s so pretty, and she might like sex too much. When she was little she was malabing with her uncles and aunties, caressing and kissing, holding and hugging, playing with their hair. She like touching the susu, not just her aunties and mine, but also the statues in the mall and in the palenke. When she was only two years old she already like to wear high heels and dresses and cross her legs

toutes les trois. Ma mère et mon père sont à la maison, en train regarder la télé dans leur petit appartement à San Francisco. Je me sens coupable pas les inviter. Je deviens américaine.

« Maman, viens ! Ce n'est plus froid après quinze minutes. »

Elles nagent les deux dans l'eau, couvertes de sable, crient comme des petits animaux, surtout la plus grosse. Rollo est debout et ouvre ses bras :

« Maman, viens ! Je te tiendrai au chaud dans mes bras. »

Dans son tee-shirt et son short mouillés, elle ressemble à un zombies des émissions qu'elle adore.

« Maniwala aka diyan ! » Je fais semblant avoir peur, mais en réalité je voudrais aller me balader. C'est rare avoir des moments de détente. Si j'avais plus de temps, je pourrais essayer ce « OK Cupid » que ma cousine me parlait. Elle a trouvé son mari dessus, un homme sympa, américain. Mais les hommes veulent pas une femme avec des enfants. D'ailleurs j'ai jeté un coup d'oeil, mais ils étaient tous moches. Elle a dit il y avait plus d'hommes que de femmes à San Francisco, et que mes chances seraient bonnes ; des intelligents qui travaillent avec des ordinateurs. Mais je suis pas sûre ce soit mon genre.

Alexandra commencera bientôt à sortir. Je suis inquiète car elle est si belle, et il se peut elle aime trop le sexe. Quand elle était petite, elle malambait avec ses oncles et ses tantes, caressait, embrassait, attrapait et câlinait, jouait avec leurs cheveux. Elle aime toucher le susu, pas seulement celui ses tantes ou le mien, mais aussi celui des statues des centres commerciaux et dans les palenke. Quand elle avait que deux ans, elle aimait déjà porter des hauts talons et des robes, et elle croisait ses jambes en

when she sat down, opposite from Aureliana who walk in the street barefoot and like to play basketball in the rain.

I'm glad we sleep in the same room. I don't mind that Auntie don't want to give Lexi her own room like Rollo. If Lexi is skyping with boys, I can see it. If there's different pawis, I will smell it on her clothes. But she's still innocent. The other day she ask,

"Mama, what is condom?"

My gosh, I just start to laugh. "I thought you already learn that in your class?"

"Oh yeah."

Even if you know English, it's easier to understand in Ilocano. But even if I could explain in Ilocano, maybe I don't want to.

Rollo is trying to tell me something I already know. It runs in our family. My uncle died of AIDS. Or was it cancer? My brother talk soft and bend his head, but I never saw him put on a dress and he never say anything to me. What is the purpose of saying? What could I tell Rollo? Instead of *Don't get pregnant*, I'll say, *Don't get AIDS*. It's more important that she transfer to a University and finish a degree. My cousin told me she will pay for the girls' college. She and her husband already give three thousand dollars to the girls last year. For what? A ski trip in Lake Tahoe? Just to see snow? What for? We already owe auntie for letting us stay in her house. We can't owe anyone else. If the government want to give me money, and the school want to give my daughters money, it's okay, but not my cousin.

s'asseyant ; le contraire d'Auréliana qui marche pieds nus dans la rue et adore jouer au basket sous la pluie.

Je suis contente Lexi et moi on dort dans la même chambre. Peu importe que tata veut pas donner à Lexi sa propre chambre, comme à Rollo. Si Lexi fait des skype avec des garçons, je peux le voir. S'il y a d'autres pawis, je pourrai le sentir sur ses vêtements. Mais elle est encore innocente. L'autre jour elle demande :

« Maman, qu'est-ce que c'est un préservatif ? »

Mon dieu ! Je me suis mise à rire. « Je pensais que tu avais déjà appris ça en classe ? »

« Oh, oui. »

Même si tu connais anglais, c'est plus facile de comprendre Ilocano. Mais même si je pouvais expliquer en Ilocano, je suis pas sûre j'en aurais envie.

Rollo essaie de me dire quelque chose je sais déjà. C'est de famille. Mon oncle est mort du SIDA. Ou était-ce le cancer ? Mon frère parle avec douceur et il penche la tête, mais je l'ai jamais vu mettre une robe et il me dit jamais rien. Quel intérêt de parler ? Qu'est-ce que je peux dire à Rollo ? Au lieu de « tombe pas enceinte », je dirais « attrape pas le SIDA ». Plus important qu'elle finit sa scolarité et qu'elle perd pas sa bourse d'études. Ma cousine m'a dit elle paierait pour l'université des filles. Elle et son mari donnent déjà 3,000\$ aux fille l'année dernière. Et pourquoi ? Un voyage de ski au lac Tahoe ? Juste pour voir la neige ? Pour quoi faire ? On doit déjà beaucoup à tata pour nous laisser rester chez elle. On peut pas devoir à quelqu'un d'autre. Si le gouvernement veut me donner de l'argent, et l'école veut donner de l'argent à mes filles, c'est d'accord, mais pas ma cousine.

I walk so far! And I'm hungry again. Why I always feel hungry in this country?

### LEXI

I love the bitch! (I know what it is) I love Miramar! I'm not cold! I want to write his name in the sand, make it big and dip. *Deeep*. But mommy is here so...wow!  
Mommy took a walk!

I love you, Raymond! He doesn't know I'm alive. Tita Jess says I should practice talking to boys I don't like. Hey, lots of boys like me! Puberty hit me good! But I'm shy. I practice talking to them in Ate's room. She thinks I'm practicing being an actress, recording myself on her iPad for auditions, but I keep forgetting my lines! It's easier to say whatever I make up without thinking about it. It's called, um, "Getting Good." No. "Improving."

I just want to talk to Raaaaymoooond! And Felipe. And Christian. I have lots to say to the camera. Why I'm not camera shy but I'm boy shy? When I'm famous they can see my videos messages to them. Or they can follow me now on Instagram, if they want to know how to put on make up. Just kidding.

Ate didn't believe me when I said I can go in the water all the way. It was really cold but I've done harder stuff than that! I've swam the big swimming pool, I've swam in Point Reyes and now I've swam in the Pacific Ocean. I

Je marche si loin ! Et j'ai faim à nouveau. Pourquoi j'ai toujours faim ?

## LEXI

J'adore la plage<sup>3</sup> ! (je sais ce que c'est). J'adore Miramar ! J'ai pas froid ! Je veux écrire son nom sur le sable, le faire gros et profond. Mais maman est là aussi... attends ! Wow, maman est partie marcher !

« Je t'aime Raymond ! » Il ne sait pas que j'existe. Tata Jess dit qu'il faut que je m'entraîne en parlant aux garçons que j'aime pas. Beaucoup de garçons m'aiment ! La puberté ne m'a pas ratée ! Mais je suis timide. Je m'entraîne à leur parler dans la chambre d'Ate. Elle pense que je m'entraîne à être actrice en me filmant avec son IPad pour des auditions. Mais j'arrête pas d'oublier mes lignes ! C'est plus facile de dire ce qui passe par la tête sans avoir besoin d'y penser. Ça s'appelle, euh, « Devenir Bon ». Non. « S'améliorer ».

Je veux juste parler à Raaaaymoooond ! Et Felipe. Et Christian. J'ai beaucoup à dire à la caméra, je suis pas timide devant la caméra. Quand je serai connue, ils pourront regarder mes messages vidéo qui leur sont adressées. Ou ils peuvent me suivre maintenant sur Instagram s'ils veulent savoir comment se maquiller. Je rigole.

Ate ne m'a pas crue quand je lui ai dit que je passerais par l'eau tout le long. C'était hyper froid, mais j'ai fait des choses pires que ça ! J'ai nagé dans la grande piscine, à Point Reyes, et maintenant dans l'Océan Pacifique. Je n'ai pas dit à maman que tata Jess m'avait de nouveau

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<sup>3</sup>Ici encore, Lexi prononce mentalement bitch au lieu de beach.

didn't tell mommy that Tita Jess sponsored me again for Girl Leader's Adventures this summer and I got in! She won't mind. She's used to me going away. I never thought I would like not taking showers, not eating rice, and pooping outdoors. It's definitely easier when everyone has to do it. Too bad Ate was too old for Girl Adventures. She's not afraid of anything. But the hiking might be too hard because of her fat and diabetes. Hey girl, if I could do it with my asthma, you could too. Ate! Stop faking! Stop being lazy! I can't tell my Ate that.

She got into Music School in Ohio. (I never even heard of Ohio.) She got her acceptance the same day I heard about Girl Leader Adventures. I know mommy is worried about money but Tita Jess will pay for it! Ate's an artist, like Tita Jess. It runs in the family. This is who she is. That's why she should go to Ohio. (I should record this as video message for when she can't sleep at night)

Ate really likes Leilani. She already wrote twenty songs about her. Reach for the stars! I think Leilani live somewhere near Ohio, like Toronto or something. They've been skyping for six months! Ate says it's true love, but it's not really love until you touch.

That's why I can't talk to Raymond yet. If he touches me, patay! I'll talk to him when I'm a Freshman and he's a Sophomore and then we can go until I graduate. We'll break up at the beginning of that summer so I can heal my heart before College starts, because I need to low-key focus on my studies. I'll study Science or Math at

sponsorisée pour Girl Leader's Adventures cet été, et j'ai été admise ! Ça sera pas un problème. Elle a l'habitude que je m'en aille. Je n'aurais jamais cru que j'aurais aimé ne pas me laver, ne pas manger de riz et aller aux toilettes en extérieur. C'est décidément plus facile quand tout le monde doit le faire. Dommage, Ate était déjà trop vielle pour Girl Adventures. Elle n'a peur de rien. Sauf la randonnée, qui aurait été trop dure à cause de son diabète. Eh, jeune fille, si je peux le faire avec mon asthme, tu peux aussi. *Ate ! Arrête de faire semblant ! Arrête d'être paresseuse !* Je peux pas dire ça à ma Ate.

Elle a été reçue à l'école de Musique d'Ohio. Je n'ai jamais entendu parler d'Ohio. Elle a reçu son admission le même jour que moi pour Girl Leader Adventures. Ça fait bizarre de ne pas en parler à maman, mais on ne veut pas l'inquiéter, et on ne fait rien de méchant.

Ate aime vraiment Leilani. Elle a déjà écrit vingt chansons pour elle. Atteins les étoiles ! Je sais bien que maman est préoccupée par l'argent mais tata Jess la lui paiera ! Ate est une artiste, comme tata Jess. C'est de famille. C'est ce qu'elle est. C'est la raison pour laquelle elle devrait aller à Ohio. (Je devrais même enregistrer ça en message vidéo pour les nuits où elle n'arrive pas à dormir.) Je crois que Leilani vit quelque part près de Ohio, comme Toronto ou quelque chose comme ça. Ça fait six mois qu'elles se skypent ! Ate dit que c'est le véritable amour mais c'est pas de l'amour avant de s'être touché.

C'est pour cela que je ne peux pas encore parler à Raymond. S'il me touche, boom ! Je lui parlerai quand je serai Junior et lui Senior, on pourra sortir ensemble jusqu'à ce que j'aie mon diplôme. On rompra au début de l'été pour que mon cœur puisse guérir avant que l'université ne commence, parce que je devrai me concentrer sur mes études. J'étudierai les Sciences ou

Stanford, (if I don't go to UCLA for acting) and become a teacher, even though mommy doesn't want me to. It's still awhile. We'll talk. I'll get married when I'm twenty-five. I want a handsome model who is half-Filipino, half-Mexican. When I'm twenty-seven I'll have my first child, a boy, and then a girl when I'm twenty-nine. And then we'll move to Paris. Or maybe I'll marry a half-Filipino, half-Paris man. He can propose to me on the Eiffel Tower. I'll wear black lace and strappy heels. The wind will blow my hair and I'll say *Maybe*. Nah-uh! He might cry.

les Maths à Stanford (si je ne vais pas à UCLA pour être actrice) et deviendrai professeure même si maman ne veut pas. C'est pas pour tout de suite. On en parlera. Je me marierai quand j'aurai 25 ans. Je veux un beau mannequin moitié philippin, moitié mexicain. Quand j'aurai 27 ans, j'aurai mon premier enfant, un garçon d'abord, puis une fille quand j'en aurai 29. Ensuite on déménagera à Paris ; ou peut-être que je me marierai avec un moitié philippin, moitié de Paris. Il pourra faire sa demande sur la tour Eiffel. Je porterai de la dentelle noire avec un décolleté plongeant et des talons aiguilles. Le vent soufflera dans mes cheveux et je répondrai : « peut-être ». Nan-Nan ! Il se peut qu'il pleure.

## Translator's Foreword

Inspired by the numerous books read to her when she was young, Mathilde Nabias began writing at an early age. She would move through her day-to-day, seeing and feeling how various aspects of her life could be a story. She was always aware of a duality, that while she is present, she is also not present. Born and based in Paris, Nabias escapes to Cévennes as much as possible to write. Currently, she attends Paris VIII University as an MFA Creative Literature student, and has published short stories and non-fiction in various French journals. She lists Dostoevsky, Bulgakov and Balzac as her main inspirations.

“Neon Day,” (“Jour Néon”), is a short story that explores a near-future urban vision where luminous advertisements relentlessly illuminate the night sky. In consequence, the various city inhabitants, in order to rest their eyes, stop looking up, gravitate towards shadows and forget what exists beyond the artificial lights. The author explores themes of economic disparity, oppression, freedom and the illusion of appearances dark and bright. Nabias has said of her work, “I want to remove the masks that people wear, to find truth and sincerity.”

Throughout the piece, Nabias created neologisms such as engrotter, mirelles, ajanémur, attrapsit, fuman, which help flavor the near-future atmosphere but won’t be found in the Lexilogos dictionary or in idiomatic collections. Alternately derived or combined from known French words, these hybrids nonetheless served the author more as sonic texture than as a shifted dimension of meaning. I asked myself: Should I attempt to mimic the French sounds? Should I retain the original, since they are unfamiliar in the French and so would be the

same in the English? Or should I make up my own, as Nabias had encouraged me to do? I made up my own.

One term was particularly troublesome: *mirelles*, a word Nabias derived from *mirabelle*, a yellow plum commonly found in Lorraine and Les Vosges. In “Jour Néon,” *les mirelles* are a futuristic type of animated photograph, not unlike the moving photo images that exist in Harry Potter’s world. Thinking of *mirelles*, magic, images, photographs, *pictos* (which I’d spotted and remembered from a chapter in Peter Stockwell’s book, *The Poetics of Science Fiction*), I landed on “mirage-picts,” my futuristic version of a hologram. As mentioned, there are a smattering of new terms, though not as pertinent to the story as this particular one. I hope you will enjoy the unfamiliar.

# MATHILDE RECOING

## JOUR NEON

Arturo a rejoint la maraude. Peut-être à cause de ce jour où nous les avons rencontrés pour la première fois, les gars du Broc, il y a longtemps. Enfants, nous suivions ma mère dans les ruelles, agrippés à ses doigts, les yeux sur le tissu de ses jupes. Elle n'avait pas peur, elle marchait vite, arpantant les limites du territoire à la recherche d'images-mobiles pour sa boutique. Sur les rebords des fenêtres il y en avait toujours à prendre. Mirelles et petits-gris, ces icônes mises à sécher pour les mioches qu'elle chipait en passant. D'un geste elle les enfouissait dans les plis de son vêtement, parfois elle en glissait une dans ma main et je m'absorbais pour le reste du trajet dans la contemplation de ces carrés de mystère.

Un soir, ma mère allait plus vite que d'habitude, son regard de travailleuse embué par la fatigue. Nous étions proches de l'heure, nous étions en retard. En passant sur une place avant le pont-limite, elle accéléra, ses jambes avançaient si vivement qu'elle paraissait sauter. Au centre de la place il y avait un arbre, un chêne. Nous avions si peu d'arbres. Je lâchai sa jupe et entraînai mon frère. C'était la première fois que j'étais sans ma mère dans la rue, toujours je la suivais en aveugle, traînée par elle, protégée, coupée du monde. Soudain les deux mains libres, mon petit frère à mes pieds, je ressentis la ville, j'exultai sous la nuit électrique. Au dessus de ma tête le ciel semblait s'ouvrir, recouvert de couleurs en mouvement.

C'est là que nous les vîmes, les gars du Broc, la maraude.

**translated from the french by  
RONA FIGEUROA**

## NEON DAY

Arturo joined the marauders. Maybe because of that day we first met them, the Broc folk. As children we used to follow our mother through the alleys, clutching her fingers, eyes fixed on the fabric of her skirts. She wasn't afraid. She would walk fast, scanning to the edges of the Zone for those moving holograms she would sell at her boutique. There was always something to swipe from the window ledges. Mirage-picts and scuttlecombs, trinkets hung out to dry for toddlers, she would filch while passing, folding them into the pleats of her garments. With a flick of the wrist, sometimes she'd slip one into my hand and I'd become absorbed for the rest of the jaunt, meditating on these mysterious squares.

One evening my mother moved more quickly than usual, her keen survey of the streets blurred with fatigue. It was close to curfew and we were running late. While crossing the square before the bridge, she sped up, her legs moving so fast she seemed to skim the ground. At the center of the square was a tree, an oak. We had so few trees. I let go of her skirt and pulled my brother along. It was the first time I was in the street without my mother. I'd always followed blindly, led by her, protected, separated from the world. Suddenly, little brother at my heels, my hands free, I felt the city, I basked under the electric night. Over my head the sky seemed to open, revealing its dome of moving colors.

It was there that we saw them, the marauders—the Broc.

Ils surgirent tout autour, ombres sortant des ombres. Ils passaient furtivement sans nous voir, et je découvris les nains, leurs doigts gonflés, les bottes et les bonnets qui cachaient leur visage. Puis il y eut les enfants. Ils couraient dans tous les sens, ramassaient les écorces, les mégots, les images abandonnées, ils traversaient la place d'un pas presto, le corps sous le vent, comme des feuilles. L'un deux s'arrêta devant nous, planta ses yeux dans les miens. Il portait une veste rouge, il était grand, surtout ses mains. Il semblait fasciné, et il me fascina, car ses yeux étaient libres. Il s'avança, Arturo déjà s'élançait pour le rejoindre mais l'autre s'arrêta. J'entendis siffler. Les ombres se pressèrent dans l'obscurité d'une ruelle. Une rumeur d'excitation me parvint, l'enfant nous regardait toujours puis il pointa son doigt vers le ciel, pencha la tête et dit : La fabuleuse, la fabuleuse ! Je compris qu'ils s'étaient rassemblés pour voir quelque chose, l'entendre, en être traversés, mais je ne sus pas quoi, car ma mère arriva comme une furie, se jeta sur nous et nous fourra sous sa jupe dans un cri d'angoisse. Accrochée à sa jambe, je n'entendis plus ni les hommes ni le vent, et nous rentrâmes en courant, encore plus vite qu'à l'accoutumée, par les escaliers des bords, les pentes, les échelles et les coursives, jusqu'au pont du Quartier gris. Puis ma mère abandonna les images pour vendre autre chose, et plus jamais nous ne traversâmes la nuit ensemble.

Si je dis *la nuit*, je suis la seule à le faire ici. C'est un mot qu'on n'utilise pas, on dit *le brillant, le jour néon*. La nuit n'est jamais totalement noire. Elle n'est qu'une toile, un arrière-plan. Les couleurs inondent le ciel, et s'y écrivent en lettres brillantes les noms de ceux qui nous possèdent. Des choses que nous possédons. Des lieux qui nous sont interdits, des objets que nous aimerais avoir. Alors, beaucoup ferment leurs volets dès le crépuscule pour ne les rouvrir qu'à l'aube. Ils se créent une nuit factice dans laquelle ils s'enveloppent, les yeux fermés, hagards du monde.

They suddenly loomed all around, shadows emerging from shadows. They moved stealthily without noticing us. And I saw the dwarves, their swollen fingers, their boots, caps hiding their faces. There were children. They ran in every direction, collecting cigarette butts, fruit rinds, discarded pictis. They were passing through the area with nimble feet, their bodies leaning like leaves in the wind. The one wearing a red jacket stopped in front of us, locked eyes with mine. He was big, especially his hands. He seemed fascinated by me, as I was fascinated by him because his eyes were free. Stepping forward, Arturo was already dashing to meet him, but the boy stopped. I heard a whistle. The shadows scattered into the darkness of an alley, but their buzz of excitement hovered. The boy, watching us the whole time, pointed his finger at the sky, tilted his head back and said: *The Sublime, the Sublime!* I understood that they were gathering to watch something, to catch sight of it while it passed above, but I didn't know what it was because my mother arrived in a flutter, pounced on us and thrust us under her skirt in a cry of anguish. Clinging to her leg, I no longer heard the people or the wind. And we took off, running once again, faster than we were used to, along the back stairways, the hills, the ladders and corridors, out to the bridge in the Grey Zone. After that my mother gave up the mirage-picts and decided to sell other things, and we never roamed the night all together again.

When I say *night*, I'm the only one to do so here. It's a word we don't use. We say *the shine* or *neon day*. Night is never totally black. It's no more than a backdrop, a blank canvas. Colors flood the sky and write upon it, in bright letters, the names of things that possess us and things we possess. Places that are forbidden to us, objects we'd like to have. It's the reason many close their shutters at sunset and don't reopen them till dawn. They create a false night in which they bury themselves, close their eyes, drained by the world.

D'une certaine façon pourtant, c'est beau. Après le départ de ma mère, j'emménageais Arturo avec moi sur une colline du quartier pour assister à la mise en lumière. Il était marqué par le Broc, il répétait souvent le geste de l'enfant qui nous avait parlé ; doigt au ciel il chantonnait '*abuleuse, aho, aho*'.

Nous montions par les passerelles qui relient les toits au nord, à la recherche d'un terrain plat. J'étendais une couverture, nous nous allongions. Le jour déclinant nous donnait l'impression de nous éléver très lentement au-dessus de la ville en mouvement. Les pilotes rentraient aux hangars quand nos yeux ne pouvaient plus lire les bannières publicitaires. Un ballet flottant partait de tous côtés, et le ciel nous revenait pour un court instant nettoyé. Quelques points lumineux apparaissaient au loin dans un fragment que nous saisissions fébrilement.

Arturo les pointaient, *c'est quoi ?*, mais déjà les lampadaires s'allumaient et les points s'effaçaient. Nous attendions les néons-satellites. Nous jouions au *memori*.

— La première, Arturo ?

— En face, au-dessus du clocher ! 3, 2, 1 ! Oui !

Il riait. Le plaisir de savoir à l'avance ce qu'il allait voir lui donnait les joues rouges, il se trémoussait, les yeux grands ouverts. Je jouais aussi, avec moins d'entrain. Notre ciel est sans bienveillance, il nous impose ses choix

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*NeRriS, Les yeux malins* ;

*Bald & Boldis, le fisc sur l'oreiller* ;

In a way, though, it's beautiful. After my mother left, I used to bring Arturo up a hill in our neighborhood to watch the lights power on. The Broc had made an impression on him. He often repeated the gesture of the boy who spoke to us. Finger to the sky he'd chant: *The Sublime, woo-hoo!*

We would climb the walkways that linked the roofs to the north in a quest for flat ground. I'd spread our blanket and we'd sprawl out. The waning day gave the impression of us ascending very slowly over the city in motion. The pilots, like a floating ballet leaving the stage, would fly the publicity banners back to their hangars when our eyes could no longer read them. Briefly, the sky would come back to us wiped clean. A group of bright dots would appear in the distance—we were transfixed by this fragment of sky.

Arturo would point at them. "What's that?" But already the floodlights would be switching on and the dots would disappear. We were waiting for the neon satellites. We'd play *Abracadabra*:

"You go first, Arturo."

"Over there, beneath the clock tower. Three-two-one.... Abracadabra!"

He would laugh. The pleasure of predicting what would illuminate flushed his cheeks. He would wiggle, open his eyes wide. I would play too, with less enthusiasm. Our sky was without benevolence. It imposed its choices on us:

*Ocean's Furnish: Flotilla Mansions*

*Builderness: Best Nets for Retirees*

*A janémur, la mort du futur ;*

*Les bouclettes caramel, c'est BAT!*

Au-dessus de la ville s'affrontent dans une guerre lumineuse les enseignes qui ouvrent au matin. La nuit est leur voix, à laquelle l'œil n'échappe pas. Ce qui avait pour lui la beauté des couleurs était pour moi une agression. Mais j'aimais accompagner sa joie. Il était gai, c'était pour lui un terrain de jeu, une carte clignotante et mystérieuse.

Tout cela ne nous était pas destiné, ou si peu. Des cages dans lesquelles pleuvaient des larmes de diamants vendaient des bagues à des gens très riches.

*Oramine, Julian, John Fumi*

Des mots en lettres incandescentes venaient prendre une place dans nos mémoires sans qu'ils puissent être autre chose que des mots sur un ciel, les mots des autres, vendant des objets à d'autres que nous. Les bulles de champagne, les fêtes, les ouvertures prochaines de musées dynamiques, nous n'y serions jamais. Pas un du quartier ne toucherait de ses mains la matière des images, et pourtant nous ne pouvions y échapper.

~

« Regarde, regarde là-bas. »

Nous avions grandi. Son esprit s'alourdissait de pensées nuagères. Un soir il me montra un lieu plus lointain que les autres, un espace, un trou noir dans le ciel saturé. Ses yeux se plissèrent, un sourire amène lui releva les lèvres, son visage se perdait.

*Death's Doves: Trilling dives*

*Caramel Loops, a Loot!*

Over the city, ads greeted the morning with battles of brilliance. The night is their voice from which the eye does not escape. What for Arturo was a dazzle of colors was for me an aggression—I never shared his delight. He was happy. It was a playground, a map, flashing and mysterious.

None of it was destined for us, or rather, only a small portion. Cages, raining diamond tears, hawked rings for the filthy rich:

*Oramine, Julian, Jean Fumi*

These incandescent words sold objects to people other than us, yet they insisted on taking up space in our memories without being anything other than words from the sky: champagne bubbles, festivals, the latest pop-up exhibit. We would never go. No one from the neighborhood ever touched the material reality of these images, yet we couldn't escape them.

~

“Look, look over there.”

We grew up. Cloudy thoughts weighed Arturo’s spirit down. One night he showed me a spot further than the others, a gap, a black hole in the busy sky. His eyes narrowed, an easy smile lifted his lips, his expression lost.

« Cela ne ressemble à rien... Qui peut bien utiliser ces formes, Mina ? Pas de lettres. Ce ne sont que des points... »

Il était agité. Je regardai l'heure. Nous arrivions aux limites du couvre-feu.

« Pour qui sont ces lumières si douces ? »

Il s'était levé. Soudain un tourbillon de vert et de jaune explosa au centre du ciel, *CHHALUME, Exotique et toxique — des jardins fantastiques !* Des plantes coruscantes s'enroulèrent sur les mots avant d'engloutir la réclame. Éblouis, nos yeux perdirent le cercle sombre où brillaient des points. Nous ne nous dîmes rien. Mais nous partagions le même sentiment d'effraction intérieure. Un vol. Un mépris. Puis retentit l'alarme. Arturo refusait de partir, et je dus le tirer avec force pour rentrer à temps dans les ruelles du quartier.

Plus tard, il demanda partout, *Avez-vous vu ces points qui ne nous vendent rien ?* Sans cesse son regard s'échappait, les fenêtres lui étaient chères, et au crépuscule, où qu'il se trouve, il tournait son visage vers le ciel. Indifférent aux mots colorés que son enfance avait élus, il s'exclamait en rage : *Crois-tu qu'il puisse n'y avoir que ça ?* Je sentais son esprit surir, il prenait la tangente. Je ne l'emménai plus sur les hauteurs, car il ne riait pas. Il ouvrait ses yeux comme les portes, avec fracas. Il se levait avant l'aube, à l'affût. Il cherchait la maraude.

*Ce sont des rats,* répétait-il avec une vipère de sourire, *s'en délectait, ce sont des rats, mais, nous aussi, nous sommes des rats à qui l'on jette les déchets du monde, des petits rongeurs malheureux enfermés dans nos passerelles,* et tandis que le Broc passait furtivement aux heures interdites je le voyais frémir. Un matin, je me levai, il s'était enfui.

“That doesn’t look like anything. What are those shapes, Mina? They’re not letters. Just dots.” He was disturbed.

I looked at the time. We were on the brink of curfew.

“Who are those tiny dots for?” He stood up.

Suddenly a turbulence of green and yellow exploded in the center of the sky: KABOOM. Exotic and Toxic Fantasy Gardens! Glittering plants twisted around the words before the advertisement vanished. Stunned, our eyes lost sight of the dark patch where the dots glowed. We said nothing but shared the same feeling, that something had trespassed inside us. A theft. A disrespect. Then the curfew bell sounded. Arturo refused to go and I had to drag him back into the alleys of our neighborhood in time.

Afterwards he asked everywhere, “Have you seen the dots that sell us nothing?” His eyes darted nonstop. He was attached to the windows, stood there at dusk, turning his face upwards. Detached from the colorful words that had engaged his childhood, he’d shout with rage, “Can you believe that’s all there is?” I sensed his spirit curdle. He was losing it. I no longer brought him to the heights because he no longer laughed. He would fling his eyes wide like gates, with agitation. He would rise before dawn, on the lookout. He was waiting for the marauders.

“They’re rodents,” he’d say with the smile of a salivating viper. “They’re rats, but so are we, we get tossed the world’s scraps. We’re miserable vermin trapped in our corner.” And while the Broc crept past during the forbidden hours, I would see him tremble. One morning I woke up and he was gone.

~

Depuis qu'il est parti je traque la maraude, par ma fenêtre. J'attends. Dès qu'ils sont en bas, j'ouvre même si la pluie entre et mouille tout en un instant. Ils marmonnent dans leur langue. Ils soulèvent les détritus, balancent les canettes et les sacs en plastique dans de grandes poches. Parfois ils attrapent de petits animaux rances et les écrasent avec leurs bottes. Ils ne s'arrêtent que pour fumer sur la cigarette d'un autre, qui passe de main en main, de bouche en bouche durant toute la maraude. C'est une vision étrange que ces hommes avachis qui traversent le quartier pour le retourner. Ils prennent tout ce qui traîne, mégots, gants oubliés, cravaches, échabeau, ils ratissent et embarquent ce dont on n'a plus voulu. L'un se baisse et jette sa main, détrousse le trottoir de sa couverture, lève au ciel sa trouvaille, crache et s'enfuit. Ils arrivent à quinze, et peu à peu dans les lueurs de l'aube ils disparaissent. Les plus rapides sont les enfants. Les enfants et les nains. Les yeux au niveau du sol ils remarquent tout. Ils se faufilent entre les pierres et les voitures renversées, et repartent en un claquement de doigt d'où ils sont venus, derrière les tours.

Mais avant ils ont eu la nuit pour eux. Car l'heure de la ronde est connue, l'heure est imprimée dans la tête de chaque enfant —

l'heure n'est pas pour vos petites têtes blondes. Les maîtresses leur enseigne le Broc, ses dangers.

Mais que font-ils dehors, demandent-ils, que font-ils quand nous sommes à l'intérieur ?

Et elles répondent les mêmes mots invariablement. Ils volent. Se battent. Attaquent les chiens errants. Se

~

Ever since he left, I've been tracking the marauders from my apartment. I wait for them. As soon as they're below, I open the window, even if the rain comes in and wets everything. They murmur in their secret language. They sift through the trash, toss tin cans and plastic bags into deep pockets. Now and then they catch small, rank animals and crush them with their boots. They don't stop except to smoke someone's cigarette as it passes from hand to hand, mouth to mouth throughout the raid. It's a strange sight to see these slouching figures moving through the streets, ransacking everything. They take whatever's around: cigarette butts, lost gloves, whips, step stools. They scavenge and collect what no one else wants. They crouch and fling their arms, rob the sidewalk of its ornaments, present their findings to the sky, spit and take off. Fifteen of them arrive, then one by one, in the glimmer of dawn they disappear. The kids are the fastest. The kids and the dwarves. Eyes close to the ground they see everything. They thread themselves between rocks and overturned cars, and at the snap of a finger go back to where they came from, to the other side of the towers.

The night used to belong to them. Now everyone knows the exact hour the patrols start up, and it's imprinted in the mind of every child.

*It's not the time for little darlings like you to be out and about.* Their teachers tell them about the Broc, how dangerous they are.

*But what do they do out there,* they ask, *what do they do outside when we're inside?*

And their teachers repeat the same exact words over and over. *They steal. They fight. They attack like stray dogs.*

nourrissent de détritus.

N'ont-ils pas d'endroit à eux ?

Ils veulent celui des autres. Ce sont des envieux. Des égoïstes. Ils sont dangereux.

Je regarde la maraude et je ne vois pas de danger. Seul un mouvement continu qui a quelque chose d'une danse, macabre et vivante.

~

La semaine dernière, il y avait quelqu'un que je n'avais jamais vu. Il portait une salopette cramoisie, il était large d'épaules, très brun. Il me fit penser à un arbre ventru. Il restait en retrait comme un sage, enveloppé de rouge sous la brillance du ciel. Il était au centre, un phare, le pilier du Broc. D'un coup, je me suis penchée, déraisonnée, l'aube était loin, les néons éblouissaient les tours du fond qui séparent la ville-monde des Quartiers. Il s'est figé tandis qu'autour de lui le Broc s'activait, les mots montaient en moi, *la fabuleuse*, ceux que j'avais enfouis depuis le départ d'Arturo. Le vent s'engouffra par la fenêtre et me fit fermer les yeux. Je crus entendre siffler, mais le son fut emporté. Quand je rouvris les yeux, la maraude s'était envolée.

~

Je n'en dors plus, car je l'ai reconnu, le gosse aux yeux noirs, le gamin vers qui Arturo avait tendu la main. Peut-être mon frère avait-il appartenu au Broc dès le premier instant, avant même ce trou dans le ciel qui avait précipité sa fuite. Je regarde mon appartement et les grilles qui ferment les portes au premier crépuscule.

*They feed on garbage.*

*Don't they have a place to live?*

They want what belongs to other people, they're jealous.  
They're selfish. They're dangerous.

I watch the marauders and don't see any danger. Just a continuous movement that seems like a dance, lively and macabre.

~

Last week, there was someone I'd never seen. He was broad shouldered, deeply tanned, and wearing crimson overalls. He made me think of a paunchy tree. He hung back like a sage, enveloped in red under the luminous sky. He stood at the center, a lighthouse, the pillar of the Broc. Suddenly I swooned, my senses muddled. Dawn was still a ways off, the bright lights splashing against the back towers that separated the city proper from the residential neighborhoods. He stood fixed in place while the Broc hustled around him. Those words floated up to me: *the sublime*—the ones I'd repressed since Arturo left. The wind rushed through the window, forcing my eyes shut. I thought I heard a whistle, but the sound was carried away. When I re-opened my eyes, the marauders had fled.

~

I no longer slept because I recognized him, the kid with black eyes, the boy towards whom Arturo had extended his hand. Perhaps my brother had been part of the Broc from the start, even before the hole in the sky hastened his flight. I look around my apartment and at the grill that locks the gates at the first sign of twilight. I hear people talking in the hallways, their faces turning as I

J'entends les gens parler dans les couloirs, les visages se tordre sur mon passage. L'oppression me prend tout entière. Je suis allée à la bibliothèque pour en apprendre plus sur la maraude, sur le Broc, j'ai demandé partout, et j'ai pensé : pourquoi ne l'as-tu pas fait plus tôt ? Hier, j'ai arpente le quartier dans tous les sens, me sont revenues en mémoire les ruelles que ma mère connaissait par cœur, les images dont elle faisait commerce. Mais les mireilles ont disparu des fenêtres, plus personne ne cherche des images.

La vie pourtant n'est pas désagréable ici, les gens sont serviables. Les enfants ont des beaux yeux, les parents les coiffent à *l'ancelle*, une boucle sur le front, deux boucles sur les tempes, un chapeau sur le haut du crâne. Ils ressemblent à des petits bijoux. Ils jouent calmement dans les jardins, donnent des miettes aux oiseaux. Ils poursuivent les fourmis, lancent des cailloux dans l'herbe, arrachent les fleurs et ont peur du bourdonnement des abeilles. Je ne les vois jamais lever les yeux au ciel, mais le ciel est un territoire saturé.

Arturo avait raison, nous sommes des rats. Mis au banc. Le bruit des bannières a remplacé les rires, les lumières blafardes des néons-satellites nous font vivre derrière les fenêtres, engrottés dans l'obscurité pour rendre un peu de liberté à nos yeux. Alors, je décide de les rejoindre.

~

Ce matin, je suis sortie après l'alarme et j'ai marché. Au jour néon, je ne suis pas rentrée. Cachée sous une passerelle, j'ai laissé filer les hommes qui ratissent les coins où se cachent les marginaux. J'ai eu peur, j'ai respiré doucement. Maintenant tout est calme. Au ciel la vulgarité s'étale en lettre d'or — *Atrapshit* ;

*FuMAN ; GAF, Hé Ho !*

walk past. I feel suffocated by an oppression. I went to the library to learn more about the marauders, about the Broc. I asked everywhere and thought: *Why didn't you do this sooner?* Yesterday I roamed the Zone in every direction. Memories came back of alleyways my mother knew by heart and the moving holograms she collected for her business. But the mirage-picts have disappeared from the windows; no one seeks out those images anymore.

Life, however, isn't unpleasant here. People are ready to help. The children have beautiful eyes, the parents style their hair à *lancelle*, one curl on the forehead, two curls at the temples, a cap on top. They look like little jewels. They play serenely in the parks, tossing crumbs to the birds. They chase ants, throw pebbles into the grass, pluck flowers and run away from buzzing bees. I never see them look up at the sky. But the sky is a saturated landscape.

Arturo was right—we're rats. We're shunned. The noise of aerial ads has replaced laughter. The blaring radiance of flashing satellites forces us to live behind windows. We shroud ourselves with shadow to restore a little freedom to our eyes. Well then, I decide to join them.

~

This morning I went out after the curfew bell sounded, ventured into the neon day and didn't come home. Hidden under a bridge, I eluded the men who sweep through corners where the homeless hide. I was scared, I held my breath. Now all is still. In the sky, vulgarity spread in gold letters:

Chekkit: ZMO...! ZMO-kup, KEWL; Arrr

— mais je la fixe d'un œil rageur, à la recherche de cet illimité qu'Arturo avait entrevu. Dans le parc je m'assieds près de la porte, un son léger parvient à ma conscience et je me souviens du bruissement des jupes de ma mère... mais ce sont eux. Fidèles, ils arrivent. Des enfants aux joues noires, sans boucles, sans parents, les pieds nus, traversent de leur pas vif. Les nains les précèdent, puis des hommes et des femmes en robes longues. Et enfin le voilà. Sa stature m'étonne une nouvelle fois. Je me relève, il se tient face à moi, le grand enfant ventru en salopette rouge. Il est énorme. Ses yeux ont la profondeur d'un velours noir, il me tend la main, j'entends tout autour des petits cris, leur langue secrète, une langue qui échappe aux écouteurs, aux drones, aux tours de contrôle, et qui connaît les mots oubliés. Tandis qu'il se met à marcher, moi dans la fente de sa hauteur qui transperce la ville, les gamins nous rejoignent.

*Ça arrive*, me dit-il, de sa voix qui caverne, engloutit et recouvre, *Tu viens au bon moment*. Nous traversons le quartier jusqu'au pont.

Devant l'eau écarlate j'hésite, jamais je ne suis allée aussi loin. Mais de ses bras énormes il me tire et traverse, les enfants nous font fête, les sifflements ont remplacé les cris, je pense à Arturo : est-il ici ?

De l'autre côté le colosse me lâche sans un mot. En territoire inconnu. L'herbe sous mes pieds m'apaise, je m'allonge. Et bientôt, près de moi je le sens qui me rejoint. Je soupire. Un long moment nous restons silencieux, puis il me prend la main et me dit :

« Il est ici, avec nous. Nous nous sommes vus il y a longtemps, et je suis venu te chercher. On attendait que tu comprennes, que tu y viennes seule, que tu veuilles t'échapper. On a vu tes yeux au sol, qui cherchaient une trace, un signe dans la maraude, mais c'est là-haut

—but I glared at it, searching for the unfettered gap Arturo had glimpsed. In the park, I sit near the gate. I become aware of a faint rustling that recalls my mother's skirts....but it's them. Like clockwork, they arrive. The children with grimy cheeks, no curls, no parents, barefoot, passing through with a skip in their step. The dwarves come first, then men and women in long dresses. And finally, there he is. His height surprises me once again. I get up. He stands before me, the grown-up potbellied child in red overalls. He is huge, his eyes as engulfing as a black ocean. He offers his hand. I hear small cries around us, their secret language, a way of speaking that evades headphones, drones, control towers, and even those familiar with forgotten words. He starts walking, and I follow in the wake of his height that cuts through the city while the kids catch up to us.

“It’s happening,” he says in a cavernous voice that looms and swallows me. “You’ve come at a good moment. We’re crossing through the Zone and over the bridge.”

In front of the sunset-tinted water I hesitate—I’ve never walked so far—but his enormous arms pull me along and we continue. The children are celebrating. The whistles become shouts and I think of Arturo: *Is he here?*

On the other side, the colossus releases me without a word. I’m in unfamiliar surroundings. The grass under my feet puts me at ease. I stretch. Soon enough, I feel him next to me again. I sigh. We sit in silence for a long time.

Then he takes my hand and says, “He’s here with us. We saw each other a long time ago, and I came to find you. We were waiting for you to understand, for you to come alone, for you to want to escape. We saw your eyes looking at the ground, searching for a trace, a clue from the marauders, but you have to look up to see it. It’s

qu'il faut voir. C'est le ciel au-dessus de toi. Cette toile magique recouverte de déchets. Tu vas la voir, bientôt pure, celle qu'on appelle *la fabuleuse*. Ici c'est une fête sacrée, les autres sont partis éteindre tous les feux, rassembler l'obscurité pour jouir de la nuit. Ça n'arrive qu'une fois par mois, pendant quelques minutes, parfois quelques heures, jamais les mêmes, jamais au même endroit. Il faut compter, chercher les défaillances, additionner les heures, noter le point du jour, mais c'est notre vie, on se relaie, on la retrouve, on ne la perd jamais. »

Sa voix vibre dans l'air.

« Regarde, déjà les cages dorés s'éteignent, les bijoux, les réclames, les grands serpents verts qui vendent à l'étranger des morceaux d'argent détournés. C'est ça, le Broc. Nous n'avons pas besoin des détritus que nous allons chercher, nous jouons la peur dont ils ont besoin pour nous bannir. Nous foutre la paix. Nous ratissons les rues pour posséder le territoire. Pas celui que tu foules, l'autre, l'immense, le magnifique. »

Tandis qu'il parle, le ciel s'éteint doucement. Je suis d'abord terrifiée par le noir profond qui recouvre tout. Mais il continue, il dit des mots que je n'ai jamais entendus, il dit *étoile, galaxie, astéroïde, univers*, et les mots apparaissent à mes yeux.

« Les étoiles nous regardent toute la journée, elles sont là, derrière le bleu du ciel et derrière les nuages, derrière les réclames, les carrousels, les bannières et les néons, l'immensité ne disparaît jamais. Cela, on nous le vole, mais avec nous tu peux le voir, *tu es la seule à le voir encore*, ces points, lointaines représailles de l'univers, les étoiles sont là, Mina. »

Et, une à une, je les vois, dans cette nuit qui m'envahit et

in the sky overhead, this magical canvas covered with trash. You will see it, suddenly immaculate, what we call *the Sublime*. Here we celebrate its sanctity. The others have gone to put out the lights, recover the darkness to enjoy the night. It happens only once a month, for a few minutes or sometimes several hours, but it's never the same and never in the same place. We have to count, look for discrepancies, add the hours, mark the break of day. This is our life. We take turns, we track the pattern, we never lose it.”

His voice vibrates in the air.

“Look, the gold cages are already switching off, the jewelry, the advertisements, the sinewy green snakes that sell embezzled silver pieces to foreigners.” As he speaks, the sky gradually grows dark. “That’s the Broc. We don’t need the detritus that we collect; we play up their fear that justifies our banishment—*Leave us alone*. We rake the streets to claim the territory, not the ground you walk on but the other, the infinite, the profound.”

At first I’m terrified by the opaque darkness that overtakes everything. But he continues, uttering words I’ve never heard. He says *star, galaxy, asteroid, universe*, and they appear before my eyes.

“The stars watch us all day long; they’re up there, behind the blue sky, behind the clouds, beyond the ads, the fireworks, the banners and neon lights. The infinite never disappears. It’s taken away, but with us you can see it. *You are the only one to see it again*, those dots, the distant renewal of the universe. The stars are up there, Mina.”

And one by one, I see them in the night which invades

m'emporte, les incantations magiques, les abstractions, elles sont si nombreuses qu'elles tombent en mouvement infini, qu'elles s'élèvent, s'étendent et transforment le temps, je les vois et elles me libèrent, les invitées de la *fabuleuse*.

me and lifts me, these magical charms, these abstractions. They are so numerous that they dip and dive in constant motion. They rise, extend and transform time. I see them and they free me, those guests of *the Sublime*.

## Translator's Foreword

Ces quatre poèmes de Shanga Labossiere sont inspirés par la *Martian Poetry*, dont l'écrivain anglais Craig Raine est l'un des principaux représentants (*A Martian Sends a Postcard Home*, 1979). Un Martien, rescapé d'une catastrophe, se retrouve exilé sur Terre, seule planète désormais capable d'abriter la vie. Mais l'espoir du survivant de trouver un lieu accueillant est bientôt anéanti par l'apprentissage violent des nouvelles règles aussi étranges qu'inadaptées, et par l'hostilité ambiante. Loin d'être reconnu comme une victime cherchant un refuge, il est regardé avec méfiance : sa présence est suspecte. Pourtant, aussi dévastatrice que soit la tristesse qui l'envahit, le Martien se comporte en poète : il trouve en lui les capacités de jeu et de rêverie, s'émerveille malgré tout de ce nouveau monde qui l'entoure, et l'amertume laisse la place à une langue tendre et ironique. C'est ainsi que le Martien s'adapte à sa nouvelle condition — ainsi peut-être sera-t-il accepté. Mais le sentiment d'étrangeté persiste, quand la détresse demeure enfouie. À moins que le salut ne vienne d'une rencontre imprévue ?

La poésie de Shanga Labossiere résonne puissamment avec les innombrables destinées martiennes qui peuplent notre histoire, contemporaine ou passée. Elle rappelle aussi que la créativité, poétique ici, est une alliée précieuse face à la violence implacable de la réalité. Et il n'est pas interdit de penser que les poètes, en fin de compte, ne sont peut-être rien d'autre que des Martiens.



# **SHANGA LABOSSIÈRE**

## **MARTIAN**

### **A Martian Meets NASA's Rover**

Each grain of red sand  
marks a world changed.  
The composition of soil:  
ash: bones, vegetation, the green  
of our skin, minds, heartbeats: once home.

All these years you have  
been searching for proof of  
our life, when everything  
we needed  
has been right under your wheels.

**traduit de l'anglais par  
DAMIEN TRIPETTE**

**MARTIEN**

**Un Martien rencontre un robot de la NASA**

Chaque grain de sable rouge  
signale un monde passé.

Composition du sol :  
cendre : os, végétation, le vert  
de notre peau, pensées, bruits du cœur : jadis chez nous.

Toutes ces années tu as  
cherché des preuves de  
notre vie, quand tout ce qu'il  
nous fallait  
se trouvait juste sous tes roues.

## A Martian Writes A Postcard

I wish I could deliver this by mind vibrations. Propagation is instant through the atoms and silence of space. Instead, I take a form, foreign to me. I stumble over these utterances, like one's first steps, a foot in front of foot, a quest for balance, stable ground to plant one's roots and receive some sustenance. I am not of this planet. My roots, they lie elsewhere, on your sister planet. I am the last Green Martian, last of my race, last son of Mars. My people, long ago were snuffed by flame, extinguished by plague. Not too long after, I crashed onto your planet, Earth. I came in peace, and now I exist in pieces. Fragments. Life on Earth, I search for a word to describe it all, everything hospitality is not. I gradually learned how to resist resisting. It is the only way I appear sane. My shape shifts to your taste buds as I morph to a form you can digest so my words are considered biblical, or like the soft crunch of honey, so smooth upon the tongue and sitting between the teeth. So many pains in every step I take. I check reflections and can't recognize my face. Our skin was the loveliest jade,

## Un Martien Écrit Une Carte

J'aimerais l'envoyer par des vibrations  
d'esprit. Propagation instantanée  
dans les atomes et le silence cosmique.  
Mais non, je dois prendre une forme, allogène.  
Et devant chaque énoncé je trébuche,  
C'est comme apprendre à marcher, pas à pas,  
chercher l'aplomb, la terre ferme où planter  
ses racines, recevoir sa subsistance. Je ne  
viens pas de votre planète. Mes racines  
sont ailleurs, sur ta planète sœur. Je suis  
le dernier Martien Vert, dernier de ma race,  
dernier fils de Mars. Mon peuple, jadis  
fut consumé, éteint par la peste. Peu  
après, je me suis écrasé sur ta  
planète, la Terre. Je venais en paix, on  
m'a mis en pièce. Fragments. La vie sur Terre,  
il me faudrait un mot pour la dire toute :  
tout ce que l'hospitalité n'est pas.  
J'ai peu à peu appris à résister  
en résistant. Seul moyen d'avoir l'air  
normal. Je mute pour flatter vos papilles,  
en me transformant je me rends digeste  
et de ma bouche sortent tous vos canons,  
mes mots ont la texture du miel, si doux  
sur la langue et s'enroulent autour des dents.  
Tant de souffrances à chaque pas que je fais.  
Quand je vois mon reflet je n'y trouve plus  
mon visage. Notre peau du plus beau jade,

but I've shed too many times and I've felt  
my colors fade. This postcard, coming from  
the lost one, comes from the melting of eyes,  
and body levitating with pain. The Martian  
ashes have mixed into the Martian dust  
storms; this postcard is without addressee.  
From Earth, to whom I may disturb. Above  
this vast desert, in form, I cry. I will  
take the rest of my days and read about  
myself, in color, with my eyelids shut.

effacée par trop de mues, et j'ai vu  
passer mes couleurs. Cette carte vient de l'être  
perdu, vient des yeux qui ont fondu,  
d'un corps soulevé de douleur. Les cendres  
martiennes se sont mêlées aux poussières des tempêtes  
martiennes ; cette carte est sans destinataire.

De : la Terre, à qui d'émoi. Sur tout ce  
désert, formaté, je pleure. Je passerai  
le restant de mes jours à lire des choses  
sur moi, en couleur, et les paupières closes.

## The Martian Learns of Double Consciousness

I walk up the street, no cars purring by,  
None of their nighttime staring to further illuminate  
The close huddle of buildings or  
The smooth ground beneath my shoes.

The cold creeps its way into the spaces  
Between skin and clothes, I've learned.

As I approach my residence,  
A mother and her young daughter walk ahead of me,  
The daughter drifting behind, as she savors  
Each step, absorbed in her mind's adventures.

I smile as I pass. Her laughter  
Filling the empty night air throughout the block.

Her mother sees me and grabs her daughter,  
holds her as far away from me as physics will allow.  
Her mind screams in my head “HIDEOUS” and “STAY  
AWAY”  
As if her actions did not communicate it loud enough.

Her stare pierces its way into the space between my body  
and soul.  
Is it because I am the only green thing alive this winter?

## **Le Martien découvre la double-conscience**

Je marche dans la rue, nul bruit de voiture,  
Leur regard nocturne ne vient plus éclairer  
Les immeubles agglutinés ou  
Le sol lisse sous mes chaussures

J'ai découvert que le froid s'immisce dans l'espace  
entre la peau et les habits.

Quand j'arrive vers ma résidence,  
Une mère et sa petite fille marchent devant moi,  
La fille derrière se laisse dériver, savoure  
Chaque pas, absorbée dans ses aventures intérieures

**Je la dépasse en souriant. Son rire**  
**Envahit dans tout le quartier l'air de cette nuit déserte.**

Sa mère me voit et s'empare de sa fille,  
la tient aussi loin de moi que la physique le permet.  
Son esprit dans ma tête hurle «MONSTRE» et  
«T'APPROCHE PAS»  
Comme si son geste ne le disait pas encore assez fort.

Son regard s'enfonce dans l'espace entre mon corps et  
mon âme.

Tout ça parce que je serais le seul truc vert en vie de  
l'hiver ?

I try to scan her mind, to see how I can alleviate  
Her horror. I consider every way I can twist

My body. In panic, I decide to communicate  
harmlessness by blending in with the night,

Becoming invisible. But she can still see me,  
and my new hue makes her fear more urgent than before.

J'essaie d'accéder à ses pensées, de voir comment soulager  
Sa terreur. J'envisage toutes les façons d'arranger

Mon corps - panique - je décide de me montrer  
inoffensif en me diluant dans la nuit :

Je deviens invisible. Mais elle, elle me voit toujours,  
et ma nouvelle couleur rend sa peur plus forte encore.

## a martian meets a bee

the small ball of sun rays and night sky  
spots me, its wings vibrating in my direction  
rendering me an appropriate place of rest, safety

shapeshifts me to petals and pollen,  
a welcoming, a delicacy, a nurturing,  
a presence worthy enough of a visit

with a constant singing, it floats to  
my smallest finger and lands with  
an imperceptible gentleness

i feel you have  
seen fear  
they run from  
your  
strike  
do not worry  
new friend  
i would  
do nothing  
to make you hurt  
you humans,  
they know  
not  
the power of  
their own  
sting

un martien rencontre une abeille

la petite boule de soleil et de nuit  
me repère, vibre ses ailes dans ma direction  
me transforme en un refuge opportun, à l'abri

me métamorphose en pétales et pollen,  
nid douillet, mets délicat, bonne nourrice,  
présence qu'elle daigne visiter

dans un chant continu elle se dirige vers  
mon petit doigt et s'y pose avec  
une imperceptible douceur

je sens que tu as  
vu la peur  
ils fuient  
tes  
piques  
sois tranquille  
nouvelle amie  
je ne  
ferais rien  
qui puisse te blesser  
toi vous les humains,  
ils ne savent  
pas  
le pouvoir de  
leur propre  
dard

## Translator's Foreword

Before pursuing writing, Damien Tripette was a psychologist for seven years, receiving his degree in psychology at Université Paris 7. But, during that time, he had an underlying urge to write, which is what eventually brought him to Université Paris 8 to pursue his writing further in the Master's program. He received his first inspirational spark at twenty, reading Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, and over time his horizons have broadened with authors such as Thomas Bernhard and Robert Walser.

In this untitled piece, a portion of a larger seventy-five page work, there are frame narratives within frame narratives, initiated when a writer at a symposium tells an anecdote about his life. In the story, this writer finds parallels between himself and the biblical tales of Moses, Jesus, and Jonah. Once the writer brings us back to the present, at the symposium, he undergoes his own biblical story.

Yet Tripette did not want to write a story. He states that he follows his writing like a piece of music, going from one note to the next, allowing the music to dictate the next move. He tried not to write a narrative, but he admits that a story unfolds nevertheless, despite his best efforts. Tripette writes with various questions in mind that radiate through the text: What is a writer? What does it mean to behave as a writer? What is a narrator?

One of the biggest challenges in translating this text was preserving this resistance to narrative. This manifests, for example, through the length of the sentences and paragraphs, and the repetition of certain phrases. Tripette is aware that these elements make it difficult for a reader and wanted that effect in his piece. I did my

best to preserve the sentence length through the use of em dashes and semicolons. This challenge of preservation also manifested when certain clauses and phrases tempted an easy way out through streamlining, but I wanted to find a way to capture the length that Tripette used and maintain the difficulty he wanted for the reader, while emulating his philosophy of following the music.

# DAMIEN TRIPETTE

## UNTITLED

Comme n’importe quel écrivain, il était né par un meurtre. Souvent à la fin du repas, on lui posait des questions, on voulait qu’il nous raconte quelque chose, alors on lui demandait de raconter sa naissance. Il se figeait un instant, puis avalait ce qui restait de bière dans son verre, demandait qu’on lui allume une cigarette, et après avoir tiré quelques bouffées, c’est comme ça que le silence se faisait, c’était le petit rituel qui installait l’attente, même si on savait toujours un peu ce qu’il allait dire, il se mettait à parler et en effet il disait que ç’avait été un vrai massacre, et il éclatait de rire. Il expliquait qu’il avait volé une hache et qu’il avait abattu son arbre généalogique, après quoi il y avait mis le feu et jeté la hache — fin de l’histoire. Mais on savait que ce n’était pas la fin de l’histoire, c’était seulement sa façon à lui de ponctuer son récit, fin de l’histoire, parce qu’il prétendait que chaque phrase devait être définitive.

Naturellement — cela arrive souvent — le feu n’avait été empêché par rien, et il était rapidement devenu hors de contrôle, ce qui devait être le but recherché. Dans la confusion générale, c’est-à-dire au milieu des cris de panique et des hurlements terribles des malheureux occupants de l’arbre en train d’agoniser, et il disait toujours que cette fois-là c’était même toute une forêt qui avait brûlé, il avait filé discrètement par la rivière, d’abord en nageant puis, et comme il avait commencé à manquer de souffle, il avait aperçu une barque vide qui dérivait et allait le dépasser, était parvenu à y monter, et à la rame il avait pu s’enfuir plus rapidement, et bien sûr à tout jamais. Il n’est pas nécessaire de préciser que cet

**translated from the french by  
SHANGA LABOSSIERE**

## UNTITLED

Like any writer, he was born out of murder. At the end of the meal, we'd often ask him questions. Wanting him to tell us something, we asked him to tell us the story of his birth. He would freeze for a second, down the rest of his beer, ask for a light and then, after a few drags on his cigarette, a silence would settle over the room: this was the little ritual that established suspense, even if we always knew some of what he was going to say. He'd start speaking, saying it had indeed been a real massacre, before bursting into laughter. He'd explain that he'd stolen an axe and chopped down his family tree; afterwards he'd set it on fire and thrown away the axe, end of story. But we knew that wasn't the end of the story; it was only his way of reinforcing his tale, because he meant for every sentence to be definitive.

Naturally, as often happens, the fire quickly grew out of control and couldn't be put out, which must have been his true goal. In the general chaos, that is to say, in the midst of the panicked cries and dreadful screaming from the unfortunate occupants of the dying tree—he always said that the whole forest had burned down that time—he slipped away in the river, swimming at first, but then, just as he started to run out of breath, he noticed a small, empty boat drifting by. He swam over and climbed in; rowing would let him escape faster and never come back. It went without saying that such an extraordinary

événement véritablement exceptionnel se déroulait par une nuit sans lune et sans étoiles.

Les choses n'étaient peut-être pas si bien engagées qu'on pouvait se l'imaginer, car tel qu'il était assis dans la barque, c'est-à-dire pour ramer efficacement, il était contraint d'être de dos par rapport à la direction qu'il suivait, ce qui fait qu'en s'éloignant, au lieu de regarder devant lui comme il aurait fallu, il était toujours plus ou moins forcé de regarder l'incendie. Il disait : Rien de plus sidérant qu'une belle flambée. Mais sans le feu, je n'y aurais rien vu ; l'incendie heureusement éclairait très bien, et ça faisait que l'eau se distinguait, un jaune un peu moiré, et donc par contraste je devinai la berge qui était noire, et j'essayais de rester à peu près au milieu de l'eau. D'autres fois il disait que l'incendie était si fort qu'il avait pris des deux côtés de la rivière, et qu'avec le surcroît de lumière que produisait l'incendie sur les berges, il avait vu très bien pendant longtemps. Il disait aussi qu'il n'avait pas cessé, pendant qu'il ramait, de penser à Moïse et son peuple qui s'étaient enfuis d'Egypte de la façon qu'on sait, à Moïse qui n'avait abattu aucun arbre mais était lui aussi un meurtrier, à Moïse qui avait eu aussi quelques difficultés généalogiques (on comprenait très bien comment le lait hébreu qui le nourrissait, qui était n'était pas seulement du lait hébreu mais précisément le lait de sa véritable mère, on comprenait bien que ça ferait des problèmes ensuite, parce que Pharaon serait jaloux), il pensait à Moïse plus tard dans le désert redescendant vers son peuple, sur les pentes du Sinaï avec ses sandales, chargé de ses Tables de la Loi qui devaient peser très lourd, et qui s'était agacé parce que le plan ne fonctionnait pas comme prévu, et à la fin il n'avait pas pu faire autrement que de conclure qu'il n'y avait aucune différence entre Moïse et lui. «Il n'y a pas de différence, il n'y a pas de différence, il n'y a vraiment aucune différence, fin de l'histoire.»

Il ajoutait aussi que Moïse avait mal réagi en brisant ses

event took place under a night sky with no moon and no stars.

Things hadn't gone according to plan, and sitting backwards in the boat, in order to row efficiently, forced him to watch the blaze, instead of watching where he was going, like one normally does. Nothing is more stunning than a raging inferno, he'd say. If not for the fire, I wouldn't have been able to see anything; luckily it was very bright and made the water shine a shimmering yellow, a yellow that enabled me to discern the dark masses of the riverbanks, and helped me stay on course down the middle of the river. Other times, he'd say that the fire was so strong that it broke out on both sides of the river, but with the abundant light the flames cast on the riverbanks, he'd been able to see for a long time. He also said that, as he rowed, he couldn't stop thinking of Moses and his people, whose escape from Egypt we know about today; of Moses, who didn't cut down a single tree, but was also a murderer himself; of Moses, who'd also had a few difficulties with his family tree (one understood very well how the Hebrew milk that had nourished him—which was not only Hebrew milk, but specifically his actual mother's milk—one understood that this would cause some problems later on, because Pharaoh would get jealous). He thought of Moses in the desert, heading toward his people down the slopes of Sinai in his sandals, loaded down with his Ten Commandments—which must have been quite heavy—irritated because things hadn't gone according to plan. In the end, all he could do was conclude that there was no difference between Moses and himself: "There's no difference, no difference, no difference at all, end of story."

He added that Moses had reacted poorly by destroying

Tables de la Loi (quelques fois il disait aussi: les Tablettes), que Moïse n'aurait pas dû, non seulement qu'il n'aurait pas dû, mais qu'il avait commis une faute, parce que hébreu ou pas, il aurait bien dû s'attendre à ce que son peuple agisse ainsi, surtout dans une telle situation, puisque le peuple hébreu avait suivi Moïse sans trop bien savoir pourquoi, mais sans doute par habitude de suivre, et il se trouvait alors dans le désert, dans l'attente que quelque chose d'intéressant se passe, comme la terre promise, ou au moins un bon repas, et un bon lit, mais évidemment rien n'arrivait, et Moïse était introuvable depuis quarante jours, et si on ajoute à cela, ce qui était déjà beaucoup, qu'il avait certainement dû y avoir des morts lors du passage de la mer rouge, soit parce que les Egyptiens avaient quand même réussi à tirer quelques flèches, ou parce que l'eau avait fini par revenir, et les traînards et les attardés, tous ceux qui n'avaient pas assez vite, les rêveurs et les craintifs, une bonne part de ceux-là certainement avaient dû mourir noyés ou massacrés. Il était bien naturel, et même très compréhensible, finalement, que le peuple hébreu, malheureux et triste, et ne sachant plus à qui s'en remettre, se tourne un peu vers les idoles qu'on trouve dans le désert. Donc tout ce qu'on pouvait dire de Moïse, c'est qu'il avait fait preuve par sa colère d'un manque de lucidité, et même on pouvait dire qu'il avait manqué d'amour, en tout cas il n'avait pas du tout été à la hauteur des enjeux, et il avait eu beaucoup de chance que son peuple s'était senti coupable de s'être intéressé aux idoles du désert, car aussi bien le peuple hébreu aurait pu voir dans la colère de Moïse la preuve flagrante qu'ils avaient bien eu raison de ne plus lui faire confiance. Mais le peuple hébreu s'était senti coupable, et il avait continué à se sentir coupable malgré le massacre qui avait suivi, ordonné par Moïse, de trois mille hommes, en guise de punition, et c'est dans un bain de sang que le peuple hébreu avait renoncé à ses idoles, il avait exprimé ses regrets sincères à Moïse, il lui avait même demandé pardon. Evidemment certains avaient dû trouver

the Ten Commandments (sometimes he called them “the Tablets”), and that Moses didn’t have to react. Not only did he not have to, but he had made a grave mistake because, Hebrew or not, he should have very well expected his people to act the way they did, especially in such a situation, since the Hebrew people followed Moses without really knowing why—surely just following out of habit—and they had found themselves in the desert, hoping that something interesting would happen, like the Promised Land, or at least a good meal and a good bed, but obviously nothing happened, and Moses was nowhere to be found for forty days; and if one adds to that—which was already a lot—the fact that there must certainly have been some deaths during the crossing of the Red Sea, either because the Egyptians had managed to shoot some arrows, or because the water was flowing back, and because of all the stragglers and the dawdlers, the daydreamers and the fearful, and everyone else who didn’t move fast enough, we can assume that a good number of them must have died, either having been drowned or massacred. It was quite natural, and even understandable that the Hebrew people—unlucky, unhappy, and not knowing whom to trust—eventually turned to the idols found in the desert. Thus, all one could say of Moses is that his anger had only proven his lack of clarity, and one could even say that he had no love. In any case, he hadn’t been up to the task at all, and he was very lucky that his people felt guilty about their interest in the desert idols, especially since the Hebrew people could see in his anger the glaring proof that they were right not to put their trust in him. But the Hebrews had been feeling guilty, and they kept on feeling guilty, despite the massacre of three thousand men that followed, commanded by Moses as punishment, and it was in the midst of this bloodbath that the Hebrews had renounced their idols and expressed their sincere regret to Moses, even asking him for forgiveness. Evidently, certain people must have found this to be an

regrettable ce renversement de situation qui profitait exclusivement à Moïse et aux Lévites. Il s'en était même trouvé qui avaient voulu protester, affirmant que Moïse était un escroc et qu'il fallait être bien naïf et avoir la mémoire bien courte pour accepter, par exemple, une loi qui voulait interdire de tuer alors que Moïse lui-même avait tué un Egyptien de ses mains avant de s'enfuir lâchement, sans parler des cadavres encore fumants de ses trois milles frères, amis, voisins, et de même qu'il n'était pas acceptable que Moïse, qui demandait de rassembler tout l'or du monde pour le culte qu'il fallait rendre à Dieu, tout l'or et toutes les pierres et tous les plus beaux tissus, avouant par cette exigence déraisonnable la faiblesse divine pour les marques les plus triviales de l'attachement, Moïse donc ne pouvait tolérer que son peuple ait pu s'en remettre à un veau d'or, alors même qu'on pouvait très bien imaginer que ce veau d'or n'était pas un abandon de Dieu, mais tout au contraire, une conjuration du sentiment d'abandon qui avait dû saisir le peuple hébreu dans ces circonstances, de sorte qu'il était permis et même justifié d'affirmer que le veau d'or était pour le peuple hébreu une façon de maintenir vivant le lien avec Dieu, et ainsi Moïse dans sa colère avait profondément manqué de discernement, le moment n'était-il pas venu pour chacun de prendre ses responsabilités, mais ces protestations courageuses de ceux qui avaient montré par leur audace qu'ils avaient la nuque bien raide, ces protestations avaient eu un effet très limité sur le peuple hébreu qui avait enfin retrouvé un peu d'entrain et d'enthousiasme, personne n'ignore ici les vertus euphorisantes de l'aveu d'une faute auprès de celui qui vous pardonne, peu importe d'ailleurs que celui-ci ait été, en l'absence de tout élan spontané, dans la nécessité stratégique de vous accorder son pardon. Ces rares objections avaient donc été étouffées par l'emballlement général du peuple hébreu et Moïse avait repris les choses en main de la meilleure des façons. Fin de l'histoire. Ce genre de déclarations avait un effet puissant sur nous autres qui l'écoutions, et nous

unfortunate turn of the tide, since it exclusively benefited Moses and the Levites. There were even some who wanted to protest, claiming that Moses was a swindler, and that he must have possessed a combination of naïveté and a short-term memory to accept, for example, a commandment that would make killing a sin, even though Moses himself had killed an Egyptian with his bare hands before running away like a coward, not to mention the still-warm corpses of that Egyptian's three thousand brothers, friends, and neighbors. It was just as unacceptable that Moses—who demanded the gathering of all the gold in the world as an offering to God; all the gold, all the precious stones, and all the most luxurious fabrics, this unreasonable demand revealing the divine weakness for the most trivial signs of devotion—that Moses couldn't tolerate his people putting their faith in a golden calf, though one could very well imagine that this golden calf did not signify an abandonment of God, but quite the opposite: it was a conjuring of the feeling of abandonment that must have seized the Hebrew people in these circumstances, so that they were permitted and even justified to argue that the golden calf was a way for them to keep their connection with God alive. In this way, Moses, in his rage, greatly lacked discernment. Hadn't the moment come for everyone to take responsibility? But these courageous protests by the stiff-necked people who had shown their audacity, these protests had a very limited effect on the Hebrews, who had finally regained some energy and enthusiasm. Nobody here can ignore the exhilarating virtues of confessing to sin before one who forgives you; it matters little that this one had depended, in the absence of all spontaneity, upon the strategic necessity of granting you his forgiveness. These occasional objections had been stifled by the general enthusiasm of the Hebrews, and Moses had regained control in the best way possible. End of story. This declaration had a powerful effect on those

plongeait dans des réflexions profondes. Mais il reprenait presque aussitôt en affirmant que d'après lui, et même s'il n'était peut-être pas la personne la plus compétente ni la plus experte pour parler de ces questions, parce que d'autres avaient vraiment étudié ces choses tandis que lui s'était contenté de passer à côté, qu'il s'était limité à longer pour ainsi dire ces problèmes complexes, tandis que d'autres avaient pu pénétrer au cœur de la chose et pouvaient de ce fait prétendre à une véritable autorité en la matière, lui n'avait qu'une compréhension superficielle de ces questions, son point de vue était latéral, ou, pour être précis, il était resté à une distance strictement périphérique de ces choses, mais néanmoins et donc d'après lui, c'est ce qu'il affirmait, il était tout à fait certain que Moïse avait été bien loin d'être ce qu'on pourrait appeler un bon chef, qu'il ne valait pas mieux qu'un autre, que Dieu aurait tout aussi bien pu s'adresser à un autre hébreu, mais Dieu était versatile, pour ne pas dire quinteux, et certes il valait mieux éviter de commencer à parler de Dieu, car alors il y aurait eu aussi des choses à dire, mais en tout état de cause, c'est Moïse que Dieu avait choisi, et Moïse n'était pas le plus exemplaire, mais il avait l'avantage d'avoir été choisi par Dieu, ce qui était un avantage décisif. De même que le peuple hébreu avait aussi cet avantage décisif, mais, et c'est là où il voulait en venir, disait-il, ce peuple hébreu ne valait pas plus qu'un autre peuple, par exemple le peuple égyptien, qui n'avait certainement pas à rougir de ce qu'il était, et que Dieu aurait pu choisir le peuple égyptien, et on pouvait vraiment s'interroger sur les raisons qui avaient poussé Dieu à choisir le peuple hébreu, mais c'était un choix ancien, qui avait été fait longtemps avant la naissance de Moïse, et peut-être qu'à cette époque lointaine Dieu avait pensé que le peuple hébreu constituait un choix intéressant, en quoi on pouvait voir que Dieu n'avait pas toujours beaucoup de suite dans les idées, étant donné que le peuple qu'il s'était choisi se retrouvait donc, des siècles plus tard, tenu en esclavage par le peuple égyptien qui disposait ainsi d'une

of us listening, and from there we'd dive, as deep as we could go, into thought. But he'd pick up where he left off almost immediately, assuring us that according to him—and even if he wasn't the most competent or the most well-versed in these matters, because others truly studied these things, whereas he was satisfied with just brushing past, limiting himself to merely skimming the surface of these complex problems, so to speak, whereas others might have gone to the heart of the matter and consequently claimed true authority, he only had a superficial comprehension of these matters; his point of view was lateral, or, to be more precise, he was staying on the periphery of these things, but nevertheless—according to him, as he maintained, he was quite certain that Moses was far from what one could call a good leader; that he wasn't worth more than the next person; that God could very well have spoken to another Hebrew person. But God was fickle, not to mention volatile, and surely it was best to avoid talking about God, because then he really would've had things to say. But in any event, God had chosen Moses, and Moses might not have been exemplary, but he had the advantage of having been chosen by God, which was a decisive advantage, just as the Hebrews also had this decisive advantage in the same way. But he said—and this is what he was getting at—the Hebrews were not worth more than any other people, like the Egyptians for example, who were nothing to sneeze at; God could have chosen the Egyptian people, and one could truly wonder about the reasons that had pushed God to choose the Hebrew people, but it was an ancient choice, made long before the birth of Moses; and maybe during that time so long ago, God had thought that the Hebrews made an appealing choice, but from this, one could see that God wasn't always thinking ahead, given that the chosen people found themselves, some centuries later, enslaved by the Egyptians, who

main d'œuvre abondante et bon marché qui lui permettait de réaliser les merveilles que l'on sait. Et Dieu, voyant qu'il s'était lourdement trompé, aurait tout aussi bien pu se choisir un autre peuple, par exemple le peuple égyptien, ou tout autre peuple digne d'un Dieu comme lui, et cela n'aurait surpris personne, car Dieu n'était pas à une volte-face près, mais finalement il avait maintenu son choix, du moins pour ce qui concerne cette période, mais de manière générale, et c'est donc véritablement là où il voulait en venir, il ne fallait pas s'étonner que le peuple hébreu ait tout de même fini par être abandonné par Dieu, car, il le disait très tranquillement, sans frémir, c'était couru d'avance, il ne fallait pas s'attendre à autre chose de la part d'un Dieu qui se nommait lui-même Jaloux, et qui avait régulièrement eu recours au chantage, le peuple hébreu n'aurait pas dû placer ainsi aveuglement sa confiance en Dieu, et le culte des idoles aurait été l'occasion rêvée de restaurer un peu d'équilibre avec Dieu, si seulement il s'était trouvé quelqu'un parmi le peuple hébreu pour voir là l'opportunité qui s'ouvrait, mais il ne s'était trouvé personne pour faire voir au peuple hébreu comment il s'agissait de tirer les marrons du feu, et lorsque Moïse s'était mis en colère, le peuple hébreu s'était senti coupable et le Jaloux avait remporté la mise, fin de l'histoire. Nous l'écoutions et tandis que nous l'écoutions nous demeurions intensément perplexes, mais il poursuivait, car il était à ses yeux absolument fondamental de voir, et il fallait être bien aveugle pour ne pas le voir, que l'abandon par Dieu de son peuple était la meilleure chose qui soit jamais arrivée au peuple hébreu, qui avait enfin eu, par cet abandon, la possibilité miraculeuse de reprendre de sa liberté. Dieu avait abandonné le peuple hébreu, et désormais le peuple hébreu était libre, il n'avait jamais été aussi libre que depuis cet abandon, même si le peuple hébreu avait payé très cher cet abandon, et plusieurs fois même le peuple hébreu avait payé très cher cet abandon, et d'ailleurs là encore, Dieu n'était pas exempt de tout reproche, et

brought together this abundant and inexpensive workforce that enabled them to produce the wonders of which we know today. And God, seeing that he had made a big mistake, could just as well have chosen another people, such as the Egyptian people, or any other people worthy of a God like him, and that wouldn't have surprised anyone, because God changed his mind so much that this was only a drop in the bucket, but ultimately he maintained his choice, at least for this period of time. But generally—and this is what he was truly getting at—it came as no surprise that the Hebrew people still ended up being abandoned by God because, he told them very calmly without hesitation, it was a forgone conclusion: one cannot expect anything else from a God who named himself Jealous, and who had regularly resorted to extortion. The Hebrew people shouldn't have placed their faith so blindly in God, and the cult of idols could've been the chance they'd dreamt of to restore a bit of equilibrium with God; if only there was someone among the Hebrew people to see the opportunity that had opened up, but there was no one to show the Hebrews how it was a matter of taking advantage of the situation, and when Moses had flown into a rage, the Hebrews had felt guilty and Jealous hit the jackpot, end of story. We sat there listening to him and as we listened, we remained intensely perplexed, but he kept going, because in his eyes it was absolutely fundamental to see, and one would have to be very blind not to see it, that God's abandonment of his people was the best thing that had ever happened to the Hebrews, who ultimately had, due to this abandonment, the miraculous possibility to reclaim their freedom. God had abandoned the Hebrews and from that point on, the Hebrews were free. They had never been as free as they were now, even if the Hebrews had paid a high price for having been abandoned, and several times the Hebrews did pay a high price for having been abandoned, and moreover, God was not beyond

même il était manifestement coupable d'avoir abandonné son peuple après l'avoir choisi et lui avoir par diverses manipulations imposé son choix, ce qui n'avait pas manqué bien plus tard de susciter beaucoup de jalousies et de rancœur de la part des autres peuples qui ne pouvaient pas s'enorgueillir d'avoir été choisis par un tel Dieu, et finalement, quand les autres peuples avaient compris que ce Dieu était capable d'abandonner son peuple, ils avaient su exploiter cette opportunité avec la réussite que l'on sait, et donc le peuple hébreu l'avait payé très cher, simplement parce que Dieu avait changé d'avis, ce qui bien sûr était parfaitement légitime, mais il fallait tout de même reconnaître que cet abandon était intervenu après une longue série de promesses et de nombreuses scènes de chantage et de démonstrations de force, ce qui avait eu pour effet d'intimider au plus haut point le peuple hébreu, qui avait fini par adhérer pleinement aux promesses divines, et comme toujours lorsqu'on s'en remet ainsi aveuglement à quelqu'un d'autre, quand, usé et vaincu, on accepte, pour finir, de s'en remettre entièrement à l'autre, le peuple hébreu s'était alors trouvé dans une situation dangereuse de précarité et de dépendance, et puisque, selon la formule, les promesses n'engagent que ceux qui y croient, le peuple hébreu s'était ainsi retrouvé exposé à toutes sortes de menaces qui devinrent rapidement une suite désespérante d'événements tous plus horribles les uns que les autres. Mais, c'était là ce qu'il voulait dire depuis le début, car ce long raisonnement ne visait qu'un seul objectif, ce raisonnement n'avait jamais eu d'autre finalité que de parvenir à la conclusion suivante, c'était que le peuple hébreu ne devait pas son caractère exceptionnel au fait qu'il avait été choisi par Dieu, et qu'il était, à ce titre, le peuple élu, mais que c'était le contraire qui avait valeur de vérité, à savoir que le peuple hébreu était exceptionnel pour cette raison qu'il avait été abandonné par Dieu, car c'est cet abandon qui avait permis au peuple hébreu de gagner sa liberté, le peuple hébreu était le peuple le plus libre qu'il fût permis de connaître, et sans cet abandon, le

reproach, and even he was obviously guilty for having abandoned his people after he had chosen them and imposed his choice upon them through various manipulative means, which didn't fail to stir up a lot of jealousy and resentment from other peoples who couldn't pride themselves on having been chosen by such a God, and ultimately, when the other peoples had understood that this God was capable of abandoning his people, they knew how to exploit this opportunity with the success that we know of today. And so the Hebrews had paid dearly, simply because God had changed his mind, which of course was perfectly legitimate, but one must have recognized all the same that this abandonment took place after a long series of promises and numerous scenes of extortion and demonstrations of power, which consequently intimidated the Hebrew people to the utmost extreme, and they ended up adhering completely to the divine promises, the way it always goes when one relies so blindly on someone else: in the end, worn out and defeated, one surrenders and submits to the other. The Hebrews thus found themselves in a dangerous situation of precariousness and dependency, and since, according to the formula, promises are only binding to those who believe in them, thus the Hebrews found themselves exposed to all sorts of threats that quickly became a series of despairing events, each one more horrible than the last. But that was the conclusion he'd been trying to reach from the beginning; this long train of thought had only one objective in mind, his reasoning had no purpose but to arrive at the following conclusion: the Hebrew people, he contended, didn't owe their exceptional character to the fact that they had been chosen by God, and that they were, as a result, the chosen people, but in fact the contrary was true, namely that the Hebrew people were exceptional because they were abandoned by God, since it was precisely this abandonment that enabled the Hebrews to gain their freedom. The Hebrews were the freest of people, and had

peuple hébreu serait resté un peuple stupide, un peuple stupide comme tous les peuples sont stupides quand ces peuples sont, pour ainsi dire: sous le charme.

De temps en temps, il se trouvait quelqu'un pour lui demander si comme Moïse, il pensait qu'il était un escroc, à quoi il répondait sans hésitation que ce n'était pas à lui d'en juger, et que pour autant qu'il sache, il n'avait pris le commandement d'aucun peuple. Chacun de ce fait était libre de se faire sa propre opinion.

Il racontait aussi comment après avoir ramé très longtemps, et alors que l'incendie n'était même plus une lueur vague à l'horizon, et alors donc que l'obscurité était désormais complète, il avait poursuivi son effort encore quelques temps, mais il avait finalement été contraint de s'arrêter car il n'avait vraiment plus eu assez de force pour continuer de ramer. Il avait échoué sa barque sur une petite plage de sable qui justement se trouvait là, et il avait commencé à s'enfoncer tout droit dans les hautes herbes et les jones qui bordaient la rivière. Il avait marché un moment, sans savoir du tout où il allait, dans le noir complet, et miraculeusement, il était parvenu à apercevoir ce qui ne pouvait pas être autre chose qu'une vieille grange. Il avait d'abord pensé que c'était une grange mais il avait fini par constater que le toit du bâtiment était beaucoup moins haut qu'il l'avait d'abord cru, et pour cette raison, il n'avait pas eu d'autre choix que de considérer qu'il ne se dirigeait pas vers une grange mais vers une étable, dont les dimensions étaient finalement beaucoup plus modestes. Après avoir longé les murs de l'étable, il comprit qu'il n'y avait pas vraiment de porte, et de cette façon il avait pu aisément pénétrer à l'intérieur du petit édifice. Il dut se cogner plusieurs fois avant de parvenir, de façon approximative, à se représenter mentalement l'organisation spatiale du lieu où il se trouvait. La chose fut naturellement facilitée par le fait qu'il y avait du bétail et qu'en se dirigeant vers leur souffle chaud, il trouva une mangeoire

they not been abandoned, they would have remained a stupid people, stupid the way all people are stupid when they are, so to speak, spellbound.

Occasionally, someone would ask if, like Moses, he thought he was a swindler too, to which he'd respond, without hesitation, that it wasn't for him to judge, and that as far as he knew, he hadn't taken command of any people. Therefore, everyone was free to form their own opinions.

He'd also recount how, after having rowed for a long time, when the blaze was no more than a faint glow on the horizon, and so from that point on, the darkness was total, he kept up his efforts for a while longer, until he'd been forced to stop rowing because he really didn't have enough strength to continue. He had run his boat aground on a little sandy beach that just so happened to be conveniently right there. Then he disappeared, straight into the tall grasses and bulrushes along the river. He had been walking in complete darkness for some time, not knowing where he was headed when, miraculously, he caught sight of what was unmistakably an old barn. At least he thought it was a barn at first, but then he saw that the building's roof was a lot lower than he'd initially thought, and that's why he couldn't help but figure that he was heading not toward a barn but a stable, whose dimensions were much more modest. After walking the perimeter of the stable, he realized that the door was missing, so it was easy to get inside the humble structure. He bumped into the walls several times before he could construct a rough mental map of its layout. The task was made easier since there was some livestock inside, and groping his way in the direction of their warm breath, he came upon a manger filled with

avec de la paille dedans. Il s'installa dans la mangeoire, en s'offrant pour ainsi au museau des bêtes et à leur souffle chaud, et même à leur langue parce que les bêtes étaient curieuses de sa présence et passaient leur tête à travers les barreaux métalliques de leur enclos et elles passaient leur mufle sur lui, et parfois il recevait un coup de langue sur le visage. Cependant, comme on imagine, la mangeoire, bien que rendue confortable par le fait qu'elle était encore garnie du foin que les bêtes n'avait pas tout mangé, et que cela constituait de façon inespérée une matelas dont les qualités de moelleux et de douceur ne peuvent être remises en question, il dut néanmoins admettre que le confort de la mangeoire restait limité, du fait des dimensions intrinsèques de la mangeoire, qu'il n'était pas possible de modifier: il était à l'étroit et ses jambes dépassaient largement. Après avoir en vain cherché une position suffisamment confortable pour lui permettre de s'endormir, ce qui en principe aurait dû être très facilement possible, compte tenu du fait qu'il était épuisé par l'intense effort physique qu'il avait dû faire au cours de sa fuite, mais il ne trouvait pas de bonne position, et ainsi il dut se relever, ce qui eut pour effet de surprendre les bêtes qui eurent un soudain mouvement de recul, fidèles en cela à leur nature craintive, et donc il se releva, il poussa la mangeoire sur le côté et il prit le foin qui s'y trouvait et le disposa directement sur le sol de terre battue, à l'endroit où se trouvait la mangeoire, de sorte que lorsqu'il cessa ses gesticulations dans l'obscurité et qu'il se recoucha dans le foin, les bêtes revinrent rapidement vers lui pour le réchauffer car il est bien évident qu'il faisait froid et que dans ces circonstances on tombe facilement malade surtout après un tel effort physique, et qu'il avait marché un certain temps à travers les herbes hautes et les joncs, le corps couvert de sueur, et qu'il avait commencé à avoir froid parce que l'humidité, la nuit et la végétation avaient rapidement pris l'ascendant sur la chaleur que son corps produisait. Les bêtes revinrent placer leur museau juste au-dessus de lui, et tout ce qu'il pouvait dire encore à

straw. He lay down in the manger, thus exposing himself to the animals' snouts, their warm breaths, and even their tongues, because the animals, curious about his presence, would stretch their heads past the metal bars of their enclosures, rubbing their noses on him and occasionally licking his face. However, as one might imagine, the manger, though cushioned with straw the animals had yet to finish, and though this straw unexpectedly made a mattress of undeniable softness and smoothness, he still had to admit that the comfort of the manger remained limited by its dimensions, which made it impossible for him to change position: he was cramped, and his legs stuck out way beyond the edges of the manger. After searching in vain for a position comfortable enough to fall asleep in—which should have been very easy for him to do, in theory, given how exhausted he was from exerting himself so intensely during his escape—he still just couldn't find a good position, and had to get back up, which startled the animals, who sprang back, faithful to their timid natures. He got up, upended the manger, gathered the straw that had fallen out, and arranged it directly on the same patch of dirt where the manger had been. Once he stopped flailing in the dark and finally settled back down on the straw, the animals quickly returned to warm him up—it was clear that it was cold, and that one could easily fall ill in these conditions, especially after such grueling physical effort, and since he'd walked for so long through the tall grasses and bulrushes, his body covered in sweat, he had started to get cold because the humidity, the darkness, and the vegetation had quickly preyed upon the heat that his body produced. The animals returned, resting their snouts right above him, and the only thing he could say

ce sujet, c'est qu'il était tout à fait certain qu'il y avait parmi ces bêtes un âne et un boeuf, qu'il n'avait certes pas pu les voir distinctement, mais il n'avait aucun doute sur le fait qu'il y avait un âne et un boeuf, parce qu'il avait reconnu l'odeur de ces deux-là, qui ont une odeur très caractéristique, et il avait même tendu les bras pour toucher leur museau, et c'était bien la forme du museau d'un âne et de celui d'un boeuf, il en était absolument sûr, et partant: fin de l'histoire. Le lendemain, disait-il, il était prêt.

on this subject, even now, was that he was absolutely certain that there was a donkey and an ox among those animals; he wasn't quite able to make them out, but there was no doubting the fact that there was a donkey and an ox, because he had recognized their odors—they both have very distinct odors—and he had even reached out to touch their snouts, and what he felt was indeed the exact shape of a donkey's snout and the shape of an ox's snout, of this he was absolutely certain, and so, end of story. The next day, he was ready, he said.

## Translator's Foreword

On navigue dans ce texte, en parallèle du quotidien d'une narratrice insomniaque, entre des réminiscences fugaces et des vies imaginées pour d'autres, ces fils narratifs étant liés par une perception sensorielle empreinte de poésie. L'auteure insère des expressions dans d'autres langues que l'anglais – dans cette version, principalement le chinois transcrit en alphabet latin. Un effet de ce procédé, intéressant *a fortiori* dans l'exercice de la traduction, est celui produit sur la lectrice non sinophone pour qui l'incompréhension, certes atténuée par le contexte, est comme une miniature, en creux, du déracinement des personnages semblant faire irruption dans l'univers culturellement dominant et évident à lui-même de l'Amérique et de sa langue, comme, sinon la narratrice elle-même, M. Qian, le peintre chinois, ou encore, dans une version longue du même texte, un étudiant belge et une enfant d'immigrés pakistanais.

Ce texte de Kimberly Liu constitue le début de sa nouvelle *Light, now* (*Lumière, maintenant*). Il s'intitule donc avec à-propos *Light, at the limen* (*Lumière, sur le seuil*). Bien qu'il ne les contienne pas tous, il laisse déjà voir les nombreux thèmes entremêlés de la nouvelle: la souffrance psychique, la brutale incompréhension entre plusieurs mondes, la place de l'artiste dans des sociétés imprégnées de violence, ou encore les multiples échelles d'écoulement du temps superposées dans le vécu. Il réplique dans sa structure le mouvement de l'ombre vers la lumière, rendu par les deux titres chacun à leur manière, et laisse – prudemment – espérer des jours meilleurs.



## KIMBERLY LIU

### LIGHT AT THE LIMEN

A voice resembling mine vibrates from the future through the dark: these past few months, I've been kept awake by the futures I imagine for others. I'd be in bed after having taken my melatonin, when I'd turn off the light and the ceiling would disappear completely. I'd close my eyes, let me sleep just an hour or two, I'd say to no one. Yet most nights, my eyelids would separate on their own, and I'd watch the ceiling tiles above me blur into focus as my vision adjusts to the dark. As I trace the outline of every panel over many times, the shades of people's lives would take form and waltz in the blackness, until the soft orange glow of dawn would creep in through the blinds and cast itself upon the walls.

During rush hour on the last day of October, through the veil of fatigue, I listen to my shoes squelch as they pass along the grimy linoleum of 42nd Street station. Wheels of a train screech. Coins clink inside a plastic cup tapping on the ground. A staticky voice announces to stay clear of the platform edge. Train cars blare their door closing signals. The rhythmic beat of drums rises from the lower level tracks. A woman makes a sound of shock as someone dressed as Frank the rabbit from *Donnie Darko* bumps into her, then proceeds to raise two furry paws, whether in apology or mockery, it's hard to tell.

It's been a few weeks since I stopped wearing noise-

**traduit de l'anglais par  
THOMAS SIBUT-PINOTE**

## LUMIÈRE SUR LE SEUIL

Une voix qui ressemble à la mienne résonne depuis l'avenir à travers la pénombre : ces derniers mois, les avenir que j'invente pour d'autres m'ont maintenue éveillée. J'étais au lit après avoir pris ma mélatonine, lorsque j'éteignais la lumière et le plafond disparaissait complètement. Je fermais les yeux, *juste dormir une heure ou deux*, demandais-je dans le vide. Malgré cela, la plupart des nuits mes paupières se séparaient d'elles-mêmes, et je regardais les carrés au plafond devenir nets à mesure que ma vue s'ajustait à la pénombre. Alors que je traçais sans cesse du regard le contour de chaque panneau, les ombres de la vie des gens prenaient forme et valsaients dans les ténèbres, jusqu'à ce que la douce lueur orangée de l'aube se faufile à travers les stores et se projette sur les murs.

Pendant l'heure de pointe ce dernier jour d'octobre, à travers le voile de l'épuisement, j'écoute mes chaussures couiner sur le lino crasseux de la station *42<sup>nd</sup> street*. Les roues d'un train crissent. Des pièces de monnaie tintent dans un gobelet en plastique tapoté contre le sol. Une voix saturée intime de s'éloigner de la bordure du quai. Des rames beuglent leur signal de fermeture des portes. Le battement rythmique de tambours surgit des voies du niveau inférieur. Une femme émet un son de frayeur quand quelqu'un qui est déguisé en Frank le lapin dans *Donnie Darko* lui rentre dedans, puis entreprend de lever deux pattes de fourrure, pour s'excuser ou pour se moquer, c'est difficile à dire.

Depuis quelques semaines, j'ai arrêté de porter un casque

cancelling headphones on my commute. It's one less thing to think about in the morning, one less item to keep track of throughout the day, to weigh me down. I've come to find that the cacophony of the subway can be in fact soothing; the anonymous slivers of people's lives carried by the roar of the trains into my ears as one giant unintelligible wave.

Passing faces range from expressionless to frustrated. As I turn a corner, a sharp melody reaches my ears. It's the sound of a violin— piercing and sweet, the vibrato resounding through the station in gentle waves. It grows louder as I continue walking. Then, there she is, the violinist: long brown hair, tan skin, lean limbs. Water has darkened the bottom rim of her green skirt, and it brushes along the soiled metro floor, but she doesn't seem to mind or be aware. Her eyes are closed as she moves in emphasis to the music. She has an elegant face with mild features, one that you might find in a bridal photography ad, or on the cover of a Nation's Top 20 Universities magazine. Her right arm: bowing with ease; her left fingers: quick and agile.

I feel the fog lift, like her music has fanned it away. Now wanting to attract attention by standing right in front of her, I slow down my walk as I approach her. Some heads turn to her as they pass, but so far she has not accumulated an audience.

At her feet, there is a light green and white checkered cloth, and on it stands a sign, paper-white and clean, a contrast to the usual rippled cardboard ones we see in the subways. Forced leave from Juilliard for mental health openness, it read in painstakingly neat black letters. In front of it sits a woven basket. In front of that lie

anti-bruits pendant mon trajet quotidien. Une chose de moins à penser le matin, un élément de moins sur la liste des préoccupations de la journée, des poids sur mes épaules. J'ai fini par me rendre compte que la cacophonie du métro peut en fait apaiser : les éclats anonymes des existences des gens, portés par le rugissement des métros jusqu'à mes oreilles, en une onde géante et inintelligible.

J'évite le regard des visages croisés dont je connais les expressions qui vont de vides à frustrées, et alors que je bifurque, une mélodie aiguë atteint mes oreilles. C'est le son d'un violon – perçant et doux, le vibrato résonne à travers la station en vagues apaisantes. Il s'amplifie à mesure que j'avance. La voici, la violoniste : cheveux bruns longs, peau sombre, membres fins. L'eau a foncé le bas de sa robe verte, qui frotte le sol souillé du métro, mais elle n'a pas l'air de s'en inquiéter ou même de s'en rendre compte. Ses yeux sont fermés alors qu'elle se meut en symbiose avec la musique. Elle a un visage élégant aux traits élémentaires, le genre typique d'une publicité pour photos de mariage, ou de la couverture d'un numéro du magazine des *20 meilleures universités du pays*. Bras droit : fluide dans le jeu d'archet ; doigts de la main gauche : rapides et agiles.

Je sens le brouillard se lever, comme si sa musique l'avait dissipé avec son éventail. Ne souhaitant pas attirer l'attention en me tenant en face d'elle, je ralenti mon pas en m'approchant. Des têtes se tournent vers elle en passant, mais elle n'a pas encore amassé de public.

À ses pieds se trouve un tissu à carreaux blanc et vert clair, sur lequel est posé un panneau en papier, blanc et propre, en contraste avec les habituels cartons ondulés qu'on voit dans le métro. *Congé forcé du conservatoire de Juilliard pour cause de transparence au sujet de ma santé mentale*, peut-on lire en lettres noires méticuleusement tracées. Juste devant le panneau est posée une corbeille

several copies of a CD, immaculately arranged in a fan shape.

My walk is almost slowed to a standstill. I can feel the weight of my wallet in my tote bag. I remember the small amount of cash I happen to have. I'm reaching for the wallet when I hear a passing voice say, "She's too pretty to be mentally ill," followed by another that says, "Seriously."

When I swivel around to look for faces, there's only the teeming crowd. The subway station begins to spin around me. Then, a translucent waterfall of black raven hair imposes itself over the bustling scene of the metro station, still and dreamlike, a mirage. An image from the past. Snippets of overheard voices from that time follow, echoing in my head. Too pretty to be mentally ill. Attention whore.

My hand withdraws from my bag. It never even touched my wallet. I push through the crowd, my vision fuzzy, my head hurting from the effort of keeping my senses focused on the present—the glistening yellow platform edge, the stale smell of the underground—and keeping memory at bay. Standing on the end of the platform, I watch as the dark tunnel is flooded with light. My hair whips wildly as steel screeches. "This an uptown express C train. Please stay clear of the doors."

A block away from home, the Qian Palace, with its red and gold-lined interior, glows like a haven on the otherwise dark street. I stand still on the sidewalk, hesitating, before going in.

en osier. Et devant la corbeille sont déployées plusieurs copies d'un CD, arrangées en un éventail immaculé.

Mon pas s'est presque complètement interrompu. Je peux sentir le poids de mon porte-monnaie dans mon cabas. Je me souviens du petit montant en liquide que je me trouve avoir emmené avec moi. J'approche la main de mon porte-monnaie lorsque j'entends une voix qui passe dire "elle est trop jolie pour avoir des problèmes de santé mentale", suivie d'une autre, "c'est clair!"

Je tourne la tête pour mettre des visages sur ces commentaires, mais ils sont déjà perdus dans le grouillement de la foule. La station de métro commence à tourner autour de moi. Les bords de mon champ de vision perdent en intensité et en netteté. Alors, une cascade translucide de cheveux noir de jais s'impose par-dessus la scène effervescente de la station de métro, calme et onirique, un mirage. Une image du passé. Des extraits de voix entendues par hasard en ce temps-là suivent en écho dans ma tête. *Trop jolie pour avoir des problèmes de santé mentale. N'importe quoi pour de l'attention.*

Ma main se retire de mon sac. Elle n'a même pas touché mon porte-monnaie, de toute façon. Je me fraie un chemin dans la foule, la vue floue, la tête douloureuse à force de concentrer mes sens sur l'instant présent – l'extrémité jaune fluo du quai, l'odeur de renfermé du métro – et maintenir les souvenirs à distance. Debout au bout du quai, j'observe le tunnel obscur s'emplir de lumière. Mes cheveux fouettent l'air sauvagement tandis que l'acier crisse. "Train C express direction *Uptown*. Attention à la fermeture des portes."

À un bloc de chez moi, le *Qian Palace*, avec son intérieur doublé rouge et or, brille comme un refuge dans la rue sombre. Je me tiens immobile sur le trottoir, hésitante, avant d'entrer.

The little bell on the door chimes. Warm air and the fragrance of stale sesame oil greet me. On the counter, the lucky cat waves its arm. “Chinese restaurants are probably the only ones in the Western World that are so steeped in historical social inferiority that even the nicest ones today feel obliged to offer takeout,” someone had said at some Romance language department party last year.

I place my order for a vegetarian mifen and retreat to a distance from the counter. A long silence passes. The metronomic wave of the lucky cat is soothing. Finally I ask, “Qian laoban isn’t here today?”

“He’s in D.C. to help out with an ill friend.”

“Ah.” I suddenly feel my appetite disappear and a wave of exhaustion come over me, and I want to go home.

Someone brings out my order in a plastic bag. I thank him and the receptionist before hearing the bell chime as I exit through the door.

“Qian means money in Chinese. Jin qian de qian,” he had told me the first time I went to the restaurant, adjusting the angle of the lucky cat on the register. “But Americans don’t know that, so it’s not very funny,” he had added.

Mr. Qian is from the northernmost Chinese province of Heilongjiang. He was a fourth-year student at the National Fine Arts Academy when the Tiananmen protests shook the nation in 1989. Peers in more dynamic

La petite cloche sur la porte retentit. L'air chaud et le parfum de l'huile de sésame rassie me saluent. Sur le comptoir, le chat porte-bonheur agite le bras. *Les restaurants chinois sont probablement les seuls dans le monde occidental qui soient si imprégnés historiquement de leur infériorité sociale, que même les plus raffinés aujourd'hui croient devoir proposer leur menu à emporter,* a dit quelqu'un à une fête du département des langues romanes l'année dernière.

Je commande un *mifen* végétarien et me recule à bonne distance du comptoir. Un long silence passe. Le mouvement métronome du chat porte-bonheur est apaisant. Enfin je demande, “Qian Laoban n'est pas là aujourd'hui?”

“Il est à Washington D.C. pour aider un ami malade.”

“Ah.” Je sens soudain mon appétit disparaître et une vague d'épuisement m'engloutit, et je veux rentrer chez moi.

Quelqu'un apporte ma commande dans un sac en plastique. Je les remercie, lui et le réceptionniste, avant d'entendre de nouveau la cloche de la porte retentir en sortant.

“Qian veut dire ‘argent’ en chinois. *Jin qian de qian*”, m'a-t-il dit la première fois que je suis venue au restaurant, en ajustant l'angle du chat porte-bonheur sur le comptoir. “Mais les Américains ne le savent pas, alors ce n'est pas très drôle”, il avait ajouté.

M. Qian vient de la province chinoise la plus au nord, le Heilongjiang. Il était étudiant de quatrième année à l'Académie des Beaux-Arts quand les manifestations de Tiananmen ont secoué la nation en 1989. Ses camarades étudiant des matières plus dynamiques, comme le

mediums like film and sculpture started meeting roadblocks in circulating and showing their work. Writers were getting censored. The following year, Mr. Qian rode the wave of post-Tiananmen immigration over to the U.S. as a graduate student in East Asian Art History at the University of Maryland.

“I was one of the best painters,” he had said, with a reminiscent smile. “Only two students from my province were given scholarships to Beijing. I was one of them. When I realized I couldn’t do what I had dedicated myself to in China anymore, I came to America. I had heard you can do anything in America! Then I realized, I couldn’t paint here! Who would look at my Chinese paintings? And my English was poor. There is no place for people like me here, there is barely even a place for people like me back in China! But I could work. And I could cook. The restaurant industry is profitable! So I quit school.”

A tree shudders in the wind, and dull brown leaves drift to the asphalt. I reach a hand up to brush off any leaves caught in my hair, but there aren’t any.

There are rapid footsteps and gaudy voices behind me that signal a band of children, and I move to the side of the road to make way. They rush past, capes billowing, candy bags swinging. Someone shouts, Race you to the end of the street! The voice is bright, unrestrained.

As I ascend the creaky stairs to my apartment, my phone vibrates. Freddie and Martha are turning up this

cinéma ou la sculpture, ont commencé à rencontrer des obstacles dans la circulation et l'exposition de leur travail. Les écrivains commençaient à être censurés. L'année suivante, M. Qian s'est laissé porter par la vague d'immigration post-Tiananmen vers les États-Unis, en tant qu'étudiant de master en Histoire de l'Art d'Asie de l'Est, à l'Université du Maryland.

“J'étais l'un des meilleurs peintres”, avait-il dit, avec un sourire plein de réminiscence. “Seuls deux étudiants de ma province ont reçu des bourses pour Beijing. J'étais l'un d'eux. Quand je me suis rendu compte que je ne pourrais plus faire ce à quoi je m'étais consacré en Chine, je suis venu en Amérique. J'avais entendu qu'on peut faire ce qu'on veut en Amérique ! Et puis je me suis rendu compte que je ne pouvais pas peindre ici ! Qui regarderait mes peintures chinoises ? Et mon anglais était mauvais. Il n'y a pas de place pour les gens comme moi ici, il y a à peine de la place pour les gens comme moi en Chine ! Mais je pouvais travailler. Et je pouvais cuisiner. La restauration est un secteur qui marche ! Alors j'ai arrêté les études.”

Un arbre frissonne dans le vent, et des feuilles brun terne volettent vers l'asphalte. Je passe une main dans mes cheveux pour me débarrasser de feuilles éventuelles, mais il n'y en a aucune.

Des pas rapides et des voix criardes derrière moi annoncent une bande d'enfants, et je m'écarte vers le bord de la chaussée pour céder le passage. Ils me dépassent à toute vitesse, avec leurs capes qui tourbillonnent et leurs sacs de bonbons qui se balancent. Quelqu'un s'écrie, *On fait la course jusqu'au bout de la rue !* La voix est éclatante, sans retenue.

Tandis que je gravis les escaliers grinçants vers mon appartement, mon téléphone vibre. *Freddie et Martha*

Halloween! 64 Greene Street #5F, 10pm. Bring an angel or a demon! The more the scarier!

It's a mass text, but I reply anyway. Didn't get any sleep last night. tired, sorry! I put the phone back into my pocket. Closing the front door behind me, I feel a sudden wave of nausea towards the food in my hand, and I abandon my takeout on the kitchen counter as I make my way to the bedroom in the dark. I open the top drawer of my nightstand, and place my phone inside. Then I take out the large bottle of melatonin, shake out three pills, put the bottle back and close the drawer.

I swallow the pills, a gesture that's become more of a habit than any solution to my sleeplessness. I crawl into bed, and reach out to turn off the light. Lying as flat and still as I can, I try to keep my eyes closed, but they keep opening to see feeble light dancing on the ceiling from the occasional passing car. The radiator sputters, and I realize that I haven't slept properly since it began doing that when winter set in one or two weeks ago.

The strange thing is, this year is nothing new. I've always received the winter months with relief and also apprehension. Relief comes from how the crowds scatter, people retreat indoors, the streets silence, parks empty. I can sit in the illusion that I'm sharing this world with fewer people, that there are fewer people I have to account for, fewer people awake during this season that I have to pour myself into.

*débarquent pour Halloween ! 64 Greene Street #5F, 22h.  
Amenez un ange ou un démon ! Plus on est de fous et plus  
on crie !*

C'est un texto de groupe, mais je réponds quand même. *Pas dormi la nuit dernière. épuisée, désolée !* Je remets le téléphone dans ma poche. En fermant la porte derrière moi, la nourriture que je tiens me soulève le cœur, et j'abandonne mon plat à emporter sur le comptoir de la cuisine en me frayant un chemin vers la chambre dans le noir. J'ouvre le tiroir supérieur de ma table de nuit et dépose mon téléphone à l'intérieur. Puis je sors le large flacon de mélatonine, en fais tomber trois comprimés, repose le flacon et ferme le tiroir.

J'avale les comprimés, un geste qui relève désormais plus d'une habitude que d'une solution à mon absence de sommeil. Je me traîne dans mon lit, et tends la main pour éteindre la lumière. Allongée aussi horizontalement et calmement que possible, j'essaie de garder les yeux fermés, mais ils ne cessent de s'ouvrir à la vue d'une faible lumière dansant sur le plafond au passage occasionnel d'une voiture. Le radiateur toussote, et je me rends compte que je n'ai pas dormi correctement depuis lors, quand l'hiver s'est installé il y a une ou deux semaines.

Ce qui est étrange, c'est que cette année n'a rien de nouveau. J'ai toujours accueilli les mois d'hiver avec du soulagement, et de l'appréhension aussi. Le soulagement vient de la manière dont les foules se dispersent, les gens se retirent à l'intérieur, les rues se taisent, les parcs se vident. Je peux entretenir l'illusion de partager ce monde avec moins de gens, qu'il y a moins de gens à prendre en considération, moins de gens éveillés pendant cette saison dans laquelle il faut que je me laisse déverser.

On the other hand, apprehension comes from the way the sky droops, the way daylight narrows, the way the cold cracks the weak open from within. In addition, though I've lived a decent amount of time, and so far it's been alright, these past few years, deep in my head is something like a rhythmic tapping: a quiet fear that I may not make it out to spring.

And that's where things become peculiar.

It's not just that I can't get to sleep. Once I lie down on my bed, an uncanny sense of disbelonging washes over my body. Like a series of voices telling me I'll never sleep again—that while the other seven billion people take off their clothes and shed their lives for a few hours, I will be forever staring at a ceiling, blinking at nothing, never getting a respite from the straight pummel towards death.

I bring the back of my hand up to wipe my forehead, then press hard on my temple with my forefinger. One should not be sweating in this temperature. I get up, lift the window up a crack. Frigid air rushes in and cools my neck. I feel my heartbeat slow. I climb back into bed.

On top of the covers, my insides feel incongruously heavy or light—I can't tell which one. Like when the airplane takes off, and your body is in the stomach of the plane struggling against gravity .

Outside, brown leaves drift aimlessly as October shudders into November. With my eyes blinking at the ceiling, I imagine Mr. Qian on an airplane—the first one he will have taken since he arrived here twenty years ago. How he might push up his glasses, extend his neck, and press every button on the touch-screen entertainment system

Quant à l'appréhension, elle provient de la manière dont le ciel s'affaisse, dont la lumière du jour se restreint, dont le froid fait éclater les faibles de l'intérieur. De surcroît, bien que j'aie déjà vécu un certain temps, et si jusqu'ici tout s'est bien passé, ces dernières années, dans les profondeurs de mon crâne retentit comme un tapotement rythmé : une peur muette que je ne passe pas l'hiver.

Et c'est là que les choses deviennent singulières.

Ce n'est pas simplement que je n'arrive pas à m'endormir. Une fois que je suis allongée dans mon lit, un sens troublant d'isolement submerge mon corps : comme une série de voix m'informant que je ne dormirai plus jamais – que tandis que les sept autres milliards de gens se déshabillent et prennent congé de leur vie pour quelques heures, je fixerai le plafond pour toujours, clignant des yeux vers le néant, sans le moindre répit dans la chute vers la mort.

J'élève le revers de ma main pour essuyer mon front, et j'appuie fort sur ma tempe avec mon index. Ce n'est pas possible d'être en sueur par cette température. Je me lève, et soulève légèrement la fenêtre. Un air glacial fait irruption et rafraîchit mon cou. Je sens mon pouls ralentir. Je grimpe à nouveau dans mon lit.

Par-dessus la couverture, mes entrailles sont étrangement lourdes ou légères – je ne parviens pas à décider lequel des deux. Comme lorsque, au décollage, nos corps combattent la gravité dans le ventre de l'avion.

Au-dehors, des feuilles brunes dérivent sans but pendant qu'octobre se mue en novembre dans un frisson. En clignant des yeux vers le plafond, j'imagine M. Qian dans un avion – le premier qu'il aura pris depuis qu'il est arrivé ici il y a vingt ans. Je le vois soulever ses lunettes, étendre son cou, et appuyer sur tous les boutons du

before deciding he would rather look out the window. When the aircraft meal is served, he will take a bite, grimace, and mutter to himself, “He ershi nianqian yi yang nanchi”.

When he steps off the plane, he will be back in his home province. It’s the provincial capital of Harbin, a city bifurcated by the Songhua River that runs all the way into Russia where it becomes the Amur River. Far from politics, Mr. Qian will admire this long body of water from his childhood, its frozen surface glistening in the winter sun. The ice festival is in the works: he will paint men hauling blocks of ice their own height out of the river to carve and whittle into intricate ice sculptures. At night, Harbin explodes into color, castles and labyrinths and buddhas of ice radiating light from the inside out. Oil on canvas: soft iridescence over black surface primer.

On Sun Island, he will paint the people as little dots on an immense expanse of white. Traditional ink wash on xuan paper: minimal strokes against a large emptiness. Even in bright daylight, the air would freeze his water. Mr. Qian paints from the warmth of a dumpling shop, steam from a passing order sometimes obscuring his glasses.

At the city center, he will paint the Russian churches framed by the pale yellow buildings lining the cobblestoned streets. Bright gouache sinks into cold-pressed paper. When he’s finished, he will pack his materials up, and old friends will come burst into the noodle restaurant in a ruckus, shouting greetings and good-humored mockeries in the loud Dongbei bellow, offering cigarettes and pushing bottles of expensive Chinese spirits into his hands, exclaiming, “Lao Qian ke zhongyu hulaile!” repeatedly, as if it’s been pent up for

système de divertissement à écran tactile avant de décider qu'il préfère regarder par la fenêtre. Quand le plateau-repas est servi, il prend une bouchée, fait la grimace, et il murmure pour lui-même, “*He ershi nianqian yiyang nanchi*”.

En descendant de l'avion, il sera de retour dans sa province natale. C'est la capitale de province Harbin, une ville scindée par le fleuve Songhua qui s'étire jusqu'en Russie où il devient le fleuve Amour. Loin de la politique, M. Qian admirera le long cours d'eau de son enfance, sa surface luisante sous le soleil d'hiver. Le festival de la glace est en préparation : il peindra des hommes tirant des blocs de glace aussi hauts qu'eux hors du fleuve pour les graver et les ciseler en des sculptures de glace alambiquées. La nuit, Harbin éclate en couleur ; châteaux, labyrinthes et buddhas de glace irradient d'une lumière intérieure. Huile sur toile : iridescence douce sur l'apprêt de surface noir.

Sur l'Île du Soleil, il peindra les gens comme des petits points sur une immense étendue de blanc. Lavis traditionnel sur papier *xuan* : traits minimaux se détachant sur un grand vide. Même à la lumière brillante du jour, son solvant gèlerait au contact de l'air. M. Qian peint depuis la chaleur d'un magasin de raviolis, la vapeur d'une commande embuant parfois ses lunettes.

Au centre-ville, il peindra les églises russes encadrées par les immeubles jaune pâle qui flanquent la rue pavée. La gouache claire s'enfonce dans les fibres du papier pressé à froid. Quand il aura fini, il rangera son matériel, et de vieux amis feront irruption dans le restaurant de nouilles dans un boucan, criant des salutations et des moqueries plaisantes avec ce bruyant beuglement de Dongbei, proposant des cigarettes et poussant des bouteilles de spiritueux chinois hors de prix entre ses mains, s'exclamant “*Lao Qian ke zhongyu huilaile*” encore

all these years—being able to say that Old Qian has finally come home.

At the meal's end, the exuberance will have petered out.  
“Lao Qian, sha shi hou zai huilai kan women?”

I imagine him breaking to them the news that he's obtained a multiple-entry visa to China now, so that he'll be able to come back as often as he likes so long as his finances allow it. They'll roar their congratulations, and rise to their feet to give yet another toast. When the waiter comes around, and after the typical fight for the bill that borders on aggressive is settled, Mr. Qian sees not a single wallet pulled out, and instead his friend holds his phone screen out to the waiter who scans it with a boxy device.

“I'll be able to get Wechat Pay too, right?” Mr. Qian asks after the waiter leaves.

A hush falls on his friends for a brief second as they realize that their old friend is now legally a foreigner. Then the noise resumes as they break out in smiles and expressions of reassurance, “Don't worry! We'll find you a way to get around the shenfenzheng requirement!”

et encore, comme si on l'avait réprimé pendant toutes ces années – pouvoir dire que le Vieux Qian est enfin revenu à la maison.

À la fin du repas, l'exubérance se sera essoufflée. “*Lao Qian, sha shi hou zai huilai kan women?*”

Je l'imagine leur révélant qu'il a obtenu un visa à entrées multiples vers la Chine à présent, de sorte qu'il pourra revenir aussi souvent qu'il le souhaite tant que son budget le permettra. Ils le féliciteront en rugissant, et se lèveront pour porter un énième toast. Quand le serveur s'approche, et une fois réglée l'habituelle dispute pour la note qui confine à l'agressivité, M. Qian ne voit pas un seul porte-monnaie dégainé, et à la place son ami tend l'écran de son téléphone vers le serveur, qui le scanne avec un appareil électronique ressemblant à une boîte.

“Je pourrai avoir *WeChat Pay*<sup>1</sup> moi aussi, n'est-ce pas?” demande M. Qian une fois le serveur parti.

Un silence s'installe un bref instant, durant lequel ils prennent conscience que, du point de vue légal, leur vieil ami est devenu un étranger. Puis le bruit reprend à mesure qu'ils éclatent en sourires et expressions de réconfort, “Ne t'inquiète pas ! On te trouvera un moyen de contourner l'obligation de *shenfenzheng*<sup>2</sup>”.

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<sup>1</sup> Application de paiement omniprésente en Chine.

<sup>2</sup> Document d'identité chinois requis pour les actes officiels, mais aussi pour utiliser un cybercafé ou entrer dans certains magasins.

## Translator's Foreword

Thomas Sibut-Pinote holds a PhD in Computer Science from École Normale Supérieure in Lyon, and is currently pursuing a Masters in Création Littéraire at Université Paris 8. In addition to showing early talent in mathematics which eventually led him to his career path in computer science, he has read voraciously from a young age. When I asked Sibut-Pinote when he started thinking of himself as a writer, he cited not what was present in his life after his embrace of the title, but what was newly absent: a decade-long academic career in software engineering, and the stability and privileges that come with such a life.

In the short story *Dead Time*, Thomas presents us with a slice of a world whose actors are also defined by what is absent. A stoic physicist named Guillaume travels back in time on a mission to prevent a tragedy, only to find an unexpected old friend waiting for him. One can hear echoes of Flaubert and Proust, as well as Philip K. Dick and Stanisław Lem, as borders between thought and exposition—reality—are blurred, and memories emerge and disappear as swiftly as scientific rationality cedes to emotions.

Sibut-Pinote's French original is restrained yet elegant, and suffused with the sorrow of two characters as they come to understand the inevitable outcomes of their choices even when bestowed with the very technology that allows them to disrupt any fatal decisions.

Time forks and tenses warp in this story. Verbs that assumed the future and conditional tenses seamlessly in the French became unwieldy and cumbersome in English. The minimalist and elegant dialogue took a significant amount of molding to not sound stilted

in the translation. Additionally, the appearance of “tutoiement” presented a problem. My solution was to indicate Guillaume’s shift from the formal pronoun “vous” into the informal pronoun “tu” by shifting from addressing her as “Madame Mercier,” to using her first name, Léa.

Sibut-Pinote’s fiction feels vividly self-aware; we shouldn’t be surprised to find in his work citations from novels and song lyrics that supplement or subvert his own plot. In this story, one of Léa’s novels is titled Temps mort, literally translated as “dead time”. In the French, this title functions on several levels. In sports, “temps morts” refers to what in English we call a “time-out,” thus engaging with the story’s theme of pausing and rewinding a mission, or a life. On the textual level, temps mort points to the time that has passed—that is dead—as well as branches of time in which deaths occur. After great deliberation, I chose to use the simple translation of “Dead Time,” because I felt that it evoked death, but also the sense of a “useless” or “invalid” time.

I hope that the nuances, complexities, and time shifts come across in this translation, and that English readers can find themselves immersed in the restraint, the tenderness, the regret, the sense of helplessness, and of course Guillaume’s dry wit that make the original so stirring.

# THOMAS SIBUT-PINOTTE

## TEMPS MORT

Je serre dans ma main, imprimé et relié, le dernier roman de Léa Mercier; ce n'est pourtant encore qu'un fichier dans son ordinateur et un empilement de feuilles sur son bureau, que l'on retrouvera demain après-midi après son suicide. Je peine à décrire ce que j'éprouve en cet instant historique, ou à trouver un début à cette histoire. Je suis physicien, pas écrivain, après tout.

On m'a sélectionné parmi mon équipe de chercheurs pour incarner le premier voyageur dans le temps, une nouvelle forme d'exploration repoussant les limites de la Physique et de l'expérience humaine. Si j'avais voyagé ne serait-ce que vingt-quatre heures en arrière, même dans une vulgaire bouche d'égout, l'expérience aurait déjà causé grand bruit – et les premières tentatives cachées du public étaient grossso modo de cette teneur. On a cependant décidé en plus haut lieu que lors du premier voyage qui serait rendu public, et pour en optimiser l'impact médiatique, je rendrais visite à Léa Mercier la veille de son suicide.

Il aura fallu recourir aux ingénieux graphiques que la lectrice aura certainement déjà aperçus, par exemple sur les réseaux sociaux lors des semaines qui ont précédé le jour J, pour faire comprendre au grand public la mécanique du voyage dans le temps tel que nous l'avons patiemment élaboré ces dernières années, dans le cadre d'un projet si pharaonique que l'accélérateur de particules du CERN semble un aimable hobby de week-end en comparaison. On se souviendra de l'idée cruciale – connue par les plus savants sous le nom de l'Hypothèse

**translated from the french by  
KIMBERLY LIU**

## DEAD TIME

I grip in my hand, printed and bound, Léa Mercier's last novel. For now, it is but a file on her computer and a stack of paper on her desk, to be found tomorrow after her suicide. I have trouble describing what I feel in this groundbreaking moment, and in finding a beginning to this story. I'm a physicist, after all, not a writer.

I was selected from my group of researchers to be the first time traveller, to embody this new form of exploration pushing the frontiers of physics and of the human experience. Had I traveled back just twenty-four hours, even if only under the lid of a manhole, that alone would have created a commotion. In fact, the initial attempts hidden from the public were roughly to that effect. It was decided, however, that to optimize media impact, for the first publicized trip I would visit Léa Mercier on the eve of her suicide.

It will be necessary to make use of the elaborate visuals that the reader will certainly have glimpsed, for example on the social media platforms in the weeks preceding the day of the operation. This is to ensure that the public at large understands the mechanisms of time travel as we have meticulously developed it over these past few years—a project so colossal in scale that a particle accelerator at CERN would seem like a pleasant weekend pastime in comparison. One will recall the central theory—known by the most informed as Hypothesis

V., mais hélas rarement énoncée correctement par les éditorialistes –, qui stipule qu'un déplacement vers le passé crée, au point d'entrée, une “fourche” ou “bifurcation” dans l'espace-temps. Dans une branche de cette fourche se déroule le passé tel qu'il s'est déjà produit dans l'Univers du Visiteur, et auquel il ne peut accéder véritablement dans la mesure où sa propre présence le modifie. Dans l'autre branche s'accomplit, à partir d'un passé identique, un nouvel avenir non planifié justement parce que le Visiteur vient y interférer.

La sonnette résonne dans la cage d'escalier familière – rien n'a été laissé au hasard dans mon voyage – de l'immeuble Haussmannien dans lequel vit l'écrivaine, et dont on ne rénovera l'ascenseur que dans quelques années. D'où une troublante sensation de décadence, comme si cette boîte de métal avait brutalement rouillé depuis mon repérage des lieux hier. Hier, c'est-à-dire dans dix ans: il faut s'accoutumer au décalage temporel, pour lequel aucune pilule n'a encore été inventée.

J'entends un vague craquement de plancher, quelque part au loin, peut-être derrière la porte, et quelques notes de jazz, je devine du Billie Holliday.

Pourquoi m'avoir choisi pour ce voyage?

Des bruits de casseroles se font entendre quelque part plus haut; il fait très froid.

Déjà, j'étais le seul à avoir lu toute l'œuvre de Mercier. Il fallait un scientifique qui soit capable de parler à une femme, une femme du passé, une femme de lettres, sans se liquéfier sur place, ni faire de blagues douteuses.

Il ne fait plus si souvent froid comme ça. Ou bien est-ce parce que je suis parti en été?

V., but unfortunately rarely described accurately by journalists—which stipulates that a movement into the past creates, at the point of entry, a “fork” or “bifurcation” in space-time. In one of the branches of this fork, the past unfolds as it has already occurred in the universe of the Visitor, which he cannot truly access insofar as his own presence modifies it. In the other branch, breaking off the same moment in the past, a new unplanned future is set into motion precisely because the Visitor has come to interfere.

The doorbell rings in the familiar stairwell of the Haussmannian building where the writer lives—no part of my trip has been left up to chance. The elevator won’t be replaced for a few years, hence the uncanny feeling of decay, as if this metal box has violently rusted since I scouted the location yesterday. Yesterday, that is to say in ten years. You have to get used to the time-lag, for which a pill has yet to be invented.

I hear a vague creaking of the floor boards from somewhere in the distance, maybe behind the door. Some notes of jazz. Billie Holliday, I think.

But why was I selected for this trip?

Sounds of pots and pans trickle down from somewhere above. It’s terribly cold.

For a start, I was the only one who had read all of Mercier’s work. We needed a scientist capable of talking to a woman—a woman of the past, a woman of letters—someone who would neither freeze on the spot, nor make questionable jokes.

It’s rarely ever so cold anymore. Or is it just because I left in summer?

Il y avait bien Christine, la directrice de l'équipe. Mais Christine ne voulait pas y aller. Alors c'est moi, Guillaume H., converti aux romans de Léa Mercier à sa mort il y a dix ans, moi qui ai le contact un peu plus facile avec les gens que la moyenne des chercheurs de mon laboratoire, qui m'y suis collé.

Des bruits de pas se font entendre. Dans quel état, la veille de sa mort ?

La porte grinçante, après le claquement du loquet, évoque ces cercueils qu'on ouvre pour de lugubres histoires de parentés incertaines à interroger. Bientôt treize ans que Yaëlle est partie. Je retiens ma respiration.

– Entre, Guillaume.

Léa arbore un grand sourire en recevant de mes mains son roman publié à titre posthume; je titube de surprise et marmonne une salutation. Mon état ne s'arrange pas lorsque, obéissant à son injonction, je m'avance dans une pièce décorée de manière festive, la table mise pour deux avec grand soin, une bouteille prête à être ouverte, du caviar et, encadrée sur le mur, une photo d'un homme, peut-être pas moi mais qui pourrait certainement être mon frère jumeau si j'en avais un.

Rien dit sur l'état dans lequel se trouvait son appartement après sa mort. Rien sur une telle scène en tous cas. Suicidée dans le bois de Vincennes, et pas chez elle. Famille aura gardé le silence.

– Tu vas trouver ça bête, commence-t-elle en vissant le tire-bouchon, mais je m'ennuyais de toi.

Son regard déterminé contraste avec la nonchalance étudiée du geste; le bouchon saute.

Sure, there was Christine, the team manager. But Christine didn't want to go. So it was me, Guillaume H., who became a devotee of Léa Mercier when she died ten years ago; me, who has a slightly easier time with social interactions than the average researcher in my lab.

Footsteps echo. What state was she in, that final night?

The creak of the door, after the click of the latch, evokes the coffins of long-lost relatives that we open in search of familial links and mournful histories. Soon, it will be thirteen years since Yaëlle's been gone. I hold my breath.

“Come in, Guillaume.”

Madame Mercier takes her posthumously published novel from my hands with a big smile. I stumble in surprise and mumble a greeting. My mental state does not improve when, doing as she says, I enter an elaborately decorated room, where a table has been carefully set for two, with a bottle ready to be opened and some caviar. Framed on the wall is a photo of a man: not necessarily me, but certainly a twin brother if I had one.

Nothing in the apartment offers any information about the state in which it was found after her death. Nothing hinting at such a scene, in any case. A suicide in the Vincennes forest, not at home. The family will have kept their silence.

“You're going to find this silly,” she began, turning the corkscrew, “but I've missed you.”

Her focused gaze contradicts the carefully assumed nonchalance of her gestures; the cork leaps.

– Champagne?

Je prends le verre mécaniquement, mais mes yeux sont perdus dans son visage et l'assurance que je n'y attendais pas. Je suis venu pour un exercice salvateur et pédagogique, j'avais même mémorisé une phrase, du genre "...L'honneur ... première visite temporelle de l'histoire de l'humanité". Autre phrase déjà prise par le type qui a marché sur la Lune. Une voix hurle dans ma tête: Comment?

J'ai dû penser à voix haute. Léa, une moue faussement déçue, joueuse, pose son verre.

– Bon d'accord, je t'explique.

C'est seulement à ces mots que, cherchant un siège pour retrouver une contenance, j'aperçois, entre le plat et le porte-serviette sur la table à manger, le pistolet noir qui a fait la une des journaux people il y a dix ans – c'est-à-dire la semaine prochaine. Un piège?

Je sursaute; son sourire me frappe davantage d'affection que de malice.

– J'ai beaucoup de chance, tu sais? Je n'aurai pas besoin de m'en servir.

Je feins la reprise naturelle d'une conversation interrompue.

– À cause de ma visite?

Elle hoche la tête et ajoute:

– Tchekhov n'avait pas prévu les mondes parallèles.

“Champagne?”

I take the glass mechanically, but my eyes are lost in her face and its unexpectedly trusting expression. I’ve come for a life-saving and pedagogical mission; I’ve even memorized a phrase, something like, “Madame Mercier... It’s an honor...first travel in time in the history of humanity.” Another phrase has already been taken by the guy who walked on the moon. A voice in my head demands: How?

I must have been thinking aloud. Madame Mercier, wearing a pout of false disappointment, sets down her glass.

“Very well, I’ll explain.”

It’s only when she says these words that, looking for a place to sit to regain my composure, I notice on the table, between the main plate and the napkin holder, the black pistol that made tabloid headlines ten years ago—that is to say, next week. Is this a trap?

Her smile makes me start, striking me as more affectionate than mischievous.

“I’m very lucky, you know? I won’t have to use it.”

I feign the natural continuation of an interrupted conversation.

“Because of my visit?”

She nods, adding, “Chekhov never considered parallel worlds.”

Ce n'est pas le moment de montrer que je ne comprends rien à ce qu'elle raconte. Je reprends la main sur la conversation:

– Tu connais le principe du voyage temporel?

Je suis passé au tutoiement sans difficulté; c'est naturel pour moi, et c'est elle qui a commencé. Il est clair que la réponse est oui, la question brûlante se trouve ailleurs, toujours la même: Comment?

– La première fois que j'ai voulu te faire revenir, ça n'a pas fonctionné.

Déjà venu la voir, mais aucun souvenir. Je n'entrevois à peu près qu'une explication possible: un autre moi, dans une autre branche du temps, lui a rendu visite plus jeune. Mais pourquoi? Comment?

– Il n'est pas facile de raisonner sur les voyages temporels, c'est toi-même qui me l'as enseigné.

Je hoche la tête. Un vent froid et sifflant d'hiver agrémenté les silences longs pendant lesquels nous nous jaugeons, elle qui me connaît et moi qui tente de m'imaginer la connaissant.

– Moi, je n'ai jamais voyagé dans le temps que dans une seule direction, toujours à la même vitesse.

Elle enroule un cheveu blanc autour de son doigt qui tremble légèrement.

– La première fois que tu es venu aussi, c'était peu avant mon suicide.

This isn't the time to show that I understand nothing of what she says. I take control of the conversation.

"Do you understand the principle of time travel, Léa?"

I've switched to using her first name without difficulty; it's natural for me, and she's the one who started this way. Her answer to the question is clearly a yes. The burning question lies elsewhere, still the same: how?

"The first time I tried to make you come back, it didn't work."

So it's not the first time I've come to see her, yet I have no recollection of the visit. I see more or less only one possible explanation: another me, in another branch of time, has already visited her at a younger age. But why? And how?

"It's not easy to wrap your mind around time travel; you're the one who taught me."

I nod. A cold winter wind whistles throughout the long silences that stretch on as we contemplate each other: she who knows me, and me who tries to imagine myself knowing her.

"Well, I've never travelled in time except in one direction, and always at the same speed." She winds a lock of white hair around a finger that trembles faintly.

"The first time you came was also just before my suicide."

Elle marche vers la commode sur ma gauche et y saisit un exemplaire de Temps mort.

– C’était mon premier roman.

Elle me le tend, je lui rétorque que je l’ai déjà lu. Trois fois.

Alors Léa ouvre ce livre si familier à la page de garde, où l’on peut déchiffrer mon écriture manuscrite.

À une grande auteure partie trop tôt.

J’ignore à quel âge j’ai acquis la capacité de ne jamais montrer l’étonnement que volontairement, mais je contemple cette feuille signée de ma main avec le même détachement que j’observerais une borne incendie dans la rue. L’émotion sera pour plus tard.

– Ce n’est pas ton meilleur roman.

C’est tout ce que j’ai trouvé à dire, mais elle n’a pas l’air particulièrement offensée.

– Je parie que tu as préféré Métamorphose du Conquérant Sceptique?

– C’est le livre qui m’a sauvé de la mort de Yaëlle.

Malgré les trous béants qui écument ma compréhension, un rouage que ma stupéfaction avait enrayé s’est de nouveau enclenché dans la partie rationnelle de mon cerveau. Elle a deviné quel était mon livre préféré, qu’elle a écrit après cette visite dont je ne me souviens pas – et ne peux me souvenir, par définition. J’en connais des extraits par cœur. Mes lèvres esquissent distraitemen

She walks to the dresser on my left and picks up a copy of Dead Time.

“This was my first novel.” She hands it to me. I tell her that I’ve already read it. Three times.

She opens the familiar book to its first page, where my handwriting can be discerned.

To a great author, departed too soon.

I don’t know at what age I learned to only ever voluntarily show surprise, but I look at my signature on the page with the same detachment with which I’d observe a fire hydrant on the street. Emotion is for later.

“It’s not your best novel.”

It’s all I can think of to say, but she doesn’t seem particularly offended.

“I suppose you preferred Metamorphosis of the Skeptical Conquerer?”

“It’s the book that saved me from Yaëlle’s death.”

Despite the gaping holes in my understanding, a gear previously jammed due to my astonishment is once again engaged in the rational part of my brain. She’s guessed my favorite book—the one she wrote after this visit of which I have no memory, of which I can’t have any memory, by definition. I know whole passages by heart. My lips distractedly sketch out the beginnings of a

prémissé d'une question, mais je m'interromps avant la première syllabe. J'examine une page au hasard.

À la pause café, Clément plaisantait souvent au sujet du suicide avec ses collègues; quels arrêts de RER étaient les plus fréquemment utilisés, quelles méthodes étaient les moins douloureuses. Il semblait que le sujet ne serait jamais épuisé, son potentiel comique jamais tari, jusqu'à ce jour de novembre où Lara se jeta d'un pont en pleine nuit, à trois heures, après avoir coupé le contact de sa voiture qu'on retrouva sagement garée au petit matin sur la bande d'arrêt d'urgence.

– Est-ce que je...

Elle s'approche et me m'enserre dans ses bras; le col de sa veste absorbe l'humidité de mes yeux. Sa voix surgit comme un écho intemporel.

– Je suis devenue de plus en plus dépressive en l'écrivant. Ça ne s'est pas arrangé lorsque je l'ai achevé. Il s'est formé un vide insupportable dans ma vie.

Elle passe sa main délicatement dans mes cheveux, et, comme un enfant, je voudrais rester contre elle pour toujours.

– C'est à ce moment là que j'ai eu l'idée que si j'avais très envie de mourir, tu viendrais me sauver une deuxième fois.

Je me détache de son étreinte, le sang battant soudain furieusement à l'intérieur de mes tempes. Je ne constate aucune surprise dans son regard, mais elle baisse légèrement les yeux.

– Je pensais qu'on mangerait avant de parler de tout ça,

question, but I stop myself before the first syllable. I study a page at random.

During coffee breaks, Clément often joked about suicide with his colleagues: which RER stations were most used, which methods were the least painful. It seemed like the topic would never be exhausted, that its comedic potential would never run dry, until that day in November when Laura threw herself off a bridge in the middle of the night, at three in the morning after switching off the engine of her car, which was found, in the early morning, parked neatly on the side of the road.

“Did I...”

She makes her way over to me and takes me in her arms; her jacket collar absorbs the dampness around my eyes. Her voice emanates like a timeless echo.

“I became more and more depressed while writing it and didn’t get better after I was done. It made my life unbearably empty.”

She passes a hand gently through my hair and I realize that, like a child, I would like to rest against her forever.

“That’s when the idea came to me: if I really wanted to die, you’d come save me a second time.”

I pull myself from her embrace, blood beating furiously in my temples. There’s no sign of surprise in her eyes, but she lowers them slightly.

“I thought that we’d be eating before talking about all

tu sais.

Elle regarde brièvement par la fenêtre alors qu'une sirène d'ambulance retentit dans une rue adjacente. Elle a compris qu'on ne dînera pas de sitôt, et semble envahie d'une lassitude soudaine.

– Ce n'est pas que je voulais que tu me sauves, j'ai passé l'âge. Seulement, je ne pouvais parler à personne de cette visite, un peu absurde, qui avait changé le cours de ma vie; j'ai voulu faire revenir mon seul interlocuteur possible. Je savais grâce à ta première visite que tu voudrais me sauver. Je me suis assise en haut d'une falaise, un soir de juin, en Ardèche; mais tu n'es pas venu.

Un frisson me traverse. Elle sourit sans joie.

– J'avais apporté des croissants, pourtant.

Je connais trop ce genre de ton pour ne pas déceler l'abîme qu'il masque.

– Quelques semaines plus tard, je l'ai acheté – elle incline son menton vers le pistolet resté immobile sur la table. Mais l'été est arrivé, j'ai rencontré Célia, nous avons passé quelques mois heureux ensemble.

En ce temps-là la vie était plus belle

Et le soleil plus brûlant...

– Elle m'a quittée il y a un an.

Célia D. Tout le monde la connaît. Match a fait un dossier sur elle après sa mort.

– Passées les fêtes, j'ai recommencé mes tentatives. Tu as

this, you know.”

She glances out the window as an ambulance blares in an adjacent street. She’s realized that we won’t be having dinner anytime soon, and seems overcome by a sudden weariness.

“It’s not that I wanted you to save me; I’m past that age. It’s just that I couldn’t talk to anyone about this strange visit that had changed the course of my life; I wanted to bring back my only interlocutor. I knew, thanks to your first visit, that you’d want to save me. So one evening in June, I sat myself down on top of a cliff in Ardèche. But you didn’t come.”

A shiver courses through me. She smiles without joy.

“I had even brought croissants.”

I know that tone too well to be blind to the abyss it masks.

“I bought it a few weeks later.” She tilts her chin towards the pistol lying still on the table. “But then summer came; I met Célia, and we spent several happy months together.”

In those times, life was more beautiful

And the sun more brilliant...

“She left me a year ago.”

Célia D. Everyone knew her. Paris Match ran a feature story on her after her death.

“After the holidays, I began trying again. Have you ever

déjà connu un hiver seul à Paris?

Douze. Treize?

– Je posais le pistolet sur la table, et je fantasmais le moment ultime. Je l'approchais de mon visage. Je t'imaginais fracassant la porte pour m'empêcher de passer à l'acte. Mais quoi que je fasse, tu ne venais pas.

– La raison en est évidente.

Je regrette immédiatement mon arrogance. Elle relève la tête et répond sèchement:

– Tout le monde n'a pas ta vivacité d'esprit. Mais oui, j'ai fini par comprendre.

Excuse silencieuse, baisser la tête. Lui demander comment elle se sent. Sempiternel conseil de Yaëlle, pour parler aux femmes, aux gens, même si ça ne marche pas toujours avec les autres chercheurs.

– Qu'est-ce que tu as ressenti quand tu as compris?

Je crois déceler une certaine déception dans son regard face à l'inanité de ma question. Elle entrecoupe ses phrases courtes de silences étudiés.

– Très calme. Déterminée. J'ai compris que personne ne sait jamais dans quelle branche de l'espace-temps il se trouve. Il faut se résigner à la roulette russe. J'ai décidé de la date il y a un mois, quand j'ai commencé à voir le bout de mon manuscrit. J'ai compris qu'il fallait vraiment avoir l'intention d'appuyer sur la détente.

Elle sourit avec tendresse et mélancolie. Il y a tout un monde dans ce vraiment. Tant qu'elle n'avait pas

spent a winter alone in Paris?"

Twelve. Thirteen?

"I placed the pistol on the table, and fantasized about the final moment. I brought it up to my temple. I imagined you breaking down the door to stop me. But no matter what I did, you didn't come."

"It's obvious why."

I regret my arrogance immediately.

She lifts her head and replies dryly, "Not everyone's mind is as quick as yours. But yes, I eventually figured it out."

Apologize silently, lower your head. Ask how she feels. Yaëlle's repeated advice on how to talk to women—to people—even if it doesn't always work with other scientists.

"What did you feel after you understood?"

In her eyes, I think I detect a certain disappointment at the inanity of my question. She intersperses her short sentences with studied silence.

"Very calm. Determined. I realized that we never know which branch of time we're in; we have to give ourselves up to Russian roulette. So I settled on the date a month ago, when my manuscript began seeing its end. I understood that I needed to truly intend on pulling the trigger.

She smiles a smile of tenderness and melancholy. There is an entire world in this truly. As long as she didn't possess

l'intention inébranlable de se donner la mort, il n'y avait aucune raison pour que mon équipe décide de m'envoyer ce jour particulier puisqu'elle ne se serait pas suicidée à l'avenir. Il fallait se résoudre à tout perdre. Elle a dû être désespérée.

– J'ai eu beaucoup de chance.

Elle n'a pas besoin d'ajouter que quelqu'un de plus malchanceux, bien qu'en tous points semblable à elle, est en train de se rendre compte, dans un monde parallèle, que je ne viendrai pas et qu'elle a perdu son pari. Elle va jeter la bouteille après l'avoir bue seule, pleurer un peu pendant la nuit, puis elle va faire son devoir, pour cette autre elle-même qui n'est pas tout à fait elle, demain matin au bois de Vincennes.

the unshakeable intention of killing herself, there was no reason for my team to decide to send me on this particular day, because she wouldn't have killed herself in the future. One had to resolve to lose everything. She must have lost all hope.

“I was very lucky.”

She didn't need to add that in a parallel world, someone less lucky, despite resembling her in every way, is in the process of realizing that I won't be coming, and that she has lost her bet. She will throw out her bottle after having emptied it alone, cry through the night, then tomorrow morning in the Vincennes Forest, she will pay her dues, for this self who is not entirely herself.

## Translator's Foreword

Dès la première lecture du texte de Mariam, je me suis rappelée pourquoi j'aime autant l'anglais : c'est une langue souple et riche, protéiforme, qui permet une inventivité sans fin, et pas simplement dans son vocabulaire. Dans son écriture, Mariam profite au maximum de ces qualités de l'anglais, et pousse la langue dans ses retranchements avec une énergie et un systématisme qui touche à la performance, et si j'ai souvent pensé à Proust en traduisant son texte, je me suis aussi beaucoup tiré les cheveux. Pire encore : en travaillant sur mes propres textes, je me suis parfois surprise à vouloir écrire en anglais, à regretter une certaine rigidité du français. Il faut dire que le style même de Mariam, ses phrases interminables, l'enchevêtrement de ses propositions, avaient fini par déteindre sur moi après quelque temps passé en tête à tête avec son texte.

Au fil du temps j'ai aussi découvert qu'il y avait bien plus que ce qu'on voit au premier coup d'œil dans l'histoire de Fatima (et pourtant le premier coup d'œil ne manquait pas de richesses !), qui s'est révélé un véritable jeu de poupées russes : si le cadre de l'Islam, du chiisme en particulier, était un saut dans l'inconnu pour moi, les thématiques sur lesquelles Mariam s'appuie -la famille, la différence, la religion - me sont familières. Évidemment, une traduction est toujours une occasion d'étendre ses horizons mais comme Mariam écrit sur le contexte Irano-Américain, j'ai eu la chance d'une double perspective. De même, ce qui rend le personnage de Fatima si riche n'est pas juste d'être une musulmane aux états-unis, mais aussi une chiite dans une communauté sunnite, et, surtout, petite poupée cachée au milieu de ses sœurs, une enfant dans un monde d'adultes.



# MARIAM RAHMANI

## UNTITLED

For years I had been anticipating this moment, training with the guidance of my mother, who eased me into the transformation with the adroitness of a surgeon inserting a catheter.

Trips to the mosque had solicited covering since age six, an age of epic proportions, for it coincided with our passage to the neighborhood, public elementary school from the experimental preschool run by the university, where a one-way mirror stretched along the classroom wall so that you never knew which PhD student in Education or Sociology stood on the other side, observing, taking notes, a school which was incidentally, the only private school we each attended before college—our young parents stretched their stipends thin in order to afford the tuition. My mother had sewn me a maghna’ih, as if I were her brother’s daughter, that is, a schoolgirl in Iran rather than one in America, so that I could slip the garment on and off without fuss. I had learned to render its conic shape into a flat rectangle by folding in all the contoured edges, then folding it once more, and I stored it that way, neat and contained, in the top-right drawer of the dresser whose bottom half was reserved for my brother’s things, so that the maghna’ih lay covering my locked journal during the schoolweek before making an appearance for halaqa on Friday night—my parents had taken to the Sunni custom, deeming the roundtable discussion a part of the ongoing intellectual inquiry we were obliged to cultivate as

**traduit de l'anglais par  
PLATTNER CLÉMENTINE**

**SANS TITRE**

J'avais attendu ce moment des années durant,  
m'entraînant sous la direction de ma mère, qui  
m'accompagnait dans cette transition avec la précision  
toute scientifique d'un chirurgien insérant un cathéter.

Les visites à la mosquée impliquaient de se couvrir dès l'âge de six ans, âge de grands bouleversements puisque c'était aussi celui auquel nous rejoignions l'école primaire et publique du quartier, laissant derrière nous l'école maternelle expérimentale tenue par la faculté, dans la classe de laquelle un long miroir sans teint remplaçait un pan entier de mur, pour dissimuler les étudiants en éducation ou en sociologie qui se tenait derrière, observant et prenant des notes; ce fut le seul établissement privé que nous fréquentâmes de toute notre scolarité, et les frais d'écolage mirent à rude épreuve le salaire de docteurant de nos jeunes parents. Ma mère m'avait cousu un magnha-é, comme j'en aurais porté si j'avais été la fille de son frère, une écolière iranienne et pas américaine, pour que je puisse l'enfiler et l'enlever sans problème. J'avais appris à aplatiser sa forme conique en un rectangle en rabattant les coins arrondis, puis en le repliant sur lui même, et je le rangeais ainsi, net et sous contrôle, dans le tiroir en haut à droite de la commode dont le bas était réservé aux affaires de mon frère, de sorte que les jours d'école le maghna-é dissimulait mon journal cadenassé, et ne réapparaissait que le vendredi soir pour la halaqua -mes parents avaient fait leur cette coutume sunnite, ils avaient jugé que participer à cette table ronde faisait partie de nos devoirs de croyants, soumis que nous étions à l'ordre

believers: Seek knowledge even as far as China—until we came home—late, at ten or eleven, by the time we had enjoyed the potluck snacks of papri chaat and fruit salad sunk happily in Cool Whip, having ourselves contributed an upside-down cake made from a can of Dole pineapples and perhaps too little sugar (nobody need worry about diabetes), my mother’s specialty, which she made without consulting a recipe, and had stayed to clean, producing vacuum marks on the mosque carpeting that ran perpendicular to the lines the congregation had earlier formed in prayer; there at home, the cloth returned neatly folded to the drawer, to its place, that is, its unruly shape controlled so, a rendering that gave me great pleasure; and in that place in the top-right drawer of the dresser, the maghna’ih enjoyed a brief rest as two slivers of moon waxed or waned, as the case may be, until finally surfacing again for our return to the town mosque Sunday morning to attend—in a young custom coined from the mold of Christian worship, an immigrant’s Americanism, an oddity—Islamic Sunday School: but was this not the beauty of our religion, its ability to adapt to every corner of God’s globe?

At seven, my mother had sewn for me a simple cotton scarf in white to wear on the occasional errand on which I was allowed to accompany her, when Baba was home and I could escape my responsibilities babysitting my siblings, to instead go to the grocery store to help pick the week’s produce, which consisted of everything that was on sale, with the exception of meat, which we bought from a halal butcher in Cleveland, or to the post office, my favorite, where we stood in line in the pink light reflected off the old bricks to pay for overseas

de rechercher perpétuellement la vérité : aller chercher le savoir serait-ce jusqu'en Chine - jusqu'à ce que nous rentrions à la maison, tard, à 22 ou 23h, après avoir avidement grignoté les papri chaats et nous être repus de salades de fruits allègrement noyées sous la chantilly, notre propre contribution au repas tiré des sacs ayant été un gâteau renversé parfumé d'une boite d'ananas en conserve Dole et de probablement trop peu de sucre (aucun risque de diabète ! ), la spécialité de ma mère, qu'elle préparait sans consulter de recettes, et après avoir fait le ménage, laissant sur la moquette de la mosquée des marques d'aspiration, qui auraient constitué des angles droits parfaits avec les rangées qu'avaient formées plus tôt l'assemblée en prière; revenu à la maison, le vêtement retournaît, soigneusement plié, dans son tiroir, à sa place, c'est-à-dire sa forme chaotique de nouveau maîtrisée, un résultat qui m'emplissait de plaisir; à cet endroit du tiroir en haut à droite de la commode, le maghna-é profitait d'un bref repos le temps que viennent et passent deux phases de lune, jusqu'à ce que revienne son heure quand nous retournions à la mosquée de la ville le dimanche matin pour assister à -une nouvelle habitude coulée dans le moule du christianisme américain, un syncrétisme d'immigrants, une bizarrerie - l'école du dimanche islamique; mais n'était-ce pas la beauté de notre religion que sa capacité à s'adapter à tous les recoins de la Terre que Dieu a faite?

Pour mes 7 ans, ma mère me cousit un simple foulard blanc à porter les rares jours où j'étais autorisée à l'accompagner faire une course, quand Baba était à la maison et qu'au lieu de jouer la baby-sitter pour mes frères et sœurs je pouvais m'échapper et aller au supermarché pour l'aider à choisir les courses de la semaine - un assortiment de tous les produits soldés ce jour là, sauf la viande, que nous achetions chez un boucher halal de Cleveland- ou, mieux encore, au bureau de poste, où nous attendions en ligne dans la lumière rose que renvoyaient les vieilles briques pour payer les frais

postage. She had taught me how to iron the square meter of fabric from the back so that the threads don't catch a sheen and how to fold it into a triangle: not in half but with an inch's border so that the outer edges lay flat against the back and shoulders. She had taught me how to drape it over my hair, which was combed back into a low bun so that even its outline might disappear, and how to pin the two wings of the triangle together just beneath the chin with a small gold safety pin, threading the needle through the fabric outside my line of vision by reflection (I had no mirror in my room but stood before my mother's vanity table), and when from practice that difficult task became easy, simply by touch.

Upon my eighth birthday, in due preparation for my arrival at the age of maturity, my mother had sewn a second scarf not in blue but in black, yet with a lace fringe, to soften the affect—it was America, after all—which required extra patience, for I had to allow the iron to cool before applying its metal plate to that more delicate fabric, and which I was, for the holy month of Muharram—or at least, for the part of the month that mattered, the first ten days till Ashura, a cliff's edge after which everything fell, back to normal, back to the abyss—to where out, everywhere but school. “A queen does not lend her image to whoever is passing,” my father said, and I believed him.

Nina, on the other hand, seemed content to let these

de ports de nos courriers outre-atlantiques. Elle m'avait appris à repasser le mètre carré de tissu sur son revers, afin d'éviter que les fils surchauffent et ne se mettent à briller, et à le plier en triangle : de manière légèrement asymétrique, en laissant une marge de quelques centimètres afin que les rebords extérieurs reposent à plat contre le dos et les épaules. Elle m'avait appris comment le draper sur les cheveux, eux-mêmes tirés en arrière et rassemblés en chignon sur la nuque afin que même leur forme soit imperceptible, et la façon d'épingler les deux ailes du triangle l'une à l'autre juste sous le menton avec une petite épingle à nourrice dorée, enfilant l'aiguille à travers le tissus hors de mon champ de vision en m'aidant d'abord de mon reflet dans le miroir (je n'en avais pas dans ma chambre, mais je me tenais devant la coiffeuse de ma mère), puis quand à force de pratique je fus capable de réaliser cette tache fastidieuse les yeux fermés, à l'aveugle.

A la veille de mon huitième anniversaire, en préparatif de rigueur pour célébrer mon passage à l'âge de la maturité, ma mère me cousit une deuxième écharpe, non plus bleue mais noire, avec néanmoins pour en adoucir l'effet une bordure brodée -nous étions en Amérique après tout- ce qui m'imposait de faire preuve d'une patience supplémentaire, car il fallait laisser au fer le temps de reposer avant d'appliquer sa face métallique sur ce tissu délicat, et que j'étais censée, durant le mois saint de mouharram -ou tout du moins pour la partie du mois qui comptait vraiment, les dix jours qui menaient à l'Achoura, apogée après lequel tout retombait, retour à la normale, retour à l'abysse- porter à l'extérieur, partout sauf à l'école . « Une reine n'offre pas son image au premier venu », m'assurait mon père, et je le croyais.

Nina, elle, ne semblait pas s'inquiéter de rater tous

markers pass her by. At eight she had finally, belatedly, started wearing hijab to the mosque—it had taken the dismay of a Sunday School teacher, voiced sternly to her mother—but Nina had no scarves of her own; she was content to borrow her mother's, which she messily folded into a triangle and held in place not with a stealthy pin but one of those cheap scarf clips shaped like a seashell or butterfly she sourced from her mother's folded prayer rug, unclipping it from the floral-printed prayer chador whose easy, undignified fabric, was meant for using around the house and not for appearing in public, even if we hadn't lived in America. Big and pink and plastic, the thing looked as cartoonish as the clip-on earrings our classmates had begun to toy with, but for which we had no use: the gold studs that had been used to pierce our ears as infants still lived there, suspended in our scarred, now healed, flesh through showers and sleep until the day the corpse washers would take us to handle our vacated bodies and prepare these inert soul-cages to return to the soil from which they came. The scarf Nina had haphazardly chosen for that day—I saw it for myself those afternoons I returned home to the twins' apartment instead of my own after our collective pickup—would then be stuffed back into the dresser drawer unwashed, surely, soon to be wrinkled, given the carelessness with which this particular daughter handled what belonged to her mother.

Now, at long last, our ninth birthday neared. My mother went fabric shopping. She sewed me five new scarves, one for each day of the week. I asked Nina what she was doing to prepare. She was tight-lipped, and her strange

ces rites de passage. A 8 ans elle avait finalement, tardivement, commencé à porter le voile pour se rendre à la mosquée -Il avait fallu qu'un professeur de l'école du dimanche exprime en termes choisis sa consternation à sa mère, rien de moins- mais elle n'avait toujours pas sa propre écharpe; non, Nina se contentait d'une écharpe empruntée à sa mère, qu'elle pliait en un triangle brouillon et maintenait en place non pas avec une épingle à nourrice, mais avec une de ses broches de pacotille, en forme de coquillages ou de papillon, qu'elle piochait dans les plis du tapis de prière de sa mère, le dé-clipsant du tissu à fleur du tchador que celle-ci enfilait pour prier et dont le tissu léger, indigne, convenait à l'intimité du foyer et pas à un lieu public, Amérique ou pas. Enorme et rose et en plastique, la chose qui lui servait d'épingle avait l'air tout aussi absurde que les boucles d'oreilles à clips avec lesquelles nos camarades de classe avaient commencé à jouer, mais qui nous étaient complètement inutiles : les clous en or qui avaient percé nos oreilles alors que nous n'étions que des bébés n'avaient pas bougé de nos lobes troués, désormais cicatrisés; ils étaient là que nous nous douchions ou que nous dormions et y resteraient jusqu'au jour où les mains en charge des ablutions rituelles se saisiraient de nous pour s'occuper de nos corps vides et préparer ces inertes cages de nos âmes à retourner à la terre dont elles venaient. L'écharpe que Nina avait choisi de nouer au petit bonheur la chance ce jour-là - je le vis de mes propres yeux les après-midi où nous rentrions chez elle au lieu de chez moi, après que l'un de nos parents est venu nous chercher - était ensuite fourrée dans le tiroir de la commode sans avoir été lavée, à coup sûr bientôt couverte de faux plis, au vu du peu de soin avec laquelle cette fille particulière traitait les affaires de sa mère.

Maintenant, enfin! Nos neuvièmes anniversaires approchaient. Ma mère fit des emplettes de tissu. Elle me cousit 5 nouvelles écharpes, une pour chaque jour de la semaine. Je demandais à Nina comment elle comptait se préparer. Pas un mot ne franchit ses lèvres, et son étrange

silence made me wonder whether she had not thought about it at all; and if so, how? How had she managed to skate by without devoting a single second, a single thought, to the momentous event that awaited us?

A week later Nina said she and her mother had discussed the matter; they had concluded that Nina was “going to wait.” Wait? For what?

Sunnis waited for all kinds of happenstance: their first blood, or budding breasts, or who knows what other terrestrial occurrences. For us, however, all was clear: it was nine; it was always nine. Nine was the age at which the Prophet’s daughter, my namesake, had wed our first Imam, the source of the chain that made us Twelvers, the last link of which, his name stamped on my brother, lived among us, unknown, unaging, his forever heart, infallible, beating until he might rise with the Christian prophet, our savior, sitting beside you perhaps on the next bus and you’d never know it, bearing this world at our sides, waiting as we waited for the end of time—but till then, this. This obedience, this responsibility: our discipline our freedom; our servitude our deliverance. This was the gift of nine—to think boys had to wait so much longer, a full six years till fifteen, to be invited into God’s bosom!—this was the gift of nine, and Nina was wasting it. “Till I’m ready,” she had said. That wasn’t what “ready” meant, at all: you couldn’t show up after the second bell had rung because you had been waiting to feel ready; you got ready when you needed to go.

silence me fit me demander si elle avait même pensé à tout cela; si non, comment? Comment était-elle parvenue à ignorer un tel sujet sans jamais consacrer une seule seconde, une seule pensée, à l'événement monumental qui nous attendait?

Une semaine plus tard Nina m'annonça que sa mère et elle s'étaient penchés sur la question; elles en étaient arrivées à la conclusion que Nina « allait attendre. » Attendre? Attendre quoi?

Les Sunnites étaient toujours en train d'attendre un événement ou un autre: leur premier sang, ou l'arrondissement de leur poitrine, ou Dieu sait quelle autre terrestre circonstance. Pour nous, en revanche, tout était parfaitement clair : c'était neuf ans; ça avait toujours été neuf ans. Neuf ans, c'était l'âge auquel la fille du Prophète, à qui je devais mon nom, avait épousé notre premier Imam, le premier maillon de la chaîne qui faisait de nous des duodécimains, et dont le dernier anneau, du nom duquel mon frère avait été marqué, vit encore parmi nous, inconnu, immortel, son cœur éternel, infaillible, battant jusqu'à ce que, avec le prophète chrétien, il puisse s'élever, notre sauveur, peut-être assis derrière nous dans le prochain bus sans qu'on ne puisse jamais le savoir, supportant ce monde à nos côtés, attendant, comme nous attendions, la fin des temps -Mais jusqu'à ce que ce jour vienne, ceci. L'obéissance, la responsabilité: notre discipline, notre liberté; notre servitude, notre délivrance. C'était ça, le cadeau des neuf ans - Et dire que les garçons devaient attendre si longtemps, six interminables années de plus jusqu'à leur quinze ans pour être invités dans le sein de Dieu ! - c'était ça le cadeau des neuf ans, et Nina le gaspillait. « Quand je serai prête » avait-elle dit. Ce n'était pas ce qu'être «prête» signifiait, pas du tout : on ne peut pas débarquer après que la cloche a sonné parce qu'on attendait de se sentir prête, non, on s'arrange pour être prête au moment de partir.

I was too embarrassed to tell my mother. Perhaps she already knew.

Muharram that year was untimely: the first of the month was just four days before my birthday, our birthday. My mother had agreed to celebrate early, throwing me the jashne ebadat for which I had long been yearning a week early, as long as I earnestly helped with the preparations the day prior. “No Nina,” she warned.

That Saturday I had kept my promise, vacuuming all three rooms of our modest apartment and taking a bottle of glass cleaner and a washrag to the windows and coffee table. Zealous in my desire to thank her, I had taken it upon myself to dust the small collection of three or four items in crystal given as gifts or bought on sale, which my mother kept behind the glass doors of the television console, as she stepped outside to sweep the entryway. I’m not sure she ever noticed.

Sunday morning my mother had caved, permitting me, in the end, to invite Nina over early so that my friend and I skipped Sunday School as our brothers were shuttled off by one or either father. I was intent on impressing her, on proving my mother wrong, and I managed my friend unusually adroitly as Maman stood bent over the stove: together Nina and I unwrapped and unfolded a brand new tablecloth of faux lace over the kitchen table, attempting to smooth the stubborn folds of the plastic and interleaved stacks of dinner plates, ours and Khaleh Fereshteh’s best dishes, with white paper napkins, while shuttling the small plates and pairing knives from the kitchen to the coffee table for the fruit, bags of peaches

J'étais trop gênée pour en parler à ma mère. Peut-être le savait-elle déjà.

Mouharram tombait mal cette année là : le premier jour du mois arrivait quatre jours seulement avant mon anniversaire, notre anniversaire. Ma mère avait accepté de le célébrer en avance, et m'organisa le jashne ebadat que j'attendais impatiemment une semaine plus tôt que prévu, à condition que j'aide de bon cœur aux préparatifs la veille. « Pas de Nina », m'avait-elle averti.

Le samedi arrivé, j'avais tenu ma promesse, et passé l'aspirateur dans chacune des trois pièces de notre modeste appartement et m'étais attaqué aux fenêtres et à la table basse avec une bouteille de nettoyant à vitre et un chiffon. Zélée dans mon désir de la remercier, je pris l'initiative d'épousseter la petite collection de trois ou quatre bibelots en cristal, reçus en cadeau ou achetés en soldes, que ma mère conservait derrière la porte en verre du meuble de télévision, au moment où elle était sortie pour balayer le hall d'entrée. Je ne suis pas sûre qu'elle ait vu la différence.

Le dimanche au matin ma mère avait cédé, m'autorisant, finalement, à inviter Nina en avance, de sorte que mon amie et moi fimes l'école du dimanche buissonnière tandis qu'un de nos pères faisait la navette pour y amener nos frères. J'étais bien décidée à impressionner et détromper ma mère, et je dirigeais mon amie avec une adresse exceptionnelle pendant que Maman s'affairait au-dessus du four : ensemble, Nina et moi déballâmes et déplâimes une toile cirée en simili dentelle flambant neuve sur la table de la cuisine, tentant de lisser les faux plis obstinés du plastique et d'arranger les piles d'assiettes - notre plus beau service et celui de Khaleh Fereshteh côté à cote- et les serviettes en papier blanches, tout en transportant les coupelles et les couteaux d'office de la cuisine à la table basse pour les fruits, sacs de pêches et

and plums, premature pears and offseason oranges we enjoyed with knowledge of their novelty, nectarines both white and yellow, and, since we'd gotten lucky, cucumbers that were appropriately sized for a single vertical splice and a salting—Persian cucumbers, that's what they called them at the old market in Cleveland to which my parents pilgrimaged if the guestlist were long enough, arriving purposefully at closing time when the vendors were too tired to argue with a discount—all of which we washed, dried, and arranged in two heaping platters, achieving a delicate balance so that though it seemed that at any second any one of them might tumble and cause the whole mound to topple over, the fruits sat patiently, each in his designated position, ready to surrender. The cherries, dark and handsome, I touched lightly, treating myself to a single one as they dripped in the strainer, gingerly biting into it like an apple to reveal the thin flesh which was resplendent and yet not jewellike—indeed, alive, supple and willing—impatient for the moment when the party would start and I could collect this fruit, no longer forbidden to me, in a plateful I would devour by popping the pieces into my mouth whole and staining my white teeth with an oxblood blood inhumanly deep.

de prunes, poires vertes et oranges hors-saison que nous apprécions en connaissance de cause, nectarines blanches et jaunes, et, par un coup de chance, des concombres de la taille idéale pour être tranchée dans la longueur et salés -des concombres perses, comme on les appelait à l'ancien marché de Cleveland où mes parents allaient en pèlerinage dès que la liste des invités se faisait assez longue, arrivant précisément au moment de la fermeture, quand les commerçants étaient trop fatigués pour s'opposer à leur négociation- et tout cela lavé, essuyé, et arrangé en deux plateaux débordants, maintenant un équilibre si délicat qu'un effondrement qui ferait cascader tout l'échafaudage semblait menacer à chaque instant, mais les fruits restaient là patiemment, chacun à leur place, prêts à rendre les armes. Les cerises, elles, avaient le droit à toute ma délicatesse. Alors qu'elles égouttaient dans la passoire, sombres, magnifiques, je m'autorisai le plaisir coupable de mordre dans l'une d'entre elle, comme dans une pomme, révélant la chair brillante comme une pierre précieuse -mais vivante, souple et chaleureuse- trépignant d'impatience à l'idée du moment où la fête commencerait et où je pourrais me servir une assiette débordante de ces fruits, qui ne seraient alors plus défendus, et où je les goberais toutes rondes, tachant le blanc de mes dents d'un rouge sang à l'intensité surhumaine.

## Translator's Foreword

This excerpt constitutes a chapter from a longer work by Clémentine Plattner, a writer and former teacher based in Paris. Plattner's novel delves into the life of a family in the wake of an untimely death. Here, in the only chapter from the perspective of the family matriarch, Maria reflects on her son's death and life.

My method in translating Plattner and this text in particular has been to try to strike a balance between Maria's acerbic tone and elevated style. The character's complex language is a result and reflection of her career as a notary, which in France has higher class connotations than in the U.S. As Plattner explained to me, practicing as a notary in France requires five years of law school before a further specialization of three years, not to mention that the license itself is expensive. The latter can be bought or inherited—or, as in Maria's case, obtained through other familial ties such as marriage; indeed, the way Maria has used her marriage to the advantage of her career is precisely the example she wishes her son had followed. The daughter of a Portuguese housekeeper, Maria has worked against the odds of race and class; her prestige and standing is self-made and hard-won.

To me, this text is most attractive in its surprise, that is, in what I read as a stealth feminism: the rejection of clichés of motherhood—i.e., the kind mother, the sacrificial mother—in favor of an unsentimental woman who produces a prose as unforgiving as her attitude.



# CLÉMENTINE PLATTNER

## *de L'ÉTRANGÈRE*

À la naissance d'un enfant, il est de coutume que les gens se pressent autour de vous, porteurs de présents inutiles et répétant les uns après les autres des lieux communs qui n'effleurent pas même la surface du bouleversement que vous venez de vivre. Trente ans après, je ne devrais pas être surprise de découvrir que la même procédure absurde s'applique quand votre fils meurt.

J'ai fait une pile des cartes de condoléances sur le coin du bureau, je les ai ouverte soigneusement au coupe papier, et j'ai répondu à chacune avec la même cordialité de bon ton que celle avec laquelle j'avais répondu aux lettres de félicitations il y a des décennies. Cette fois-ci, cependant, je n'ai pas été surprise de ne rien y trouver d'intéressant à lire.

Il y a, je le découvris très vite, tout un univers de choses au sujet des enfants qui ne sont qu'à peine murmurées autour d'une table à langer, dissimulées derrière le voile épais de la pudeur, enfouies sous le poids des tabous, ou bien au sujet desquelles toute la société ment, franchement et de concert, pour protéger son intérêt. Il faut cependant que je prenne le blâme là où la faute est mienne: quant à ma surprise face à l'ingratitude de mon fils, je suis seule responsable. C'est moi qui n'ai pas prêté l'oreille à cette vérité transmise de générations en générations : les enfants sont des ingrats.

Je croyais au début, naïve - pire que naïve, arrogante - que cela ne me toucherait pas. Je savais bien que mon fils n'écrirait jamais de poèmes à ma gloire. Mais j'étais

**translated from the french by  
MARIAM RAHMANI**

*from SHE, THE STRANGER*

When a child is born, it is customary for people to crowd around you bearing useless gifts, repeating ad nauseam clichés that don't begin to skim the surface of the turmoil you've just experienced. Thirty years later, I shouldn't have been surprised to discover that the same absurd procedure applies when that son dies.

I stacked the sympathy cards at the corner of the desk, opened them one by one with a letter opener, and responded to each with the same cordial, tasteful tone I had used to reply to notes of congratulations decades ago. This time, however, I wasn't surprised to find that the reading was at best banal.

There is, I'd quickly discovered as a young mother, a whole universe of things having to do with children that are scarcely whispered around the changing table, things hidden behind a thick veil of propriety, buried under the weight of taboo; and there are still other things that all of society lies about, shamelessly, in unison, so as to protect its interests. Yet I must take blame when blame is due: being surprised at my late son's ingratitude, for example—I take full responsibility for that. It was I who had failed to listen to the following truth passed from one generation to the next: children are ingrates.

Naïvely—no, even worse, arrogantly—I had thought at first that this wouldn't affect me. I knew very well that my son would never write odes in my honor. But I was

convaincue que puisque tout ce que je faisais, je le faisais pour lui, peu m'importerait qu'il ne m'en remercie pas, que je tirerais ma satisfaction de le voir jouir des dons que je lui avais faits.

Je n'avais pas réalisé que l'ingratitude va bien plus loin que la simple absence de reconnaissance. L'ingratitude, j'en ai conscience désormais, n'est pas qu'il ait tenu pour évidents tous mes sacrifices, mais qu'il les ait méprisés, piétinés, et me les ait jetés à la figure.

Qu'il se contentât de fouler le sol, du pas sûr et léger de l'homme constamment certain de son bon droit, qu'il n'envisageât pas même que la route puisse être autre que large et droite, qu'il jugeât naturel que la voie soit tout à fait libre, le chemin tracé non seulement parfaitemennt mais aussi expressément pour lui, c'eût été facile. Cette élégance qu'il avait reposait sur l'ignorance de la quantité de travail, de douleur, de renoncement que j'avais dû déposer sur l'autel de son existence, et à ce titre il en était le parachèvement. Le privilège immense que j'avais fait sien n'était pas seulement d'être accepté, d'être reconnu comme un pair par les puissants et les notables, d'occuper une place de choix dans ce monde. Non, plus encore que cela, il reposait sur la conviction que tel était l'ordre des choses. Bel enfant, tendre idiot, me disais-je alors, qui n'imagine pas la honte et la terreur et la rage. Je croyais que là était son ingratitude, et m'en réjouissais comme d'un prix que j'avais obtenu tout autant que payé.

La première fois qu'il m'a reproché de l'avoir privé de son héritage, j'ai ri. Privé de son héritage ? Ne voyait-il pas qu'il avait un héritage, un héritage conséquent, et qui n'existant que parce que j'avais sacrifié ce qu'il osait impudemment me réclamer ? Il avait beau jeu de jeter de grands mots : histoire, culture, origines, racines. Qu'aurait-il voulu que je lui transmette ? L'embarras

also convinced that after all that I'd done, all that I'd done *for him*, it wouldn't bother me that he never thanked me; I'd thought that seeing him enjoy the fruits of my labor would be satisfaction enough.

I hadn't realized then that his ungratefulness would go well beyond mere lack of recognition. Indeed, I now understand that it was not just that he took my sacrifices for granted, but rather that he sneered at them, stepped on them, and threw them in my face.

If only he'd been content to walk the sure, easy path set out for a man like him; if only he'd never dared to imagine a road that was not straight and wide; if only he could have taken it for granted that he'd always have a clear line of sight, that the path was laid out perfectly and expressly for him—then, things would've been easy. Such elegance lay in his ignorance, ignorance of how much work and pain and self-sacrifice I'd had to offer at the altar of his existence, of which he represented the final achievement. For the great privilege I had given him didn't lay in being accepted as a peer by those of power and status, nor even in enjoying a prominent place in the world—no, more than that, his privilege lay in the conviction that such was the order of things. What a lovely child, I then said to myself, what a sweet fool, who can't even conceive of shame or terror or anger. In that lay his ungratefulness, I thought, and I welcomed his ignorance as both price and prize for my labor.

The first time he accused me of keeping his heritage hidden, I laughed. Hiding his heritage? Couldn't he see that he had a real heritage, an important heritage whose survival had depended, precisely, on my sacrificing what he now so insolently dared to demand? It was easy for him to throw around big words like "history," "culture," "origin," "roots." But what exactly would he have wanted me to pass on? The constant embarrassment of

constant d'être soi-même ? L'humiliante rage d'être mis au banc ? La peur, omniprésente, tapie dans le moindre recoin d'ombre, ancrée si profondément que son odeur acré finit par se confondre avec la mienne ? La peur, que dis-je, la terreur, que quelqu'un arrive et en quelque mots bien choisis, puisse remettre en question tout ce que je suis, tout ce que j'essaye d'être, tout ce que je prétends être, chaque matin, dès le premier regard dans le miroir ? Pauvre enfant, pauvre fou.

Oui bien sûr, enfant j'aimais la tendresse de ma mère, j'aimais qu'elle me promène d'appartements en appartements, qui furent pour moi autant de nouveaux mondes à explorer, qu'elle me laisse battre les lourds tapis d'orient, et passer la raclette sur les marbres des douches, qu'elle chantonne en permanence, sans raison, comme un oiseau gazouille "Conchi, conchita, minha conchita" Mais la blessure n'en fut que plus profonde, quand les insultes sont venues sous la forme de mots doux. La première fois qu'un garçon m'a crié « Hé là ! Conchita » j'ai souri de son insulte. J'ai cru y voir l'affection que jusque-là, mes camarades de cette école des beaux quartiers m'avaient refusée. Il y eut, une année, dans ma classe, une autre petite fille que les garçons ont essayée d'appeler « Conchita. » Elle aussi avait une mère qui passait d'appartement en appartement, un tablier blanc impeccablement repassé enfilé par-dessus ses vêtements. Mais elle, elle était blanche comme le marbre de Marianne, blonde comme les ors de la République, et quand le déluge de mépris s'abattit sur elle, elle ne s'y trompa pas. Quand ils crièrent « Hé, Conchita » sur son passage, elle garda la tête bien droite, elle reconnut l'insulte en ne s'y reconnaissant pas. Moi, encore et encore et encore, je retournais la tête. Oui, c'était moi, j'étais Conchita ; et même, j'aimais ça.

Est-ce cela qu'il aurait aimé ? Qu'on lui apprenne à aimer la pointe de l'arme qui plus tard le blesserait ? Non, il va de soi que non. Il ne pouvait pas comprendre,

being me? The humiliating anger of consistently being put to the test? The fear, always there, lurking in the shadows, anchored so profoundly that its sour smell finally merged with my own? The fear—no, the terror—that someone could come at any moment and, with a few choice words, call into question everything that I am, everything that I am trying to be, everything that I pretend to be each morning when I look in the mirror? Poor child, poor fool.

Yes of course, as a child I loved my mother's affections, I loved that she took me from one apartment to another, which were to me so many new worlds to explore; I loved that she let me beat the heavy oriental rugs and wash the marble showers, that she was always singing, for no reason, chirping like a bird, "Conchi, conchita, minha conchita." But when these terms of endearment were turned to insults, the wounds only cut deeper. The first time a boy yelled at me, "Hey you, conchita!" I'd smiled, thinking I was finally getting the affection my classmates at that school in one of the nice neighborhoods had denied me. One year, there was another girl in my class whom the boys tried to christen "conchita." She also had a mother who went from apartment to apartment with a pristine white apron tied at her waist. But she was white as a bust of Marianne, blonde as the gilded halls of the Republic, and when the flood of disdain came at her, she made no mistake. When they yelled "Hey, conchita" after her, she held her head high and saw the insult as one in which she could not see herself. But me, I'd turn my head, again and again. Yes, that's me, conchita, for I'd loved being my mother's conchita.

Is that what he wanted? To be taught to love a knife that would later be used to wound him? No, obviously not.

je n'avais pas voulu qu'il comprenne, car l'ignorance de mon sacrifice était l'ignorance de la douleur. Et s'il osait affirmer que je ne lui avais rien transmis, c'est parce qu'il refusa, encore et encore, tout ce que je tentais de lui offrir ! J'ai renié père et mère et jusqu'à moi-même, j'ai lutté chaque jour depuis l'enfance pour m'arracher à ce que l'on avait fait de moi, et pour arracher à la vie ce qu'elle me refusait : honneurs, richesse, pouvoir, facilité...

Oh, les premiers, je les ai obtenus. Mais la facilité ne se conquiert pas, et elle me fut si amer, la coupe du succès, qu'elle avait parfois le goût de l'échec. Pourtant, je serais morte de ne l'avoir pas bue.

Voilà ce que je voulais pour Charles, voilà, mon fils, ce que j'avais rêvé pour toi, le seul héritage que j'avais trouvé digne de toi : une vie de portes ouvertes, un monde à cueillir comme une fleur sauvage, à récolter comme un fruit mûr. Et maintenant que te voilà mort et ton corps en terre, que reste-t-il de nous, quand tu as refusé tout ce que j'ai tenté de te donner ?

Ta femme, pour commencer, n'était pas celle que nous voulions. J'ose le dire aujourd'hui, qui l'entendra ? Ton père l'aurait voulu mieux née, mieux dotée, partant plus en avant sur la route du succès, pour arriver plus loin; il voulait un héritier, qui porterait plus haut la couronne familiale, et pour ça il savait que le soutien d'une épouse, de la bonne épouse, te serait nécessaire. Au début, il voulut la croire ambitieuse, comme lui, car, disait-il, la chance sourit aux ambitieux. Hélas, c'est de leur mère que les petits garçons tombent amoureux, pas de leur père. Très vite je reconnus en ta femme celle que j'avais été. Épuisant ses forces à se tirer du bourbier d'où elle venait, menant cette secrète guerre contre elle-même, que mènent tous ceux qui veulent échapper non pas au joug de la société, mais au pilori d'une mauvaise identité.

He couldn't understand—I hadn't wanted him to. To be ignorant of my sacrifice was to be ignorant of pain. He dared to accuse me of passing nothing on to him, but that was only because again and again, he refused everything I tried to give him! I had renounced mother and father alike, and even myself, fighting every day since my childhood to tear myself away from everything I was, and to tear from life what it had denied me: privilege, wealth, power, ease.

The first few, I managed. But ease cannot be won; indeed the cup of success was so bitter to me that at times it tasted like failure. And yet, I would have died if I had not tasted it for myself.

What I wanted for Charles—what I dreamed for you, my son, the only heritage I found worthy of you, was this: a life of open doors, a world ready to be plucked like a wildflower, like ripe fruit. But you refused everything I tried to give you, so what's left for us now that you're dead and your body's grown cold?

For starters, your wife wasn't what we wanted for you. I dare say it now; who will hear me? Your father wanted someone well-born, of means, someone further along on the road to success who would then land closer to the horizon. He wanted an heir who could elevate the family crown, and for that he knew you'd need to carefully choose a spouse, the right kind of spouse... At first he wanted to trust that your wife was ambitious, like him; as he used to say, fortune smiles upon those with ambition. But alas, it's their mothers little boys fall in love with, not their fathers. Almost immediately I saw something of myself in her. Wasting all her energy on escaping where she came from, secretly waging a war against herself aimed not at escaping society's yoke but rather at escaping the pillory of the wrong identity. The

La puissance qui émanait d'elle n'eut jamais vocation à élargir les frontières du royaume de ton père, mais pour seul objet de modeler un être nouveau, conforme à l'idéal romanesque qu'elle s'était construite.

Du jour où tu la rencontrais, il ne fut plus jamais question de t'installer dans une carrière à la hauteur de ce que tu méritais. Non seulement l'étude notariale que ton père et moi avions mis tant d'années à installer ne resterait pas dans la famille, ce qui avait été un premier coup dur quand tu avais abandonné la faculté de droit, mais en plus tu rejetas fermement l'idée d'un cabinet à Paris, refusa toutes nos suggestions de rejoindre une clinique Versaillaise, et même quand, cédant à ton caprice, nous te trouvâmes une collaboration à Bordeaux, tu méprisas notre offre au profit d'un poste absurde dans une maison médicale de Seine-Saint-Denis.

J'ai cinquante-huit ans, et cinquante années de haine ne me firent pas connaître désespoir plus authentique que de voir ce prince égocentrique que j'avais élevé s'abaisser à ce dont je m'extirpais : ton génie enterré et terni dans une pratique banlieusarde, tes passions devenues des passe-temps, la grandeur qui t'était promise un lointain écho que plus personne n'écoutait ; et, sur le dos de mes petits-enfants, les mêmes vêtements de seconde main qui me brûlèrent la peau tant d'années durant.

Voilà le fils que j'ai enterré.

Pour lui, cet ingrat, cet inconnu, cet étranger, pas une larme ne versera sur l'épais papier ivoire des cartes que j'écris. En silence pourtant, continue un deuil qui a commencé bien avant ton décès, et je pleure le fils que j'aurais pu avoir, et qui m'aurait compris, et qui m'aurait aimé.

power that emanated from her never did expand the boundaries of your father's kingdom, but it modeled as something new, conforming to the romantic ideal that she'd constructed for herself.

From the day you met her, it became crystal clear that you would never land the career you deserved. Not only would the notary office that your father and I had run for years not stay in the family—it was a hard blow when you quit law school—but you also rejected outright the mere idea of having a doctor's office in Paris; you dismissed our advice that you join a shared practice in Versaille; and even when we gave into your whims and found you something in Bordeaux, you turned it down to accept that ridiculous job at a clinic in Seine-Saint-Denis, of all places.

I'm fifty-eight years old. Fifty years of hate, and I have never known more real despair than when I saw the arrogant prince I'd raised descend to the depths I'd pulled myself out of: your genius defiled, buried, by a practice in the banlieue; your passions made pastimes; the greatness you were destined for nothing but a distant echo no one could hear; and on the backs of my grandchildren, second-hand clothes like the castoffs that had scorched my own skin for so many years.

Voilà, that's the son I buried.

For him, this ungrateful nobody, this stranger, not a tear will be shed on the thick ivory cards I now write. Yet silently, a mourning that began well before your passing goes on, and I cry for the son I could have had, who could have understood me and loved me.

## Translator's Foreword

Le premier enjeu de ces trois « flash fictions », trois textes intégraux, a trait à la culture. Kameron Ray Morton y raconte – chaque fois depuis un point de vue différent – des histoires entre deux réalités, entre celle qui revient à se trouver à l'intérieur d'une culture et celle qui consiste à ne pas en faire partie. L'auteur, qui est elle-même originaire de ce sud des États Unis qu'elle dépeint, fait encore davantage qu'inviter les lectrices à découvrir une cuisine à Scott, Arkansas : ielle nous permet de nous glisser dans la peau d'un natif de Scott, d'un de ces habitants du monde dont le sang est « chargé de la poussière du Delta ». Nous sommes à la fois un étranger qui rentre chez lui et un enfant du pays en exil.

Dans *Sur la corde raide*, nous continuons de graviter dans cette région qui résonne d'un imaginaire connu à travers le monde, celui des bayous de Louisiane, des plages de Floride, des parcs d'attractions. Dans ce monde empreint de magie, tout devrait être possible, tout pourrait être évident. La question du genre elle aussi pourrait tenir du conte de fée, quelque part entre les portants de robes de princesses et les boucliers de superhéros, mais les vérités les plus intimes restent parfois enfermées au fond d'une valise et les funambules sont condamnés à la chute dans un lac infesté de requins. L'eau est également synonyme de danger dans *En panne*, menaçant l'équilibre précaire de la vie de Becca, qui choisit de laisser les éléments partir à vau l'eau pour tenir à distance un quotidien qui l'opresse.

Le français est moins économique en mots que la langue originale. Le premier enjeu de la traduction de ces trois flash fictions a été d'éviter une transcription littérale qui aurait sonné trop syncopée, tout en respectant la concision du rythme des phrases de Kameron, qui participe à la montée d'un sentiment de danger et de

vertige.

## KAMERON RAY MORTON

### A KITCHEN IN SCOTT, ARKANSAS

There is always coffee. The first thing you do when you walk through the back door of the house, what might as well be the only door, is pour a cup from the pot regardless of the time. You don't give any thought to caffeine, to having trouble falling asleep. The days are long and never easy, and nothing could keep you awake when it is time to go to bed. The mugs are white and chipped and thin. You have to hold them by the handles because wrapping your hands around the cup burns. The coffee dribbles down the sides after you take a drink, painting brown lines down the white porcelain.

There is always dessert. Pecan pie, Suzie Q cake, sugar cookies. Chocolate cream pies with fluffy white meringue. Cobblers that change with the seasons, peach and blackberry and apple, topped with vanilla ice cream. These things are always homemade, or always look homemade. The trick with a store bought pie is to put it in your own pie dish. Pinch ridges into the crust with your thumb and first finger, distort its perfect edge.

There is always talk. What a sweet baby. Bless his heart. It's black as Colby's butt. She showed her ass. The devil's beating his wife. Pick out the phrases that mean something to everyone, the ones that only mean something in this room. Remember the time Betty locked herself out of her house twice in one day. Remember how

**traduit de l'anglais par  
KIM LÉVY**

## UNE CUISINE À SCOTT, ARKANSAS

Il y a toujours du café. La première chose que vous faites quand vous franchissez la porte arrière de la maison – qui pourrait aussi bien en être la seule porte – c'est vous servir une tasse à la cafetière, peu importe l'heure du jour. Vous ne pensez pas à la caféine qui pourrait troubler votre sommeil. Les journées sont longues et ne sont jamais faciles, et rien ne pourrait vous maintenir éveillé quand arrive l'heure de dormir. Les mugs sont blancs, ébréchés et fins. Il faut les tenir par l'anse parce que ça brûle d'enrouler ses mains autour de la tasse. Après chaque gorgée, le café redescend le long des parois en peignant des lignes brunes sur la porcelaine blanche.

Il y a toujours du dessert. Tarte aux noix de pécan, gâteau de Suzie Q, cookies au sucre ; tartes au chocolat et à la crème avec une meringue blanche onctueuse ; tourtes aux fruits variant avec les saisons, pêche, myrtille et pomme, surmontées de glace à la vanille. Ces choses-là sont toujours faites maison, ou ont toujours l'air d'être faites maison. L'astuce pour une tarte achetée dans le commerce, c'est de la mettre dans votre propre plat à tarte. Pincez la pâte entre le pouce et l'index pour tordre son bord parfait.

Il y a toujours des conversations. Quel beau bébé. Que Dieu le bénisse. Il fait noir comme le derrière de Colby. Elle a montré son cul. Le diable bat sa femme. Isolez les phrases qui ont un sens pour tout le monde des expressions qui n'en ont un que dans cette pièce. Rappelez-vous la fois où Betty s'est enfermée à l'extérieur de sa maison deux fois dans une même

Joyce took a nap during a storm and woke up underneath her bathtub in the soy bean field, her house gone in the tornado. Remember Ricky taking figure drawing classes forty minutes northwest in Little Rock, always trying to sit so he drew the naked model's back, trying not to offend his mother too much with the sketches he brought home. Remember Doug's felony pardon from President Clinton that let him own a gun again. Remember the days when you could have a shotgun rack on your truck, when everyone stood for Dixie like they do for the Star-Spangled Banner, when the battle flag didn't cause such a fuss.

You drink the coffee that burns your hands, follow the bitterness with egg whites and sugar that were combined in a bowl and whipped into bright white peaks. The stretched out words lap at your ears, disrupting your sense of what is right in the world. The Delta-dirt-blood that runs through your veins carries this place, so that even if you've never sipped the coffee, never caught the difference between a real pie crust and a cheated one, you know what it feels like to be here.

journée. Rappelez-vous comment Joyce, qui faisait une sieste pendant une tempête, s'est réveillée sous sa baignoire dans le champ de soja, alors que sa maison avait été emportée par la tornade. Rappelez-vous de Ricky qui prenait des cours de nu à quarante minutes au nord-ouest de Little Rock, et qui cherchait toujours à s'asseoir de manière à dessiner le nu de dos afin de ne pas trop choquer sa mère avec les esquisses qu'il rapportait à la maison. Rappelez-vous quand Doug a été gracié par le président Clinton, qui l'a laissé posséder une arme à nouveau. Rappelez-vous le temps où on pouvait avoir un porte-fusils dans son camion, où tous défendaient Dixie comme ils le font avec la Bannière Étoilée, le temps où on ne faisait pas tellement d'histoires autour du drapeau confédéré.

Vous buvez le café qui vous brûle les mains, et après l'amertume, poursuivez avec des blancs d'oeufs et du sucre qui ont été battus dans un saladier jusqu'à prendre la forme de petites pointes blanches et brillantes. Les mots persistent et claquent à vos oreilles, troublant votre perception de ce qui, dans ce monde, est juste. Le sang qui coule dans vos veines, chargé de la poussière du Delta, porte en lui ce lieu : même si vous n'avez jamais bu ce café, jamais fait la différence entre une vraie pâte à tarte et une industrielle, vous savez ce que ça fait de se trouver là.

## BROKEN

The air conditioner was broken, but Becca hadn't done anything about it. When she lay in bed at night she listened to the air kick off and heard the water drain down to God knows where like it wasn't supposed to do. Her boyfriend was worried about it, so worried that the water whirling away kept him up when he spent the night.

"Let me try to fix it," he said. "I think the water is draining into the wall."

"I'll call my landlord," Becca said. "It's his job to fix it."

Becca didn't call her landlord. Her boyfriend stopped spending the night, unable to stand the sound of water that shouldn't be there.

The water became Becca's favorite thing about her bedroom. The water helped her fall asleep. The water kept her boyfriend away so she didn't have to worry about finding new excuses to not sleep with him every evening and most mornings. Her worries were draining away with the water, so even when it started to leak through the wall Becca did not call her landlord. She watched the water pool on the out-dated, muted paisley wallpaper and waited to fall asleep.

## EN PANNE

Le climatiseur était en panne, mais Becca n'avait rien fait pour y remédier. Quand elle s'allongeait dans le lit la nuit, elle écoutait l'air se mettre en route et l'eau ruisselet Dieu sait où, ce qu'elle n'était pas censée faire. Son petit-ami s'en était inquiété, tant inquiété que l'eau en tourbillonnant le tenait éveillé quand il venait dormir chez elle.

« Laisse-moi essayer de le réparer, avait-il dit. Je pense que l'eau s'écoule à l'intérieur du mur.

Je vais appeler mon propriétaire, avait répondu Becca. C'est à lui de la réparer. »

Becca n'appela pas son propriétaire. Son petit-ami ne vint plus dormir, incapable de supporter ce bruit d'eau qui n'aurait pas du exister.

L'eau devint la chose que Becca préférait dans sa chambre. L'eau l'aidait à s'endormir. L'eau tenait son petit-ami à distance de telle sorte qu'elle n'avait pas à s'inquiéter de trouver de nouvelles excuses pour ne pas coucher avec lui chaque soir et presque chaque matin. Ses soucis s'échappaient avec cette eau, et même quand elle commença à fuir à travers la paroi du mur, Becca n'appela pas son propriétaire. Elle regarda l'eau stagner sur le papier peint vieillot recouvert de motifs cachemire et attendit le sommeil.

## TIGHTROPE WALKING

The dress modeled off one of the portraits in the haunted house ride is two hundred dollars after Logan's annual pass holder discount is applied. Logan buys the dress with the emergency cash his dad gave him so the name of the store won't show up on the credit card statement, guessing on the size. He tells the sales clerk that it's for his girlfriend. The sales clerk doesn't seem to care and wishes him a magical day.

Logan is on vacation with his family, his parents and his aunt and uncle and his cousins. They're staying in a four-bedroom suite, so Logan has his own room. When they go back to change for dinner he goes to his room and locks the door. He hid the bag from the dress shop inside his bag from the superhero store where he bought a replica shield, but he pulls it out now, carefully removing the dress from its tissue paper wrapping. He runs his hands over the red velvet sweetheart neckline, straightens the tulle underskirt, rubs the silky, flower-printed skirt between his fingers. He is too afraid to try it on now, in such close proximity to his family, but he imagines what it will feel like when he does. He doesn't think about how the top will likely fit wrong or how the hair on his legs will look out of place. He thinks only of the feel of the lining of the skirt against his thighs, the tightness around his waist. He thinks of she.

They're having dinner at one of the nicest restaurants on the property, on the top floor of a hotel overlooking the theme park with a castle. Logan wears a blazer and watches his cousins balance on high heels. After they finish their appetizer, it's time for fireworks. They and the other patrons walk out onto the large balconies where speakers pipe in music so they can get the full experience

## MARCHE SUR LA CORDE RAIDE

La robe, dont le modèle est tiré de l'un des portraits de la maison hantée, coûte deux cents dollars après la remise accordée à Logan avec son pass annuel. Logan achète la robe avec l'argent liquide que son père lui a donné en cas d'urgence pour que le nom du magasin n'apparaisse pas sur le relevé bancaire, en devinant la taille. Il raconte au vendeur que c'est pour sa copine. Le vendeur n'a pas l'air de s'en soucier et lui souhaite une journée magique.

Logan est en vacances avec sa famille, ses parents, sa tante, son oncle et ses cousins. Ils séjournent dans une suite de quatre chambres, donc Logan en a une à lui. Quand ils repassent se changer pour le dîner, il va dans sa chambre et ferme la porte à clef. Il a caché le sac de la boutique de la robe dans son sac du magasin de superhéros, où il a acheté une réplique de bouclier, mais il l'en retire à présent, et défait soigneusement la robe de son emballage en papier soie. Il parcourt de ses mains le velours rouge du décolleté en forme de cœur, lisse le jupon de tulle, fait rouler la jupe soyeuse imprimé fleurs entre ses doigts. Il a trop peur de l'essayer tout de suite, avec sa famille si près, mais il imagine ce qu'il ressentira quand il le fera. Il ne songe pas au haut qui ne lui ira probablement pas ou aux poils de ses jambes qui auront l'air de ne pas être à leur place. Il pense uniquement à la sensation de l'étoffe de la jupe contre ses cuisses, à l'étroitesse autour de sa taille. Il pense à elle.

Ils dînent dans l'un des meilleurs restaurants du domaine, au dernier étage d'un hôtel avec vue sur le parc d'attractions avec son château. Logan porte un blazer et regarde ses cousines perchées sur talons hauts. Quand ils ont fini l'apéritif, c'est l'heure du feu d'artifice. Eux et les autres clients sortent sur les grands balcons où les haut-parleurs diffusent de la musique afin qu'ils

of the fireworks show, high above the other theme park goers who can't afford forty dollar entrees.

The show is only a year old, but Logan has seen it enough times to have it memorized. The singers urge him to find his happily ever after as the fireworks pop and sizzle, and Logan tries to visualize something. The fireworks flash red and he thinks of the dress now tucked inside his suitcase, but he can't imagine himself in it. He pictures the portrait in the haunted house, a woman standing on a tightrope over a lake filled with sharks. The sky goes dark, and he imagines the tightrope snapping.

puissent profiter pleinement de l'expérience du spectacle pyrotechnique, bien au-dessus des autres visiteurs du parc d'attractions qui ne peuvent pas s'offrir des entrées à quarante dollars.

Le spectacle n'a qu'un an, mais Logan l'a vu suffisamment de fois pour le mémoriser. Les chanteurs l'exhortent à trouver sa fin de conte de fée tandis que les feux d'artifice éclatent et grésillent, et Logan tente de visualiser quelque chose. Les feux d'artifice passent au rouge et lui pense à la robe qui est maintenant rangée dans sa valise, mais il ne parvient pas à s'imaginer dedans. Il se représente le portrait de la maison hantée, une femme qui marche sur une corde raide au-dessus d'un lac rempli de requins. Le ciel s'obscurcit, et il imagine la corde qui cède.

## Translator's Foreword

In her untitled novel in progress, whose opening chapter is excerpted here, Kim Lévy has turned to a world she knows quite well—the life of a freelance journalist.

This was Lévy’s career for seven years until she began writing literature, leading to this account based on her own experiences in New Caledonia during its referendum on independence. Annexed by France in 1853, New Caledonia had voted in 1988 to remain a territory of France. In 2018, the independent referendum produced the same results. New Caledonia remains a French territory, despite the indigenous Kanak population’s attempts to sway the vote otherwise.

Lévy’s writing is packed with information and description, rich with details that illuminate its central character, a journalist named K, as the story progresses. Parsing through this complex language and bringing it into English was not easy, specifically because English often calls for more clarity than French. For this reason, I had to add small signposts to help orient the reader in time and space, while maintaining the vivid details that define Lévy’s style. It is my hope that these small additions serve to highlight the skill with which Lévy develops her characters and the world they inhabit.



# KIM LÉVY

## UNTITLED NOVEL EXCERPT

K arriva tard au rendez-vous. À cette heure, l'hôte - un certain M. Vincent - devait déjà attendre depuis un moment dans le hall de l'aérogare. Elle ressentit un remords à ce propos. Il fut fugace : les soixante-cinq heures d'un voyage pénible depuis Paris avaient eu raison de tout bon sentiment. Cette après-midi là, K et Illy filaient donc, enfin, vers l'enceinte de l'aérogare. L'appareil roulait sur le tarmac tandis qu'à sa queue, ils somnolaient dans la cabine, sourds aux consignes d'arrivée. Illy bavait un peu sur son manteau écrasé contre le hublot et la tête de K tombait et retombait avec lourdeur dans le couloir. Une petite foule allait et venait sans fin, se pressant, défilant en cuisses, en mains, en têtes d'enfant à proximité de son visage, tapant et retapant sans pitié dans la tête de K. Le dernier virage avait du finir par advenir. On n'osait plus y croire. Chaque passage en force des prétendants au trône propageait un sursaut à son sommeil perturbé, mais seulement quand elle crut entendre rire au-dessus d'elle dans la file, elle commença à émerger doucement, cherchant à la surface du rêve à identifier les intrus à travers la paroi rouge de ses paupières closes.

Le vol était petit, elle les connaissait. Il y avait sûrement là à rire bêtement le gros Caldoche rougeaud au regard toujours écrasé de soleil, même devant le minuscule écran à 10 000 au-dessus du plancher de ses vaches, et peut-être trois rangs plus loin, la Kanak qui aimait le rose et son bébé aussi, la fille avec son véliplanchiste qui avait menacé de procès la compagnie ; ceux qui restaient à la fin du parcours, qui avaient pris les mêmes vols infernaux

**translated from the french by  
KAMERON RAY MORTON**

## **UNTITLED NOVEL EXCERPT**

K and Illy were going to be late. By that time, their host, a certain Mr. Vincent, had to have already been waiting at the airport for quite a while now. She felt bad about this, but the feeling didn't last. The grueling sixty-five hour trip from Paris had begun in high spirits. That afternoon, their plane had finally begun heading towards the terminal. As it rolled along the tarmac, they dozed in the back of the cabin, deaf to the arrival announcement. Illy drooled a bit on his coat, crushed against the window, and K kept nodding off into the aisle. A small crowd had been constantly going back and forth, hurrying along in a parade of thighs, hands, and children's heads passing K's face, bumping her head without saying sorry. The last turn of the plane surely must have brought them to their destination, but no one dared believe it was over. Each person who had passed by on their way to "mount the throne" disturbed her sleep. It was only when she thought she heard laughing that she started to wake, coming to the surface of her dream to focus on the intruders outside the red wall of her closed eyelids.

The flight was small, so she knew everyone. There, laughing stupidly, had to be that large ruddy Caldoche man, whose face always looked crushed by the sun, even ten thousand feet above his cows. Maybe three rows up, the Kanak woman who liked pink, and her baby, too. Even further, the girl with her windsurfer boyfriend who had threatened to sue the airline. They were the only ones left at the end of the journey, all on the same

depuis Paris, jusqu'à ce dernier courrier au départ de Brisbane. Ils avaient l'air en forme pour des gens dont l'horloge interne avait écumé tous les fuseaux horaires du globe ; le chaos du trafic les avait aiguillés jusqu'au bord de la ligne de changement de date. Elle avait encore détaillé ses compagnons de route à l'amorce de la descente, quand le commandant de bord l'avait arrachée quelques secondes à sa torpeur. Elle voulut jeter un œil à la vue. On devait voir l'île maintenant.

Elle se traîna au hublot par-dessus les accoudoirs rigides et la mollesse des assises défoncées. Rien: pas une construction, mais des arbres, la jungle. Qu'est-ce que je fais là ?, fut sa première réaction. Et pourquoi pas plutôt Tahiti ?, sa seconde. Tout le petit monde bougeait maintenant et sortait déjà de l'avion en pensées, et cette absence affairée les faisait se cogner aux sièges et aux gens. Illy voulut la réveiller franchement mais K continuait d'inspecter les passagers avec la mauvaise humeur distraite des sorties de sieste. Elle se suggéra que Tahiti aussi aurait pu engager un processus d'indépendance plutôt que ce caillou perdu pour l'exotisme et pour - c'était le mot par défaut - le vivre-ensemble ; avec en ville surtout, du racisme et de la ségrégation. Tout le monde demandait pardon et se cédait le passage.

Les bagages dégringolaient des coffres. C'est moi qui l'ai voulu après tout, se reprocha K. Ça avait commencé, croyait-elle, alors qu'ils consultaient l'actualité. En plus de ce qu'ils pouvaient lire dans les journaux, colonne des brèves, Illy recevait aussi par mails un agenda lointain à propos de réunions relatives au scrutin d'autodétermination de la Nouvelle-Calédonie. Il classait froid-tiède dans la hiérarchie ces informations mineures parmi la masse des courriers reçus. Les services de presse des institutions concernées avaient pris quelques années mais l'inscrivaient maintenant sans faute sur les listes de diffusion des journalistes spécialistes de l'outre-mer.

maddening flights from Paris up to this last departure out of Brisbane. They looked all right for people whose internal clocks had crossed through all the time zones of the globe, the chaos of travel leading them to the very edge of the date line. She was still enumerating the details of her traveling companions as they started to descend when she was pulled away from her last bits of drowsiness for a few moments by the captain. She wanted to see the view. You could probably see the island now.

K lingered looking out the window, leaning over the rigid armrests and the soft sunken seat. Nothing, not one building. Just trees. The jungle. What am I doing here? was her first reaction. And then, Why couldn't it have been Tahiti? Everyone was moving now, exiting the plane lost in thought, and this restless absence made them bump into the seats and each other. Illy wanted K's full attention, but K continued to inspect the passengers with a sour and distracted mood caused by her interrupted nap. She mused that Tahiti could have started an independence process, instead of this so-called rock lost to exoticism and to an ideal of "living in harmony" (the default phrase) especially in the city, with its racism and segregation. In front of her, passengers said excuse me and made space for each other.

Luggage tumbled out of the overhead bins. I'm the one who wanted this, after all, K reproached herself. It had all started, she believed, with she and Illy following the news. In addition to what they could read in newspapers and briefings, Illy was also receiving emails with plans for future meetings on self-determination polls in New Caledonia. He classified this information as lukewarm in the hierarchy of minor information among the masses he received in his inbox. The press services of the institutions that were involved had taken a couple of years, but now included him on their mailing lists for journalists specializing in outlying territories. As

Les mois passant, ils s'échangeaient des nouvelles sur ce dossier, et c'était sans affect particulier. Illy avait du écrire cinq ou six feuillets en tout à ce propos, et un jour enfin voulu produire un petit reportage, un mois peut-être un mois et demi, dans cette fournaise au milieu du Pacifique. On disait que c'était la dernière colonie française. Il voulait se faire envoyer spécial, trouver un peu de la vérité sombre promise par toute aventure coloniale, et repartir après le référendum d'indépendance. La rédaction avait pris son temps. Elle avait réfléchi.

Et puis elle avait dit non. « Nous te remercions pour ta proposition. Ce scrutin est en effet un sujet qui intéresse le journal, trop pour n'être pas traité en interne. C'est un sujet identitaire pour la maison. Blouibli blouibli. La Calédonie, c'est pour les titulaires. » K s'était agacée quand Illy lui avait lu le mail, qui venait s'ajouter à ceux tout aussi décevants de ses propres employeurs, aux indifférences assumées ou pire, aux silences, aux hésitations, aux coupes budgétaires innommées qu'elle avait du elle-même deviner. Elle avait pris ce refus avec trop d'emportement. Voilà la double peine pour les précaires ! On ne pensait quand même pas qu'ils se priveraient d'une virée au soleil ! Elle avait brandi les grandes valeurs, consulté la charte comme une profession de foi, tandis qu'Illy cherchait encore un moyen de convaincre la hiérarchie. Par défi autant que par dépit, elle avait dit : « On va y aller et on va rester un an. » Et puis, une lumière s'était allumée dans les yeux d'Illy, la lueur timide de la folie.

Il avait ensuite fallu partir, délaisser les mauvais magazines, arracher de vagues engagements à des rédactions stratégiques, qui lui prendraient quelques feuillets. Toute façon, Paris commençait à être trop petit. On avait trouvé à loger deux semaines dans une famille kanak et Vincent, le père, avait proposé de venir les chercher. Il écrivait justement par message qu'il porterait un polo vert, informa Illy. Ils n'auraient qu'à le chercher

the months went by, K and Illy exchanged news on the topic, to no particular end. Illy must have written five or six articles, and one day he finally decided he wanted to write a short feature. For that, he would need to spend a month, maybe a month and a half, in this furnace in the middle of the Pacific. They said it was the last French colony. He wanted to be a special correspondent, to find a little of the dark truth promised by every colonial adventure, and leave after the independence referendum. The editorial board took their time in answering, reflecting.

And then, they said no. “We thank you for your proposal. The polls are of great interest to the paper, and they’re too important to be given to a freelancer. Topics such as this are what the paper is known for. Blah, blah, blah. New Caledonia is for staff reporters.” K was annoyed when Illy read her the email. It was the latest addition to all the other disappointments she had with her own employers, the accepted indifferences, or worse: the silences, the hesitation, the unnamed budget cuts she’d had to figure out for herself. She took the refusal too hard. Neither of them were getting anywhere! Why would the editors deprive themselves of a trip to the beach? She had brandished her great values, consulted Caledonia’s constitution like a profession of faith, while Illy looked for a way to convince the higher ups. As defiant as she was bitter, she had said, “We’ll go there and we’ll stay a year.” And then a light lit in Illy’s eyes, a hesitant glow that had a touch of insanity.

Then they had to go, leave behind subpar magazines, pull out of vague commitments to potentially promising editors who said they might take a few pages from them. Anyway, Paris was starting to feel too small. They’d found a Kanak family to put them up for two weeks and Vincent, the father, had offered to pick them up at the airport. He would be wearing a green polo shirt, Illy said.

après la haie des douaniers. K. ouvrit les yeux et suivit le mouvement jusqu'à la passerelle de débarquement.

Le couple chercha l'homme en vert, à mesure que l'aérogare se vidait de son moyen courrier. Ils tournaient depuis dix minutes quand un quadragénaire en tee-shirt kaki leur fit un signe de la main. Il se lisait à peine un peu d'hésitation sur son visage souriant et s'il vit la surprise de K tandis qu'ils s'avançaient vers lui pour le saluer, il n'en laissa rien paraître. Dans son labeur – elle tractait les deux valises derrière elle - la requérante fixa Illy en se demandant depuis combien de temps il savait que Vincent était blanc. Sans savoir la raison pour laquelle K le dévisageait de la sorte, Illy haussa les épaules et serra en souriant la main de l'hôte.

La nuit était tombée d'un coup sur le jour, genre de phénomène qui n'arrivait jamais du côté du globe d'où elle s'était laborieusement téléportée, mais K ne le remarqua pas. Elle regretta à peine de ne pas pouvoir profiter du primorama, la première vision à la sortie de l'aéroport qui aurait pu faire basculer l'idée de son voyage. Elle était trop occupée à comprendre ce que la rencontre avec un blanc à la place d'un Kanak pouvait bien changer à l'histoire. Il aurait pu lui dire, que Vincent était blanc, ça lui aurait évité de se sentir bête. On chargeait les valises à l'arrière de l'énorme pick-up. Et puis elle se dit qu'il pouvait tout aussi bien qu'elle n'avoir pas su. Elle lui jeta à nouveau un coup d'oeil : il semblait tout à fait à son aise, ne se posant pas davantage de questions ontologiques que s'il avait atterri dans l'ennui routinier d'un tour d'images au ministère des outre-mers ou dans un élevage biologique de Mayenne. Il pouvait n'avoir pas su. D'ailleurs, dit-on jamais ce genre de choses ?

Le pick up les transportait à présent sur la route territoriale, à travers un paysage vallonné ponctué

He'd be waiting for them after customs. K, fully awake now, followed the movement along the jet bridge.

The two of them looked for the man in green, the possibility of finding him increasing as the airport emptied of its small crowd. They'd been turning in circles for ten minutes when a man in his forties wearing a khaki T-shirt waved at them. There was the tiniest bit of hesitation on his cheerful face, and if he noticed K's surprise as he walked toward them, he didn't let on. Dragging both suitcases behind her, she gave Illy a look, wondering how long he'd known that Vincent was white. Without questioning the reason for K's look, Illy shrugged his shoulders and cheerfully squeezed the hand of his host.

Day fell quickly into night, a phenomenon that never happened so quickly in the corner of the world she'd been gruelingly teleported from, but K didn't notice it. She barely regretted not being able to take advantage of the panorama; the first view exiting the airport could have shifted her idea of this trip. She was too busy trying to understand how meeting a white man instead of a Kanak could affect the story. Illy could have told her Vincent was white—that way she could have avoided feeling so stupid. They loaded the luggage in the back of the enormous pick-up. Then she thought to herself that maybe he hadn't known either. K looked over at Illy again: he seemed completely at ease, not asking any more questions than if he had landed in the routine boredom of the outlying territories ministry. He couldn't have known. Besides, does anyone ever say that kind of thing?

The pick-up transported them on a government road across the rolling landscape punctuated by yellow light

des lumières jaunes des maisons, des quartiers qui se débattaient dans la nuit bleue. De profil, dans l'habitacle, K trouvait à Vincent une ressemblance sans intérêt avec ces voyageurs croisés partout, indifférencié de ces autres Zoreils installés dans tous les coins du monde. Il se montrait peut-être un peu plus tranquille, il riait un peu plus que de raison à ce qu'il entendait, tout en tenant à distance les excuses d'Illy et K. Il avait écourté son week-end, - Illy et K l'apprenaient - après avoir relevé ses nasses dans la mangrove pour les crabes de palétuvier, prévenu les jeunes qu'il n'irait pas chasser dans le lagon en apnée armés de fusils sous-marins avec les tortues, les raies et les requins dans deux mètres d'une eau transparente, et pris le chemin de l'aéroport. Son ton était égal, d'une jovialité latente et presque toujours indue, qu'il leur livrât les détails de son week-end avorté ou son analyse nourrie de la politique locale, des institutions, des tribus déplacées par les prêtres, de la délinquance, du home jacking, de son fils qui passait les concours de journalisme en métropole.

Les collines les surplombaient et ils dominaient leur sommet tour à tour, dans un manège qui mena les arrivants et leur chauffeur jusqu'au cœur de la ville. Les marinas dispersées, les promenades de bord de mer, les ronds points tournoyants, faisaient penser tour à tour à Saint-Tropez, à Tel Aviv, à Antibes. La Réunion, Illy, elle est là non ? La grande place des cocotiers pourrait ressembler à la fontaine devant l'église, dans le rapport d'espace. C'est la Réunion avec des arbres sous stéroïdes. Les banians étaient aussi imposants qu'ailleurs, avec leur éternelle aura de mystère, mais les flamboyants et les frangipaniers paraissaient énormes. Illy s'était endormi, à demi allongé sur la banquette arrière plongée dans l'obscurité. Le cinéma imposant et désert ressemblait à un phare dans la nuit.

En haut d'une colline, juste avant d'arriver devant le portail de fer, Vincent les prévint qu'il irait réveiller la

from houses, neighborhoods lingering in the night. Observing him in profile from the passenger seat, K found that Vincent had an unremarkable resemblance to other travelers that crossed the world, indistinguishable among the expats. He was maybe a little too quiet. He laughed a little too much at what he heard, refusing to hear K and Illy's excuses for being late. He had shortened his weekend to get them. That morning, he'd retrieved the nets in the mangroves for crabs, told the children that he wouldn't go snorkeling in the lagoons to hunt with underwater rifles for turtles, rays, and sharks in two meters of transparent water, and then, he took the road to the airport. His tone was calm with a touch of unnecessary cheerfulness as he shared the details of his aborted weekend, or analyzed local politics, or institutions, or tribes displaced by the church, or delinquency, burglaries or, his son who was taking his journalism exams in the city.

They overtook the summit of the hills, plunging up and down on a rollercoaster ride that took them to the heart of the city. The scattered marinas, the boardwalks, the spinning roundabouts made one think in turn of Saint Tropez, Tel Aviv, the Antibes. Might as well be Réunion Island, right, Illy? The large square of coconut trees could look just like the fountains outside of the church, in relation to the space. It's Réunion, just with trees on steroids. The Banyan trees were just as impressive as in other places, with their eternal aura of mystery, but the flamboyants and plumerias looked enormous. Illy had fallen asleep, half-lying in the dark of the back seat. The movie theater, imposing and deserted, resembled a lighthouse in the night.

Up a hill, just before arriving at the iron gate, Vincent let them know he would wake his grandmother. K would

grand-mère. K voulut réagir à temps, dire qu'il n'en était pas question, qu'on irait la voir le lendemain, mais l'hôte avait déjà sauté le marche-pied et se dirigeait droit vers la maison. Il toquait à la porte et deux petits chiens blancs frisés sautèrent à sa rencontre. K avait réveillé Illy. Une veilleuse s'alluma dans une chambre tandis qu'ils attendaient dans la cour de béton arboré.

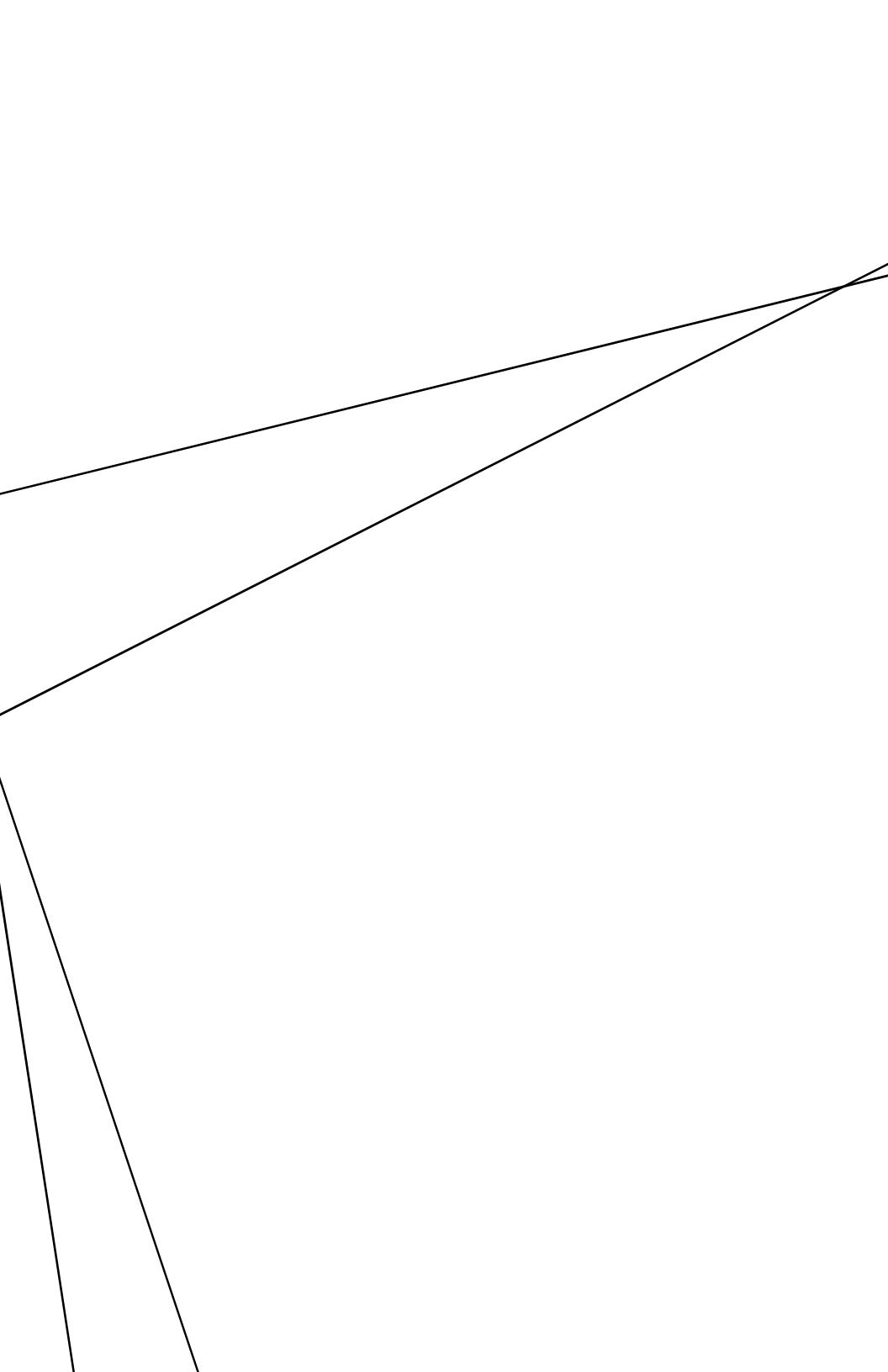
Vincent se retourna tout sourire. K crut déceler dans son expression une manière familière de rassurer les usages. Il les pressa poliment de rechercher les cadeaux. Illy détacha les arceaux élastiques de la bâche ; il fallut ouvrir ces bunkers énormes, habitacles de plastiques rigides remplis à craquer, mais les habitants sortaient déjà en file par la porte-fenêtre du salon. Ils se placèrent alignés, debout bien droits face aux deux qui se battaient accroupis entre les vêtements et les livres, les câbles de branchement s'emmêlant à leurs doigts en quête des chocolats et des bouteilles de whisky à tâtons dans le noir. Ils se relevèrent et rencontrèrent les ombres d'une vieille femme, d'un vieil homme, d'une femme et d'un garçon. Le rideau allait se lever sur le clan kanak. Le petit-fils, qui se situait le plus près de l'interrupteur, alluma la lumière du perron. Un clan métisse les dévisageaient.

Ainsi commença la longue agonie de leur méprise.

have liked to react quicker, to say that was out of the question, that they would see her the next day. The host, however, had already jumped on the walkway headed right toward the house. He knocked at the door and two little fluffy white dogs bounded out to meet him. K woke up Illy. A night light turned on in a bedroom while they waited in the cement courtyard lined with trees.

Vincent turned around, all smiles. K believed she detected in his expression a familiar manner meant to reassure them. He pressed them politely for the gifts. Illy undid the bungee cords securing the tarp. He had to open the enormous plastic bins, rigid compartments filled to bursting, while the residents were already filing out the double doors of the living room. They formed a line, standing upright, facing Illy and K as they dug through the pile, crouched between clothes and books, cables tangled in their fingers as they felt around for chocolate and bottles of whiskey in the dark. They picked themselves up and met the shadows of an old woman, an old man, a woman, and a boy. The curtain was about to rise on the Kanak family. The grandson, who was standing closest to the switch, turned on the light above the front steps. A mixed family met their gaze.

So began the long agony of their mistake.



*word for word / wort für wort*  
Columbia University School of the Arts  
Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig

## Translator's Foreword

Robert Rubsams Kurzgeschichten sind Mosaiken. Kleine Gebilde, die den Leser einladen in längst vergangene Sphären und Welten einzutauchen; kurze Momentaufnahmen, die voller Symbolkraft stecken und dabei von einer zärtlichen Nostalgie durchzogen sind. Dabei wirken die archaischen Momente und Elemente, die er aufgreift, keineswegs überholt.

Im Gegenteil, fundamentale Fragen – wie fressen oder gefressen werden? Engel oder Teufel? Beobachter oder Beobachtete? – haben nichts von ihrer Aktualität eingebüßt und sollten beim Lesen stets in den Kontext unserer Zeit übersetzt werden. Somit eröffnet sich schlussendlich die ganze Dimension dieser diversen Welt(en), auf die wir uns in all ihrer farbigen Pracht einlassen sollten.

Robert Rubsam wurde 1991 im Hudson Valley in New York geboren. Während seiner Arbeit als Kritiker und Journalist, hat er über Kunst, Kultur, Politik und Geschichte, sowie Moorleichen geschrieben, die in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Baffler*, *Commonweal* und *Texas Monthly* veröffentlicht wurden. Er begann sein MFA in Creative Writing an der Columbia Universität im Herbst 2019, in der Hoffnung sich auf seine Belletristik zu fokussieren. Ein überzeugter Ire, der vielfach durch die Weltgeschichte gereist ist.



## **ROBERT RUBSAM**

### **INTERIOR WITH IDA PLAYING PIANO**

One dusk, as she was yet again rearranging the tables and chairs, the winter light had gloamed the nape of her neck and he had found himself overcome by its unbearably sober glow. And so he had said: stay there, be still, and gone off for his pencils and his palette to paint the back of her where she stood.

He had painted her many times now: at the sideboard, before the window, across their apartment. The interior grew emptier, somehow, once a body filled it. He was forever arranging and rearranging their lives, seating her in a solitary chair, framing her across a clear, polished space. Until everything was just so – the fall of her hair, the gleam of her spine—he could not be satisfied. And, as he maneuvered every least thing, she would wait there, tolerant and restrained, asking on occasion whether she was properly seated, whether she had turned into or away from the light, and all without knowing even how he looked at her in these spare moments of perfection. Much less how she herself appeared.

Even now she could not turn back toward him, could not face either distant scrutiny or exultant gaze. Her fingers cold on the keys, she sensed something strange in all these fussings and arrangements, as if he were afraid of her look, as if for her to turn back would unsettle not only this particular composition – the propped doors, the

**aus dem englischen übersetzt von  
NATALJA ALTHAUSER**

**ZIMMER MIT IDA AM PIANO**

In der Abenddämmerung, als sie erneut die Tische und Stühle umstellte, warf das Winterlicht ein Zwielicht auf ihren Nacken und er war überwältigt von diesem unerträglich schlichten Glanz. Daraufhin sagte er: „Bleib stehen, beweg dich nicht“ und war losgelaufen, seine Stifte und die Palette zu holen, um ihre Rückenansicht zeichnen zu können.

Er hatte sie schon viele Male gezeichnet: am Buffet, vor dem Fenster, gegenüber des Apartments. Das Zimmer wurde auf wundersame Weise leerer, sobald ein Körper sich darin befand. Wieder und wieder ordnete und stellte er ihre Leben um, setzte sie in einen verlassenen Stuhl, bildete sie gegenüber einem hellen, glänzenden Platze ab. Bis alles genau saß – wie ihre Haare fielen, der Schimmer ihres Rückrades –, war er nicht zufrieden und, während er jedes noch so kleine Detail arrangierte, wartete sie dort, duldsam und beherrscht. Von Zeit zu Zeit fragte sie sich, ob sie richtig saß, ob sie sich vom Licht ab- oder sich diesem zu sehr zugewendet hatte und all das, ohne auch nur zu wissen, wie er sie in diesen seltenen Momenten der Perfektion ansah. Noch weniger, wie sie selbst wirkte.

Selbst jetzt konnte sie sich nicht zu ihm drehen, konnte ihm seine distanzierte Prüfung oder seinen triumphierenden Blick nicht ansehen. Während ihre kalten Finger auf den Schlüsseln lagen, spürte sie etwas Seltsames in diesem ewigen Herumgeschiebe und dem Arrangieren, als ob er ihren Blick fürchtete und, sofern sie sich umdrehen würde, nicht nur diese bestimmte Komposition – die angelehnten Türen, die schimmernde

gleaming bowl, the unseen but essential window – but this room, this apartment, indeed their entire life together, arranged and rearranged with such precision and even a sort of trembling, as if even one look might reveal it to be nothing but shredded paper and sawdust—a thing unable to withstand so much as a single backwards glance.

**Schüssel, das unsichtbare, aber notwendige Fenster – aus dem Gleichgewicht bringen würde, sondern den Raum, das Apartment, ihr gemeinsames Leben, das er wieder und wieder mit solch einer Präzision ordnete und umstellte, fast mit einer gewissen Bangen, als ob nur ein Blick ausreichen würde, um zu offenbaren, dass es außer zerrissenem Papier und Sagespäne nichts gab – nicht eine Sache, die einem einzigen rückwärtsgewandten Blick standhalten könnte.**

## THE ABYSS OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING

Marcel took lunch in his favorite restaurant. It was the sort of stolid and old-fashioned place where everything is made of slightly scuffed wood, and it was known for its rare meats. He ordered a bottle of wine, and, feeling bold, a single slice of roast beef, “the rarest you have.” There was much whispering amongst the staff, but he thought nothing of it. When they finally delivered his lunch, however, Marcel was astonished: there was an eye in the middle of his beef. It gazed this way and that; every so often it would blink. He poked at the meat with his knife and fork, even trimmed a bit of fat around the edges, but the eye did not seem to notice. Though he knew the meat would be tasty, Marcel could not bring himself to eat it. Something about the eye just seemed wrong. After observing it observe him for some time, he nearly cried out in shock. The eye staring back at him was none but his own. Marcel promptly sent his lunch back to the kitchen. “No,” he said to them, “that’s too rare.”

## DER ABGRUND DER SELBSTERKENNTNIS

Marcel nahm ein Mittagessen in seinem Lieblingsrestaurant ein. Es war die Art bräsigen und altmodischen Lokals, an dem alles aus leicht abgenutztem Holze angefertigt war. Die Küche war für ihre rohen Fleischgerichte bekannt. Er bestellte eine Flasche Wein und, er fühlte er sich kühn, eine einzige Scheibe Roast Beef „die Blutigste, die sie haben.“ Das führte zu Gerede unter dem Personal, doch daraus machte er sich nichts.

Als sie das Gericht endlich servierten, war Marcel jedoch überrascht in der Mitte seines Fleisches ein Auge vorzufinden. Es starrte in seine Richtung, so sanft, dass es aussah, als ob es ihm zuzwinkere. Er klopfte mit seinem Messer und der Gabel auf das Fleischstück, schnitt sogar ein Stück Fett an den Enden ab, doch all das kümmerte das Auge kümmerte herzlich wenig. Obwohl er wusste, dass das Fleisch ausgezeichnet wäre, konnte er sich nicht überwinden, es zu essen. Irgendwas mit dem Auge stimmte einfach nicht. Nachdem er es für einige Zeit beobachtet hatte, beobachtete das Auge nun ihn. Er schrie fast in Entsetzen auf. Das Auge, das ihn anstarrte, war kein geringeres als sein eigenes Auge. Marcel schickte das Fleisch unverzüglich in die Küche zurück: „Nein“, sagte er zum Kellner, „das ist zu blutig.“

## St. JEROME AND THE ANGEL

Once, during his long vigil in the desert, St. Jerome was visited by what claimed to be an angel.

His fasting and ascetic devotions had been much-beleaguered by temptations and false visions, and Jerome was naturally skeptical of this mysterious visitor. But after running his hands through the messenger's cloaks and even plucking for himself a feather, he opened his heart to the visitor. "What brings you to my cave?" he asked the Angel.

"Word of your devotion has spread all throughout our Kingdom," the heavenly being replied. "Few in this life have ever been so learned and so virtuous."

The eremite blushed at the suggestion, shrinking into his sackcloth. "I am only a sad and fallen man, and unworthy of your company."

"That may be so," said the Angel. "But I am dogged by a question, and I hoped you of all men could set me at ease:

"Consider," he posed, "the day you will arrive at the City of God. You stand before the gate, and you stand, and you stand. After some time, a messenger calls out from the walls: this gate, he says, will open only for the gravest sinners, those in need of immediate redemption. The virtuous entrance lies across the city, and to reach it one must follow a narrow and rocky path, a journey eons-

## St. JEROME UND DER ENGEL

Einmal, während einer seiner langen Wachen in der Wüste, wurde St. Jerome von jemanden besucht, der behauptete, ein Engel zu sein.

Sein Fasten und seine asketischen Andachten waren oft von Versuchungen und falschen Visionen verflucht worden. Jerome war seither skeptischer und wunderte sich über diesen mysteriösen Besucher. Doch nachdem er seine Hand durch den Mantel des Botens hatte fahren lassen und dort sogar eine Feder eigens für sich selbst ausgezupft hatte, öffnete er diesem Besucher sein Herz.  
„Was bringt dich in meine Höhle?“, fragte er den Engel.

„Man hört in unserem gesamten Königreich, deine Demut und Hingabe seien einzigartig.“, entgegnete der Himmlische. „Nur wenige sind in diesem Leben so gelehrt und von solch einer Tugend.“

Der Eremit errötete bei dieser Erwähnung und versank tiefer in seinen rauen Kittel. „Ich bin nur ein trauriger und gefallener Mann und eurer Gesellschaft gänzlich unwürdig.“

„Das mag sein“, erwiderte der Engel, „aber mich verfolgt eine Frage und ich hatte gehofft, Ihr, von allen Menschen, könnetet mir zu Frieden verhelfen.“

„Stell dir vor“, begann er, „der Tag kommt, an dem du in der Stadt Gottes empfangen wirst. Du stehst vor den Toren und dort stehst du und stehst. Nach einiger Zeit ruft ein Bote aus dem Inneren der Mauern: Dieses Tor‘, sagt er, öffnet nur für die Schlimmsten aller Sünder, diejenigen, die sofortige Erlösung benötigen. Der tatsächliche Eingang liegt jenseits der Stadt und, um diesen zu erreichen, muss man einem engen und steinigen

long. Now, I am not a man, but this question has been the source of much confusion. Tell me, hermit: Is salvation sweeter if we virtuously put off its arrival? Or ought one to sin now, and sin grievously, so that they might enter at once?"

"If we set out on the virtuous path," Jerome asked the heavenly messenger, "then the gate is sure to open? Our salvation is assured?"

"I can only assume so. But this road is so long and so arduous that no one has yet arrived."

Jerome was taken aback. "And so the City of God is empty?"

"Oh, far from it," snickered the Angel. "The gate almost never closes, and we scarcely have room enough for you all."

The Saint sat some time in thought. When he had been young and lived still a life of free indulgence, Jerome often quieted his conscience in the Roman catacombs. The further he descended into these hallowed ossuaries, the stronger and starker had grown the darkness around him, until the earth had begun to groan and the terrors of hell had flamed up out of the silence. Sunk amongst the bones of the blest dead, he would sit in that silent dark for hours with terror breathing through his soul. And then, qualms relieved, he would ascend to the depravities above, as if his own damnation had not rested for those hours beside him. As if this had changed nothing at all.

Pfad folgen, eine Reise, die ein gesamtes Weltzeitalter umfasst. Nun bin ich kein Mensch, aber diese Frage war sooft Quelle großer Verwirrung. Sag mir Eremit: Ist die Erlösung süßer, wenn wir ihre Ankunft vortrefflich verschieben? Oder sollte man sich nun versündigen und schwer versündigen, so dass die Sünder alle auf einen Schlag eintreten können?“

„Wenn wir uns auf den tugendhaften Pfad begeben“, fragte Jerome den göttlichen Boten, „dann wird sich das Tor sicher öffnen? Die Erlösung ist uns sicher?“

„Ich kann es nur annehmen, aber dieser Weg ist so lang und mühsam, dass noch niemand je dort angekommen ist.“

Jerome war verdutzt: „Also ist die Stadt Gottes leer?“

„Oh, weit gefehlt!“, kicherte der Engel. „Das Tor schließt sich fast nie und wir haben fast kaum genug Platz für euch alle.“

Der Heilige saß einige Zeit gedankenversunken da. Als er noch jung war und ein Leben in großer Ausgelassenheit genossen hatte, hatte Jerome sein Gewissen oft in den Römischen Katakomben beruhigt. Je weiter er in diese heiligen Beinhäuser herabstieg, desto stärker und nackter wuchs die Dunkelheit um ihn herum, bis die Erde zu stöhnen anfing und das Entsetzen der Hölle aus der Stille aufflammte. Versunken zwischen den Knochen der seligen Toten, saß er dort über Stunden in der stillen Dunkelheit, während der Terror seine Seele aufwühlte. Und dann, von Gewissensbissen erleichtert, stieg er wieder hinauf in die Verderbtheit, als ob seine eigene Verdammnis nicht über Stunden neben ihm gelegen hätte. Als ob all das überhaupt nichts verändert hätte.

Jerome shuddered to think of it. "Virtue," he replied.

"Without virtue, there can be nothing," and then drove this false divinity into the wilderness.

For the devil's temptations are unrelenting, and we must be forever on our guard.

Jerome schauderte bei dem Gedanken. „Tugend“, antwortete er.

„Ohne Tugend kann es nichts geben.“ Und dann schickte er diese falsche Göttlichkeit in die Wüste.

Denn die teuflischen Versuchungen sind unerbittlich und wir müssen stets vor Ihnen auf der Hut sein.

## NOTES FROM THE DEAF HOUSE

By this time in his life Goya was stone deaf and most likely going blind, as if all those years as confidant and painter of the powerful had left him disfigured as well as degraded. This was hardly the worst of it: the following years would pummel and paralyze the great artist, and, in the end, he would be buried without his head.

He no longer took commissions, living instead with his mistress on Madrid's fringe. Their house was overwhelmed by silence, with space only for the slightest sounds: the blub of the well, the swish of her skirts, the deaf man's feet as they dragged along the floor. During these days he worked exclusively on the walls, painting, as the poet said, with his fists and elbows, painting one scene only to paint another atop it, adorning their muffled house with his nightmares.

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Marta S had first discovered Francisco de Goya when she was a young student. Her class had taken a trip to the Prado, and, while wandering the halls, she had come upon the Pinturas. She walked the room, distantly

## AUFZEICHNUNGEN AUS DEM GEHÖRLOSENHAUS

An diesem Punkt seines Lebens war Goya stocktaub und würde sehr wahrscheinlich bald erblinden, als ob all diese Jahre als Vertrauter und Zeichner der Mächtigen ihn sowohl entstellt, als auch entwürdigt hätten. Dies war jedoch nicht das Schlimmste: die kommenden Jahre würden den großartigen Künstler verwüsten und lähmen und am Ende dieser würde er ohne Kopf seinen begraben werden.

Er erhielt keine Aufträge mehr an, stattdessen lebte er mit seiner Geliebten an Madrids Stadtrand. Ihr Haus wurde von Schweigen erdrückt und bot ausschließlich Raum für die kleinsten Geräusche: das Blubbern des Brunnes, das Rascheln ihrer Röcke, die Füße des tauben Mannes, während er sich über den Flur schlepppte. Während dieser Tage arbeitete er ausschließlich an den Wänden, die er mit seinen Fäusten und Ellenbogen bemalte<sup>1</sup>, wie der Dichter sagte, und malte eine Szene nur um eine andere darüber zu legen und so ihr schweigendes Haus mit diesen Schreckensszenarien zu zieren.

~

Als sie eine junge Studentin war, hatte Marta S Francisco de Goya zum ersten Mal entdeckt. Ihre Klasse hatte einen Ausflug ins Museum del Prado unternommen. Während sie die Hallen entlangwanderte, stieß sie auf die Pinturas. Sie lief durch den Raum und beobachtete

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<sup>1</sup>Das Gedicht „Summer 1969“ stammt von dem Iren Seamus Heaney und thematisiert den Spanischen Bürgerkrieg, den Heaney geschickt mit den Aufständen in Nordirland Ende der 60er verknüpft.

surveying the panorama, when her eye was caught by a stray detail in a huddled woman's eyes, the brute sidelong fear that rippled out across the canvas until it seemed to dishevel the entire composition, gathering up mantillas and manikins and ghoulishly peering faces until everything—everything she had known, everything she had assumed about art, constancy, solidity — stumbled, scattered, and disappeared before her eyes, fixing her, mute, at the center of the artist's pitiless vision.

Until this very moment, all of her studies had led her to think of the history of art as a settled thing, populated by bold names and undeniable accomplishments, its arguments undeniable, its controversies firmly in the past. What remained to be done? But here were paintings that breathed, sang, and spat, whose unvarnished and even crude style transfigured them to life in ways she had never before considered possible. They could have been painted yesterday; they could still be waiting for their executor to step back into the room and continue with his work.

For the rest of her studies, Marta S thought of little but these masterworks, writing paper after paper and thesis after thesis until she became an undeniable authority in the field. She returned time and again to the Prado, and came, she thought, to know every inch of Goya's work. During the course of this research, she came to learn the real secret of the Pinturas: that, more than a century and a half ago, they had been cropped and corrected for

das Panorama aus einiger Entfernung, als ihr Blick auf ein vereinzeltes Detail in den Augen einer zusammengekauerten Frau fiel. Die rohe Angst vor etwas Auswärtigem, das sich über die Leinwand, die die Mantillen<sup>2</sup> der Frauen, die Manikins und die schaurig spähende Gesichter versammelte, ausbreitete, und die gesamte Komposition aus der Balance gebracht zu haben schien, bis alles, was sie gekannte hatte, alles, wovon sie angenommen hatte, es über Kunst, Beständigkeit, Stabilität zu wissen – strauchelte, zerteilt wurde, sich vor ihren Augen in Luft auflöste und sie im Zentrum der unbarmherzigen, künstlerischen Vision verstummen ließ.

Bis zu diesem Moment waren ihr all ihre Kurse in Kunstgeschichte als ein fest verankertes Gebilde erschienen, das von mutigen Namen und unbestreitbaren Leistungen bevölkert wurde, ihren nicht zu leugnenden Argumenten, ihre Kontroversen, die fest in der Vergangenheit verankert waren. Was bliebe jetzt noch zu tun? Doch hier waren die Gemälde, die atmeten, sangen und ausspielen, deren ungeschminkter, sogar roher Stil sie auf eine Weise ins Leben holte, wie sie es nie für möglich gehalten hätte. Sie hätten gestern gemalt werden können. Sie könnten noch immer auf ihren Urheber warten, dass dieser zurückkehre und seine Arbeit am Werk fortsetze.

Ihre restliche Studienzeit über dachte Marta S kaum an etwas anderes, als an diese Meisterwerke und schrieb Aufsatz über Aufsatz, Artikel über Artikel, bis sie eine unleugbare Expertin auf ihrem Gebiet wurde. Sie kehrte immer wieder ins Museum del Prado zurück und dachte, sie würde jeden Winkel von Goyas Arbeiten kennen. Während ihrer Forschungen lernte sie das echte Geheimnis der Pinturas kennen: über anderthalb Jahrhunderte wurden sie für ihren Übergang auf die

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<sup>2</sup>Die Mantilla war zunächst ein ab dem Mittelalter getragenes Schleiertuch der spanischen Frauen, das den Kopf und den Hals bis auf die Schultern verhüllte.

their transition to canvas, dismembered and repainted by other, undeniably coarser hands. A glass photo plate, for instance, showed that the *Witches' Sabbath* had once been bordered, to the right, by well over three feet of darkly gleaming lacquer, but, deeming it extraneous, some intervener had sliced it right off. She had been moved not by the true thing, but only its shadow.

But this betrayal of the great artist had only redoubled her faith. Once one knew about these dismemberments, after all, it was easy enough to spot them, the hands which bulged too large, the figures who seemed almost to float in their landscape as they beat one another to death. Marta S came to believe that true mastery could be discerned only against the work of lesser hands, a reality presented in the Pinturas themselves. She became the foremost descrier of Goya's genius, dowsing the true stroke amongst the noise of falsehoods. She defended these claims in journals, at conferences, even, once or twice, on public television panel shows. "Consider the alternatives," she had reminded the audience: "The damp, an acid coat of paint, a housefire. By all rights they should never have reached us. We should be grateful that anything survives at all."

For her dedication and distinction, the researcher was awarded with a special project: the Prado would honor the Pinturas with a bicentennial exhibition, and they wanted her to write the catalog. Marta S could not have

Leinwand beschnitten und korrigiert, zerlegt und von anderen, zweifellos gröberen Händen übermalt. Eine gläserne Fotoplatte<sup>3</sup> zeigte beispielweise, dass der Hexensabbath auf der rechten Seite einst mit einem Rand von etwa einem Meter dunkel schimmernden Lacks umrahmt wurde, doch von einem auswärtigen Eindringling, der es dies für überflüssig hielt, abgeschliffen wurde. Nicht die echte Sache hatte sie berührt, sondern deren Schatten.

Doch dieser Verrat an dem großartigen Künstler hatte ihren Glauben nur verstärkt. Sobald man über diese Zerteilungen Bescheid wusste, war es recht leicht, sie zu erkennen, die Hände, die einen Ticken zu groß herausstachen, die Figuren, die in der freien Landschaft fast zu schweben schienen, während sie sich gegenseitig umbrachten. Marta S kam zu dem Schluss, dass wahre Meisterschaft nur anhand der Arbeit von weniger talentierten Händen zu erkennen war, eine Wahrheit, die in den Pinturas selbst zementiert wurde.

Sie wurde die führendste Expertin Goyas Genie, die den wahren Strich im Dickicht der Fälschungen aufspürte. Sie verteidigte diese Behauptungen in Magazinen, auf Konferenzen, ein- oder zweimal sogar in öffentlichen Talkshows. „Bedenken Sie Möglichkeiten.“, ermahnte sie das Publikum. „Die Feuchtigkeit, der Säureanstrich, ein Feuer im Haus. Diese Werke sollten eigentlich niemals bei uns landen. Wir sollten dankbar sein, dass überhaupt etwas überlebt hat.“

Für ihr Engagement und ihr Unterscheidungsvermögen, wurde die Forscherin mit einem speziellen Projekt ausgezeichnet: das Museum del Prado würde die Pinturas mit einem zweihundertjährigen Jubiläum ehren und sie wollten, dass sie den Katalog hierzu verfasste.

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<sup>3</sup> Als Fotoplatte bezeichnet man eine mit einer Fotoemulsion beschichtete Platte aus Metall oder Glas zur Herstellung von Glasnegativen. Das Verfahren stammt aus der vorfilmzeitlichen Ära.

been prouder. This book would grant her own work the great institution's imprimatur, as well as provide her with the opportunity to put right some questions she had always had about the house in which the deaf man had painted his masterpiece.

Her concerns were exceedingly minor—had the two old soup eaters been painted on an upstairs lintel, or a downstairs—but as the deaf house had been razed at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were exceptionally difficult to answer. She read through the available monographs, from Glendenning and Bozal to Benito Oterino and the ever-provocative Licht, and pored over the journals in search of alternate interpretations. She precisely analyzed Brugada's original inventory, making note of every potential ambiguity in his peculiar phrasings. And she reached out to the larger community, searching for letters, legal papers, land surveys, anything that would give her the clearest possible view of the painter's life at the Quinta del Sordo.

The writing went quickly enough. Whenever she needed a reminder or an inspiration, Marta S would return to the Prado to rest among his paintings, surprised always by some new detail: an umber shade, a blurry figure, a single broken tooth. Though these works were deplenished, they were boundless.

With several months still to go, the book was nearly complete. But still she could not resolve that single detail: the upper room, or the lower? The distinction

**Marta S hätte nicht stolzer sein können. Mit dieser Veröffentlichung würde die berühmte Institution die Druckerlaubnis ihrer Arbeit bewilligen und ihr darüber hinaus die Gelegenheit geben, einige genaue Fragen, die sie schon immer über das Haus, in dem der taube Mann sein Meisterwerk gemalt hatte, zu stellen.**

Ihre Bedenken waren äußerst gering – waren die beiden, alten Suppenesser auf der Schwelle zum Obergeschoß oder im Untergeschoß gemalt worden –, aber als das Gehörlosenhaus Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts dem Erdboden gleich gemacht wurde, waren diese Fragen außergewöhnlich schwer zu beantworten. Sie las sich durch die erhältlichen Monografien, von Glendenning und Bozal zu Benito Oterino bis zum stets angriffslustigen Licht, sie stöberte in Magazinen auf der Suche nach alternativen Deutungsmöglichkeiten. Sie analysierte Brugada's Originalbestand genau und machte sich zu jeder potentiellen Mehrdeutigkeit in seinen eigentümlichen Formulierungen Notizen. Sie versuchte die größere Allgemeint zu erreichen, suchte nach Briefen, rechtlichen Dokumenten, Landvermessungen, irgend etwas, was ihre einen möglichst deutlichen Einblick über das Leben des Malers im Quinta del Sordo geben würde.

Das Schreiben ging ihr leicht von der Hand. Wann immer sie eine Erinnerung oder eine Inspiration benötigte, kehrte Marta in das Prado zurück und verweilte dort zwischen seinen Gemälden, wo sie stets ein neues Detail fand: einen umbraunen Schatten, eine verschwommene Figur, ein einzelner, abgebrochener Zahn. Obwohl die Arbeiten an Frische verloren hatten, waren sie unermesslich.

Es würde noch einige Monate dauern, doch das Buch war fast fertig. Dennoch konnte sie dieses eine entscheidende Detail immer noch nicht lösen: war es der obere oder der untere Raum? Der Unterschied

seemed minor—at times she almost convinced herself that it did not matter—but in fact proved fundamental to her entire project. Everything differed between the floors, from the fall of the light at different times of the day to, most crucially, the paintings which would have surrounded it, influencing no doubt its painting and, in turn, whichever neighbors came next. It was a small detail, but it meant everything.

Finally, after weeks of digging through city archives, she came upon a sheaf of legal documents from the years when the old man had painted in silence. There was a will, a deed of sale, and, from later on, an inventory of the property, now in the possession of the artist's son. The papers were moldy, occasionally water-stained, and full of omissions, misspellings, and the like. Flipping through the documents, Marta S saw nothing new. But for one key detail: not one of the papers, no matter its author, function, or date, *mentioned a second story*. All, in fact, seemed to cover a group of buildings with only a single floor.

She went over the papers once and again, searching for irregularities and other flaws. Perhaps they were from an earlier date? Or referred to another property altogether? But, no, she could not ignore it: the dates, the address, even the artist's notorious signature were all correct. She sat back in her chair, the papers shivering in her white-gloved hand.

schien gering – manchmal überzeugte sie sich beinahe, dass er nebensächlich war – doch in der Tat stellte er sich als grundsätzlich für das gesamte Projekt heraus. Alles unterschied sich zwischen den Stockwerken, vom Einfall des Lichtes zu verschiedenen Tageszeiten bis, und das war äußerst entscheidend, zu den anderen Bildern, die es umgeben hatten und die zweifelsohne sein Gemälde beeinflusst hatten und, im Gegenzug, welche benachbarten Bilder folgten. Es war ein kleines Detail, doch es bedeutete alles.

Nach Wochen der Suche durch Stadtarchive fand sie endlich ein Bündel rechtlicher Dokumente aus den Jahren, in denen der alte Mann in Abgeschiedenheit gemalt hatte. Es gab einen Letzten Willen, einen Kaufvertrag und eine Inventarliste seines Eigentums, die später hinzugefügt worden war und die sich nun im Besitz seines Sohnes befand. Die Papiere waren schimmlig, wiesen einige Wasserflecken auf und waren voller Auslassungen, Rechtschreibfehler und dergleichen. Während sie durch die Dokumente blätterte, fand Marta S nichts Neues, außer ein wesentliches Detail: keines der Papiere, unabhängig vom Autor, Funktion oder Datum, erwähnte ein zweite Stockwerk. Genau genommen schienen alle eine Gruppe von Gebäuden mit nur einer Etage abzudecken.

Sie ging wieder und wieder durch die Papiere und suchte nach Unregelmäßigkeiten und Fehlern. Vielleicht waren sie einfach von einem früheren Datum? Oder sie bezogen sich auf ein gänzlich anderes Grundstück? Aber nein, sie konnte es nicht ignorieren: die Daten, die Adresse, selbst die berüchtigte Unterschrift des Künstlers war richtig. Sie lehnte sich in ihrem Stuhl zurück, die Papiere zitterten in ihren perlweißen Handschuhen.

Every record of the black paintings, she knew, described them as covering the walls of *both stories*, smeared across every surface by the mad old man. No difference in technique could be found between floors; disfigured though they had become, both were clearly the work of the same hand. Her mind struggled mightily with the conclusion, refusing for quite some time to give in. All those years spent divining brushstrokes, searching for distinctive touches, cross-referencing with the deaf man's vast body of work had brought her to this point, and yet the very simplest question—who had painted the Pinturas Negras?—foundered at her feet. Who was it that had changed her life, who had shaken every certitude and proved to Marta S that something new remained for her to discover? *She did not know.*

She scheduled a meeting with the Prado's curators, but, arriving an hour late, Marta S wandered the museum, lost, straying with an absent mind to the Goya galleries. She rested amongst his mastery, but it was no longer enough. Every liberation had become a cage. The Pinturas had become unbearable, insubstantial, as if, were she only to look long enough, they would disappear altogether. If he had not painted them, how had they gotten here? If not his masterpiece, then whose?

Stopping before the goat and his gibbering witches, the researcher's eyes drifted beyond the composition, past the frame and onto the blank and unappealing wall. She had once believed that, with enough study, much that

Jede Aufzeichnung der schwarzen Gemälde, die sie kannte, beschrieb wie diese die Gemäuer beider Stockwerke bedeckten und wie jeder noch so kleine Winkel von dem alten, verrückten Mann beschmiert wurde. Kein einziger technischer Unterschied zwischen den beiden Etagen war ersichtlich: entstellt wie sie waren, wiesen sie doch ein und dieselbe Handschrift auf. Ihre Gedanken rangen mächtig um die Schlussfolgerung. Sie weigerte sich anzuerkennen, was unleugbar war. All die Jahre, die sie damit verbracht hatte, Pinselstriche aufzuspüren, charakteristische Feinheiten auszumachen, Querverweise auf das umfangreiche Werk des tauben Mannes zu finden, hatten sie an diesen Punkt gebracht und doch war sie an der einfachsten Frage – wer hat die Pinturas Negras gezeichnet? – gescheitert. Wer war es, der ihr Leben verändert hatte, wer hatte jegliche Gewissheit ins Wanken gebracht und Marta S bewiesen, dass es darüber hinaus etwas zu entdecken gab? Sie wusste es nicht.

Sie verabredete ein Treffen mit den Kuratoren des Prados, aber, nachdem sie eine Stunde zu spät erschien, wanderte Marta S durch das Museum. Verloren irrite sie zu den Galerien Goyas. Sie verweilte unter seinen Meisterwerken, aber es war unlängst vorbei. Jede Befreiung war zu einem Käfig geworden. Die Pinturas waren ihr unerträglich und unwesentlich geworden und, wenn sie nur lang genug hinschaute, würden sie sich gänzlich in Luft auflösen und verschwinden. Wenn er sie nicht gemalt hatte, wie waren sie hierhergekommen? Wenn es nicht seine Meisterwerke waren, wessen waren sie?

Vor der Ziege und den schnatternden Hexen hielt sie inne. Ihr forschendes Auge wanderte über die Komposition hinaus, jenseits des Rahmens auf die leere und uninteressante Wand. Einst hatte sie geglaubt, dass, mit ausreichend Forschung, vieles, was heute verloren

was lost might one day be recovered. There was a gap in the pit of her stomach, as if the bottom had fallen out. She stood with her eyes mere inches from the wall, as if to take a single step would mean plummeting down to the center of the earth.

A guard walked over. “Señora?” he asked. “Señora?” But she could no longer hear him.

gegangen war, eines Tages wiederentdeckt werden könnte. Sie spürte eine Lücke in ihrer Magengrube, als ob die Unterseite hinausgefallen war. Sie stand mit den Augen nur wenige Zentimeter von der Wand entfernt, als ob ein einziger Schritt nach vorne ausreichen würde, damit sie in das Zentrum der Erde stürzen wurde.

Ein Wächter lief an ihr vorbei. „Señora?“, fragte er.  
„Señora?“ Doch sie konnte ihn schon nicht mehr hören.

## Translator's Foreword

Natalja Althauser has never seen herself as only a writer. Born in Heidelberg in 1991, her early sources of imaginative joy found fruit in theater, and later on film, a career that has included living, acting, and directing as far afield as Paris and Skopje, Macedonia. Her theatrical work includes *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Ljudmila Petrushevskaya's *Cinzano*, which she directed. In October 2019, her daily work of writing brought her to the Deutsches Literatur Leipzig, where she is currently pursuing a Masters and writing a novel. She lists many classic writers, particularly the Russians, as well as contemporaries like Nino Haratischwili, as influences on a style that is at once deeply psychological and aggressively fragmented, stabbing the reader with imagistic shards broken off from the stunted psychologies of her characters.

While she cites many writers and artists from Eastern Europe as important to her artistry, Althauser's work is deeply German, taking advantage of the possibilities of the German language to tell stories whose subtext is often deeply idiomatic. "View from the Top" tells the story of an unnamed narrator, a seriously ambivalent man who spends much of the story in twinned states of both emotional and physical constipation. While Althauser never explicitly flags him as such in the text, the man fulfills the archetype of the "Heimscheisser"—literally a "home shitter"—a phrase for those too afraid to leave their houses and risk confrontation with the world. In the original German, the story's title is itself an idiomatic pun, meaning at once a "lonesome summit" and the "breathtaking view" at the top. Conveying both of these meanings proved too much for the English to handle, leading me toward a solution that attempts to impart both height and view, losing some of the emotional resonance along the way. I hoped to convey

the story's sense of beauty and even awe in a world that frequently disappoints us. There's a mordant joy in this distressing play on words, similar to the dry humor that permeates this story about suicide. Maintaining Althauser's light touch amidst despair proved my greatest challenge.

# NATALJA ALTHAUSER

## EINSAME SPITZE!

Mühsam schleppte er sich die Aussichtsplattform hoch, Stufe um Stufe bezwang er schweren Schrittes. Das Echo seiner schweren Lederstiefel begleitete ihn. Noch war es ruhig, noch war er alleine, die Menschenschwärme (mit Selfie-Sticks), Wanderer, Familien, Verliebte, alle ruhten sie friedlich in ihren Betten an diesem Sonntagmorgen um sechs Uhr in der Früh. Er legte den Kopf in den Nacken und betrachtete die Wolken. Würde es regnen? Der Himmel war verklebt, neblig, doch jeden Moment, das wusste er, konnte die Wand aufreißen und einen winzigen Sonnenstrahl hindurchlassen. Licht! Was für ein deprimierender Gedanke an so einem friedlichen Morgen. Weiter stieg er die Stufen hoch. Das Metall klang scheppern unter seinem schweren, schwarzen Stiefeln. Noch ein Schritt. Diese Stufen wollte er hinaufsteigen, um sich zu verabschieden. Ein Ort in 720 m Höhe mit Ausblick. Das erschien ihm ein würdiger Ort, einer mit Kaliber. Sterben ist eine stille Angelegenheit. Man liegt ganz ruhig, die Wände kommen näher, der Atem lässt nach und auf einmal steht der Tod im Raum, wie ein ungeliebter Nachbar. Einfach und still.

Er hatte sich das alles anders vorgestellt. Aufregender, intensiver, geiler. Irgendwie mit mehr Pep. Stattdessen würden alle im Raum stehen, die Köpfe demütig gesenkt, hier und da ein verhaltener Schluchzer und würden, ja, traurig, betroffen, getroffen agieren. Wie bei der Beerdigung seiner Großmutter. Da war er achtzehn und hatte eigentlich an Julia, seine hübsche, blonde Nachbarin mit den reizenden Grübchen und dem kurzen Rock, gedacht. Stattdessen wurde er gezwungen, traurig

**translated from the german by  
ROBERT RUBSAM**

## VIEW FROM THE TOP

The man dragged himself up the viewing platform. He was already exhausted. The echo of his heavy leather boots accompanied him as he mastered the stairs, step-by-difficult-step, the flask in his left hand still half-full. Yet it was calm and he was alone. The human swarms (with selfie sticks), backpackers, families, and lovers were all still sleeping soundly in their beds at six o'clock on this Sunday morning. He tilted his head and examined the clouds. Would it rain? The sky was stifled, viscous, yet he knew that at any moment the clouds could crack open and let a frivolous sunbeam shine through. Light! What a dismal thought on such a tranquil morning. He kept climbing the stairs. The metal clanged. Another step. He was ascending so as to bid himself adieu. A viewing platform seven hundred and twenty meters high, a farewell with a view: it was a worthy place. Death is a silent business.

He had imagined it all differently. More exciting, extreme, profane. With more pizzazz, somehow. Instead, everyone would humbly bow their heads, stifling a sob here and there as they looked gloomy, even shocked. Like at his grandmother's funeral. He had been eighteen then with thoughts only for Julia, his lovely blonde neighbor with the cute dimples and that short skirt. Sadness required focus, but he had no attention for the miserable

zu sein und sich ein miserables Requiem reinzuziehen. Er hatte sich das viel zu große Jackett aufgeknöpft, die Krawatte gelockert und war auf die Toilette gerannt, wo er fünfmal gegen das Pissoir getreten hatte. Was war denn das für eine erbärmliche Art zu trauern? Note fünf, mangelhaft.

Mit geöffnetem Jackett und geöffneter Krawatte war er nach der Zeremonie strammen Schritts in sein Zimmer marschiert, hatte David Bowie aufgelegt und den Schampus geöffnet. Einmal muss man leben. Warum nicht heute?

Die Stufen kamen ihm lang und schwer vor. Noch 613 verblieben. Wann war er so außer Form geraten? Er schaute an sich herunter. Die Beine waren weiterhin lang, er war von Natur aus von schlaksiger Natur. Um die Körpermitte ballten sich seine gesammelten Kilos in Form von Fett, seine Haare hatten an Dichte und Farbe verloren, sein Stoffwechsel sich irgendwann von selbst verabschiedet, aber sonst war er zufrieden.

Er war nie ein Mann großer Pläne gewesen. Ein Großteil seines Lebens hatte sich, wie man so schön sagte, ergeben. Das durchschnittliche, aber durchaus präsentierbare Abitur, ein lauwarmes Studium mit einigen denkwürdigen Abenden und Abstiegen, seine Kommilitonin und Referatspartnerin Claudia, die seine Freundin und spätere Frau werden sollte und schließlich Siggi und Karin. Studium, Beruf, Familie. Der eisblaue Himmel stach ihm mitten ins Gehirn. Wo war das alles hin?

An die Brüstung gelehnt, schaute er auf das Tal hinab. Die verschiedenen Grüntöne übermannten ihn. Fichtengrün, Piniengrün, Wiesengrün, Seegrün, ja sogar einen Türkiston machte er inmitten dieses Waldmeers aus. Sein Atem hingegen bildete durchsichtigen Raureif.

requiem. He had unbuttoned the cavernous jacket, loosened his tie and run to the toilet, where he kicked the urinal five times. What kind of pitiful grieving was that? Poor work, D-minus.

After the ceremony, jacket still open and tie still loose, he'd marched back to his room and put on David Bowie as he opened the champagne. Life has to start sometime. Why not today?

Six hundred and thirteen steps to go. An eternity. When had he gotten so out of shape? He looked down. His legs were long and lanky, his hair had faded and grown thin, and his metabolism had bidden him farewell along the way—but otherwise he was content.

He had never been a man with grand plans. Most of his life had passed him by. An average but perfectly presentable high school diploma, a lukewarm course of study with a few memorable evenings and mornings after, his classmate and study partner Claudia, who would become first his friend and later his wife, and later still, Siggi and Karin. School, work, family. A cloud shifted itself sluggishly to the side and let a shred of blue escape. The ice-blue sky stung the center of his brain. Where had it all gone?

He leaned on the railing and looked down into the valley. He was overwhelmed by the sheer abundance of greens: spruce, pine, meadow, juniper, even a distinct shade of turquoise in this sea of trees. His breathing, on the other hand, formed a clear hoarfrost. Very little could be heard.

Viel war nicht zu hören. Keine Menschenstimmen, kein Verkehrslärm, kein Großstadtgetöse. Vereinzelt ein Vogel, hier und da der Wind, ein Reh, das auf einen Ast trat, ein Eichhörnchen, das eine Nuss abnagte, eine Wildsau, die mit den Füßen scharrte. All das bildete er sich ein, zu hören. Das Leben hatte eine Schneise geschlagen und er war daran vorbeigegangen. Nun stand er auf den Stufen eines Turms mit 537 verbliebenen Stufen und blickte in die grüne Hölle. Er hatte keine Wahl, er musste weiterlaufen.

Siggi und Karin blieben Vorzeigekinder, solange sie klein und handzahm waren. Von den üblichen Geschwisterquereien war bei den beiden Sonnenkindern nichts auszumachen. Ein Herz und eine Seele, die selbst beim LEGO spielen ihre durch und durch pazifistische Natur wahrten. Er hatte die kleinen Knirpse oft von der Tür aus beobachtet, wie sie vollkommen versunken und absolut selbstvergessen die Türme ihrer Kindheit errichteten und dabei in andere Welten abtauchten, unfähig oder vielmehr unwillig, sich von der Realität einholen oder gar stören zu lassen. Stunde um Stunde spielten sie, reihten mühevoll ein Steinchen auf das Nächste und errichteten ganze Städte in ihrem ureigenen Universum. Er blieb außen vor, hatte keinen Zugang zu dieser kindlichen Selbstvergessenheit. Er stand mit seinen moosgrünen, durchgelatschten Pantoffeln auf dem Holzparkett der Realität und hörte vielmehr das Knirschen der Dielen, das Schleudern der Waschmaschine und das glucksende Abpumpen der Spülmaschine. Alles Geräusche in seinem Kopf, die er hörte und nur er und so blieb ihm nichts anderes übrig, als den On/Off-Knopf der Wirklichkeit zu drücken und zu warten, bis der Trockner fertig geschleudert hatte. Er fühlte sich ausgeschlossen von der Heiligkeit der Phantasiewelt und obwohl er sich krampfhaft einredete, dass er der Erwachsene sei, dass er Verantwortung trage, dass er, ja, irgendwie die Brötchen verdiene, blieb ein dumpfes Gefühl der Sehnsucht, das sich tonnenschwer auf seine Brust legte, sodass er sich

No human voices, no traffic sounds, no big city racket. Occasionally a bird, the wind, a deer trampling a branch, a squirrel gnawing on a nut, a wild sow digging at the ground with her hooves. He imagined he could hear it all. Life had cleared him a track, and he had missed it altogether. Now he stood on a tower with 537 steps remaining and gazed into the green abyss. It wasn't a choice—he had to go on.

When they were still small and tame, Siggi and Karin had been model children. You never saw the typical squabbles between these siblings, easygoing like a sunny day in May. They were one in heart and soul, perfectly at peace as they played with their Legos. He had often watched the little tots through a cracked door as they sat, completely immersed, lost in themselves as they erected their childhood towers and disappeared into other worlds, unable or perhaps unwilling to get caught up in reality, or even to be disturbed. They played for hours, precisely lining up pebble after pebble, building glorious cities in a universe entirely of their own making. But he was cut off from their childlike abandon. He stood on the parquet of reality in his shabby moss-green slippers and heard the floorboards creaking, the washing machine spinning, the dishwasher draining with a sneer. He had no choice but to press reality's on-off switch and wait until the dryer finished tumbling. He felt excommunicated from their sacred fantasy world, and though he frantically reasoned that *he* was the adult, that it was *he* who bore the responsibilities and earned the daily bread—or perhaps more accurately the rolls—there was nevertheless a ton-weight of desire in his breast. There were times he clutched at his heart as if

manchmal ans Herz fasste, weil er ganz sicher war, keine Luft mehr zu bekommen. Ganz sicher, dass er gleich ersticken würde. Ganz sicher, dass er eines Tages den gottverdammten Löffel abgeben würde und zwar in dieser, seiner Eigentumswohnung mit marmorgefliestem Bad, gebürsteten Holzparkett und Blick auf die Alpen. Womit hatte er das bloß verdient?

Claudia schüttelte bloß verständnislos den Kopf, wann immer seine pseudophilosophischen Tiraden über Sinn und Sinnlosigkeit in bloße Selbstbemitleidung abrutschten. Anmaßend nannte sie ihn und undankbar, denn er hatte ja bloß den Haushalt zu schmeißen. Sie hingegen stemmte die 70h-Woche in der Klinik und buk nebenbei noch selbstgemachtes Emmerbrot. Das Brot hätte er liebend gern selbst gebacken, denn von dieser Körnerkacke bekam er regelmäßig Verstopfung, aber da er ja ohnehin einen Großteil seines Tages zu Hause verbrachte, konnte er sich auch ohne schlechtes Gewissen für längere Zeit ins Bad einschließen und im stillen Kämmerlein weitersinnieren, während er den Durchbruch oder die Entladung seines Gastrointestinaltraktes abwartete.

Anfangs war er begeistert von der Idee gewesen, der stay-at-home-Dad zu sein. Claudia und er, Pioniere der Elternrolle, Opportunisten alteingesessener Rollenklischees würden ein Zeichen setzen. Sie würden alles anders machen und am eigenen Leibe exerzieren, dass diese ganze Genderthematik endgültig überholt sei. Am Herd standen sie schließlich beide, mit dem Unterschied, dass Claudia das Bankkonto auffüllte, während er mit Karin und Siggi Mandalas ausmalte. Ihm hatte die Idee gefallen, anders zu sein. Ein neues Lebensmodell auszutesten erforderte schließlich Mut, Pioniergeist und die Fähigkeit, alte Muster radikal über Bord zu werfen.

about to run out of air, certain he was going to suffocate. Dead certain that one day he would bite the goddamned dust in this condo with its marble-tiled bathroom, brushed parquet floors and view of the alps. And whenever this sort of unadulterated self-pity came pouring out from his pseudo philosophical tirades over sense and senselessness, Claudia only shook her head in amazement.

She called him pompous and ungrateful. He barely even had to run the house, while she was pulling seventy-hour weeks at the clinic and still managing to bake her own Emmerbrot at home. He would have gladly baked for the family, and while, yes, he did spend most of his time at home, all her traditional multigrain shit made him constipated, forcing him to lock himself in the bathroom and ponder in the quiet for long periods of time, awaiting a gastrointestinal breakthrough, his conscience clean.

At first, he'd been excited at the idea of being a "stay-at-home Dad." He and Claudia, Pioneers of Parental Responsibilities, enemies of moldy gender clichés, would lead the way. They'd show everyone how archaic all those marital tropes really were. They both brought something to the table, but it was Claudia who filled the bank account while he painted mandalas with Karin and Siggi. This distinction delighted him. To embark upon an entirely new system of living required courage, an adventurous spirit, and the radical willingness to throw obsolete models overboard.

Nun ertappte er sich manchmal dabei, dass er, während er den Haustürschlüssel in der Kommode verstaute, vor dem Spiegel im Flur stehen blieb und in das gealterte Gesicht eines Mannes blickte, der nichts erreicht hatte. Und er erinnerte sich mit Schrecken an die Angst, die ihm durch die Glieder gefahren war. Eine plötzliche Panik, dass er mit erhobenen Fahnen dem Ende entgegensteuerte und nicht mal bemerkte, wie das Schiff unmerklich, aber todsicher in die Tiefe sank.

In solchen Momenten stürmte er ins Kindersimmer von Siggi und Karin, wie um sich zu vergewissern, dass Leben in diesem Haus herrschte, dass er noch nicht tot war, dass alles seinen Lauf nehmen würde und zum Schluss ja auch immer das Gute endete. Denn sonst wäre es ja kein richtiges Ende.

Siggi und Karin konnte er sich nicht mitteilen. Claudia arbeitete und wenn sie nach einer 14h- Schicht nach Hause kam, wollte sich lediglich die Schuhe abstreifen, die Beine hochlegen und sich ausgestreckt auf's Sofa fallen lassen. Idealerweise begleitet von einem gut gefüllten Rotweinglas. Die Einsamkeit verseuchte ihn, machte Leben und Leber sauer und toxisch und ehe er sich versah, hatte er sich auch schon isoliert. Von seinen Mitmenschen, von seinen Hobbies, von der Außenwelt, ja selbst von seiner Familie. Sein inneres Exil stand fest und erschien ihm manchmal selbst so unüberwindbar wie die Große Mauer des Ostens. 8851 km geballte Einsamkeit. An solchen Tagen schlepppte er sich mittags auf's Sofa, das an einer langen, großen Fensterfront mit Blick auf den Garten stand. Dort schloss er die Augen und versuchte sich vorzustellen, nie wieder aufzuwachen. Oft döste er dann weg in eine Art Tagtraum, die seinen inneren Dämonen Tor und Angel öffneten. Wenn er dann die Augen öffnete, war er immer noch da und um ihn herum die traurige, triste Wahrheit seiner Existenz.

But there were also times when, returning his keys to the hallway bureau, he'd catch himself pausing before the mirror and gazing into the worn-out face of a man who had achieved nothing. And he remembered with a shudder how the panic had traveled through his limbs. A sudden fear that his intrepid ship was approaching the end, full steam ahead—that in fact it had already slipped, imperceptibly but undeniably, off the edge of the world.

In these moments, he'd storm into the nursery, as if to assure himself that life still reigned in this house, that he was not yet dead, that everything would take its course and the performance would end well. Anything else would be a false ending.

He couldn't confide in Siggi and Karin, and Claudia was always at work. When she came home after a fourteen-hour shift she'd strip off her shoes and just sprawl out on the sofa, ideally accompanied by a generous glass of wine. The loneliness polluted him, making life toxic and love sour. Before he knew it, he'd already cut himself off—from his fellow human beings, his hobbies, the outside world, even his family. His inner exile stood fast, as insurmountable as the Great Wall of China: 8,851 kilometers of utter loneliness. At noon on such days he often dragged himself over to the sofa by the long window that overlooked the garden. Lying there, he closed his eyes and tried to imagine never waking up again. He'd often doze into a daydream, swinging wide the door to his innermost demons. But when he opened his eyes he was still there, still enclosed by the sad, dismal reality of his existence.

Sein Atemvolumen hatte sich verdoppelt. Die Kälte war aus seinen Gliedern gewichen, nun spürte er wie Wärme durch seine Adern floss, wie das Blut in regelmäßigen Abständen pumpte und gleichmäßig zirkulierte. Er war warm, in seinen Adern schoss Blut und Leben. Mit der rechten Hand umklammerte er das Geländer. Mit der Linken holte er aus und versuchte, die Luft einzufangen. Dabei lehnte er sich weit über die Brüstung. Sein Atem war frei. Er war frei. Das Leben hatte ihn eingeholt. Er rief seinen Namen laut und wartete auf das Echo. Noch war nichts vorbei.

Irgendwann waren Siggi und Karin groß geworden. Er konnte den Zeitpunkt gar nicht genau zurückdatieren. Nur die Überraschung, als er auf einmal realisiert hatte, dass sein Sohn neben ihm am Steuer saß und fuhr. Plötzlich war er Beifahrer. Er war stolz auf seine beiden Großen, konnte sich nicht satt sehen an ihrem Lebenshunger, ihrer jugendlichen Unbekümmertheit und ihrem Drang hinaus in die Welt zu stürmen und alles mitzunehmen. Gerne hörte er sich nachts die Geschichten von Abi-Feten und Geburtstagen an, gern nahm er teil an ihren Beziehungskisten und –chaos, nie wurde er müde, Beistand zu leisten, da zu sein und in den ungestümen und jungen Liebeswirrungen und –irrungen Trost zu spenden. Dabei war sein Trost stiller Natur, er hatte wenig praktische Erfahrungen in solchen Dingen, aber eine stabile Schulter zum Anlehnen, die hatte er und manchmal ist das so viel mehr wert, als jeder gutgemeinte Ratschlag.

Seine Kinder liebten ihn, das spürte er. Sie verehrten ihn nicht, dazu hatte er nicht genug vorzuweisen, auch das wusste er. Keine erfolgreiche Karriere, kein schickes Auto, kein Wochenendtrip nach London, New York oder Lissabon. Er war die große, gutmütige Seele, die alles zusammenhielt. Er war der Kleister in den hölzernen vier Wänden. Claudia blieb abwesend. Ihre Beziehung entzweite sich, wie so oft, ohne große Worte oder

He was breathing deeply. The cold had left his limbs, and he felt heat pulse with the blood in his veins. Growing warm, he put down the flask. He clutched the railing with his right hand and thrust his left forward as if to catch the air. He leaned out over the edge. His breathing was free. He was free. He whooped out his name and waited for the echo. Nothing was over, not yet.

At some point or other, Siggi and Karin had grown up. He couldn't pinpoint the exact moment; he could only remember the surprise at realizing that it was his own son there behind the wheel, while he was the one in the passenger seat. He was proud of his two Grown-Ups. He never tired of their hunger for life, their youthful abandon, their drive to storm out and take on the world. At night, he was more than happy to hear about birthdays and graduation parties, to watch over their amorous flings and failures, never wavering in his support, always happy to be a comfort through all the trials and tribulations of young love. True, he had little practical experience in such things, but his was a quieter comfort, a strong shoulder on which they could lean—sometimes that can be much more valuable than any well-meaning advice.

His children loved him; this he felt. They didn't worship him—no, he couldn't boast of that; this he knew as well. He didn't have a thriving career or a slick car or weekend trips to London, New York, or Lisbon. But he was the good-natured soul who held everything together, the cement to the four wooden walls. Claudia stayed away. As is so often the case, their relationship fractured not with

brutale Streitereien, sondern einzig durch die Bürde des Schweigens, des Nichts-Redens, der Verweigerung von Austausch, körperlich, wie seelisch. Sie blieben Partner ohne Bezug zueinander. Wissend, dass der andere da war, dass er selbstverständlich auch am folgenden Abend noch da sein würde, aber die Abende wurden unmerklich länger, zogen sich zäh wie Kaugummi, und stiller. Das wurden sie auch.

Die Stille in seinem Kopf hatte er zu bekämpfen versucht – mit mäßigem Erfolg. Irgendwann war es so still geworden, dass er glatt vergessen hatte, was er eigentlich sagen wollte. Unmerklich war die Stummheit in sein Leben gezogen und hatte einen Kerker des Schweigens um ihn herumgezogen. Man konnte nicht sagen, dass er litt. Es war einfach nur sehr still und so begann er die Stille vermehrt in seiner Umgebung zu suchen. Natur, Seen und Friedhöfe zogen ihn an. Stundenlang konnte er auf einem Baumstamm sitzen und in den Himmel starren. Nichts daran war überraschend. In seiner unmittelbaren Umwelt nahm niemand die Veränderung wahr. Sie kannten ihn ja nicht anders. Er war nie ausgebrochen, hatte sich nie gehen lassen, nie war etwas danebengegangen. Er war halt da, wie eine Kerbe im Baum, die man irgendwann nicht mehr sah, weil sie so selbstverständlich dazugehörte.

Siggi und Karin waren irgendwann nicht mehr da. In der stillen, geschwisterlichen Übereinstimmung aus vergangenen Tage waren sie in die selbe Stadt, ja selbst in die gleiche Wohnung gezogen, um zu studieren. Er hatte sie beglückwünscht und geweint. Die Entfremdung zwischen Claudia und ihm hatte jeglichen diplomatischen Kitt verloren. Es gab nichts mehr zu beschönigen. Nun waren sie auf sich alleine gestellt und das ging schief. Zunächst entzündete es sich an Kleinigkeiten, dann trank er zu viel, während sie sich einen Liebhaber zulegte. Zwanzig Jahre jünger, ein halbes Kind, aber ein eifriger Medizinstudent, der mit überragenden Kenntnissen

harsh words or brutal fights, but rather through the burden of silence and the nothing-phrases and the avoidance of all communication both carnal and emotional. They remained partners but without any connection to each other. She knew that her counterpart was there, that he would still be there the next night, but those nights grew longer, quieter, harsher. He tried to fight the silence in his head, but his success was middling. Over time it just got so quiet that he forgot altogether what they might even have said. A kind of muteness had crept, invisibly, into his life and erected a prison of silence around him.

Now, he was not suffering, not only. He began to find peace in his environment. He was attracted to nature and the ocean, to the stillness of graveyards. He could sit on a tree trunk and gaze into the sky for hours. This wasn't surprising. No one around him noticed the change. He didn't seem any different. He hadn't cracked, hadn't let himself go; nothing had ever really gone wrong. He was just there, like a knot in a tree trunk that, after awhile, no one notices at all.

And then, after a time, Siggi and Karin were gone. With the same quiet agreement that had distinguished their lost childhood, they had moved to the same city, even into the same apartment, to attend university. He'd wished them well, and then he started to sob. His estrangement from Claudia lost its diplomatic glue. There was no use sugarcoating it: now that they were on their own, things got worse. It began with petty disagreements, then he drank too much, and she took a lover. Twenty years younger and essentially a boy, but an eager medical student who scored with an outstanding

im Fachbereich Anatomie punktete. Er trank noch mehr. Aus Frust und weil da langsam in ihm etwas gor und sich wie Säure in seine Eingeweide fraß. Er spürte die herannahende Kotze auf der Zunge und wollte ausspucken. Die ganze Zeit, ganz heftig ausspucken. Irgendwann musste er dann tatsächlich spucken und der Arzt warf ihm einen mitleidvollen Blick zu und sagte: „Das ganze Blut, wissen Sie, ich fürchte, das ist ein Geschwür“. Die Furcht war auf der Seite des Arztes tatsächlich größer, als auf seiner eigenen. Er war nicht im Mindesten überrascht. Eigentlich war er sogar erleichtert. Endlich war es vorbei, zumindest in absehbarer Zeit.

Der Arzt verordnete ihm Medikamente, eine Therapie und eine strikte Diät, auf die er allesamt schiss. Kurz vor seinem Tod würde er sich keinem Diktat mehr beugen. Er hatte mehr als genug gebuckelt. Jahre seines Lebens mit Friedfertigkeit und Buckeln vergeudet. Zur Hölle damit.

Seine Umwelt reagierte schockierter und empathischer als er. Selbst Claudia kehrte für kurze Zeit zurück in seine Arme. In seinem Tod fühlte er sich zum ersten Mal geliebt. Eine tröstliche Erfahrung. Er war zufrieden, wie es war. Er nahm einige Kilo ab, da er keine feste Nahrung mehr bei sich behalten konnte, seine Wangen wurden hohler, seine Hosen schlackerten wieder wie mit Mitte Zwanzig. Er befand sich auf einem guten Weg. Gutgelaunt blickte er morgens ins das Gesicht eines alten, sterbenden Mannes. Manchmal ist das Beste der Party der Schluss.

Anfangs kamen Siggi und Karin ihn öfter besuchen, geduldig erzählten sie von ihren ersten, unbeholfenen Versuchen als Studenten. Von den Hürden universitärer Bürokratie, dem durchschnittlich verklebten Mensa-Essen, den ersten WG-Partys, von Lea alias Leon ihrem transgender-Mitbewohner, der sich entschlossen hatte,

knowledge of anatomy. He drank even more. Out of frustration and because something was slowly festering within him, gnawing at his gut like acid. He tasted it creeping up in his throat and wanted to get rid of it. Spitting up blood all the while. Sometimes his vomiting would become uncontrollable, and his doctor would throw him a compassionate look and say, “So much blood... You know, I’m worried it might be an ulcer.” But the fear in the doctor’s eyes was greater than in his own. He wasn’t surprised, not in the least. He was even relieved. Soon enough, this would all finally be over.

The doctor prescribed him pills, therapy, and a strict diet, all of which he shat out. He wouldn’t grovel before one more diktat, not so close to death. He’d already debased himself more than enough. Years of life wasted through his senseless pacifism. To hell with it.

Those around him reacted with far more shock and empathy than he did. Even Claudia returned, briefly, to his arms. On the edge of death, he felt loved and accepted for the very first time. A comforting experience. All things considered, he was content. He could no longer eat solid foods, so he dropped several kilos, his cheeks hollowed, and his waistline slimmed down to the mid-twenties. He was on the right path. Mornings, he’d blink good-naturedly at the face of an old, dying man. Sometimes the party only gets good at the very end.

Siggi and Karin had come to see him often in the beginning, patiently telling him about their first school experiences: the hurdles of university bureaucracy, the gluey, mediocre cafeteria food, and the first parties with their roommates; about Leon, née Lea, their transgender housemate who had decided to cast off his biological sex

sein biologisches Geschlecht endgültig abzulegen, von Einführungsveranstaltungen, die niemand interessierte und von wöchentlichen Fachschaftstreffen, die sich größter Beliebtheit erfreuten, weil das Bier vom Mitgliedsbetrag abgesetzt werden konnte. Unter Studierenden wurde endlos, ziellos und oft wirr diskutiert, doch daran störte sich niemand wirklich, denn das Herz war jung und wild. Anfangs hörte er interessiert, später amüsiert und schlussendlich gar nicht mehr zu. Siggi und Karin fuhren wohl mehr aus Mitleid, denn aus Mitgefühl zu ihm, um ihn wie früher mit ihren Stories erheitern, belustigen und vor allem teilhaben lassen wollte. Aber er war nicht mehr dabei, sein Zug war abgefahren und je mehr Mühe sich seine beiden Kinder gaben, desto eher langweilten sie ihn. Sie waren zu jung und zu blöd, um das zu kapieren. Das war nicht ihre Schuld, aber er hatte es lang genug ertragen, der Verständnisvolle zu sein und so schmiss er sie bei einem ihrer nachmittäglichen Kondolenzbesuche kurzerhand raus und teilte ihnen mit, dass sie sich Weihnachten sehen würden. Alle Jahre wieder.

Karin und Siggi hatten ihn aus großen, runden Augen angesehen und eine plötzliche Entfremdung hatte sich in ihrem Blick geschlichen. Kurz zweifelten sie, ob der fremde Mann vor ihnen tatsächlich ihr Lieber Herr Papa war. Er hatte gewinkt, die Tür zugemacht und bis zwanzig gezählt. Dann waren sie zu ihrem gebrauchten Volvo getrabi, hatten den Motor gezündet und davongesaust. Ein kurzer, klarer Schnitt. Er hörte nie wieder von ihnen.

Sein Atem rasselte nun gefährlich. Er hörte ein hohes Pfeifen in der Lunge, das ihm widernatürlich vorkam, sonst aber nicht weiter störte. Sein Rücken machte sich langsam bemerkbar, doch das war das Alter. Was sonst. Zehn weitere Stufen lagen vor ihm. Meditativ, fast wie in einer königlichen Zeremonie und mit geschlossenen Augen, zelebrierte er jede einzelne von ihnen. Er

for good, and about orientation events that interested no one, and student council meetings that enjoyed great popularity so long as the beer from their student fees was flowing freely. There were endless, and often aimless, discussions among the students, but nobody really cared much about that sort of thing while their hearts were young and wild. At first, he listened with interest, then with laughter, and finally he could no longer listen at all. Siggi and Karin didn't pity him. No, they visited him out of true feeling, trying to distract him and cheer him up by sharing their stories with him. But his train had departed; he was no longer there. The harder his children worked, the more they wore him out. They were too young and too dense to understand. It wasn't their fault, but he no longer wanted to be the sympathetic one, and so during one of their afternoon condolence visits he kicked them out and said he'd see them at Christmas.

Karin and Siggi had gaped at him with large, round eyes, a sudden alienation creeping into their expressions. They briefly wondered whether the strange man before them was in fact their dear beloved Papa. He'd waved goodbye, shut the door, and counted to twenty. Then they had trotted out to their used Volvo, started the motor, and sped off. He didn't hear from them anymore.

His breath had begun to rattle dangerously. He started hearing a high-pitched and unnatural whistling in his lungs, but it didn't worry him. His back began aching more and more, and the tennis ball in his stomach raged. Ten more steps, and he would finally be at the summit! He meditated on each and every one. He shut his eyes,

schloss die Augen und auf einmal war er Alexander der Große, Cäsar, Edward VIII, Louis XIV, er war Albert von Sachsen und Winston Churchill in einem. Er war sie alle, mit jedem Schritt, den er ging, spürte er die Kaiser, Könige und Herrscher. Spürte die Giganten ihrer Generation, ihr Genie, das ihn mit jeder Stufe durchströmte. Er schritt längst nicht mehr über einfache, metallene Stufen empor. Nein, er war auf einem Palazzo in Rom, umgeben von vergoldeten Brunnen und silbernen Messingbecher. Sein weicher Schritt wurde von einem purpurfarbenen Teppich abgefedert. Alles war leicht, tanzelnd. Alles schwang in besinnlicher Eintracht und Harmonie.

Oben angekommen bewunderte er die Aussicht. Mutter Natur und ihr Gotteswerk.

Das Grün der Berge, die Stille des Sees, die Weite des Himmels. Langsam atmete er aus, die leere Flasche glitt aus seinen Händen, zerbarst in tausend kleine Teile, während sie atemlos in die Tiefe krachte. Dabei hinterließ sie einen dünnen, feinen Rinnsal Rotwein.

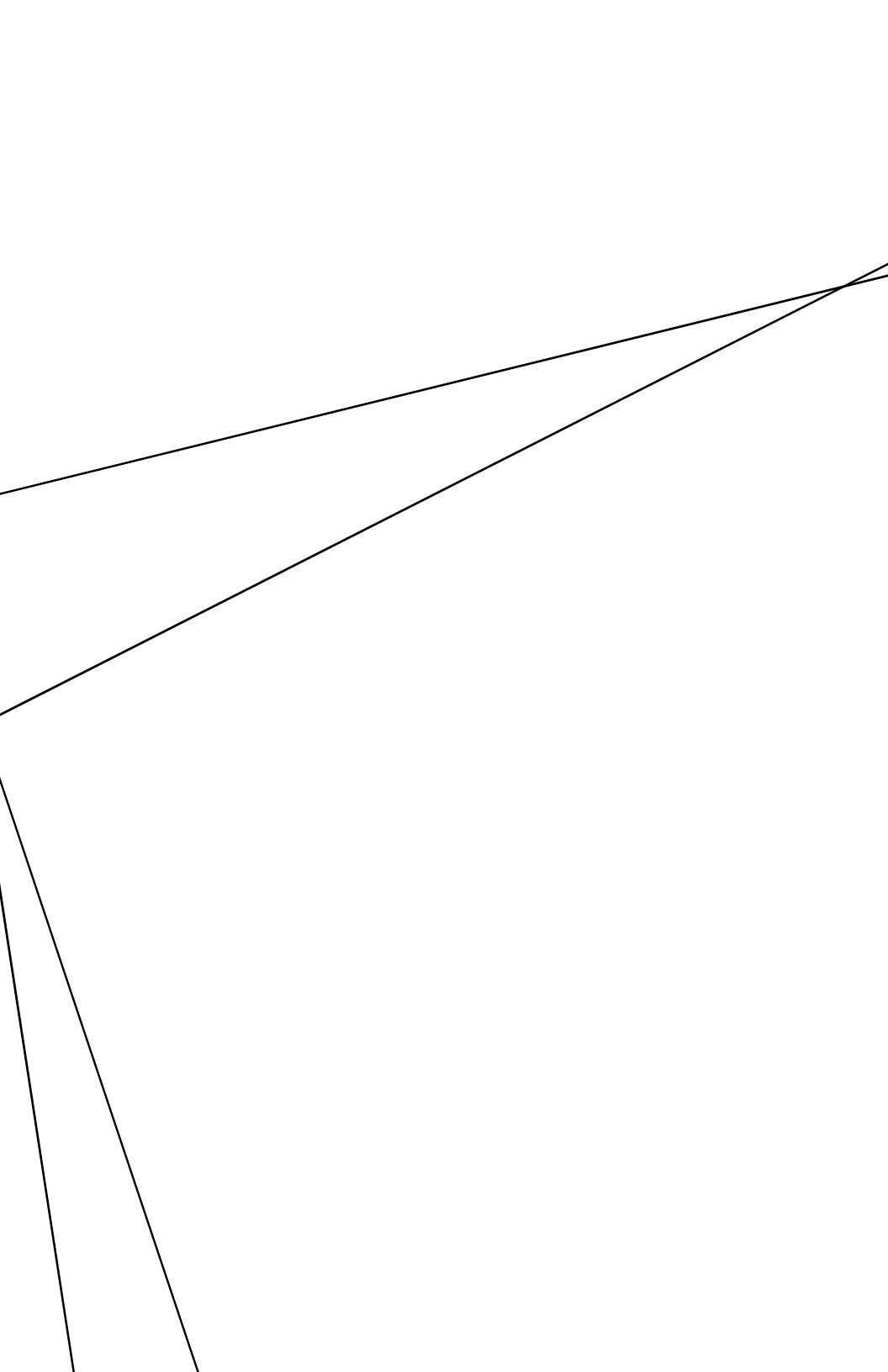
Bedächtig, ohne Hast machte er einen Schritt nach vorne. Die Aussicht war einsame spitze.

and all at once he was Alexander the Great, Caesar, Edward VIII, Louis XIV, he was Albert von Sachsen and Winston Churchill in one man. He was all of them in every step, and as he climbed, Kaiser, King, and Emperor, all those geniuses and giants of their eras flowed through him. He was no longer ascending mere metal steps. No, he was in a Roman palazzo, surrounded by golden fountains and silver basins, his soft stride cushioned by a lush purple carpet. Everything danced gently along. Everything swayed in the peace and harmony of contemplation.

He admired the view from the top. Mother Nature and her goddesswork.

The green of the mountains, the silence of the seas, the endless sky. He exhaled slowly. The empty flask slid from his hand, crashed breathlessly into the deep, and burst into a thousand little pieces. A thin streak of red wine was left on the railing.

He stepped forward with purpose. The view was breathtaking.



*word for word / parola per parola*  
Columbia University School of the Arts  
Scuola Holden

## Translator's Foreword

Laura Venita Green, classe 1979, è nata e cresciuta in Louisiana. Ha studiato marketing e finanza all'Università del Texas, e lavorato in ambito finanziario per oltre dieci anni prima di dedicarsi alla vocazione per le storie. Attualmente è iscritta alla Columbia University, dove studia scrittura e traduzione. Vive a New York con suo marito.

“Hellseer” è il secondo racconto della raccolta a cui l'autrice sta lavorando. Il progetto comprende tredici racconti, che si concentrano sull'universo femminile e ne esplorano relazioni e dinamiche di potere, indagando momenti diversi della vita di sei donne. La prima metà della raccolta è ambientata in Louisiana, la seconda metà in luoghi diversi degli Stati Uniti e dell'Europa.

“Hellseer”, in particolare, è incentrato sul conflitto tra prendersi cura di un'altra persona e gestire i propri interessi. Se Trina, la protagonista del racconto, inizialmente ha preso con sé la piccola Abby solo per le sue abilità, ben presto inizia ad affezionarsi alla bambina fino a provare per lei un istinto materno. Tra capacità di chiaroveggenza e vive descrizioni della città di New Orleans, i personaggi di questo racconto ci vengono presentati in tutta la loro contraddizione, tipica dell'umano.

Il lavoro di traduzione è stato molto divertente e mi ha costretta a entrare nei luoghi e nelle descrizioni, che volevo rendere con la stessa precisione con cui erano state scritte, a esplorare le parole e i loro significati, e a trovare un gergo adatto per i dialoghi, con voci diverse per i vari personaggi. Mi sono appassionata alla storia e affezionata ai protagonisti, che per un periodo mi hanno tenuto compagnia.



## LAURA VENITA GREEN

### *from HELLSEER*

Trina's business cards read: *Madame Trinae, Hellseer* and her shop was a prime spot on the corner of Dauphine and Bienville, just a block from the dirty strip of Bourbon Street. She'd subleased the space from Daphne Reine, the Voodoo Queen of Rue Dauphine, after Daphne's third diabetic amputation. The day Trina had moved in, she took down the tattered and mildewed awning over the door with "Psychic" spelled out in faded letters. She'd installed a custom-made sign in red, cursive neon: "Hellseer." And then, for passersby who wouldn't understand, she'd written "Psychic Advisor" with a red marker on a poster board and propped it in the corner of her shop window. She'd created a free website, just one page with a photo, a scheduling plugin, and an About Me section she used to clarify that she derived Hellseer from the German word for clairvoyant, *Der Hellseher*.

To finance her business and the neon sign, she'd given up her apartment and put in a futon and folding screens to cordon off a bedroom in her one-room shop. For the first year plus, her only customers had been bands of drunk bachelorettes, cookie-cutter girls who visited her on a dare, who looked around at all the mystic tchotchkes left by the Voodoo Queen and shot each other wide-eyed glances. The girls had come for a spectacle, and Trina hadn't disappointed. She'd bathed the room in a red neon glow and cursed the girls with visions of failed marriages,

**tradotto dall'inglese da  
MARIANNA VITALE**

*a partire dal HELLSEER*

Sul biglietto da visita di Trina c'era scritto «Madame Trinae, Hellseer» e il suo negozio era in prima linea all'angolo fra Dauphine e Bienville, a un solo isolato di distanza dal tratto sudicio di Bourbon Street. Aveva preso in subaffitto il negozio da Daphne Reine, la Regina Voodoo di Rue Dauphine, dopo che lei aveva subito la terza amputazione a causa del diabete. Il giorno stesso in cui si era trasferita, Trina aveva tolto dalla porta la tenda sbrindellata e ammuffita con la scritta «Veggente» in lettere sbiadite. Aveva montato un'insegna al neon fatta su misura, che in corsivo rosso diceva: «Hellseer». E poi, perché tutti i passanti capissero, aveva scritto «Chiaroveggente» con un pennarello rosso su una lavagnetta appoggiata in un angolo della vetrina. Aveva creato un sito web gratuito, giusto una pagina con foto, orari e la sezione «Chi sono», in cui spiegava di aver ricavato il nome Hellseer da una parola tedesca, *Der Hellseher*, che significa chiaroveggente.

Per finanziare l'attività e l'insegna al neon aveva rinunciato al suo appartamento e sistemato un futon nel negozio, con paraventi pieghevoli che delimitavano la sua stanza da letto. Durante il primo anno però le sue uniche clienti erano state donne sbronzate, tutte fatte con lo stampo, che partecipavano agli addii al nubilato. Arrivavano in gruppo e, per sfida, osservavano le cianfrusaglie mistiche lasciate in giro dalla Regina Voodoo e si scambiavano sguardi a occhi sgranati. Andavano da lei per lo spettacolo, e Trina non le deludeva. Aveva immerso la stanza in una luce al neon rossa e le torturava con visioni di matrimoni

rampant miscarriages, and every flavor of heartbreak, taking what little cash they had and scooting them out her door shell-shocked. They'd paid her back with Yelp reviews so awful and intriguing that they hyped her as the perfect New-Orleans-girls'-weekend sideshow. Still she barely covered the bills.

But all of that was before she got the girl. Since she had the girl, she had respect. Since she had the girl, business was by appointment only.

The girl, Abby, was eight years old, buoyant by nature. She liked to skip around the shop, perform summersaults, clasp her hands behind her back and twist her arms up overhead, showing off her double-jointed elbows. All this she did clearly seeking Trina's attention, and when Trina gave it to her, Abby put one hand to her waist and the other to her hair, cocked her hip, struck a pose. Ta-da!

But when she wanted her medicine, like she did this and every other morning, she wouldn't speak, just sat sweating, scratching, tearing at her skin. Trina had to clip Abby's nails to the quick to keep her from drawing blood.

Trina got the hair bleach kit out of the plastic drug store bag on the counter of the tiny kitchenette. "Come on," she said to the girl. "We may as well breathe in these chemicals while you already feel crappy."

The girl got up from the edge of the futon and moved across the room with a weak tap dance shuffle in her sock feet, her wet eyes focused on Trina.

"Don't be so eager. I might be trying to poison you, you don't even know what I got."

falliti, innumerevoli aborti e sofferenze di ogni genere, prendendo i pochi spiccioli che avevano e congedandole traumatizzate. Loro l'avevano ricambiata con recensioni su Yelp, così spaventose e intriganti, che le facevano pubblicità definendola “un’ attrazione perfetta per un weekend tra donne a New Orleans”. Eppure stentava a far quadrare i conti.

Ma tutto ciò accadeva prima della bambina. Da quando c’era la bambina, la rispettavano di più. Da quando c’era la bambina, lavorava solo su appuntamento.

La bambina, Abby, aveva otto anni e un carattere allegro. Le piaceva correre per il negozio, fare le capriole, unire le mani dietro la schiena e roteare le braccia sopra la testa, mettendo in mostra le articolazioni snodate dei gomiti. Tutto ciò ovviamente mirava a richiamare l’attenzione di Trina e, quando la otteneva, Abby si metteva in posa, inclinando il fianco, con una mano in vita e l’altra sul capo. Ta-da!

Ma quando voleva la medicina, come accadeva quasi ogni mattina, non parlava, stava lì seduta, sudando e graffiandosi la pelle fino a scorticarsi. Trina aveva dovuto tagliarle le unghie al vivo per impedirle di far uscire il sangue.

Trina estrasse dal sacchetto della farmacia il kit per la decolorazione dei capelli e posò tutto sul bancone del cucinino. – Vieni, – le disse. – Tanto vale che respiriamo queste sostanze chimiche visto che già ti senti di merda.

La bambina si alzò dal bordo del futon e si trascinò dall’altra parte della stanza con un debole passo di danza dei piedi nei calzini, gli occhi umidi puntati su Trina.

– Non essere così impaziente. Non sai nemmeno cosa ho preso, magari sto cercando di avvelenarti.

The girl bared her teeth and growled, shaping her hands into feeble bear claws, and then dropped them and grinned. Trina rolled her eyes and put the girl on the floor cushions in front of the full-length mirror and scooted a chair up behind her.

“Okay,” Trina said, brushing out the girl’s sleek brown hair. “In this city, you need a gimmick. You’re already pretty much my apprentice Hellseer, so you may as well look the part.”

The sharp smell of ammonia burned Trina’s nose when she opened the package. “Here,” she said, holding the bleach out to the girl. “Give this a huff. It’ll make you feel better.”

The girl breathed in deeply and closed her eyes, tilting her chin toward the ceiling.

“That’s all you get. Don’t want to kill your brain cells.”

Trina mixed together the contents of the kit until it made a thick paste. She used the small brush that came with the bleach to paint in streaks that started at the girl’s shoulders and ran all the way down her back, wrapping each in aluminum foil to protect the rest of her hair.

Before Trina could quite finish, her phone alarm went off, signaling pill time. The girl perked up and tried to stand. Trina put her hands firmly on the girl’s shoulders. “I didn’t say get up.”

Abby stayed seated but wouldn’t stop fidgeting. Trina swatted her lightly on the back of the head. “Sit still. I could be done with this in a minute.”

La bambina ringhiò scoprendo i denti e agitò le mani come fossero gli artigli molli di un orso, sogghignando. Trina roteò gli occhi, la fece sedere sui cuscini posati per terra davanti alla grande specchiera e sistemò una sedia dietro di lei.

– Okay, – disse, spazzolandole i capelli castani, morbidi e lucenti. – In questa città c’è bisogno di un trucco. In pratica sei già la mia apprendista Hellseer, tanto vale che ti cali nella parte.

L’odore pungente di ammoniaca le bruciò nel naso quando aprì la confezione. – Qui, – disse, porgendola a Abby. – Da’ una sniffata. Ti farà sentire meglio.

La bambina inspirò profondamente e chiuse gli occhi, sollevando il mento verso il soffitto.

– Basta così. Non vorrai mica uccidere le cellule del cervello.

Trina mescolò gli elementi del kit fino a ottenere una pasta densa. Usò il piccolo pennello venduto insieme all’ammoniaca per farle delle mèche che partivano dalle spalle e scendevano lungo la schiena, avvolgendole in fogli di stagnola per proteggere il resto dei capelli.

Quando stava per finire, suonò la sveglia del cellulare, annunciando l’ora della pillola. La bambina si riprese e cercò di rimettersi in piedi. Trina le appoggiò le mani sulle spalle con fermezza. – Non ti ho ancora detto di alzarti.

Abby rimase seduta ma non la smetteva di agitarsi. Trina le diede un colpetto sulla nuca. – Sta’ ferma. Tra poco avrò finito.

In the mirror, Trina could see Abby's nostrils flare. The whites of her eyes. Her breath came out of her open mouth in shallow huffs.

The girl's lack of control got on Trina's nerves. She would have died for someone to play with her hair like this when she was little. Instead, she'd been unwanted in every household she passed through, until she ran away and eventually found the Voodoo Queen. If the girl wanted to throw a little fit, she'd have to wait. Trina picked up her phone and turned off the alarm. She checked her schedule and saw no new clients had requested appointments, then looked ahead to review her commitments for the upcoming week.

The girl made a low, keening moan. Trina slammed her phone down, put her palms on the sides of Abby's face, and made eye contact with her in the mirror.

"If you can calm down, I will be done in ten seconds and I will make your medicine. I promise. Can you do that for me?"

Abby nodded. Trina put the rest of the mix in the last section with one swift paintbrush motion, crinkled foil around it, and clapped her hands. "All done!"

She went to the kitchen with the girl hopping behind her. She used a stepladder to pull a bottle from the top cabinet and removed a fifteen-milligram oxycodone tablet from the supply that she'd bought from the Voodoo Queen, the prescription label peeled off. With a knife she cut the tablet in two and put one half back in the bottle. Then she used the knife's handle to crush the remaining half to a fine powder.

The girl watched her closely and began to tremble. "That's not enough," she said.

Nello specchio, Trina vedeva le narici di Abby che si dilatavano. Il bianco dei suoi occhi. Il respiro che le usciva dalla bocca aperta in deboli sbuffi.

L'irrequietezza della bambina le urtava i nervi. Da piccola, Trina avrebbe dato qualsiasi cosa perché qualcuno giocasse così coi suoi capelli. Invece, nessuna famiglia a cui era stata affidata l'aveva voluta, finché era scappata e alla fine aveva trovato la Regina Voodoo. Se Abby era in vena di capricci, avrebbe aspettato. Afferrò il cellulare e spense la sveglia. Controllò l'agenda e vide che nessun nuovo cliente aveva preso appuntamento, poi diede una scorsa alle pagine successive per rivedere gli impegni della settimana.

La bambina emise un lamento forte e profondo. Trina posò con rabbia il cellulare e, tenendo tra le mani il viso di Abby, la fissò nello specchio.

– Se ti calmi, fra dieci secondi avrò finito e ti preparerò la medicina. Promesso. Ce la puoi fare?

Abby annuì. Trina applicò la pasta rimanente alle ultime ciocche con una rapida pennellata, ripiegò la stagnola e batté le mani. – Finito!

Andò in cucina con la bambina che la seguiva saltellando. Usò una scala per tirare giù il flacone da sopra l'armadio. Prelevò una compressa da quindici milligrammi di ossicodone dalla scorta acquistata dalla Regina Voodoo, la cui etichetta si era staccata. Divise in due la compressa con un coltello e ne rimise una metà nel flacone. Poi usò il manico per sbriciolare la metà rimasta fino a ottenere una polverina.

La bambina la osservava da vicino, scossa dal tremito. – Questa non basta, – disse.

Trina ignored her. She put a piece of white bread in the toaster and got out the strawberry jam, mixed the powder with a large spoonful of jam, and when the bread popped up, spread the mixture onto the toast, put it on a plate, and handed it to the girl.

Abby took a huge bite. Mouth full, she complained, “It’s not enough.” A glob of jam dropped to her forearm, and she brought it to her mouth and sucked it clean. “I need more.”

“It’s the same amount you always get,” Trina said.

The girl circled her hand around Trina’s wrist and said, “You cannot lie to me.”

“Stop that,” Trina said. “You’re fine.” The drug never took long to kick in.

When Trina had first found Abby about a year ago, huddled on a bench at Toulouse Station, the girl had fresh track marks on her arms. To get her off the drug, Trina had crushed black-market oxycodone and let her snort the powder. Eventually they got to the point where the girl was swallowing it. Now Trina was tapering the girl’s dosage. Four months ago, she went from a full tablet to three quarters, twice a day. Today it was half. The plan was to reduce from half to one quarter by the time Trina enrolled Abby in school in the fall. Eventually they would stop the drug entirely, but she couldn’t think about that right now. Abby had probably been addicted since birth and always wanted more.

Trina guided the girl to the sink to wash the bleach out of her hair. She must have left it in too long because clumps came out with the foil, and the strands that remained were split and fried.

Trina la ignorò. Mise una fetta di pane bianco nel tostapane e prese la marmellata di fragole, ne mescolò una bella cucchiaiata con la polverina e quando il pane saltò fuori ce la spalmò sopra, poi lo mise in un piatto e lo porse alla bambina.

Abby diede un grosso morso. Con la bocca piena, si lamentò: – Non basta. – Una goccia di marmellata le cadde sull'avambraccio, lei se lo portò alla bocca per succhiarla. – Me ne serve di più.

– È la quantità che prendi sempre, – disse Trina.

La mano della bambina le strinse il polso. – Non dirmi bugie.

– Smettila, – disse Trina. – Sei a posto così. – La droga non ci avrebbe messo molto a fare effetto.

Quando Trina l'aveva trovata, circa un anno prima, rannicchiata su una panchina della stazione di Toulouse, Abby aveva segni di iniezioni recenti sulle braccia. Per farla smettere con la droga, Trina aveva sbriolato dell'ossicodone preso al mercato nero e le aveva fatto sniffare la polverina. Poi, a poco a poco, era riuscita a inghiottirlo. Adesso le stava riducendo la dose. Quattro mesi prima, da una compressa intera era passata a tre quarti, due volte al giorno. Ora a mezza compressa. L'intenzione era di ridurla a un quarto prima di iscrivere la bambina a scuola, in autunno. Poi avrebbe smesso completamente, ma non era ancora il momento di pensarci. Abby probabilmente era assuefatta dalla nascita e ne voleva sempre di più.

Trina la condusse al lavandino e le sciacquò i capelli dall'ammoniaca. Forse aveva aspettato troppo, perché insieme alla stagnola vennero via delle ciocche, e quelle che restavano erano spezzate e bruciacciate.

“Oh, well fuck,” Trina said. She used dish soap to get the bleach out and then plugged her dryer in and set the girl on the counter while she dried her hair.

Trina had thought she would hate having the girl around, but she was pleased to learn that wasn’t the case. She had maternal instincts after all; she shouldn’t have sold herself short. The moodiness when the girl whined for her medicine was annoying, certainly. But for the most part, the girl was a doll. And she obeyed Trina’s rules, especially around other people, which was crucial for when they went recruiting.

Back in front of the mirror, Trina opened a pack of hair chalks and laid the colors on a paper towel. “Do you want to choose?”

The girl didn’t hesitate. “Purple,” she said, grabbing the chalk and holding it high.

“Huh,” Trina said. “Isn’t that one too pastel-y?”

“No. I like it.”

“Okay,” Trina said, taking the purple hair chalk from the girl. “I just assumed you’d want to match, seeing as how you’re my apprentice and all.”

The girl swung back to look at Trina. “I do,” she said.

“Purple, though?”

The girl took the chalk back from Trina and handed her the red. “I want this one.”

– Oh cazzo, – disse Trina. Usò del sapone per piatti per rimuovere l'ammoniaca, poi attaccò il phon e fece sedere la bambina sul bancone mentre le asciugava i capelli.

Trina all'inizio pensava che non avrebbe sopportato di averla intorno, ma era stata felice di ricredersi. Dopotutto anche lei aveva un po' di istinto materno, aveva fatto male a sottovalutarsi. Gli sbalzi d'umore di Abby, quando si lamentava per la medicina, erano una grossa seccatura, ma per la maggior parte del tempo quella bambina era come una bambola. Le obbediva sempre, soprattutto se c'erano altre persone, e la sua presenza era fondamentale per reclutarle.

Tornata davanti allo specchio, Trina aprì una confezione di gessi per capelli e sparse tutti i colori su un tovagliolo di carta. – Vuoi scegliere?

La bambina non aveva dubbi. – Viola, – disse, afferrando il gesso e tenendolo in alto.

– Mmm, – disse Trina. – Non è un po' troppo pastello?

– No. A me piace.

– Okay, – disse Trina, prendendo il gesso viola dalla mano di Abby. – Immagino che tu lo voglia abbinare, visto che sei la mia apprendista e tutto il resto.

La bambina si girò a guardarla. – Sì, – disse.

– Viola, quindi?

Abby riprese il gesso da Trina e le porse quello rosso. – Voglio questo.

Trina nodded and colored in the girl's frizzled white streaks, layering in as much red chalk as she could. She dimmed the lamps scattered throughout the shop. They stood side by side in front of the mirror and looked at Trina's handiwork. The damaged strands of hair fanned out as if charged by static electricity. Abby grinned at her, her eyes clear—the drug was working.

Yes. Her perfect little apprentice Hellseer.

~

In the afternoon Trina put on her recruiting outfit, a white peasant dress and black work boots, and they walked to the Museum of Death to find Serge. A warm spring breeze made for a perfect day, and the streets outside the shop bustled with activity. Sunday tourists wore khakis or floral dresses as if they'd just come from church. And many probably had; there were plenty of beautiful old churches in and around the French Quarter to wash away any shame these people felt over the shitshows they'd been the previous night out on Bourbon Street, sipping their hand grenades and stumbling around, flashing their tits and asses for cheap beads. The litter-strip club fliers and beads and empty containers—seemed almost festive mixed in with the tiny petals that blew like confetti from the white flowering hawthorn trees that lined Bienville.

The girl got a running start down the sidewalk and jumped up to the branches, bopping them, making them rain, twirling with her arms raised while the petals washed over her.

Trina liked the juxtaposition. Litter and flowers. Churches and strip clubs. Dirty and fresh. Abby's ruined

Trina annuì e le tinse le strisce di capelli bianchi e increspati, facendo più strati che poteva con il gesso rosso. Abbassò le luci delle lampade sparse per tutto il negozio. Poi rimasero una accanto all'altra, davanti allo specchio, ad ammirare l'opera di Trina. Le ciocche rovinate si aprirono a ventaglio come se fossero cariche di elettricità statica. Abby fece un largo sorriso, aveva gli occhi liquidi – la droga stava facendo effetto.

Già. La sua piccola, perfetta, apprendista Hellseer.

~

Quel pomeriggio Trina indossò il “completo da reclutamento”, un vestito bianco da contadina e stivali neri da lavoro, e andarono a piedi al Museo della Morte, a trovare Serge. Era una giornata perfetta, soffiava una calda brezza primaverile, e le strade fuori dai negozi erano piene di vita. I turisti della domenica indossavano abiti color cachi o a fiori, come se fossero appena usciti dalla chiesa. E probabilmente era proprio così; era pieno di chiese antiche e bellissime nei dintorni del Quartiere Francese, dove si poteva lavar via qualsiasi vergogna per le porcate della notte precedente, trascorsa in Bourbon Street a sorseggiare Hand Grenade, barcollando e mettendo in mostra tette e culi in cambio di collane da quattro soldi. L'immondizia – volantini di strip club, perline e contenitori vuoti – sembrava quasi allegra mescolata ai piccoli petali caduti, come confetti, dai biancospini in fiore che fiancheggiavano Bienville.

La bambina si mise a correre lungo il marciapiede, saltò all'altezza dei rami e li colpì per far piovere i petali, e mentre le scivolavano addosso fece una piroetta con le braccia alzate.

A Trina piaceva l'accostamento. Fiori e immondizia. Chiese e strip club. Pulizia e sporcizia. Le ciocche

strands amidst her healthy hair. On one street corner, a man in a suit played the saxophone well enough to perform at Preservation Hall, his instrument case open and displaying CDs for purchase. Across on the other corner, a homeless man blew into a cheap party-favor kazoo, a dirty hat for donations next to a pit bull that slept at his feet.

Inside the museum, families amassed in the front lobby for the serial killer tour. A small group of nuns clustered by the stained-glass window where a collection of Victorian hair wreaths hung on a freestanding plaster pillar. Trina loved those wreaths, remnants of entire families more than a century dead. She planned on collecting them for her shop when she had more money.

The girl stayed behind, as usual, to admire the fetal pigs preserved in jars, tapping the glass as if they might wake up, while Trina found Serge at the ticket desk.

“That is too perfect,” Trina said, gesturing at the nuns. She got a handful of business cards from her purse and added them to the stack at the desk.

“I know. So weird. That old one with the hunch bought enough Pogo the Clown iron-on patches to give out to her whole group.”

Serge squeezed her into a hug. He was a tall guy, stocky and a little awkward. A couple years younger than Trina, not quite twenty-five. Underneath his tattoos and piercings and collection of death metal t-shirts, he remained the pudgy, sweet momma’s boy that he’d surely been growing up.

rovinate in mezzo ai capelli sani di Abby. A un angolo della strada, un uomo in giacca e cravatta suonava il sassofono così bene che avrebbe potuto esibirsi al Preservation Hall, la custodia dello strumento era aperta e metteva in mostra i CD da acquistare. All'angolo opposto, un senzatetto soffiava un kazoo rimediato chissà dove, il cappello sporco per le donazioni accanto al pitbull che dormiva ai suoi piedi.

All'interno del museo, le famiglie si ammassavano nell'atrio d'ingresso per il tour dei serial killer. Un gruppetto di suore si era raccolto accanto a una vetrata colorata dove, su un pilastro di gesso, era appesa una collezione di coroncine di fiori vittoriane. Trina amava quelle coroncine fatte di capelli umani, gli ultimi resti di intere famiglie defunte da più di un secolo. Pensava di comprarle per il suo negozio, quando avrebbe avuto abbastanza soldi.

La bambina restò indietro, come al solito, a contemplare i feti dei maialini conservati nei vasi, picchiettando sul vetro come per svegliarli, mentre Trina raggiunse Serge alla biglietteria.

– Quelle sono perfette, – disse Trina, indicando le suore. Tirò fuori una manciata di biglietti da visita della borsa e li aggiunse al mucchietto sul banco.

– Lo so. Così bizzarre. Quella vecchia con la gobba ha comprato le toppe di Pogo il clown per tutto il gruppo.

Serge la strinse in un abbraccio. Era un tipo alto, robusto e un po' goffo. Aveva quasi venticinque anni, due meno di Trina. Sotto ai tatuaggi, ai piercing e alla collezione di magliette death-metal, restava quel cocco di mamma tenero e grassottello che sicuramente era stato da piccolo.

The girl skipped up to him. He said, “What up, Abby,” and lifted her high into the air, swinging her around in a circle. “Badass hair. Now you two even *look* like sisters.”

When he hugged the girl to his chest and they came face-to-face, she reached out and touched the black metal piercing above his eyebrow, very tenderly, with a thoughtful look on her face.

Trina knew the look. The girl had seen something.

Serge put Abby down and excused himself to go grab something from the storage room.

Once he left, Trina said, “We don’t do that to our friends, remember?”

“I try not to,” the girl said. “I can’t help it.”

“I know. You can tell me what you saw later.”

Trina swatted the girl on the back of the head and let her loose to scurry amongst the museumgoers and gather information. She had already learned a few things about Serge from Abby. Nothing terrible; he’d obviously lived a pretty sheltered life. His best friend growing up was a mutt named FatBoy who got run over by a pickup truck that never even slowed down. Thursday’s “guys’ gaming night” meant barbecuing at his parents’. He had an associate degree in hospitality management from Delgado Community College even though he straight up told Trina he’d quit high school just like she had and left

La bambina li raggiunse saltellando.

– Come butta, Abby? – le disse lui sollevandola e facendole fare una giravolta in aria. – Fighi i capelli. Adesso sembrate proprio due sorelle.

Quando la strinse al petto e furono faccia a faccia, lei allungò una mano per toccare il piercing di metallo nero sul suo sopracciglio, in modo molto tenero, con un'espressione pensierosa.

Trina conosceva quello sguardo. Abby aveva visto qualcosa.

Serge la mise giù e si scusò prima di andare a rovistare nel magazzino.

Una volta uscito, Trina disse: – Con gli amici non lo facciamo, ricordi?

– Ci ho provato a non farlo, – disse la bambina. – Non ci riesco.

– Lo so. Dopo mi dici cos'hai visto.

Trina le diede un colpetto sulla nuca e la lasciò vagare tra i visitatori del museo per carpire informazioni. Aveva già saputo un paio di cose su Serge grazie a Abby. Niente di terribile; ovviamente aveva sempre vissuto sotto a una campana di vetro. Il suo migliore amico d'infanzia era stato un bastardino di nome FatBoy, investito da un pickup che non aveva nemmeno rallentato. La “serata giochi del giovedì” consisteva in un barbecue a casa dei suoi. Si era diplomato in Management del turismo all'università pubblica locale, il Delgado Community College, anche se aveva detto chiaramente a Trina di aver abbandonato gli studi alle scuole superiori, proprio come

it at that. Of course, everyone lied to everyone, but the knowledge didn't help their relationship.

He came out of the storage room backward, dragging something heavy that he set down gently on the floor by Trina's feet. It was a child-sized coffin made of glossy black wood with red resin inlay crisscrossed throughout. Trina loved the flaws in the piece, the deep scratches that marred the wood.

"You said you needed a coffee table," Serge said. "I picked this up at the flea market in Metairie, but we don't have room for it here."

It was absolutely perfect. "How much?" Trina said, pulling a crisp twenty from her wallet and feeling the thrill she always felt when handling money of her own.

"It's a gift. It's yours."

Trina kissed Serge hard on the mouth and put her cash away. She spotted Abby across the big room, looking aimless beside a group of bros in LSU ball caps bunched around the Jeffrey Dahmer exhibit. "Watch," Trina said to Serge and pointed at her. The girl looked up as Trina pointed, and without missing a beat, struck her hip-cocked pose.

"You know you're her person, right?" Serge said.

Yeah, Trina knew.

She told Serge they were going to make the rounds and went to get the scoop from Abby. The girl told her that the young nun with the cat-eye glasses had a daughter

lei, e non aveva aggiunto altro. Certo, tutti mentono a tutti, ma averlo saputo non facilitava il loro rapporto.

Serge uscì dal magazzino camminando all'indietro e trascinando qualcosa di pesante che adagiò sul pavimento ai piedi di Trina. Era una bara per bambino, di lucido legno nero con intarsi in resina rossa che s'incrociavano su tutta la superficie. Trina ne ammirò le imperfezioni, i graffi profondi che rovinavano il legno.

– Avevi detto che ti serviva un tavolino da caffè, – disse Serge. – L'ho trovata al mercato delle pulci di Metairie, ma qui non c'è spazio.

Era perfetta. – Quanto? – disse Trina, estraendo dal portafogli una frusciante banconota da venti e avvertendo il brivido che provava ogni volta che teneva in mano del denaro tutto suo.

– È un regalo. È per te.

Trina lo baciò sulla bocca con impeto e mise via la banconota. Avvistò Abby dall'altro lato della vasta sala, sembrava vagare senza meta accanto a un gruppo di ragazzi ammassati intorno all'opera di Jeffrey Dahmer, tutti con dei cappellini della LSU in testa. – Guardala, – disse a Serge indicando la bambina. Abby alzò subito lo sguardo e, in un batter d'occhio, si mise in posa inclinando il fianco.

– Lo sai che stravede per te, vero? – disse Serge.

Sì, Trina lo sapeva.

Gli disse che dovevano fare il giro e andò da Abby per ascoltare le novità. La bambina riferì che la suora giovane con gli occhiali a gatto aveva una figlia data in

she'd given up for adoption who she'd just begun to visit in secret. The short nun that just sneezed had a scientist mother who disowned her when she joined the church. The LSU hat-boy in the camouflage shorts went home to his parents' farm some weekends and used binoculars to spy into his sister's bedroom window. As always, the girl delivered the news in monotone, matter-of-fact, adult.

"That's all you got today?"

The girl stamped her foot. "I don't feel good," she said. "You didn't give me enough."

"Okay, shush." Trina wished she hadn't said anything. Most days, they spent all afternoon recruiting, at the museum, parks, cemeteries, cafes. And Abby was becoming clever, seeking out information that Trina could really use and not just delivering random thoughts like she had at first. But, particularly when her withdrawal symptoms were bad, she could cut the girl some slack. Trina was hustling to get to the point where repeat clients would sustain her business. She was trying to save enough so that she could take over the lease directly from the landlord before the Voodoo Queen died and they were kicked out. By the time she put the girl in school, she wanted them to have their own apartment.

Trina sent Abby to wait with Serge at the ticket counter while she approached the sisters. She decided not to mess with Mr. LSU—he reminded her of too many guys she'd encountered during her runaway years—but she would love to have a couple nuns as clients. It would be so perfect if one of them agreed to write a testimonial and supply a picture for her website, holy countenance and crucifix in full view. She could call herself Hellseer to the Nuns! Trina stepped beside the short nun and said quietly, "If you want to repair your relationship with

adozione, che da qualche tempo incontrava in segreto. La suora bassa che aveva appena starnutito era figlia di una scienziata da cui era stata disconosciuta quando aveva preso i voti. Il ragazzo con il cappellino della LSU e i pantaloncini mimetici quando tornava alla fattoria di famiglia nei fine settimana spiava sua sorella dalla finestra col binocolo. Come sempre, Abby riportò le informazioni in modo monotono, diretto, da adulta.

– Tutto qui per oggi?

La bambina batté i piedi. – Non sto bene. Me ne hai data troppo poca.

– Okay, ssh. – Trina si pentì di averlo detto. Il più delle volte, passavano l'intero pomeriggio a reclutare, al museo, nei parchi, nei cimiteri o nei bar. E Abby stava diventando scaltra nel reperire informazioni che Trina poteva davvero usare, non solo pensieri casuali come faceva i primi tempi. Ma doveva avere pazienza con lei, soprattutto quando i sintomi dell'astinenza erano acuti. Le stava facendo pressione per ottenere clienti fissi che sostenessero la sua attività. Stava cercando di risparmiare per rilevare il locale dal proprietario prima che la Regina Voodoo morisse e lui le buttasse fuori. Voleva un vero appartamento tutto per loro entro l'inizio della scuola.

Trina mandò Abby da Serge alla biglietteria, mentre lei abbordava le suore. Decise di non impicciarsi di Mister LSU – le ricordava fin troppi ragazzi che aveva incontrato negli anni della sua fuga – ma le sarebbe piaciuto avere qualche suora come cliente. Sarebbe stato perfetto se una di loro avesse acconsentito a scrivere una testimonianza e a fare una foto per il sito web, con espressione estatica e crocifisso in bella vista. Si sarebbe potuta chiamare «Hellseer per suore»! Trina passò accanto a quella più bassa e disse piano: – Se vuoi recuperare il rapporto

your mother, I'm Madame Trinae, and I can help you see," then slipped a business card into her hand. Next to the nun with the cat-eye glasses, she said, "Will you leave the church for your daughter? I'm Madame Trinae, and I can help you see," and slipped her a business card. To the old nun who'd bought the Pogo patches, she gave a handful hoping she'd distribute them to the group.

The nuns turned to her as one and watched as she walked away.

con tua madre, sono Madame Trinae e posso aiutarti a vedere, – poi le fece scivolare tra le mani un biglietto da visita. A quella con gli occhiali a gatto disse: – Lascerai la chiesa per tua figlia? Sono Madame Trinae, e posso aiutarti a vedere, – e le passò un biglietto da visita. Ne diede una manciata alla più anziana che aveva comprato le toppe di Pogo, sperando che li distribuisse a tutto il gruppo.

Le suore si voltarono all'unisono e la guardarono mentre si allontanava.

## Translator's Foreword

Marianna Vitale (b. 1993) was born and raised in Rimini, a popular beach resort on Italy's Adriatic coast often featured in her fiction and famous as the birthplace of director Federico Fellini. She holds a bachelor's degree in culture and fashion techniques, a master's in cultural events organization, and is currently a master's candidate in creative writing at Scuola Holden in Turin. From an early age she knew she wanted to be a writer and self-published two novels at ages sixteen and eighteen.

Vitale is at work on a collection of short stories, all featuring teenage protagonists and set in Rimini. The collection contains twelve stories grouped by the seasons of the year, from spring to winter, a structure that brings to mind *Seasons in the City* by Italo Calvino, one of Vitale's writing inspirations. The stories investigate coming-of-age themes such as navigating relationships, coping with changes both physical and emotional, and grappling with the adult world and the uncertainties of one's own future. "Boundaries" appears in the summer section and explores the intimacy that can arise between two teens who don't know each other and who may never see each other again.

The main challenge, and the most rewarding aspect, of translating "Boundaries" was believably depicting Italian teenage banter and letting the two protagonists' unique personalities come through in their own words. Implicit in the teens' conversations are the intricacies of life in Rimini—the divide between private and public beaches, nuances of the Italian high school system, distinctive characteristics of the Adriatic Sea. Clarifying these concepts for the American reader without letting the dialogue come across as stilted proved challenging. The dialogue in "Boundaries" is full of double meanings, subtle shifts in conversational tone, and the unspoken is

often as important as what's said.

## MARIANNA VITALE

### CONFINI

Quel tratto di spiaggia libera tra Rimini e Riccione è terra di nessuno, cinquecento metri esatti di vuoto tra un cartello di fine e uno di inizio. È lì che Vera stende sempre il suo asciugamano, in quella lingua di sabbia che sulla carta non esiste. Il momento della giornata che preferisce è il pomeriggio tardi, un'ora prima del tramonto, quando i turisti sono tornati in albergo per la cena, il vento si è addormentato e il sole proietta ombre lunghe sulle cose. Le piace rimanere sola, con un libro qualsiasi – non quello che le hanno dato a scuola – e lo stridio dei gabbiani come sottofondo sul tutto. Sceglie un posto vicino alla riva, spiega il telo e si siede, si toglie la maglietta e la ripiega con cura. Sistema le infradito da una parte, accanto alla borsa, e tira fuori il libro. Poi si lega i capelli in alto sulla nuca, per permettere al collo di abbronzarsi. Una ciocca troppo corta le ricade sul viso, lei non la sposta.

Comincia a leggere, sa che non andrà più avanti di qualche pagina perché verrà distratta da qualcuno che passeggiava, un'onda che le raggiunge i piedi, un cane che le annusa la borsa. Non le importa – in quel momento si sente bene – sorride ai passanti, lascia che i piedi si bagnino, accarezza il cane. La lettura, in fondo, è solo una scusa.

«Che stai leggendo?»

Sul libro di Vera si disegna l'ombra di un ragazzo coi

**translated from the italian by  
LAURA VENITA GREEN**

## BOUNDARIES

The stretch of public beach between Rimini and Riccione is a no man's land, precisely five hundred meters of empty space with signposts that mark where it begins and where it ends. It's there, on that strip of sand that doesn't exist on any map, that Vera always spreads her towel. Late afternoon is her favorite time of day, an hour before sunset, when the tourists have gone back to their hotels for dinner, the wind has drifted off, and the sun casts long shadows. She likes to be alone with a book—any book, as long as it's not assigned for school—with the soundtrack of screeching seagulls in the background. She chooses a spot near the water, lays out her towel, removes and carefully folds her t-shirt, and sits. She arranges her flip-flops next to her bag and pulls out her book. Then she ties her hair up high so that her neck can tan. Some of it's too short for the ponytail and falls across her face, but she doesn't try to tuck it back.

She starts to read, knowing that she won't get past a few pages before something distracts her: a person strolling by, a wave reaching her feet, a dog sniffing at her bag. It doesn't matter because right now she feels good—she'll smile at passersby, let her feet get wet, pet the dog. The book is just an excuse, after all.

“What are you reading?”

The silhouette of a boy with short, bushy hair falls over

**capelli a spazzola.** Lei, istintivamente, lo chiude e lo appoggia sulla sabbia, dall'altro lato.

«Non stavo leggendo.»

«Okay.»

L'ombra non se ne va, Vera alza gli occhi ma ha il sole contro e non riesce a capire chi ha davanti.

«Ci conosciamo?»

«No, piacere, Luca. Sto a quell'ombrellone laggiù.»

Lei segue con lo sguardo il suo dito, che sta indicando lo stabilimento a pochi metri da lì.

«Vera.»

Gli stringe la mano anche se non è ancora riuscita a vederlo in volto.

«Sei di qui?»

«Sì, infatti stavo per andare a casa.»

«Messaggio ricevuto.»

Lui fa finta di andarsene, ma ci ripensa.

«È che sono in vacanza coi miei nonni e ho passato tutta la giornata con loro... Pensavo di andare a fare un bagno, magari ti va di venire...»

«Un bagno?»

Vera's book and she shuts it instinctively, setting it down on the opposite side.

"I wasn't reading."

"Okay."

The shadow doesn't go away. Vera looks up, but the sun is right behind the boy and she can't make out who it is.

"Do I know you?"

"No, but hi, nice to meet you, I'm Luca. I'm that umbrella over there."

She looks over to where he's pointing, at rows of identical umbrellas on the private beach.

"Vera."

She shakes his hand when he offers it, though she still can't really see his face.

"You from here?" he asks.

"Yes. Actually, I was just about to go home."

"Ah. I get the hint."

He starts to leave, but then turns back.

"It's just that I'm on vacation with my grandparents and I've been with them all day... I thought I might go for a swim. You don't want to come, do you?"

"For a swim?"

«Scusa, forse non ti va» dice accorgendosi che lei porta ancora gli shorts.

Vera guarda il mare, le onde calme, la schiuma leggera. Sa che a quell'ora l'acqua è tiepida al punto giusto.

«In realtà mi va» dice, ma non si muove.

«Okay.»

Luca si siede accanto a lei, senza aggiungere altro.

«Io faccio lo scientifico. Ultimo anno» dice dopo alcuni minuti.

«Artistico.»

«Io sono una frana a disegnare, sono bravo solo con i numeri.»

«Io odio disegnare.»

«E allora perché hai scelto...»

«Mi piace fotografare.»

Vera si volta e finalmente lo vede: gli occhi grigioverdi, i segni dell'acne sulla fronte e sulle guance. Lui abbassa lo sguardo.

«Scommetto che tu sei uno da media dell'otto.»

«Si vede così tanto?»

Lei si gira dall'altra parte, nascondendo un accenno di sorriso. A quest'ora il cielo è così limpido che il

“Sorry, never mind. Probably not,” he says, noticing her shorts are still on.

Vera looks at the sea’s calm waves, the gentle foam. She knows the temperature of the water is perfect right now.

“Actually... maybe. Kinda,” she says, but doesn’t move.

“Okay.”

Luca sits next to her and doesn’t mention swimming again.

“I’m in my last year of high school. Math concentration,” he says after a few minutes.

“Arts.”

“I really suck at drawing. I’m only good with numbers.”

“I hate drawing.”

“Then why’re you doing . . .”

“I like photography.”

Vera turns and finally sees him: his grey-green eyes, some acne on his cheeks and forehead. He looks down.

“You look like someone who always gets good grades,” she says.

“Great. It’s that obvious?”

She turns away, hiding the hint of a smile. The sky is so clear that she can see the entire Gabicce Promontory. It’s

promontorio di Gabicce si vede per intero e sembra quasi di poterlo toccare allungando una mano.

«Tu invece non studi tanto, eh?»

«Solo quando ne ho voglia.»

«Cioè mai.»

«Quasi mai.»

«Sei stata rimandata?»

«Matematica, chimica, storia.»

«Storia?»

«La prof è una stronza.»

«Immagino.»

«Mi prendi per il culo?»

«No, no, ci credo, ci credo.»

«Vabbè ma tanto non me ne frega se mi bocciano.»

«Invece secondo me ti frega.»

«Tanto non lo so cosa voglio fare nella vita.»

«Non hai detto che ti piace fotografare?»

Vera non risponde. «Tu cosa vuoi fare?»

Luca ci pensa su un istante. «Non ho ancora deciso.»

almost as if she can reach out her hand and touch it.

“So you don’t study that much?” Luca says.

“Only when I feel like it.”

“As in never.”

“Almost never.”

“Are you failing any of your classes?”

“Math. Chemistry. History.”

“History?”

“The teacher’s a bitch.”

“I’m sure.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“No, no, I believe you, I believe you.”

“Whatever. I don’t give a shit if they flunk me.”

“Sounds to me like you might.”

“I guess I don’t really know what I want to do with my life.”

“Didn’t you say you like photography?”

Vera doesn’t answer. “What do you want to do?”

Luca thinks for a minute. “I haven’t made up my mind

«Però non vedi l'ora di finire il liceo.»

«Sì, certo.»

«E perché?»

«Perché voglio andarmene di casa il prima possibile.»

«E questo pensiero ti fa stare meglio?»

«Perché, a te no?»

«Non lo so, credo di no.»

Vera rimane a fissare l'orizzonte, sempre più sfumato, mentre il cielo sembra liquido.

«Mi sono sempre chiesto com'è abitare al mare» fa lui, dopo un po'.

Vera si scioglie i capelli, ci infila le mani e li pettina lentamente con le dita. «Come tutte le cose che hai sempre a portata di mano, dopo un po' ti stanca» dice.

«Io penso che mi piacerebbe.»

«Certi giorni non ci vengo neanche, perché a volte non ne ho voglia» fa lei, come se dovesse giustificarsi. «E poi le persone che incontro qui se ne vanno sempre.»

Luca accarezza un po' la sabbia, ci affonda dentro la mano sinistra e ne prende una manciata, poi se la lascia scivolare tra le dita.

yet.”

“But you can’t wait to graduate.”

“Of course I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to get away from home as soon as possible.”

“The thought of getting away from home makes you feel better?”

“Why? Doesn’t it make *you* feel better?”

“I don’t know, I don’t think so.”

As she stares at the horizon, it fades, becomes almost liquid.

“I always wondered what it’s like to live near the water,” he says after a little.

Vera undoes her ponytail and slowly combs her fingers through her hair. “It’s the same as everything else that’s always there. You get sick of it after a while.”

“I’m pretty sure I’d like it.”

“Some days I don’t even come here, I don’t even feel like it,” she says as if she needs to justify herself. “Plus, the people I meet here always end up going away.”

Luca runs his hand over the sand, scoops up a handful and lets it fall through his fingers.

«E dove ti piacerebbe abitare?»

Lei guarda verso sud. «In un posto pieno di colori, tipo l'India.»

«E ci vivresti sul serio? Tutto l'anno?»

«Credo di sì.»

«E non ti stancheresti anche dei colori, dopo un po'?»

«Possibile. Io mi stanco di tutto.» Alza la testa e punta gli occhi in quelli del ragazzo. Si accorge che ora sono più verdi. «Pensi che crescendo andrà meglio?»

«Mi piace pensarla.»

Vera abbassa di nuovo lo sguardo. «E tu dove vorresti abitare?»

«A Rimini, per esempio.»

«Ma dai!»

«No, dico sul serio. Mi è sempre piaciuta l'idea di abitare in un posto dove la gente va in vacanza. Mi farebbe sentire importante.»

«I turisti danno fastidio dopo un po'.»

Lui ride. «Sì, soprattutto alcuni.» E riesce a strappare un sorriso anche a lei.

«Facciamo che mi dici tutte le cose che ancora non ti hanno ancora stancato.»

“Where do you want to live?”

She looks to the south. “In a place full of color, like India.”

“You’d seriously live there? All year?”

“I think so.”

“Wouldn’t you get sick of all the color after a while?”

“Maybe. I get sick of everything.” She looks up into the boy’s eyes—they seem greener now. “Do you think things’ll be better when we grow up?”

“I hope so.”

Vera looks down again. “How about you? Where do you want to live?”

“I don’t know—maybe Rimini?”

“Oh, come on!”

“No, I’m serious. I like the idea of living in a place where people go for vacation. It would make me feel important.”

“But tourists get annoying after a while.”

He laughs. “Yeah, I can think of one or two,” he says, and manages to get a smile out of her. “How about this: tell me all the things you’re not sick of yet.”

«E perché dovrei dirtele?»

Lui alza le spalle. «Così. È un gioco.»

«Non so se ce ne sono.»

«Qualcosa ci sarà.»

Vera finge di pensarci. «Le lasagne?»

«È già un inizio.»

«Ma se le mangiassi tutti i giorni mi stancherei anche di quelle.»

«Però ancora non è successo.»

«Okay, hai ragione.»

«Poi?»

«Il mio gatto, forse.»

«Puoi fare di meglio.»

Questa volta Vera ci pensa davvero. «Ascoltare la musica con gli occhi chiusi. Quello non mi stanca, e lo faccio ogni sera.»

Luca annuisce. «Ecco, vedi?» Le rivolge un debole sorriso, ma lei non lo sta guardando.

«Ora sta a te.»

«Che cosa?»

“Why should I tell you?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Because. It’s a game.”

“Can’t think of any.”

“There’s got to be *something*.”

Vera pretends to consider it. “Mm, lasagna?”

“That’s a start.”

“But I guess if I had it every day, I’d get sick of that too.”

“But it hasn’t happened yet.”

“Okay, you have a point.”

“What else?”

“My cat, maybe.”

“You can come up with something better than that.”

This time Vera really thinks about it. “Listening to music with my eyes closed. I do it every night and I never get sick of it.”

Luca nods. “There, see?” He gives her a faint smile, but she’s not looking at him.

“Now it’s your turn.”

“For what?”

«Dirmi tre cose che ti piace fare. E non vale dire  
“studiare”.»

«Non volevo mica dirlo.»

Vera lo guarda di sottecchi, come per vedere se è sincero,  
e non commenta.

«Okay, allora...Sciare, guidare la macchina e leggere  
fumetti.»

«Sei un secchione» dice lei. «E sei anche molto noioso.»

Poi all'improvviso si alza, si sfila gli shorts e li ripone  
nella borsa. Senza voltarsi, si incammina verso il mare.

Prima che l'acqua le arrivi almeno alla pancia, Vera  
deve fare diversi metri. Cammina in fretta perché  
sente addosso lo sguardo di Luca. È sicura che le stia  
guardando il sedere – lei sa che è troppo grosso – o peggio  
ancora le cosce.

Ma Luca non la sta guardando affatto, tiene gli occhi  
incollati al fondale perché ha paura dei granchi e a  
malapena si è bagnato le caviglie.

Lei non lo aspetta, si immerge, nuota un po' come le  
viene, lascia filtrare l'acqua tra i capelli e li tira indietro  
sulla fronte. Si sistema il costume sul seno, ché ogni volta  
che si tuffa le si sposta da un lato.

Finalmente Luca la raggiunge. I due corpi si mantengono  
a debita distanza.

«Sei brava a nuotare.»

“Tell me three things you like to do. And don’t say studying.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

Vera glances at him to see if he’s serious but doesn’t say anything.

“Fine. Skiing. Driving. Comics.”

“You’re *such* a nerd,” she says. “And you’re also extremely boring.”

Suddenly she hops up, pulls off her shorts and stuffs them into her bag. She runs toward the sea.

Vera has to wade in several meters before the water reaches her waist. She hurries because she can feel Luca’s eyes on her. He’s definitely checking out her butt, or even worse, her thighs—she knows they’re too big.

Luca’s actually not looking at her at all. He’s barely made it in up to his ankles. He keeps his eyes glued to his feet because he’s scared of crabs.

She doesn’t wait. While he makes his way to her, she dives in and swims, lets the water rush through her hair, whips it back off her forehead. Every time she goes under, her swimsuit slips down a little and she has to pull it back up.

Finally, Luca joins her. They keep their bodies a safe distance apart.

“You’re a good swimmer.”

«Me la cavo» fa lei. «Tu invece no.»

Luca scuote la testa, ridendo. «Io no, infatti. Ma io vengo dal nord quindi sono giustificato.»

Vera rimane a fissare le sue ciglia, così lunghe e folte, quasi femminili. Se riuscisse a isolare gli occhi di Luca dal resto del volto potrebbe anche pensare che è carino.

«Voglio farti provare una cosa, ma dobbiamo andare dove non si tocca. Ce la fai?»

Lui la guarda aggrottando le sopracciglia.

«Non pensare male. Fidati.»

«Okay.»

Vera nuota verso il largo e lui la segue, le sta dietro a fatica. Lei questa volta lo controlla, e di tanto in tanto rallenta per aspettarlo.

Si fermano davanti a una grossa boa arancione, ancorata a terra con una fune spessa e ruvida, che disegna il confine oltre il quale non si può più andare. Una linea immaginaria tra la natura addomesticata e quella incontrollabile.

«Aggrappati qui» dice Vera, e gli fa vedere come deve fare: si tiene alla boa con le mani e lascia andare prima le gambe, poi tutto il resto. Il corpo che fluttua in orizzontale, i piedi che si muovono come se stesse correndo.

Luca la guarda, un po' titubante, poi la imita. Tira su un piede e poi l'altro. Chiude gli occhi. E subito si rende conto di cosa significhi abbandonarsi alle

“I get by,” she says. “Unlike you.”

Luca shakes his head, laughing. “Yeah, I suck. But I have an excuse. I’m from up north.”

Vera stares at his long, thick lashes, almost like a girl’s. If she could separate his eyes from the rest of his face, he might even be cute.

“Let’s try something, but you have to go in really deep, like where you can’t touch the bottom. Wanna do it?”

He raises his eyebrows, grins, and just stares at her.

“Don’t be such a perv! Trust me.”

“Okay.”

Vera swims out further and he follows, barely keeping up. This time she slows down whenever he falls behind.

They stop at a big orange buoy anchored by a coarse rope. The buoy marks the boundary past which swimmers aren’t supposed to go, an imaginary line between the tame and the wild.

“Okay, hold on here,” Vera says, and then shows him what to do: she grabs onto the buoy with both hands and lets her legs drift out behind her, then the rest of her body so that she’s floating horizontally, her feet kicking in place like she’s running.

Luca watches and follows her lead with some hesitation. He lets one leg drift up, then the other, closes his eyes, and immediately understands what it means to give in to

correnti sotterranee e sentire che quel corpo quasi non ti appartiene più, che non sei tu a guidarlo.

«Certe volte la corrente è più forte, e sembra quasi di viaggiare» spiega Vera. «Ma anche così non è tanto male, no?»

Lui annuisce.

Rimangono immobili per diversi minuti, i corpi che si sfiorano appena, ancorati alla boa e abbandonati al mare.

Luca pensa che dovrebbe dire qualcosa, ma non trova le parole adatte. Si concentra sul rumore delle onde e sulle grida dei gabbiani – i capelli lunghi di lei che ogni tanto gli accarezzano una spalla e gli fanno il solletico. Prova anche lui a muovere i piedi, sente la differenza tra l'acqua che scorre, fredda, sul fondo e quella calda che ha sotto la pancia. Dieci gradi di differenza a una gamba di distanza.

Vera è la prima a staccarsi, e senza dire nulla nuota lentamente verso la riva. Si avvolge nell'asciugamano prima che Luca la raggiunga.

«Non sono stata del tutto sincera prima.»

Sono di nuovo seduti uno accanto all'altra nella sabbia, lo sguardo perso nel vuoto.

«Lo so cosa non mi ha ancora stancata.»

Vera si porta le ginocchia al petto e si stringe nell'asciugamano perché il vento ha ricominciato a soffiare e gli ultimi raggi di sole sono oscurati dai palazzi.

the water's pull, to almost feel that his body's no longer his, that he's no longer in the driver's seat.

"Sometimes when the current's stronger, it's almost like you're on a ride," Vera says. "Still, not bad, right?"

He nods.

They float that way for several minutes, their bodies barely touching, anchored to the buoy and abandoned to the sea.

Luca feels like he should say something, but he can't quite find the words. He focuses on the sound of the waves, the cries of the seagulls, on Vera's long hair tickling his shoulder. He tries letting his legs sink down to feel the patch of cold water a little deeper—it's easily ten degrees cooler than right below his stomach.

Vera lets go first and without saying a word swims steadily toward shore. Before Luca catches up, she's already wrapping herself in her towel.

"I wasn't being totally honest before," Vera says.

They're sitting next to each other again on the sand, staring into space.

"I actually *can* think of something I never get sick of."

She brings her knees to her chest and wraps her towel tighter because the wind has picked up and the buildings are blocking the last rays of the sun.

Luca non dice nulla, aspetta che sia lei a continuare.

«Quando mio babbo torna dal lavoro la sera, dopo che è stato fuori tutto il giorno. Lo sento mentre fa le scale e fischieta qualcosa, poi entra in casa e mi prende in braccio, come quando ero piccola, mi solleva completamente e mi fa fare una giravolta. Io annuso il suo profumo, che è lo stesso da quando lo ricordo, e chiudo gli occhi. È come avere cinque anni per sempre, e non avere più paura di niente. Di questo non mi stanco mai.»

Sospira, si prende i piedi con le mani e si dondola leggermente avanti e indietro. Un'oscillazione lieve.

«Però certe volte mi dà fastidio che mi tratti come una bambina. Non lo vuole proprio capire che sono grande per queste cose.»

Luca sorride, ma è un sorriso impercettibile, che tiene racchiuso dentro di sé.

«Mio padre se n'è andato un anno fa.» Lo dice come se fosse la prima volta che pronuncia queste parole ad alta voce. «Per questo sono in vacanza coi nonni. Mamma lavora, e poi qui non ci vuole più venire.»

«Perché no?»

«Perché qui è stata felice, e non vuole più ricordarselo.»

«Mi dispiace» dice lei, quasi sussurrando.

«Penso che ci si abitui a tutto, dopo un po'» dice lui, e sembra ancora che stia riflettendo a voce alta.

Vera fa un cenno di assenso. Con la testa piegata da un

Luca doesn't say anything, waiting for her to go on.

"It's when my dad gets home from work after being gone all day. I hear him coming up the stairs, whistling something. Then he comes in and wraps me in his arms like when I was little. He picks me up and spins me around. I smell his cologne, close my eyes. It's like I'm five years old forever and I'm not scared of anything. I never get sick of that."

She holds onto the bottoms of her feet and rocks herself back and forth. A gentle swing.

"But sometimes he gets on my nerves when he treats me like a baby. He just doesn't want to admit I've grown up."

Luca smiles, but it's a tiny smile he keeps to himself.

"My father's been gone a year." He says it as if it's the first time he's spoken the words out loud. "That's why I'm on vacation with my grandparents. My mom works, and she doesn't want to come anymore."

"Why not?"

"Cause she was happy here and she doesn't want to be reminded of it."

"Oh. I'm sorry," Vera says, almost whispering.

"I think you just get used to things after a while," he says, as if to himself.

Vera nods. She tilts her head and studies him. First his

lato riprende a guardarla. Prima ne studia il profilo: il naso appuntito, le labbra sottili, il mento sporgente. Poi si sofferma ad osservare i minuscoli granelli di sale incastrati tra le ciglia, quelle ciglia che vorrebbe avere anche lei. Si accorge che quello è il momento, che non ce ne sarà uno migliore.

Lo abbraccia.

Lo fa spostando leggermente il sedere nella sabbia e buttando il peso da una parte. Lo avvolge un po' col braccio sinistro, con il destro tiene l'asciugamano che le sta scivolando via. Non è una stretta forte, è solo un gesto accennato. Annusa il suo odore, un misto di salsedine e sudore giovane, che le dà la nausea.

Luca fa un solo movimento: appoggia la mano destra sulla mano sinistra di Vera, e la strofina, come una carezza maldestra.

Forse perché li hanno visti – o soltanto perché si è fatto tardi – i nonni lo chiamano da lontano.

Vera si stacca subito.

«Devo andare» fa lui, mentre si alza.

Si salutano soltanto con la mano, Vera lo guarda allontanarsi e voltarsi solo per un istante, come se ci avesse ripensato.

Ma è solo un istante.

profile: his pointy nose, thin lips, prominent chin. Then she lingers on the specks of salt trapped between his eyelashes, those lashes that she would love to have for herself. Now's her chance, she realizes. There won't be a better time.

She hugs him.

She does it by scooting her butt a little in the sand and shifting her weight to one side. She wraps an arm around him while using her other hand to keep her towel from slipping. It's not a firm embrace, only a gesture. She can smell his body, a mix of salt and boy sweat that makes her queasy.

Luca makes just one move: he puts his hand on Vera's and rubs it, an awkward caress.

Maybe because Luca's grandparents have seen them—or it's just getting late—they call to him from a distance.

Vera jerks away.

"I gotta go," he says, standing up.

They say goodbye with nothing more than a wave. Vera watches him walk away then turn back for a second as if he's changed his mind.

But only for a second.

## Translator's Foreword

Cerys Wilson è nata nel 1984 nel nord dell'Inghilterra, dove è cresciuta. Ha studiato Belle Arti alla Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), conseguendo poi un Master in Storia dell'Arte alla University of St Andrews. Per tre anni ha studiato e lavorato in Italia. Attualmente vive a New York, dove sta concludendo un Master in Scrittura Creativa alla Columbia University. Wilson è autrice di racconti ambientati nei panorami della sua infanzia, soprattutto le brughiere e le città post industriali dell'Inghilterra del nord. Qui si muovono i personaggi de "Il sacrificio," che racconta le vicende di una famiglia in una cittadina industriale negli anni del governo di Margaret Thatcher, durante il falò del 5 di Novembre. L'autrice riesce a incastonare in una prosa sostenuta e letteraria, la lingua peculiare parlata dalla classe operaia inglese nel periodo della TINA e degli scioperi dei minatori. La sfida più interessante, nel tradurre il testo in italiano, è stata quella di restituire il contesto sociale e culturale del racconto, fortemente localizzato nel tempo e nello spazio, e di dare nuova vita ed espressività a una lingua colorata e a tratti vernacolare.



## CERYS WILSON

### THE SACRIFICE

Singing on tables is his thing. Irish ballads, bit of Motown, depending. The man wants an audience. He likes himself, thinks he's cleverer than everyone—which he is, sort of, but that's not the point. Other people like him too much, too, sometimes, and by people I mean Sheila and Sandra and Janine, and all the others.

I can't think how else to describe him.

Long before I came along, before he met Mum, he and a bunch of lads would get up at the crack of dawn and hop the ferry to Ostend. Munich: That was their destination. They'd stay for a week, crashing somewhere, the lot of them, going about dressed as women. This went on for years.

“Who are those funny-looking men, Mummy?” a young Münchner had asked.

“Those, Hans,” replied the mother, “are young men on the road to ruin.” Or so he said she said. Dad doesn't speak German—not now, not then.

I've seen the pictures. He's in the back, the tallest, laughing the hardest. A looker, a bobby dazzler in fishnets and heels. Lord knows where he found them, those shoes. Not from Granny, wee slip of a God-fearing thing that she was. German women must have huge clodhoppers, is all I can think.

**tradotto dall'inglese da  
LIVIA CHIRIATTI**

## **IL SACRIFICIO**

Cantare sui tavoli è il suo forte. Ballate irlandesi, un po' di Motown, dipende. L'uomo esige un uditorio. Si piace, pensa sempre di essere il più intelligente - cosa che è, in un certo modo, ma non è questo il punto. Alle altre persone piace troppo, troppo, a volte, e con altre persone intendo Sheila, Sandra, Janine e tutti gli altri.

Non riesco a pensare un altro modo per descriverlo.

Molto prima che arrivassi io, prima che incontrasse mamma, lui e altri ragazzi si svegliavano alle prime luci dell'alba e saltavano sul traghetto per Ostenda. Monaco: era quella la loro destinazione. Ci restavano una settimana, sbattendosi di qua e di là, la maggior parte di loro andando in giro vestiti da donna. Tutto ciò andò avanti per anni.

- Chi sono quegli uomini buffi, mami? - aveva chiesto un giovane monacese.

- Quelli, Hans, - aveva risposto la madre, - sono giovani uomini destinati alla rovina. - O così lui diceva che lei aveva detto. Non parla tedesco, né adesso, né allora.

Ho visto le fotografie. È sullo sfondo, il più alto, si sbellica dalle risate. Un fico, un bel pezzo d'uomo in calze a rete e tacchi. Dio sa dove le ha trovate, quelle scarpe. Non dalla nonna, cosettina timorata di Dio quale lei era. Le donne tedesche devono avere enormi scarponi, è tutto quello che posso pensare.

I have his high forehead. Secretly I wish I'd got his legs. But that's not the story. This other one's better, though, whether it went down this way or not, I can't say.

Up North they moved, Mum, Dad and Sally, to a proper house, two up, two down, with a scrappy garden out front. I'd show up late the next spring, though perhaps at the time no one knew it. Instead, thoughts were of money, of pits closed and jobs lost. Terms like *Class Warfare* and *Society* were bandied about the pubs and down party headquarters; *Christmas is cancelled*, whispered the women huddled round the school gates.

Dad was quickly voted in as head of the local chapter. As I said, he could work a room, knew the speak, whose knee to squeeze and for how long. He wasn't ambitious, more idealistic. And, though neither of my parents came from money, they'd studied, with pieces of paper to show for it, and so were welcomed, if not fully trusted, as all strangers are.

It was early November, Bonfire Night, and bitter cold. Folks made the most of it, laying down drink, sausages, sparklers and whatnot. Outside the Co-op, young boys jangled metal tins as their forebears had before them: "Penny for the Guy, miss?"

But for the gradual rise in bus fare, and now the closures, little had changed in the town for a hundred years. Even the Chinese on the corner sold fish and chips. That was how people liked it, and no one dared be otherwise.

Ho la sua fronte alta. Secretamente vorrei avere le sue gambe. Ma non è questa la storia. Quest'altra è meglio - sebbene se le cose siano andate così o no, non posso dirlo.

Si trasferirono su al nord, mamma, papà e Sally, in una vera casa, due stanze al piano di sopra, due al piano di sotto, con un giardino pieno di rottami sul davanti. Io mi sarei presentata solo un po' più tardi, la primavera successiva, sebbene forse all'epoca nessuno lo sapesse. Invece, i pensieri erano rivolti ai soldi, alle miniere che chiudevano, al lavoro perso. Nei pub e giù, nel quartier generale del partito, si diffondevano parole come Lotta di classe e Società; il Natale è cancellato, mormoravano le donne assiepate ai cancelli della scuola.

Papà fu presto eletto capo della sezione locale. Come ho detto, lui sapeva lavorarsi la platea, sapeva tener discorso, sapeva quale tasto premere e per quanto tempo. Non era ambizioso, idealista piuttosto. E, sebbene i miei genitori non venissero da famiglie ricche, avevano studiato, con pezzi di carta per dimostrarlo, e così furono ben accolti, anche se non gli venne data piena fiducia, come sempre con gli stranieri.

Era inizio novembre, la notte del falò, faceva un freddo cane. La gente si dava un gran daffare, preparando bibite, salsicce, stelline filanti e quant'altro. Fuori dalla Co-op, dei ragazzi facevano tintinnare lattine di metallo come i loro antenati avevano fatto prima di loro.  
- Un penny per il falò miss?

Ma salvo il progressivo aumento del biglietto dell'autobus, e ora le chiusure, in un secolo ben poco era cambiato in città. Nemmeno il cinese che vendeva fish and chips all'angolo. Alla gente andava bene così, e nessuno osava essere diverso.

Then came Dad with his big ideas and full head of shiny black hair, and things got a little more exciting. This is how he remembers it. When I ask Mum, she shakes her head and mutters, “*Feeckless cheating wanker psychopath.*” She’s not wrong.

On Saturdays, he sold the *Socialist Worker*, including outside the Co-op, which must’ve been where he got the notion. It was simple enough: Dad and his chums would join in the festivities with a Guy all their own. Unlike the kids’ version, however, they’d build theirs in the image of the Iron Lady—Maggie the witch, the bitch, the . . . you get the idea.

“Let’s hold her feet to the fire, lads!”

“Just her feet? We’ll toss the whole bloody lot of her on!”

“Aye, she’ll yield then!”

They cobbled together the money and went in search of materials. Ron Bagley gathered straw, Stan Lewis picked out her getup from Save the Children. (When Stan mentioned his intention to the lady behind the counter, she’d laughed and thrown a handbag into the bargain: “A donation to a worthy cause.”)

On the sackcloth face, they drew beady eyes with coal. A grim little line of Mrs. Bagley’s best lippy served for a mouth—a business, I’m told, that caused Ron a fair headache after. The nose, more of a snout, was one of those rubber party favors fixed about the head with elastic; and for hair, someone dug up a wig—maybe from Dad’s Munich days, I forgot to ask.

Poi arrivò papà con le sue grandi idee e una gran chioma di lustri capelli neri, e le cose si fecero un po' più eccitanti. È così che lui se lo ricorda. Quando chiedo a mamma, scuote il capo e borbotta, "Inetto imbroglione stronzo psicopatico". Non ha torto.

Il sabato, vendeva il «Socialist worker», anche davanti alla Co-op, che dev'esser stato dove partorì l'idea. Era abbastanza semplice: papà e i suoi compagni avrebbero preso parte ai festeggiamenti con un personale fantoccio di Guy Fawkes. A differenza della versione dei bambini, tuttavia, l'avrebbero costruito a immagine e somiglianza della Lady di ferro: Maggie la strega, la stronza, la... avete afferrato l'idea.

- Ragazzi, ficchiamole i piedi nel fuoco...

- Solo i piedi? Ci gettiamo dentro tutto il suo dannato corpo!

- Signorsì! E allora si piegherà!

Misero insieme un po' di soldi e andarono in cerca di materiali. Ron Bagley aveva da raccogliere la paglia; Stan Lewis scelse i vestiti da Save the Children. (Quando Stan aveva accennato le sue intenzioni alla donna dietro il bancone, lei aveva riso e aggiunto all'affare una borsetta:

- Donazione per una nobile causa.)

Sulla faccia di sacco, disegnarono piccoli occhi brillanti col carbone. Una sottile severa linea del miglior rossetto di Mrs. Bagley servì da bocca - una faccenda, mi è stato detto, che provocò a Ron una grossa grana. Il naso era più che altro un muso, uno di quei cotillons che ti fissi intorno alla testa con un elastico; e per i capelli qualcuno riesumò una parrucca - forse dei tempi di Monaco di papà, mi sono dimenticata di chiedere.

Finishing her off was the pair of pearl earrings Granny had given Mum on her wedding day and which she didn't wear that much. They were too heavy and old ladyish for her taste.

When I was in school, teachers would tell of the hedgehogs that burrowed under the pyre only to become barbecue. This didn't sit right with me and I'd have to close my eyes when, later, the flames took hold. I think Sally and I even boycotted one year. For that was our fight—the welfare of hedgehogs.

Back then, Guy Fawkes was a star on the calendar, a night when everyone came out. The little ones were made to stand well back while the men threw on extra sticks and dared each other closer. The air crackled and bit. Sulfur burned thick in the chest, and the sticky sweet of toffee apples melted on the tongue.

It's different nowadays: officiated, cordoned off. I've read in some places they've even stopped the tradition altogether. Save the ozone and all that. Where people go to be together, I don't know.

Before the sun set and they put old Maggie down, Dad and his boys showed her the sights: "Come and have a gander, Mags. We're nice blokes really, you'll see."

Dad was in the driver's seat, the guest of honor beside him. Wilson Pickett blared from the stereo, the windows down for maximum effect. In the back sat Stan and Chalky, the party treasurer, with Big Andy squished

A completare il tutto c'erano gli orecchini di perla che nonna aveva dato a mamma il giorno del matrimonio e che lei metteva di rado. Erano troppo pesanti e troppo da signora per i suoi gusti.

Quando andavo a scuola, ci raccontavano dei ricci che si scavavano una tana sotto la pira solo per diventare barbecue. Questo non mi tornava e dovevo chiudere gli occhi quando, dopo, le fiamme divampavano. Credo che io e Sally abbiamo addirittura boicottato un anno. Perché quella era la nostra lotta, il benessere dei ricci.

All'epoca, Guy Fakes era una star nel calendario, una notte in cui tutti uscivano. I piccoli erano costretti a tirarsi bene indietro mentre gli uomini ci gettavano altri sterpi e si sfidavano a chi andava più vicino. L'aria crepitava e mordeva. Lo zolfo bruciava viscoso nel torace, e i bastoncini appiccicosi della mela caramellata gocciolavano sulla lingua.

Oggiorno è diverso: officiato, transennato. Ho letto che in alcuni posti hanno addirittura interrotto la tradizione. Salva l'ozono e tutto il resto. Dove vadano le persone per stare insieme, non lo so di preciso.

Prima che il sole tramontasse e la mettessero giù, papà e i suoi ragazzi mostraronno alla vecchia Maggie i luoghi d'interesse della zona: - Vieni a dare un'occhiata, Mags. Siamo tipi a posto, vedrai.

Papà era alla guida, l'ospite d'onore accanto a lui. Wilson Pickett strombazzava dallo stereo, coi finestrini giù per il massimo risultato. Sui sedili posteriori sedevano Stan and Chalky, il tesoriere del partito, con Big Andy spremuto

between them.

They circled the grey town once, twice, hitting all the hot spots: the high street, the job center, the Women's Institute. Then they made for the hills (which, by the way, are russet that time of year, not drab like everyone presumes).

"See that chimney yonder? Thanks to you, she don't burn no more . . . not like you will, you saucy minx!" they told her, calling out landmarks, turning her head to certain views.

Our car, a ruby-red Robin Reliant—stolen soon after I was born, found burnt out in a field—crawled through the streets that day never getting above first. To drown out the protests, Dad, too, made free with his horn, so that people stopped and stared. Chalky and Stan leaned way out, waving like a pair of pageant queens. And when Dad stalled at the town's only pelican crossing, those on the pavement gathered round to see what all the fuss was about.

If you're wondering what they thought, know this: There isn't a soul for miles who would say she warranted better, and many who would claim she deserved far worse. That I'm sure of.

"The laughs we got that day, Luce!" Dad liked to tell me, over and over. "You should've seen us. Kings, we were. Kings! Even Big Andy."

tra di loro.

Avevano fatto il giro della grigia cittadina una, due, tre volte, toccando tutte le mete gettonate: High Street, l'ufficio di collocamento, l'istituto delle donne. Poi si diressero verso le colline (che, in ogni caso, hanno il colore della ruggine in quel periodo dell'anno, non marrone verdastro come tutti suppongono).

- Vedi quella ciminiera laggiù? Grazie a te, non brucia più... non come farai tu, tu monella sfacciata! - le dicevano, nominando i monumenti, girandole la testa verso questo o quel panorama.

La nostra auto, una Robin Reliant rosso rubino - rubata subito dopo la mia nascita, trovata distrutta in un campo - quel giorno avanzava lentamente sulle strade mai scalando oltre la prima. Per sovrastare le proteste, inoltre, papà si sbizzarrisiva con il clacson, di modo che la gente si fermasse a guardare. Chalky and Stan si affacciavano, salutando come una coppia di reginette di bellezza. E quando papà spense il motore all'unico semaforo pedonale della città, quelli sul marciapiede si radunarono per vedere a cosa era dovuto tutto quel clamore.

Se vi state chiedendo cosa pensassero, sappiate questo: non c'è una sola anima nel raggio di molte miglia che direbbe che lei meritava di meglio, e molti affermerebbero invece che meritava assai di peggio. Di questo sono sicura.

- Le risate che ci siamo fatti quel giorno! - amava raccontarmi mio padre, ancora e ancora. - Avresti dovuto vederci, Luce. Eravamo dei re. Re! Persino Big Andy.

Poor Big Andy. Long after, when he'd already shrunk in every way a man can but one, he caught his missus doing the dirty on him and topped himself. I suppose that's one way to deal with infidelity. At the time, though, he was fat as anything and just about the funniest man you could imagine.

"And what about Mum's earrings?" I'd ask. Given half the chance, I was wont to stir the pot (and I still am, when he's up on that table of his).

He'd get mad—"Oh for . . . Now you sound just like her"—and refuse to finish the story.

"Suit yourself," I'd say. "I know how it ends, anyway."

In the heat of the moment, so to speak, Dad, who swore he had every intention of retrieving the pearl earrings, forgot, and they went to their death, along with the rest of Maggie, handbag and all.

Mum might've been more annoyed if not for the fact that, soon after the spectacle, a spark from a wayward firecracker flew off, landing right in my sister's welly. As Mum tells it, Sally's screams, paired with her own, rivalled those of the Catherine wheel, and for a minute, folks unaware of what had happened pushed towards them, thinking the entertainment had shifted.

The boot fairly melted around Sally's foot like a warped cast, making it all but impossible to remove—she fainted when several people tried. Shrieking for my dad, Mum picked Sally up and started to run, but found herself

Povero Big Andy. Quando era già stato umiliato in ogni modo che può esserlo un uomo tranne uno, beccò la sua signora che gli metteva le corna e la fece finita. Suppongo che sia un modo per affrontare l'infedeltà. All'epoca, in ogni caso, era ciccione come non mai e l'uomo più divertente che potreste immaginare.

- Cosa ne fu degli orecchini di mamma? - Ogni volta che ne avevo l'occasione, avevo l'abitudine di mettere zizzania (e ce l'ho ancora, se solo mio padre tira fuori l'argomento).

Lui s'infuriava. - O per... Adesso sembri proprio lei - e rifiutava di finire la storia.

- Fa' come ti pare, - dicevo. - Tanto lo so come finisce.

Nel fervore del momento, per così dire, papà, che spergiurava di avere tutte le intenzioni di recuperare gli orecchini di perle, se ne dimenticò, così andarono verso la morte, insieme al resto di Maggie, borsetta e tutto.

Mamma avrebbe potuto scocciarsi di più se non fosse che, subito dopo lo spettacolo, una scintilla prese il volo da un petardo capriccioso, atterrando esattamente sullo stivale di gomma di mia sorella. Come mamma lo racconta, le urla di Sally, accoppiate alle sue, rivaleggiavano con quelle della girandola, e per un minuto la gente, ignara di cosa era successo, spinse verso di loro, credendo che l'intrattenimento si fosse spostato.

Lo stivale si liquefece ben bene attorno al piede di Sally, come uno stampo deformato, diventando impossibile da rimuovere - svenne quando alcune persone ci provarono. Strillando per mio padre, mamma prese su Sally e cominciò a correre, ma si trovò disorientata dal fumo e

disoriented by the smoke and sulfur and by the loud bang of fireworks still going strong. Again, she yelled my dad's name. Somebody came forward and said they thought they'd seen him leave.

"Leave! What do you mean, leave? Why would he leave? Everyone's here. Everything's here. Why would he leave?" But she didn't wait for an answer, knowing only that she had to move. "Where's the road? I need an ambulance, help me!"

The crowd parted, and a band of concerned friends and strangers ran alongside, also shouting: "Someone ring an ambulance! Whose house is nearest? Where's the closest phone box? Did you see the boot? Do you know what happened? Bless me, it looks plenty bad, poor mite!"

When Mum stumbled, a pair of strong arms took up my sister and ran with her the rest of the way to a waiting car.

At the hospital, friends insisted on staying, bringing Mum cups of tea, rubbing her back. She doesn't like to be fussed over, but I doubt she noticed much of what was going on. A nurse came to say that Sally was doing better and that she was asking for her. They'd had some trouble getting the boot off, and, as was to be expected, there was a fair amount of damage to the flesh of the foot and ankle. Nothing that wouldn't heal in time. She'd have scars, of course, but nothing a pair of tights wouldn't hide.

Mum took one look at her little girl's bandaged leg and

dallo zolfo e dai botti dei fuochi d'artificio che ancora andavano avanti forti. Di nuovo, gridò il nome di mio padre. Qualcuno si fece avanti e disse che pensavano di averlo visto andarsene.

-Andarsene! Cosa significa “andarsene”! Perché se ne sarebbe andato? Sono tutti qui. È tutto qui. Perché se ne sarebbe andato? - Ma non attese una risposta, sapendo solo che doveva sbrigarsi. - Dov’è la strada? Ho bisogno di un’ambulanza, aiuto!

La folla si divise, e un gruppo di amici e sconosciuti preoccupati correva al suo fianco, anche loro urlando:  
- Qualcuno chiami un’ambulanza! Di chi è la casa più vicina? Dov’è la cabina telefonica più vicina? Avete visto lo stivale? Sapete cos’è successo? Santo cielo, ha un brutto aspetto, ha un aspetto piuttosto brutto, povera piccina!

Quando mamma inciampò, un paio di braccia forti acchiapparono mia sorella e corsero con lei la strada che mancava fino a un’auto in attesa.

In ospedale, gli amici insistettero per restare, le portavano tazze di tè, le davano pacche sulle spalle. Di solito non le piaceva ricevere molte attenzioni, ma dubito notasse granché di quello che stava succedendo. Un’infermiera venne a riferire che Sally migliorava e chiedeva di lei. Avevano avuto delle difficoltà a sfilare lo stivale, e, come c’era da aspettarsi, c’era un bel po’ di carne danneggiata al piede e alla caviglia. Niente che non si sarebbe rimarginato col tempo. Le sarebbero rimaste le cicatrici, ovviamente, ma niente che un paio di collant non avrebbe nascosto.

Mamma diede un’occhiata alla gamba fasciata della sua

burst into tears. It was the relief, she said, between sobs. She'd been holding it in and now she could finally let it all out. Sally was given another toffee apple and told how brave she was. The doctor said it was the second busiest night of the year, after the Cup Final.

Dad showed up at the hospital soon after Sally had fallen asleep. Mum had been given a bed on the ward, and when he came in, she rolled over and wouldn't look at him. "No point showing up now," she told him. Dad was silent for some minutes, fidgeting with his jacket zipper. "Like I said," she said at last, "only one of us need stay and, clearly, you'd rather be elsewhere, so . . ."

"I'm sorry, Frances, I came as soon as I heard, honest to God. I was having a drink with some of the lads, strategizing—"

"Your friends were all at the park. Some of them helped me."

Dad sighed. "Yes, well . . . thankfully. Obviously, I was with different ones, but that doesn't matter."

"Perhaps not," she said, and then, "I'm very tired, can you leave now, please."

Come the next morning, what remained of the night was a patch of charred earth and a slew of strewn beer

bambina e scoppio in lacrime. Era il sollievo, disse, tra i singhiozzi. Prima del sollievo, si era tenuta dentro lo spavento, e ora, finalmente, poteva farlo uscire tutto. A Sally fu data un'altra mela caramellata e le fu detto quanto fosse coraggiosa. Il dottore disse che era la seconda notte più affollata dell'anno, dopo la finale di Coppa.

Papà si presentò in ospedale poco dopo che Sally si era addormentata. A mamma era stato dato un letto in reparto, e, quando lo vide entrare, si girò dall'altra parte e nemmeno lo guardò. - Non ha senso presentarsi adesso, - gli disse. Papà rimase in silenzio per qualche minuto, giocherellando con la cerniera del giubbino. - Come ho detto, - disse lei alla fine, - è necessario che resti solo uno di noi, e chiaramente tu preferiresti essere altrove, quindi...

- Mi dispiace, Frances, sono arrivato appena ho saputo, giuro su Dio. Stavo facendomi una bevuta con alcuni dei ragazzi, organizzando un piano...

- I tuoi amici erano tutti al parco. Alcuni di loro mi hanno aiutato.

Papà sospirò: - Sì, bene...per fortuna. Ovviamente, io ero con altri, ma questo non importa.

- Magari no, - disse, e poi, - sono davvero stanca, puoi andartene, per favore.

Il mattino successivo, quello che rimase della nottata fu un pezzo di terra bruciacchiata e un mucchio di lattine di

cans. And for the lucky scamps who always, after a big bash, trawl the ground for fag ends, maybe even a pair of blackened pearls.

birra sparpagliate. E per i monelli fortunati che sempre,  
dopo una grande festa, setacciano il suolo in cerca di  
rimasugli, forse addirittura un paio di perle abbrustolite.

## Translator's Foreword

Livia Chiriatti (b. 1995, Rome) is an Italian poet and writer of short stories. She is a graduate of La Sapienza university in Rome, where she studied Modern Literature, and a Masters candidate in Creative Writing at the Scuola Holden, a specialist writing school in Turin. In 2015, Livia published her first collection of poetry, *Rime dimesse, disperse nell'etere*. Her story “Corso Giulio” is a semi-autobiographical tale of five foreign exchange students sharing an apartment in Turin to tragi-comic effect.

The language Livia employs in *Corso Giulio* is straight forward. However, the original syntax tends toward lengthy sentences, which, when translated into English, proved the greatest challenge. I weighed decisions of style versus clarity in each case, with the latter winning out every time. For example, all em dashes are my own addition, intended to aid in the flow and comprehension of the translation. I encountered the occasional problematic idiom: Stella era una pasqua literally translates as Stella was an Easter; here, I chose the English idiom pleased as punch to indicate that Stella was extremely pleased, as the Italian does. Finally, as an Italian-speaking British translator in an American context, I acknowledge that my task was occasionally filtered from Italian through English English to American English.



## LIVIA CHIRIATTI

### CORSO GIULIO

Qualche tempo fa, a Torino, abitavo in un appartamento condiviso con alcuni studenti Erasmus. Eravamo in cinque: Quentin, Stella, un ragazzo che chiamavamo il Magro, Coralie, e infine io, che mi facevo gli affari miei e che, forse, se fossi stata un po' più attenta, avrei potuto prevedere gli eventi funesti che sconvolsero la tranquillità dell'appartamento di Corso Giulio Cesare 77.

La mia coinquilina preferita era Stella, scalzista sudafricana, che così camminava il mondo, ma portava sempre con sé un paio di infradito per quando prendeva il tram. La incontravo spesso sotto casa, che raccoglieva i rari fiori che spuntavano qua e là dal cemento, le pareti del corridoio.

Ci trovavamo spesso in cucina e mangiavamo insieme. O meglio, ci trovavamo in cucina e io cucinavo, lei tostava i suoi semi e frullava qualunque cosa le passasse tra le mani. Frullava ogni tipo di alimento commestibile e sorrideva contenta mentre sorbiva con il cucchiaino le sue pappe colorate.

Stella ed io fumavamo in cucina, nonostante la cosa non rendesse felice Quentin, che tossiva per esprimere il suo dissenso. Parlava pochissimo, con me mai quanto meno. Ogni tanto discuteva di sport al telefono.

Più che la sua voce, ero costretta ad ascoltare i suoi gemiti e le sue urla, attraverso la parete finissima che

**translated from Italian by  
CERYS WILSON**

## CORSO GIULIO

At one time, I shared an apartment in Turin with several Erasmus students. We were five in total: Quentin, Stella, a thin guy we called “The Stick,” Christine, and, lastly, myself. Admittedly I was taken up with my own life, though perhaps if I’d been more attentive, I could have foreseen the grave events that upended the calm of the apartment at 77 Corso Giulio Cesare.

My favorite of the group was Stella, a South African hippie who had roamed the world barefoot, but always carried a pair of flip flops for the tram. I often ran into her outside the building, where she gathered flowers that sprouted here and there from the paving, making them into garlands that she draped along our hallway.

We also usually ended up in the kitchen at the same time and ate together—or rather, we ended up in the kitchen and I cooked while she toasted seeds and blended whatever was to hand. She blended anything and everything edible, smiling contentedly as she slurped her colorful mush with a spoon.

Stella and I used to smoke in the kitchen, despite the fact it bothered Quentin, who would cough to express disapproval. He spoke little, with me even less. Every now and then I’d hear him on the telephone talking sports.

Besides his voice, I was obliged to listen to his groans and shouts through the thin wall that separated our

separava le nostre stanze. Non frantendetemi, magari avesse portato qualche accompagnatrice. Quentin infatti emetteva suoni o per insultare in cuffia, rigorosamente nel cuore della notte, i suoi amici con cui giocava ai videogiochi -fils de pute, tu es mort oh la la-, o urlava e si motivava durante le sue eterne sessioni di allenamento.

Una volta, i primi tempi, quando ancora fingeva di interessarmi a quello che faceva, lo guardai dritto nei suoi occhi celesti come la maglia da trasferta del Paris Saint Germain, e gli chiesi se avesse voglia di aiutarmi a tornare in forma. In effetti, speravo ci saremmo allenati insieme qualche volta, ma lui mi deluse molto limitandosi a darmi in prestito la sua “bibbia del bodybuilder”, senza conferire alcuna parola al riguardo.

Ogni tanto spariva per settimane intere. Nessuno aveva idea di dove andasse, apparentemente non aveva amici. L'unica volta che intercettammo uno dei suoi spostamenti fu quando andò a correre la maratona di Milano, insieme al nostro affittuario. Ci raccontò che aveva visto la città correndo, e che dopo la gara era andato a mangiare una pizza. Non era una persona molto interessante.

Interessante, invece, avrei dovuto capirlo, era invece Coralie. Una ragazza grossa e lenta, oserei dire giunonica, che non rispondeva mai direttamente alle tue domande, piuttosto emetteva un gridolino imbarazzato e si copriva la bocca con le manone. Quando ci trovavamo entrambe davanti al frigorifero, o davanti ai fornelli, lei si muoveva a specchio nella direzione in cui mi muovevo anche io, quindi finiva sempre che ci incastravamo e che lei continuava, paonazza, con i suoi gridolini. Era un animale notturno. O meglio, di giorno non era mai in casa, suppongo che fosse in università a fare i suoi esperimenti scientifici. Credo che studiasse fisica nucleare, o qualcosa del genere. Non gliel'ho mai chiesto.

rooms. Don't get me wrong: I'd have been happy if he'd ever brought someone back with him. But Quentin's exuberance was aimed either at friends from home, with whom he played video games late into the night, transmitting cries and insults through his headset—*fils de pute, tu es mort oh la la*—or at himself, during his never-ending workouts.

One time near the beginning, when I was still pretending to be interested in what he did, I looked straight into those sky-blue eyes—the color of a Paris Saint Germain shirt—and asked if he would help me get in shape. I guess I'd thought we might work out together a few times, but instead he just handed me his Bodybuilder Bible and, without another word, that was that.

Now and then, Quentin would disappear for weeks on end. No one had any idea where he went; he didn't appear to have friends in the city. Only once did we get an idea of his movements, when we discovered he'd run the Milan marathon with our landlord. He told us how, during the race, he'd seen the city, then had gone out for pizza afterward. He wasn't very interesting.

Christine was actually the interesting one, I realized all too late. Fat and slow—or Junoesque, perhaps—she never responded directly to questions but instead gave an embarrassed yelp and covered her mouth with her large paws. Whenever we bumped into each other by the fridge or the oven, I'd step aside only for her to mirror me, so that we were still at an impasse, and she, beet-red by then, was still yelping. She was nocturnal—or rather, by day she was never home, presumably at the university conducting her experiments. I think she studied nuclear physics, or something along those lines. I never asked.

In ogni caso, di notte, la incontravo sempre in cucina, unica stanza condivisa dell'appartamento, bagno a parte, si intenda.

La trovavo che spremeva gobba un tubetto di salsa di pomodoro su un piatto di spaghetti mollicci, i nostri sguardi si incrociavano fugaci, forse il mio alludeva a un velato rimprovero, ci salutavamo rapidamente e poi lei defilava subito verso la sua stanza, contigua alla mia. Pensavo sempre che dovesse essere molto triste, forse depressa, addirittura. Ma, in tutta sincerità, non me ne curavo granché.

Il primo periodo che passai a Torino, tornavo sempre a notte fonda. Giravo la chiave nella toppa, attenta a non far rumore per non svegliare la mia casa di fantasmi. In camera, sfilavo il giubbino, lanciavo le scarpe, infilavo il pigiama e andavo verso il bagno. Ogni sera la doccia notturna di Coralie intralciava la mia liturgia quotidiana di cura del corpo, che seguivo con lo zelo di un'educanda. Modulavo i ritmi delle mie giornate per tornare abbastanza tardi per permettermi di andare non dover passare la serata a casa ritrovarmi sola con i pensieri che mi davano la caccia e mi rendevano brutta. Allora ero solo triste, probabilmente abbrutita. Non ancora disperata.

Trovo che ci sia una bellezza incontestabile nella disperazione delle persone, una sorta di santità che ti purifica il volto e ti regala una fisionomia irresistibile. Le persone tormentate sono belle, in un modo molto romantico. Forse avrei dovuto accorgermi della bellezza di Coralie. O meglio, magari, se l'avessi guardata veramente, mi sarei accorta di quanto era bella. La sua bellezza poteva suonare come richiesta di aiuto. Ma allora non pensavo che fosse bella. Pensavo solo che fosse strana.

Either way, at night I'd always run into her in the kitchen, the one room in the apartment we all shared, apart from the bathroom.

I'd find her there, hunched over, squeezing globs of tomato paste onto a plate of soggy spaghetti and, for an awkward moment, she'd catch my eye, perhaps sensing my disapproval. Then we'd mutter quick goodbyes and she'd make a beeline for her room, which was right next to mine. I always thought she seemed very sad, maybe even depressed. But to be honest, beyond that, I didn't give it much thought.

During my first months in Turin, I stayed out as late as possible. Returning home, I'd quietly turn the key in the lock, careful not to make any noise and disturb that house of ghosts. Then, safe in my room, I'd throw off my coat and shoes, pull on my pajamas and head to the bathroom, intending to perform my nightly ablutions, which I followed with religious fervor. But every time, Christine would be in the shower, thwarting my plan, even though I'd purposefully altered my schedule so as not to spend evenings waiting around at home with only my dark thoughts for company. I was sad too, you see, probably standoffish, but not desperate.

I think there's beauty to be found in desperation, a certain sanctity that lends itself to people so inclined, and which draws us to them. Those who are tormented are beautiful, in a romantic sense. Maybe I should have seen this beauty in Christine. Or better yet, if only I'd really looked at her, I'd have noticed just how beautiful she was, her beauty calling out like a cry for help. Back then, though, I didn't think she was beautiful. I just thought she was strange.

Un altro che consideravo strano era Il Magro. Non ho mai capito come si chiamava, o meglio, probabilmente me lo ha anche detto, qualcosa come Alex credo, ma onestamente non ricordo. In ogni caso lui era la figura più evanescente dell'appartamento. Era l'ultimo arrivato, e lo avrò visto forse tre volte.

Eppure ero partita con un piede diverso con lui. Era in casa da pochi giorni, e non conosceva nessuno. Io e Stella lo invitammo al parco con noi. Non disse praticamente una parola, ma sembrava contento. Camminava in equilibrio sulla corda che avevamo montato tra due alberi, aveva persino portato dei dolcetti per far merenda tutti insieme. Stella era una pasqua. Capitemi bene, c'era il sole, lei era lì sul prato in comunione con gli alberi, con gli insetti e tutte le anime del Creato. E il Magro che camminava dinoccolato sul filo, agitando le braccia lunghe e fini e con lo sguardo concentrato sulla corteccia del tronco di fronte a lui. A un certo punto, non inizia mica a volteggiare? Si rivoltava su se stesso e atterrava come un fenicottero della laguna, su un piede solo. Poi saltò fuori che a scuola aveva studiato l'arte del trampolino. Valli a capire i francesi.

Stella soffriva per l'individualismo dell'appartamento, ma alla fine aveva anche lei le sue cose a cui pensare, tra le sessioni di danza alla luce della luna piena, i cerchi di liberazione dei chakra e i suoi frullati. Lei probabilmente era quella che stava meglio. Certo aveva anche lei i suoi problemi, ma era l'unica che sembrava aver raggiunto un equilibrio. Io avevo tanto da imparare da lei. E le chiedevo sempre di condividere con me un po' della sua saggezza. È un peccato che ci siamo allontanate, ma dimenticare quella storia e cancellare quella porzione di vita, ci sembrò la strategia più ragionevole e semplice da adottare. Lei era sempre lì, in cucina, che disegnava e colorava. Io, accanto a lei, scrivevo al computer e mi muovevo compulsivamente al suono dei tasti e al ritmo delle mie parole, che allora credevo fossero la musica più

The Stick was another strange one. I never learned his real name. Or more likely, he did tell me once—something like Alex, maybe—but I forgot. Either way, he was the least familiar of all my roommates, the last to arrive, and I saw him probably three times in total, though we started off on the right track.

He'd been in the apartment a few days and didn't know anyone, so Stella and I invited him to the park. He barely said a word but seemed happy, balancing on the cord we'd tied between two trees. He even brought treats along for a picnic. Stella was pleased as punch. Or to paint a fuller picture: the sun was shining, she was lazing about on the grass, in communion with the trees and the insects and the animals. And there was The Stick, with his lanky frame, waving his long, thin arms about, fully focused on the trunk in front of him. Would you believe, at a certain point he even started twirling! He did a flip and landed on one foot like a flamingo. It turned out at school he'd studied the art of trampolining. Leave it to the French . . .

At first, Stella suffered from the antisocial atmosphere of the apartment, but by the end, she, too, had her own things going on, what with her dance sessions under the light of the full moon, her chakra practice and, of course, her smoothies. Of us all, she was probably the one who fared best. Sure, she had her problems. But she alone seemed to find stability. I had a lot to learn from her and always asked her to share a little of her wisdom. It seems a shame that we've lost touch. But to forget this story, to delete it from our lives seemed the easiest and most sensible strategy back then. She was always in the kitchen, sketching, with me next to her plugging away at my computer, bobbing along to the sound of the keys, moved by the rhythm of my own words, which I thought

bella del mondo. Le chiedevo cosa ne pensava delle cose, quale era il suo punto di vista, e lei mi rispondeva sempre che l'amore è una torta e che non si può scegliere quale fetta prendere, e che presto sarebbe tornata in India. Mi sentivo sempre un po' confusa dopo le conversazioni con lei.

Forse il nostro problema fu la disattenzione. Non posso non incolparci per quello che successe. Coralie viveva insieme a noi quattro, e nessuno si accorse mai di quanto stava male. Era per noi praticamente una sconosciuta, eravamo tutti estranei l'uno all'altro, eppure vivevamo insieme. Conoscevamo i reciproci ritmi quotidiani, ma ignoravamo con una certa consapevolezza i nostri stati d'animo. Forse fu per questo iato particolare che io e Stella reagimmo a questo modo, e che Quentin e il Magro si comportarono come si comportarono.

Quella sera ognuno era nella propria stanza. Io ero seduta sul mio balcone, e fui la prima ad accorgermene. Avete mai sentito un corpo schiantarsi a terra? È un suono sordo, senza eco. Un po' liquido alla fine, quando si distruggono i tessuti. Non l'avrei mai immaginato così, in ogni caso. Mi sono affacciata e Coralie era distesa a terra, incosciente. Aveva una gamba piegata al contrario e le braccia larghe. Il viso contratto in una smorfia di dolore.

Fu tutto molto rapido. Corsi in corridoio, chiamando Stella. Coralie si è buttata dalla finestra, le dissi, anche se non ero certa che si fosse gettata volontariamente. Stella mi fece una faccia interdetta, e poi un fulmine di terrore attraversò i suoi occhi. Ci catapultammo in strada, saltando i gradini tre alla volta. Le controllai il respiro, era ancora viva. Stella ebbe la prontezza di chiamare un'ambulanza. Restammo paralizzate accanto al corpo di Coralie non so per quanto tempo. Non fu certo un bello spettacolo, e mi accorsi che la smorfia che le deturpava il viso non era di dolore fisico, bensì di disperazione. Per la

the most beautiful music in the world. I'd ask her opinion, how she felt about things, and she'd say that love is a cake and you can't choose which slice you're going to get, and that pretty soon she'd be going back to India. I was always a little confused after our chats.

Perhaps the problem was our lack of attention. After all, I can't not blame us for what happened. Christine lived with the four of us, and no one ever realized how badly she felt. To us, she was unknown—though we were all strangers, each and every one of us, despite living together. We knew one another's daily rhythms but purposefully ignored each other's well-being. Maybe it was that lapse that caused Stella and me to react the way we did, and Quentin and The Stick the way they did.

That evening, we were all in our rooms. I was out on my balcony, so I was the first to notice. Have you ever heard a body hit the pavement? It's a dull sound with no echo. Only a little slosh at the end when the tissue breaks apart. In any case, I'd never imagined such a thing. I looked out and Christine was there, sprawled on the ground, one leg bent under, an arm extended, her face contracted in a painful grimace.

It all happened so quickly. I ran out to the hall, shouting for Stella. Christine's thrown herself out the window, I said, even though I wasn't sure it had been deliberate. Stella's face, when she appeared, stopped me short. A lightning bolt of terror shot through her eyes. Taking three steps at a time, we hurled ourselves into the street. I checked Christine's breathing. She was alive. Stella had the wherewithal to call an ambulance, and then, paralyzed with fear, we knelt beside Christine's body for I don't know how long. The wait was terrible, and I noticed then that the grimace fixed on her face wasn't pain but despair. I found her, for the first time,

prima volta la trovai davvero bella, nella sua sconfitta. Non scoprимmo mai cosa la portò a tentare il suicidio, pensammo solo che non doveva averlo meditato a lungo, avrebbe elaborato una soluzione migliore di gettarsi dal primo piano, altrimenti.

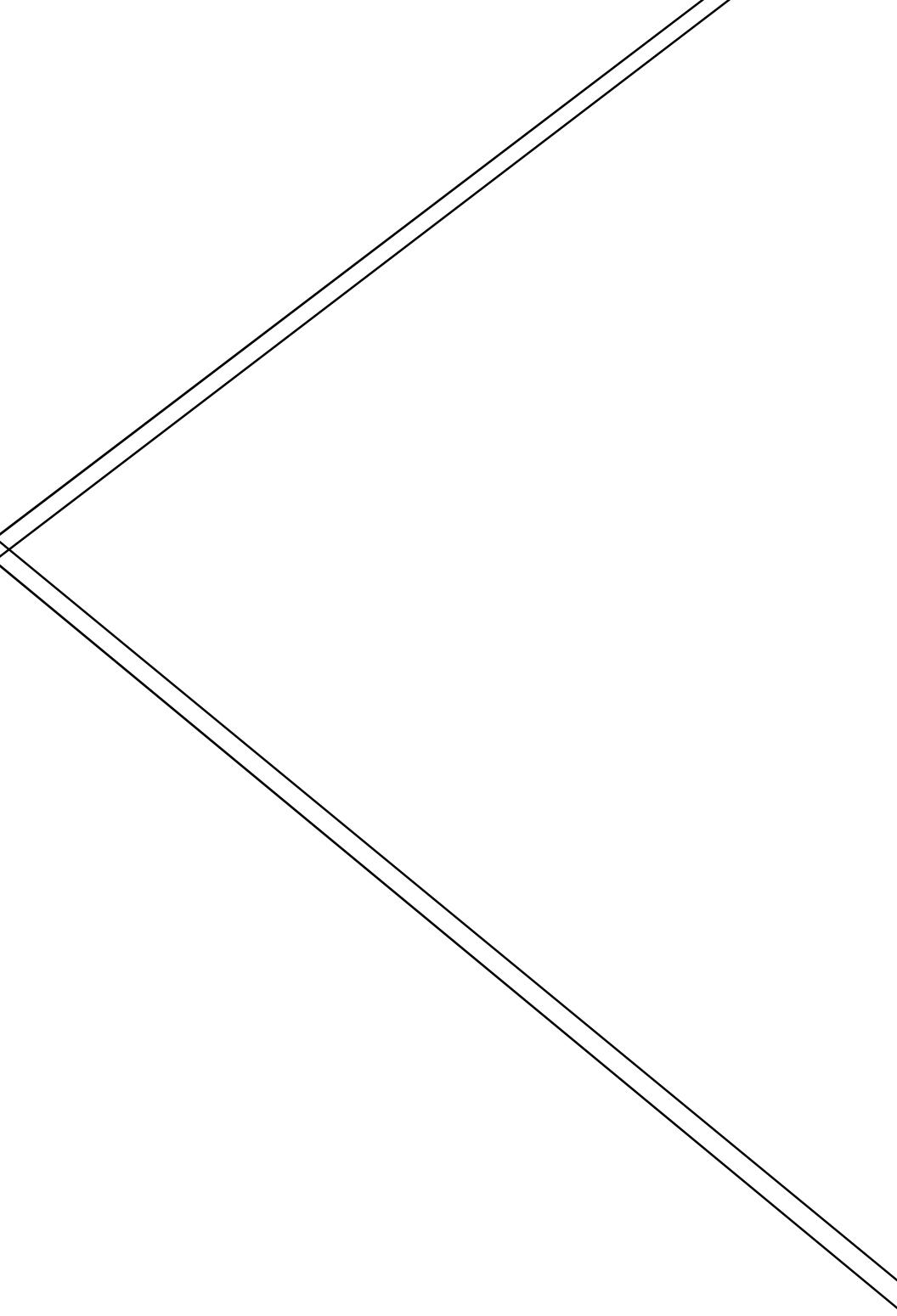
Arrivarono i soccorsi, ci fecero alcune domande a cui non fummo in grado di rispondere. Mi sentivo un verme. Non sapevo neppure quanti anni aveva. Stella non riusciva a smettere di piangere. Coralie fu fortunata, si era rotta solo un ginocchio e aveva avuto qualche versamento interno, era caduta praticamente in piedi.

La mattina successiva, le camere di Quentin e del Magro erano vuote, e nessuno ci contattò mai. Semplicemente, scomparvero. Qualche tempo dopo andammo a trovare Coralie all'ospedale, e lei si coprì la bocca con le manone ed emise un gridolino. I genitori vennero a prendere le sue cose, e dopo di questo di lei nessuna traccia, ma questo era comprensibile. Io e Stella non parlammo mai dell'accaduto, probabilmente perché sapevamo che in parte era colpa nostra. Poco tempo dopo entrambe ci trasferimmo e da allora non ho più avuto alcuna notizia di lei.

truly beautiful in her defeat. We never learned the cause of her attempted suicide. We only assumed she hadn't given it much thought, or else she'd have found a better way than throwing herself from the second floor.

The paramedics arrived, asking questions we couldn't answer. I felt like a shit: I didn't even know how old she was. Stella couldn't stop crying. Christine was lucky. She only had a broken knee and some minor internal issues. She'd landed practically on her feet.

The following morning, Quentin's and The Stick's rooms were cleared out, and we never heard from them again. They simply disappeared. Sometime later, we visited Christine in hospital. On seeing us, she covered her mouth with her paws and yelped. Her parents came to retrieve her things, and after that there was never a trace of her. But this was understandable. Stella and I never spoke of what had happened, likely because we knew that it was our fault, in part. A little later, we both moved away, and I haven't heard from her since.



*word for word / palavra por palavra*  
Columbia University School of the Arts  
Instituto Vera Cruz Formação de Escritores

## Translator's Foreword

Rafaela Bassili nasceu em São Paulo e se formou em Cinema pela Universidade de Chapman. Hoje, mora em Nova York e faz mestrado em Escrita Criativa de Não Ficção, na Universidade Columbia. Algumas de suas principais referências literárias incluem Clarice Lispector, Elizabeth Hardwick e Elena Ferrante.

Em sua escrita, une a paixão pelo cinema e pela literatura. Alguns de seus textos exploram a relação entre filmes e vivências particulares para refletir sobre a condição da mulher no mundo de hoje. É o caso de *O poder do salto alto*. Neste ensaio, a narradora parte da figura de sua avó para aproximá-la de Nathalie Chazeaux, personagem principal do filme *O que está por vir* e interpretada pela atriz francesa Isabelle Huppert. Ambas são mulheres fortes, que cuidam da casa e estão sempre em cima de um lindo par de saltos. Partindo de uma experiência pessoal e familiar, Rafaela amplia a reflexão para discutir a respeito do poder que mulheres dedicadas ao serviço doméstico têm, subvertendo a visão sobre a dona de casa como personagem passiva na configuração social. Para isso, combina argumentos firmes com imagens sensíveis, um estilo que sustenta seu conteúdo. Além disso, o original mescla momentos mais expositivos com passagens narrativas e meditativas, preservando a fluidez e a descontração do estilo até o final — o que busquei manter na versão em português.

O salto alto é peça fundamental do ensaio. Por isso, em minha tradução, me dediquei a encontrar uma onomatopeia que expressasse o som dos saltos, em português. No original, ele está representado por click clack e optei por traduzi-lo como tac tac. Da mesma forma, a expressão assume, também, a função de verbo, por exemplo, em “hearing my mother and my grandmother click clacking around the house”, traduzido

como “ouvir minha mãe e minha avó taquetaqueando pelos cômodos”. A frase que fecha o ensaio “They fit, and they clacked beautifully on her floor”, para além de seu sentido evidente, também envolve a noção de seguir um mesmo caminho. Por isso, na tradução, optei por estender um pouco o tamanho da frase final e adicionar “e, então, eu segui seus passos”, para trazer os dois sentidos que a expressão original conjuga: “Eles serviram e fizeram um belo tac no mesmo chão onde ela havia pisado e, então, eu segui seus passos”.

## RAFAELA BASSILI

### THE POWER OF HIGH HEELS

I went on a walk with my grandmother to exchange a pair of shoes that didn't fit when I was spending a few days at her house for the holidays. I held her hand, partly to envelop myself in her energy—that of a woman who is always on the go, ready, even enthusiastic about taking on quotidian challenges. When I'm not with her, I long for her care. To have her around feels like being wrapped in blankets. But we also held hands to help her stabilize on a pair of heels she insists on wearing despite the trickiness of the Portuguese cobblestones that populate the streets of Rio. Even when people tell her she should step down from those heels, to let go of this unnecessary sign of feminine passivity, she reminds us that there's nothing she can't do, nowhere she can't go, wearing them. She *click clacks* the cobblestones defiantly, purposeful.

My grandmother's energy, although agitated, is elegant, not unlike the actress Isabelle Huppert's, who is a decade younger than her. In Mia Hansen-Løve's 2016 picture *Things to Come*, Huppert, like my grandmother, often wears heels of the office variety: retaining the poise of a stiletto, but also practical, efficient. *Things to Come* is about Nathalie Chazeaux, a high school philosophy teacher and academic, whose life gets swept up in misfortune. Her husband of twenty years leaves her for another woman, her depressed mother dies, and she's fired from her part-time publishing job. She struggles to keep her life together without losing grasp of the person

**traduzido do inglês por  
TALITA LILLA**

## O PODER DO SALTO ALTO

Fui caminhar com minha avó para trocar um par de sapatos que não serviram, aproveitando que eu passava alguns dias na casa dela durante o feriado. Segurava sua mão, em parte para me envolver em sua energia — a de uma mulher sempre em movimento, disposta, até entusiasmada com os desafios do cotidiano. Quando não estou com ela, sinto falta dos seus cuidados. Perto dela, me sinto embrulhada por cobertores. Mas nós também demos as mãos para que ela se equilibrasse sobre o par de saltos que insiste em usar, apesar das armadilhas das pedras portuguesas que povoam as calçadas do Rio. Mesmo quando as pessoas falam para ela aposentar o salto e abandonar esse símbolo desnecessário de passividade feminina, ela nos lembra que, mesmo com eles, não há nada que ela não possa fazer, nenhum lugar a que não possa ir. Ela desafia a calçada de pedras com seu *tac tac* obstinado.

A energia de minha avó, embora agitada, é elegante, não muito diferente daquela da atriz Isabelle Huppert, uma década mais jovem. No filme *O que está por vir* (2016), de Mia Hansen-Løve, Huppert, assim como minha avó, está sempre usando saltos anabela: que conservam a elegância do stiletto, mas são práticos, versáteis. *O que está por vir* conta a história de Nathalie Chazeaux, uma acadêmica e professora de filosofia do Ensino Médio, cuja vida é devastada pela desgraça. Seu marido havia vinte anos a abandona por outra mulher, sua mãe depressiva morre, e ela é despedida de seu trabalho de meio período em uma editora. Ela luta para se manter inteira, sem perder o

she is or the footing of the space she has carved out for herself as mother, wife, daughter, and intellectual.

Shortly after *Things to Come* came out, Richard Brody, long time *New Yorker* staff film critic and Godard scholar, wrote in his review that “Hansen-Løve never gets to the soul of her protagonist—her film comes to life with Nathalie’s own activity but doesn’t reveal much about her in repose beside her baseline of human decency.” His comment disturbed me: what about Nathalie went unexplored? Brody assumed, as many people—especially men—do, that a domestic life can’t construct a personality. For men, more than women, the housewife role is boring because it is granted. I wanted to tell Brody that on the contrary, Nathalie’s activity told me all I needed to know about what kind of person she was. Beyond human decency, she had the beautifully maternal quality of refusing to be forced into repose; of caring, deeply and unconditionally, about those around her. So much that her presence becomes not only pleasant, but essential. It feeds the energy of the entire house, makes it safe. I saw it because I recognized it; Nathalie Chazeaux is akin to the lineage of women I come from.

The film is striking in all of its aspects, but what I couldn’t forget was the way Nathalie’s wedge heels *click clacked* on the floor. How loudly she moved from place to place; how her movement characterized her struggle. Nathalie is always picking up, setting down, moving things around. Holding a bag and a stack of papers, piling books in her purse. Essential to her movement is the sound her heels make on hard floors, which consistently asserts the presence of femininity. You can hear her when she’s coming around from a

equilíbrio ou o espaço que conquistou para si como mãe, esposa, filha e intelectual.

Logo depois de *O que está por vir* estrear, Richard Brody, o renomado crítico de cinema da *The New Yorker* e especialista em Godard, escreveu em sua resenha que “Hansen-Løve nunca adentra a alma de sua protagonista — seu filme ganha vida com os afazeres diários de Nathalie, mas não revela muito a respeito de sua interioridade para além de seu senso básico de dignidade humana.” Esse comentário me perturbou: o que não tinha sido explorado sobre Nathalie? Brody assumiu, como muita gente — especialmente os homens —, que uma vida doméstica não molda uma personalidade. Para eles, mais do que para as mulheres, o papel da dona de casa é pouco estimulante porque já foi naturalizado. Eu gostaria de dizer ao Brody que, pelo contrário, os afazeres de Nathalie me ensinaram tudo o que eu deveria saber sobre que tipo de pessoa ela é. Além de sua dignidade humana, ela tem a louvável qualidade materna de recusar ser forçada ao descanso; de cuidar, profunda e incondicionalmente, de todos ao seu redor. Tanto que sua presença se torna não só prazerosa, como essencial. Ela alimenta a energia de toda a casa, a torna segura. Percebo isso porque reconheço isso; Nathalie Chazeaux parece fazer parte da linhagem de mulheres das quais eu descendo.

O filme é marcante em todos os aspectos, mas o que eu não consegui esquecer foi a forma com que os saltos plataforma de Nathalie faziam *tac tac* no chão. O som alto de quando ela se movia de um lugar para o outro; como seu movimento era característico de sua determinação. Nathalie está sempre se mexendo, pegando alguma coisa, trocando os objetos de lugar. Segurando uma sacola e um amontoado de papéis, enchendo a bolsa de livros. O som dos saltos no chão duro é essencial para o seu movimento, que marca, consistentemente, a presença da feminilidade. Dá para ouvir quando ela

couple of rooms over, *click clacking* with the same force she does when she is determined to leave. It's more powerful than slamming a door, the way these shoes clack, because they linger for a while before they completely cease. It's also hovering, imminent, as if the room, by listening to the sound of her approach, can feel her presence before she is even there—much in the way clouds turn grey and the wind picks up before a storm. And once the weather resettles, you're left with a space that has been changed by the force that has reckoned with it. No place is the same after Nathalie's shoes have come and gone.

The clutter of daily tasks Nathalie's life revolves around is enveloped in that sound; it's a testament to her effort. Her shoes clack when she is moving in places that bear the weight of her activity, to use Brody's word. Contrary to what might be assumed—in a society where men's roles oscillate between work and home, agitation and inertia—this is simply most of the time. Women like Nathalie and my grandmother don't have a moment where they might put their cares out to rest. In all spaces, they are moving, their shoes clacking, nonstop, unapologetically and unhesitant about announcing themselves and asserting their presence while meeting ordinary challenges.

Housekeeping has long been understood as non-labor, an activity that should largely go unpaid, perhaps because society has taught us to believe it comes naturally to women. As expectations of women in the work force have shifted from the post-war era onwards, we have favored women's plight in the workplace and mostly ignored the fact that some women occupy a duality of space in the home and the work environments. Nathalie wakes up every morning to go teach at the high school, a job requiring her presentation of femininity to signify

está vindo, lá do final do corredor, fazendo *tac tac* com a mesma força de quando está decidida a ir embora. Esse *tac* dos sapatos é mais poderoso do que a batida de uma porta, porque ele persiste por um momento até sumir por completo. Também é dominante, iminente, como se o quarto, por ouvi-la se aproximando, pudesse sentir sua presença antes mesmo de ela estar ali — como quando o céu escurece e o vento muda antes de uma tempestade. E, uma vez que o tempo se acalma, o que resta é um espaço transformado pela força que o enfrentou. Nenhum lugar é o mesmo depois do ir e vir dos sapatos de Nathalie.

A correria das tarefas diárias em torno da qual sua vida gira é envolta por esse som; ele é um atestado do seu esforço. Seus sapatos fazem *tac* quando ela se move por lugares que carregam o peso dos seus “afazeres diários”, para usar as palavras de Brody. Contrariando o que pode ser assumido — em uma sociedade em que os papéis masculinos oscilam entre o trabalho e a casa, a agitação e a inércia —, elas só têm uma opção. Mulheres como Nathalie e minha avó não têm como deixar as preocupações de lado e descansar. Em todos os espaços, elas estão em movimento, os sapatos fazendo *tac tac*, sem parar, sem pedir desculpas e sem hesitar, ao anuciarem a si mesmas e imporem sua presença enquanto enfrentam os desafios do dia a dia.

O trabalho doméstico foi sempre encarado como um não trabalho, uma atividade que não deveria ser remunerada, talvez porque a sociedade nos ensinou a acreditar que ele é naturalmente feminino. Como as expectativas sobre as mulheres no mercado de trabalho mudaram do pós-guerra em diante, acabamos focando em melhorar as condições trabalhistas das mulheres e, praticamente, ignorando o fato de que algumas delas ocupam dois espaços simultaneamente, em suas casas e em seus ambientes de trabalho. Nathalie acorda todos os dias para dar aulas no Ensino Médio, um emprego que exige que ela se apresente de forma feminina para

authority and elegance. Often, we see her dressed in light sweaters, contained patterned blouses, fitted pants and, of course, wedge heels. She paces up and down the classroom, challenging her students to think through the sound of her *click clack*. Nathalie takes on the streets of Paris and the hallways of her own home with the same resolve she presents in the classroom. The division of her labor does not translate to fragmentation in identity, or efficiency: the same woman who will stand up for the seriousness of her textbooks in a publishing meeting will make dinner for her children; still the same woman will take care of her ill mother; she will peruse her bookshelves at home in search of a volume her ex-husband had the audacity to take away. There is no need for Nathalie to change outfits in between, to slip into something more practical or less demanding than heels—the sound of her shoes stomping the ground accompanies her like a shadow does its figure, inextricable from each other. Nathalie doesn't succumb to the impracticality of her shoe choice, she persists through it: a woman as unafraid of tripping in her heels as she is unstoppable wearing them.

The sound of Nathalie's shoes provides a clue to how we have come to perceive womanhood. Domesticity has been connected to meekness, conformity, subordination—domestic women have become symbols of the hidden, the quiet. So much so that it becomes increasingly harder for our current generation of feminists, who are preoccupied with the wage gap and the female CEO, to appreciate a woman who moves in the space between the office and the house and who takes seriously these infinite labors without complaint, ignoring the tenderness in the balls of her feet after a long day in heels. But is it possible that in our eagerness to see the maternal as meek, we have blinded ourselves entirely to the powers a woman can have in the domestic sphere? Is it possible we have deafened ourselves to the sound of their presence?

transparecer autoridade e elegância. Na maior parte do tempo, ela aparece vestindo suéteres de cores claras, blusas com estampas discretas, calças bem ajustadas e, claro, saltos altos. Ela vai e vem pela classe, desafiando seus alunos a pensarem ao ritmo do seu *tac tac*. Nathalie domina as ruas de Paris e os corredores de sua casa com a mesma determinação que apresenta na sala de aula. A divisão de seu trabalho não se traduz em uma fragmentação de sua identidade, nem de sua eficiência: a mesma mulher que defende a seriedade de seus livros didáticos em uma reunião editorial fará o jantar para os filhos; ainda, a mesma mulher cuidará de sua mãe doente; e tateará sua estante em casa para procurar um livro que seu ex-marido teve a audácia de levar embora. Não há motivos para ela trocar de roupa nesse meio-tempo, vestir algo mais prático ou confortável que os saltos — o som dos sapatos pisando firme no chão a acompanha como uma sombra, inseparável. Nathalie não sucumbe ao desconforto que sua escolha de sapatos lhe impõe, persistindo nele: uma mulher sem medo de tropeçar, irrefreável sobre seus saltos.

O som dos sapatos de Nathalie dá uma pista sobre como percebemos a condição da mulher. A domesticidade tem aparecido relacionada à docilidade, à conformidade, à subordinação — donas de casa se tornaram símbolos do escondido, do silencioso. Tanto que se tornou cada vez mais difícil para a nossa atual geração de feministas, preocupadas com a desigualdade salarial e a liderança feminina, valorizar uma mulher que se desloca entre o escritório e a casa e que leva a sério esses múltiplos trabalhos sem reclamar, ignorando os calos doloridos nos pés depois de um dia inteiro em cima do salto. Mas é possível que, em nossa ânsia de vermos a maternidade como dócil, tenhamos nos cegado completamente para o poder que uma mulher é capaz de ter na esfera doméstica? É possível que tenhamos nos blindado para o som de sua presença?

It's true that a hard working housewife is a delight to any patriarch—at least at first glance. In the same way, it's also true that there are patriarchal strongholds—the imposition to be beautiful, to appeal to the male gaze—that encourage women to wear heels, as well as the unjust task of submitting our feet to a torture men don't have to. In an essay about the evolution of the high heel for the *Atlantic*, as it concerns its primary wear by men in pre-Revolution France, Megan Garber notes that heels “simultaneously raise up the wearers, and by virtue of their heights, hold them back as they move through the world.” But, what of women who use the momentum of the height to propel forward, to proclaim to the world—the institutions that they are fighting—that not only are they able to bear its impracticality but in fact use that same characteristic to assert, to threaten, to mark presence?

At this age of feminist thought it should go without saying that this is not true of all women. As Garber rightfully argues, there are no absolute truths to gender. This points us to the liberating idea that women can choose to give heels meaning by refusing to wear them just as much as they can by choosing to wear them. Nathalie's, my mother's, my grandmother's presences are so obvious, so all-encompassing and so vital to the workings of the home—a space that has as one of its functions to provide us with solace and mercy—that the sound of their heels clacking on the floor becomes a lullaby; and the silence of their absence becomes menacing, as if we've done something wrong and our privilege to comfort has been revoked. These women excel at the ability to give us the most primal of sensations, which is to feel protected. Although protection has been long associated with patriarchal roles, I am certain that hearing my mother and my grandmother *click clacking* around the house is what has

É verdade que uma dona de casa dedicada é um deleite para qualquer patriarca — pelo menos à primeira vista. Da mesma forma, também é verdade que existem bastiões do patriarcado — a obrigação de estar sempre linda e de agradar o olhar masculino — que encorajam as mulheres a usarem saltos, essa injusta tarefa de submetermos nossos pés a uma tortura que os homens não sofrem. Em um ensaio sobre a evolução do salto alto para a *Atlantic*, considerando o fato de que ele foi, primeiramente, usado pelos homens da França pré-revolucionária, Megan Garber notou que os saltos “simultaneamente elevam seus adeptos e, por conta de suas alturas, os contêm enquanto eles se movem pelo mundo.” Mas, o que dizer das mulheres que usam o impulso da altura para se lançarem para frente, para proclamarem ao mundo — às instituições contra as quais estão lutando — que elas não só estão aptas a aguentarem o desconforto mas, também, dispostas a fazerem uso dessa característica para se imporem, ameaçarem, marcarem presença?

Nessa altura do feminismo, nem seria preciso dizer que isso não é verdade para todas as mulheres. Como Garber bem argumenta, não existem verdades absolutas sobre os gêneros. Isso remete à ideia libertadora de que as mulheres podem escolher dar um significado para os saltos, recusando-se a usá-los tanto quanto elas podem escolher usá-los. As presenças de Nathalie, de minha mãe e de minha avó são tão evidentes, tão envolventes e tão vitais para os afazeres da casa — um lugar que tem como uma de suas funções nos acolher e consolar — que o *tac tac* de seus saltos no chão se torna uma canção de ninar; e o silêncio de suas ausências passa a ser ameaçador, como se tivéssemos feito algo de errado e perdido o privilégio desse conforto. Essas mulheres têm o talento único de nos oferecer a mais essencial das sensações, que é fazer com que nos sintamos protegidos. Embora a proteção tenha sido associada aos papéis masculinos, eu sei que ouvir minha mãe e minha avó *taquetaqueando* pelos cômodos

always given me the deepest sense of safety, of being home.

Women like Nathalie, like my grandmother, can be as threatening to men and the oppressive structures of our society as a woman occupying a leadership position in a corporate job, because they have the ability to transform the spaces they move in subtly and yet irrevocably—with the sound of their heels, with the warmth of their touch. Their power is founded on the knowledge that they protect us as they do because they can, not because they're obliged to; their action rests entirely upon their will. A decision to refuse access to this power is able to throw off the equilibrium of the whole house and substantially change our perspective of family and the concept of home. The sound of Nathalie's shoes is threatening because it proves her to be a woman whose life is interesting, engaging; which requires her comings and goings, loudly proclaiming where she is. Far from being submissive, she is defiant of what the world asks of her, because she knows there's nothing she can't do—and what's more, there's nothing she can't do her own way, the way she knows best. Clacking her heels. Nathalie Chazeaux will be fine, and free, because it is what women like her do. A rebel can still rebel in motherhood, daughterhood, wifehood. In this light, heels represent not the response to the male gaze, but an essence of assertive personality, a refusal to be ignored.

After coming back from the walk with my grandmother on that hot summer's day in Rio, I tried on the pair of wedges with black straps she had gifted me for Christmas. They fit, and they clacked beautifully on her floor.

é o que sempre me deu a sensação mais profunda de segurança, de estar em casa.

Mulheres como Nathalie, como minha avó, podem ser tão ameaçadoras para os homens e para as estruturas opressivas da nossa sociedade quanto uma mulher que ocupa uma posição de liderança em um trabalho corporativo, porque elas têm a habilidade de transformarem os espaços pelos quais avançam sutil, mas implacavelmente — com o som dos seus saltos, com o calor dos seus toques. O poder delas é baseado no conhecimento que têm de que elas nos protegem porque podem, não porque são obrigadas a isso; suas ações reposam totalmente sobre suas vontades. Recusar o acesso a esse poder é capaz de desequilibrar toda a casa e mudar nossa perspectiva de família e o conceito de lar. O som dos sapatos de Nathalie é ameaçador porque prova que ela é uma mulher com uma vida atraente; que requer suas idas e vindas, proclamando alto onde ela está. Longe de ser submissa, ela bate de frente com o que o mundo pede dela, porque sabe que não há nada que ela não possa fazer — e, mais ainda, não há nada que ela não possa fazer do seu jeito, do jeito que ela sabe melhor. Fazendo *tac tac*. Nathalie Chazeaux ficará bem e será livre, porque é o que mulheres como ela fazem. Uma rebelde ainda é rebelde sendo mãe, filha, esposa. Assim, os saltos representam não uma resposta ao olhar masculino, mas a essência de uma personalidade assertiva, a recusa a ser ignorada.

Na volta da caminhada com minha avó, naquele dia quente de verão do Rio, experimentei o par de sapatos plataforma com tiras pretas que ela me deu de Natal. Eles serviram e fizeram um belo *tac* no mesmo chão onde ela havia pisado e, então, eu segui seus passos.

## Translator's Foreword

Talita Lilla has a bachelor's degree in both Portuguese and English from the University of São Paulo, where she is now pursuing a master's degree in Portuguese Literature. Concurrently, she is an MFA candidate in Nonfiction Writing at the Instituto Vera Cruz. She lives in São Paulo, and includes among her literary references Marguerite Duras and Hilda Hilst.

Lilla's references and her formation are evident in her writing—she approaches nonfiction with the sensibility of a poet and the movement of a novelist. Her essay, *Fragments of Desire*, creates a world in which these modes are constantly playing off each other: a scene that takes place inside a room filled with objects and metaphors, movement and abstraction, serves to contextualize and inform an essayistic exploration into the development of her sexuality, and the role it plays in her identity. Before the reader can forget that language is sensuous, and inextricably tied to the body, Lilla reminds us of the movement between them; the way they connect to form an identity, a place from where poetry can be created.

Because the narrator of *Fragments of Desire* is operating between these two realms—the abstract and the tangible; poetry and reality—there is a sudden, though seamless shift of tone about midway through the essay that is the key to their connection, and a challenge to translate. Though Lilla veers between poetic and more straightforward language, her distinct imagery remains a throughline. In English, I had to work in order to maintain this sense of continuity without losing grasp of the image that binds these two registers, making it neither too abstract nor too rigid. A language whiz, Lilla uses the flexibility of the Portuguese to turn it against itself and create informalities out of formality in order

to construct humor; there is the mystery of the line, “Eu não tenho o rosto do gozo, mas logo terei gozo na cara,” at once a reference to Marguerite Duras and a moment of levity in the departure from a more formal tone to a moment of quick, incisive crassness of language. The word gozo can mean pleasure, ecstasy, thrill both in a sexual and a non-sexual form, and it also means the literal release of pleasure in the act of ejaculation. I settled for a compromise: “I don’t have the face of pleasure, but soon pleasure will ooze all over my face,” choosing to retain the important reference to Duras and the delightful sudden twist of language that makes the line not only clever, but also a capsule of the way language interacts with itself and also with the body.

## TALITA LILLA

### FRAGMENTOS DO DESEJO

Imagino um quarto vazio enchendo-se de objetos. Um lençol molhado, com pequenas manchas de sangue na borda esquerda; uma cama imensa, em que cabem todos os corpos do mundo; um lustre sobre a cama; uma janela do chão ao teto. As paredes movem-se conforme o movimento dos corpos, encolhendo-se e expandindo como se respirassem, mudando de cor de acordo com a temperatura do quarto.

Percebo que é um quarto cercado por grades. De que são feitas? Me Aproximo e vejo: são feitas de minha pele. Pela primeira vez, sinto meu cheiro, como sentiria um estranho, um não eu. É menos doce do que eu gostaria.

É o cenário do desejo. Do depois. Momentos antes, dois, três, quatro ou cinco corpos. Marcas de batom vermelho nas bocas das taças de vinho por beber. O cheiro do ambiente é sua temperatura, uma mistura de diferentes respirações, um bafo quente, úmido, como o calor que sai de um imenso órgão feminino.

Na primeira vez que trouxe Gê a esse quarto, senti a ponta de meus dedos dissolverem suas couraças. Deitamos na cama e éramos só nós a ocupá-la inteira. Os pescoços enlaçados, as pernas semidobradas, uma sobre a outra, a outra sob uma, os dentes protegidos pela língua, a languidez e a flexibilidade dos corpos cheios de ondas quase indistinguíveis em meio aos beijos. Nossas massas vibrando uníssonas, formando uma escultura movente de Rodin ainda por ser descoberta, sua obra-prima, mais

**translated from the portuguese by  
RAFAELA BASSILI**

## FRAGMENTS OF DESIRE

I imagine an empty room filling with objects. A wet sheet with tiny stains of blood on the left corner; an immense bed, big enough for all the bodies in the world; a chandelier over the bed; a floor-to-ceiling window. The walls move to the rhythm of the bodies, rising and falling as though breathing, changing color according to the temperature of the room.

I notice that the room is caged in, enclosed by bars. What are they made of? I come closer and see: they're made of my skin. For the first time I can smell my own scent as if from a stranger, a non-me. It's not as sweet as I'd like.

It's the scene of desire. Of what comes after. Moments before, two, three, four or five bodies. Red lipstick stains on the rims of wine glasses left half full. The temperature of the room is damp like its smell, a mixture of different breaths, a whiff of hot air, humid, like the heat exuding from an enormous female organ.

The first time I brought Gê into this room, I felt his callous armor dissolve beneath my fingertips. We lay down and took up the whole bed. Necks and half-bent legs intertwined, over and under each other; tongues covering our teeth, our languid, flexible bodies undulating amid kisses, almost indistinguishable from each other. Our flesh becoming one, forming a Rodin sculpture in motion, his greatest masterpiece yet to be

do que qualquer outra. E, enfim, os músculos mastigados que descansam nos braços abandonados.

O corpo de Gê parece beijado pelo sol e derrete minha pele de neve. Nossos corpos fundem-se um no outro a cada vez. E na minha lembrança, que já não sei se lembrança ou fantasia, logo na primeira vez, peguei um pote de óleo de coco, derramei sobre nós e passamos a noite a dançar um no corpo do outro, deslizando, as formas escorregadias, os beijos escapando, o gelado fora da cama, o lençol grudado no suor, o cheiro de sexo com toque de coco a dominar nossa brincadeira noturna.

Mas se, no início, Gê não desocupava esse quarto, hoje, ele já não vem sempre. A maior parte do tempo, passo sozinha aqui dentro. Quando ele não está, quem me visita são as memórias, nossas também, mas, às vezes, elas envolvem outros participantes. Personagens sem rosto que povoam minhas fantasias. São elas que comandam minhas lembranças de elementos misturados, compondo contextos infinitos e variáveis.

Não sei precisar quando foi que Gê diminuiu a frequência de visitas. Foi um processo esculpido a silêncio e sutileza. Agora, estou sozinha dentro deste quarto e o preencho com novos objetos. Criei uma estante de memórias, com uma coleção de amores antigos, bem menos numerosa do que aquela que eu esperava ter, mas louvável pelas peculiaridades de cada um. Quando Gê está perto de chegar, viro a estante para a parede, arrumo os lençóis, perfumo o ambiente.

Também pendurei quadros em preto e branco retratando a vulnerabilidade dos corpos nus, orgias, fetiches, gozos e todas as ideias que eu tinha para nós. Nunca tive muito tempo para decorar o quarto, preocupava-me mais em trazer visitantes. Mas desde que Gê apareceu pela primeira vez, não recebo visitas, nem faço convites.

discovered. And finally, our arms lying at rest, muscles spent.

Gê's sun-kissed body melts my snow-white skin. Our two bodies always become one. I recall our first time (I can no longer tell whether it's memory or fantasy): I took some coconut oil, spread it over us, and we spent the night dancing in each other's bodies, gliding, our forms slippery, our kisses all over the place. It was ice cold just beyond the bed, the blanket sticky with sweat, the smell of sex with a hint of coconut overpowering our nocturnal games.

But if at first Gê hardly ever left this room, now he doesn't always come over. I spend most of my time in here alone. When he's away, my only visitors are my memories, sometimes of us, though sometimes they include others. A cast of faceless characters who populate my fantasies. They're the ones who control my memories: disparate elements composing infinite, varying contexts.

I can't say exactly when Gê started coming over less often. It was a process sculpted from silence and subtlety. Now, I'm alone in this room and I fill it with new objects. I built a shelf for my memories, a collection of past loves much smaller than I'd hoped to have, but admirable for its peculiarities. Whenever Gê is on his way here, I turn the shelf to face the wall, make the bed, spritz the room with perfume.

I've hung black-and-white photos depicting the vulnerabilities of naked bodies on the walls: orgies, fetishes, kinks, and all the ideas I've had for us. I never had much time to decorate the room. I've been mostly caught up in having guests over. But ever since Gê was here for the first time, they stopped coming, and I stopped inviting them. The only characters roaming

**Os únicos personagens que circulam por este quarto são fantasmas, não os considero verdadeiros visitantes.**

Agora, na maior parte do tempo, Gê fica do lado de fora esperando meu momento de saída. Sustenta um sorriso de esperança que se sabe perdida. Eu sei que ele gostaria que eu não me importasse tanto com este quarto. Que fosse apenas um quarto de descanso, para retornar de vez em quando, para não habitar, um quarto de passagem, para sair e voltar e sair novamente.

Mas eu não vou sair. Habitar este lugar é, para mim, um movimento espontâneo, incontrolável, eu diria. Estou presa a este quarto e a essas fantasias que um dia compuseram a realidade. E no momento em que eu abandonar o lençol manchado, a cama imensa, as paredes de pele, o ambiente movente, a janela do chão ao teto, talvez aí eu possa afirmar que fiz algo além por nós, que abri mão, mas, então, já não serei eu.

~

Vejo que quando uma mulher entende que sua disposição para o sexo, o mistério e o prazer é mais intensa do que em outras mulheres, é irresistível pensar que é mais livre do que elas. De minha parte, questiono se esse juízo não carrega, justamente, a sua proposição contrária. Ao longo de minha vida, percebi que essas outras mulheres — que seriam consideradas menos livres ou mais reprimidas — não sentiam a necessidade de se provarem sexualmente a todo momento, porque podiam seguir suas vontades, recusar o sexo e gozar de forma espontânea, mesmo que isso significasse não gozar, enquanto eu tinha que sustentar um papel, o que requeria um controle e uma autoconsciência constantes. Eu nunca pude recusar. Mesmo que o fizesse no plano da realidade, minha fantasia submetia-se a qualquer proposta. Era a maneira que encontrava de me relacionar com o mundo e trazer

about this room are ghosts I don't consider real visitors.

Now, Gê waits for me outside most of the time. He's still got that hopeful smile on his face, though he knows there's no hope. I know he wishes I wasn't so attached to this room; that it was just a refuge to come back to sometimes, not to live in. He wishes it were a temporary room, to leave and return to then leave again.

But I won't leave. For me, living in this place is an impulse, I'd say spontaneous, beyond my control. I'm trapped in this room and in these fantasies that once constituted reality. And the moment I abandon the stained blanket, the immense bed, the moving, breathing walls made of skin, the floor-to-ceiling window; then maybe I'll be able to say I did something more for us, that I sacrificed something, but by then I won't be myself any longer.

~

The way I see it, when a woman conceives of her own attitude toward sex, mystery, and pleasure as stronger than that of other women, she irresistibly thinks of herself as more liberated than they are. As for me, I question whether this judgment doesn't imply the very opposite idea. Throughout my life, I've realized that these other women—considered less free or more oppressed—don't feel the need to constantly prove themselves sexually. They can heed their desires, refuse sex and spontaneously come to orgasmic pleasure, even if that means not achieving climax; whereas I have to play a part that requires constant control and self-awareness. I could never refuse. Even if I did in reality, my fantasies gave in to every request. It was my way of relating to the world and finding some excitement in life. Not refusing

algum interesse para a vida. Não recusar era uma forma de agradecer ao desejo. Fora ele que me permitiu tocar e penetrar o externo de mim.

Na adolescência, fui acometida por fortes crises de ansiedade, o que comprometeu meu desenvolvimento social, de modo que o isolamento interior apresentou-se como uma alternativa axiomática. Aos domingos à noite, eu acreditava viver dentro de um sonho, descolada de mim. Posso ver minha identidade escapando com o crepúsculo, dissolvendo-se em limites indistinguíveis, misturada à madrugada, e retornar ao corpo na segunda de manhã. Essa sensação estranha e familiar durou anos e ainda hoje se manifesta, com menor frequência, em momentos pouco previsíveis e agora diagnosticada. Deixou de chamar-se a sensação, como eu a batizei, e passou a ser classificada como “despersonalização decorrente de ansiedade”.

Não considero que tive uma adolescência comum — embora esse conceito soe um pouco artificial — ou, pelo menos, não aquilo que eu consideraria comum ou desejável em uma adolescência. Em vez disso, os primeiros encontros amorosos, as festas do pijama, os sorvetes no shopping e as viagens com a turma davam lugar às sucessivas crises de ansiedade, ao medo de vomitar, ao punho entalado na garganta que me impedia de engolir, fazendo com que eu chegasse aos 14 anos com o corpo de uma menina de 9. Um corpo que não era o do desejo.

As crises arrefeceram quando tive minha primeira paixão, embora alguns sintomas derivados da ansiedade ainda permanecessem. O que se passou foi a emergência de um novo eu, fruto de um sentimento intenso de entrega, aniquilação e alteridade, e de um sofrimento à moda de Werther, mas com um final menos trágico. Ouso afirmar até um final feliz, afinal, por cerca de dois

was a way to show gratitude for desire; it was this desire that allowed me to touch and penetrate my external self.

As a teenager, I suffered from intense anxiety attacks, which hindered my social development: introverted isolation was an axiomatic alternative. On Sunday nights, I saw myself living in a dream, detached from my body. I could see my identity dissipating with twilight and dissolving whatever margins it had in the middle of the night, only to come back to me on Monday morning. This strange and familiar feeling lasted for years and still comes up today, though unpredictably and less frequently, and has now been diagnosed. It has ceased to be called *the feeling*, as I'd baptized it, and is now classified as “depersonalization due to anxiety.”

I don't think I had a normal adolescence—though this concept sounds a little artificial—or, at least, it wasn't what I would consider normal or preferable in adolescence. First dates, slumber parties, ice cream at the mall, and vacations with friends gave way instead to successive anxiety attacks, fear of vomiting, the knot in my throat that prevented me from swallowing. As a result, when I was fourteen I had the body of a nine-year-old girl. Not a body of desire.

The anxiety attacks decreased after I first experienced lust, though some symptoms remained. A new me emerged as the fruit of an intense feeling of selflessness, of annihilation and separation. A kind of suffering in the style of Werther, but with a less tragic ending. A happy ending, I'd venture. After all, for around two years I

anos, pude voltar à normalidade, se é que ela algum dia tenha existido em minha vida. De qualquer modo, essa estranha relação entre paixão e ansiedade gerou em mim uma inquietação; e se, num primeiro momento, a julguei como uma coincidência feliz, não demoraria para perceber que eu estava submetida a uma condição inescapável.

E foi então que se iniciou o processo calculado da construção de minha máscara, como uma oferenda em agradecimento a Eros, pelo alívio da angústia de todos os dias. Esse processo, esculpido por minha falta de julgamento moral, talvez inicialmente lícita pela educação pouco repressora que tive, somada à minha disposição para o desejo e à necessidade inevitável de conexão com o mundo que vira chances apenas nos interstícios da paixão, resultou num refinamento notável, de modo tal que se estabeleceu entre a máscara e minha verdadeira face uma relação de perfeita simetria, ficando impossível enxergar o espontâneo e o criado; eles já não se diferenciavam. O resultado dessa composição demandou que eu tivesse me submetido, ajoelhado e sido arrastada pela coleira da liberdade. Sentia-me na obrigação de fazer jus a toda minha ausência de moralidade, criando um sistema próprio de regulação sobre minhas ações, pautado apenas pelo prazer.

Como numa relação de sujeição, ofereci ao sexo a minha face e a outra. Acontece que, hoje, ela já não existe sem a máscara e, embora seu exterior não revele todos os corpos que me habitaram, ela, diferentemente de minha carne, nunca poderá ser vista completamente nua.

~

*J'ai un visage détruit.* Tenho um rosto destruído. É uma bela frase essa da Duras. Uma linha e está criado esse rosto destruído. A literatura de Duras é a literatura da

returned to normalcy, if that's ever existed in my life. In any case, this strange relationship between passion and anxiety created a state of restlessness in me—and if at first I thought of it as a happy coincidence, it wasn't long before I realized that I was trapped in an inescapable condition.

That's when I began the meticulous process of constructing my mask, like an offering to Eros for the relief from daily anguish. This process, shaped by my lack of moral judgment (initially sanctioned, perhaps, by my liberal education) together with my tendency towards desire, and that inevitable need for connection to a world that saw possibilities only in the margins of passion, resulted in a significant refinement in that it established a relation of perfect symmetry between my mask and my real face. It became impossible to tell the natural from the contrived; the two could no longer be distinguished. So I had to subject myself to kneeling and being dragged by the leash of freedom. I felt like I had to compensate for my lack of moral standards, so I built my own system of rules, based solely on pleasure, to govern my actions.

As in any relationship of subjection, I offered both my face and my mask to sex. It just so happens that now my face no longer exists without the mask, and though its exterior doesn't reveal all who it once contained, unlike my body, it will never be seen completely naked.

~

*J'ai un visage détruit.* I have a face laid waste. A beautiful line by Duras. One line and this ravaged face comes into being. Duras's literature is a literature of destruction.

destruição. É a literatura do erotismo feito linguagem. É a linguagem que eu queria para os meus livros, quaisquer que fossem eles.

Duras dizia ter o rosto do gozo antes de conhecer o gozo, por isso, falava em um rosto visionário. Vendo suas fotos, enxergo isso nela, não sei se porque ela me fez enxergar ou porque enxergaria mesmo se essa sua frase não existisse.

Por muito tempo, essa imagem me perseguiu. Como uma obsessão, reparava nas mulheres na rua para julgar se tinham esse rosto do gozo.

Aqui, diante do espelho, posso dizer: não tenho o rosto do gozo. Vejo juventude, entusiasmo, melancolia, hesitação e até beleza. Mas gozo, não. Meu rosto não encerra o mistério que eu gostaria. É amplo demais para isso. Não tenho a fisionomia das mulheres inacessíveis, de rostos condensados e olhos comprimidos que nunca revelam. Meu semblante é amigável, inspira confiança.

É comum me colocar na frente do espelho e tentar cobrir os lábios com a ponta da língua, tentando emular alguma sensualidade. Mas ela é externa a mim, não me cabe. Vejo fotos de mulheres que me atraem e que conseguem transmitir essa sensualidade acariciando os lábios com a ponta da língua. São mulheres de mistérios, inquebrantáveis. Quanto à minha sensualidade, ela está em outro lugar, um lugar que não sei nomear, mas que existe. É um outro tipo de sensualidade, que não identifico nas fotos ou nos filmes, mas que vejo claramente em outras mulheres com que convivo.

Frente ao meu reflexo, me confundo. Observo meu nariz. Agora, parece adquirir proporções aceitáveis, bem diferentes daquelas que me entristecem quando olho minhas fotos. Nelas, ele me deforma, denuncia

It's a literature of eroticism made into language. It's the language I'd like for my own books, whatever they might be.

Duras said that she had the face of pleasure before knowing pleasure—that's why she spoke of a visionary face. Looking at pictures of her, I can see this, either because she makes me see it, or because I'd see it anyway, even if that line had never been written.

That image haunted me for a long time. I obsessed over it, staring at women in the street, trying to decide whether or not they had the face of pleasure.

Here in front of the mirror, I can say: I do not have the face of pleasure. I see youth, excitement, melancholy, hesitation, even beauty. But not pleasure. My face doesn't hold the mystery I want it to; it's too open for that. I don't have the physiognomy of an impenetrable woman, with her compact face, her narrow eyes that reveal nothing. My likeness is friendly and trustworthy.

I often look into the mirror and try to caress my lips with the tip of my tongue, attempting to emulate some form of sensuality. But it doesn't fit, it's external to me. I see pictures of women I find attractive, who convey sensuality as they touch their lips with the tips of their tongues. They are mysterious, unbreakable women. As for my sensuality, it's located somewhere else, a place whose name I do not know but that exists. It's another type of sensuality, which I don't find in pictures or films, but that I can clearly see in certain women around me.

In front of my reflection, I am confused. I study my nose. Right now, it seems to have acquired acceptable proportions, quite unlike what depresses me when I see pictures of myself; in pictures, my nose deforms my

minha boca sem volume e sem contorno, afunda meus olhos e infantiliza minha expressão. Numa de minhas “autosessões” de foto — e o banheiro é o lugar onde costumo me fotografar — enquanto media com o olhar as dimensões de meu nariz, depois de ter empreendido seguidas tentativas de achar um ângulo que o disfarçasse, algo gritou dentro de mim. Uma voz de inconsciência.

*Women with big noses are better lovers.* Não sei de onde vem. É dessas frases que me perturbam com frequência e eu apenas aceito com resignação. Talvez mais um fruto da ansiedade. Repito a frase até que ela se torne verdade. Tomo-a como real para compensar o tamanho do nariz e conferir a mim aquela sensualidade perdida no meio dos lábios e da língua. *Women with big noses are better lovers.* Fuck them, fuck me.

— Você não tem cara de quem transa — uma amiga me disse. As palavras penetraram em mim sem consentimento e abriram uma fenda na minha identidade. Ouvi formulações semelhantes depois, vindas de diferentes lugares, mas encerrando sempre a mesma conclusão a meu respeito. O mais frequente é mencionarem a mim em terceira pessoa, como se eu estivesse alheia à conversa. *Não fala isso perto dela, ela vai ficar chocada. Tadinha, ela não deve nem entender do que estamos falando. Fico com vergonha de falar isso perto dela, ela vai me achar uma depravada. Ela não faz essas coisas.*

Meu rosto não denuncia meu sexo. Meu rosto enganador. Reconheço.

Gê me chama. Ele está no quarto ao lado enquanto eu me vejo nua no espelho do banheiro. Ele me deseja e me quer, sei por que me chama. *Women with big noses are better lovers.* Não tenho o rosto do gozo, mas logo terei o gozo na cara.

face, highlights my thin mouth, makes my eyes look sunken and my expression childish. When I scrutinize the dimensions of my nose, in one of my “self-photoshoots”—they usually happen in the bathroom—after trying out various angles to disguise it, something inside me screams. A voice from my subconscious. *Women with big noses make better lovers.* I have no idea where it comes from. It’s one of those lines that often haunts me and to which I resign myself. Perhaps it’s another product of anxiety. I repeat the words until they become true. I accept them as real to compensate for the size of my nose, and to grant myself the sensuality lost somewhere between my lips and my tongue. *Women with big noses make better lovers.* Fuck them, fuck me.

“You don’t have the face of someone who has a ton of sex,” a friend once said to me. The words penetrated me without consent and opened a rift in my identity. I kept hearing similar comments after that, from different places, but always arriving at the same conclusion. They’d most often refer to me in the third person, as if I weren’t a part of the conversation. *Don’t say that around her, she’ll be shocked. Poor thing, she probably doesn’t even know what we’re talking about. I’m embarrassed to say this around her, she’s gonna think I’m a perv. She’s not into that kind of thing.*

My face doesn’t give away my sexuality. My face is deceptive. This I know.

Gê calls out to me. He’s in the other room while I look at my naked body in the bathroom mirror. He wants me, I know why he’s calling. *Women with big noses make better lovers.* I don’t have the face of pleasure, but soon pleasure will ooze all over my face.

~

— Gê, você é maravilhoso — digo sussurrando.

Os dedos firmes se agarram à minha pele, apertam o corpo até que ele se faça disforme, mude de cor, de temperatura. As mãos descem pelas costas, acariciam de leve a lombar e sobem devagar até chegarem à nuca. Lá, ele segura com força, olha para mim com os olhos de um vencedor. Estremeço.

Nossos movimentos parecem o de duas células prestes a se fundirem — ou a se desprenderem. Gê me coloca sobre seu colo, puxa meus cabelos para trás, expondo por completo meu pescoço, para enfim devorá-lo de uma vez.

Sinto minha veia jugular pulsar subjugada por sua língua úmida, completamente segura de sua impotência. Morro. A morte dura trinta segundos e é plena.

E, então, ele me vira de bruços, abre minhas pernas, o gozo ainda escorrendo, molha o lençol. Ele observa. Passa muito tempo pousando o olhar lá. Sei que observa, porque eu o observo, meus olhos virados para ele.

Eu o chamo. Vem. Ele nada. Continua hipnotizado, parece transtocado para dentro. De mim. De si.

Sinto a ponta de seu dedo indicador encostar de leve a superfície viscosa da minha pele. Ele faz movimentos circulares, muito suaves, mas que me tomam o corpo todo. A fresta aberta da janela faz um feixe de luz entrar e vejo que seus olhos estão cheios de lágrimas represadas.

Aqui, percebo. Não conheço esse homem. Nunca o conhecerei.

“Gê, you’re amazing,” I whisper.

His strong fingers grab my skin and tighten around my body until it deforms, changing color and temperature. His hands slide down my spine, lightly caress the small of my back, and slowly make their way up until they reach the nape of my neck, which he holds firmly, looking at me with dominant eyes. I tremble.

Our movements resemble two cells on the verge of becoming one—or pulling apart. Gê puts me on his lap and pulls my hair back, baring my neck to devour it whole.

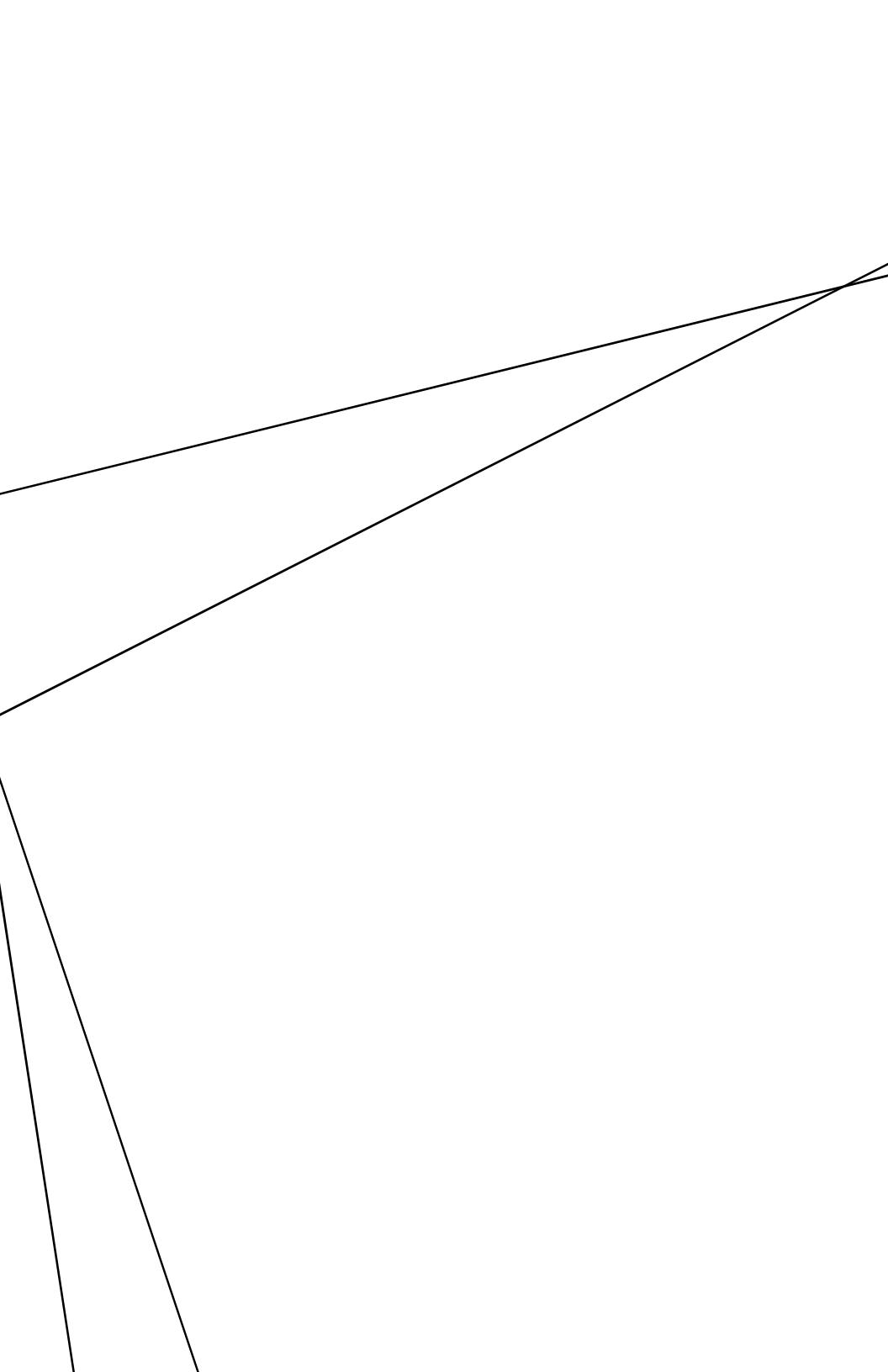
I can feel my jugular vein pulse, completely powerless under his wet tongue. I die. The death takes thirty seconds and it is total.

He flips me onto my stomach and spreads my legs; his come is still dripping and wets the blanket. He watches me, resting his eyes *there* for a long time. I know he’s watching, because my eyes turn to him, and I watch him too.

I call out to him, *Come here*. Nothing. He’s transfixed, as though he’s been transported inside. Of me. Of himself.

I feel the tip of his index finger brush the viscous surface of my skin. He draws circles, very gently, that take over my entire body. The slit in the window lets in a strip of light and I see that his eyes are welling up.

Right here, I realize: I don’t know this man. I never will.



*word for word / palabra por palabra*  
Columbia University School of the Arts  
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## Translator's Foreword

Ellos son una pareja. Son estadounidenses. Viven en un barrio conocido de la capital de España. Las primeras páginas de la novela “Madrid” de Melanie Broder dan cuenta de la vivencia de estos extranjeros en esta ciudad cosmopolita, siempre vibrante, con sus bares y su nocturnidad. Pero lo más interesante de la narración no es lo que ocurre en la calle, sino en esa casa donde ambos son -como gran parte de la generación de los millennials-, trabajadores en línea, que viven muchas horas del día pegados a la computadora.

La novela de Broder es que es contada desde la perspectiva de la mujer, mucho más joven que su pareja, quien tiene dudas sobre su relación con su compañero y también sobre qué está haciendo con su propia vida laboral. Muestra así la frustración que vive en ambos aspectos de su vida, a la vez que está en una ciudad ajena que no pareciera ejercer ninguna influencia sobre ella.

Melanie Broder es una escritora y traductora estadounidense, nacida el 21 de abril de 1991. Estudió Artes y Escritura Creativa en la Universidad de Columbia y actualmente está haciendo el máster de Escritura Creativa en la misma casa de estudios. Es hija de dos periodistas y nieta de una profesora de inglés, por lo que siempre ha estado rodeada por el mundo de la palabra escrita. Ha trabajado en el área de marketing y editorial. La autora pasó un tiempo en Madrid, por lo que conoce la ciudad que también ha influido, no solo en la escritura de esta novela, sino en su relación con el idioma español. Es admiradora de la obra de Ernest Hemingway y Lucía Berlín, entre otros autores. Llama la atención que estos dos autores tienen mucha relación con el mundo de habla hispana.

Traducir las primeras diez páginas de su novela ha sido un desafío. En primer lugar por la decisión de llevar al idioma español algunas frases propias del inglés, que no tienen una versión igual en castellano. La otra decisión importante como traductora es por cuáles términos del español traducir algunas palabras del inglés, dado que tanto en España como en Latinoamérica hay innumerables expresiones diferentes para un solo concepto. En mi caso, soy venezolana viviendo en Chile, entonces en muchas ocasiones tuve que decidir entre venezolanismos y chilenismos. Por ejemplo, en relación con la palabra “underwear”, tuve la duda entre traducirlo por “pantaletas” (Venezuela), “calzones” (Chile y México), “bragas” (España), “bombachas” (Argentina) o “ropa interior”, más general. Finalmente, decidí -por cuestiones de estilo- utilizar el venezolanismo pantaletas, que daba un sentido más íntimo y jocoso al término.

# MELANIE BRODER

*from* MADRID

January, 2018

“You look fresh,” he said. “As if you’ve just been born.”

My face warmed. The apartment had recently been renovated, and the shower had neither heat nor much pressure, so I started my days in a cool trickle. It wiped my mind clean.

Colin always knew the right things to say, had them waiting with my coffee. This was how our mornings started: At eight or so, he’d leap out of bed and rush to the kitchen to put the pot on. I’d slowly pad to the shower, leave my clothes on the floor, and feel the goosebumps rise on my skin. When I finished washing, I’d put on thin clothing and walk out to him.

“You’ve slept well, I can tell, sweetcheeks.” He called me that ironically at first, but then it became a real term of endearment. The best kind - one that was both a private joke and a sincere gesture.

“Thanks, sweetcheeks,” I said. “How’d you sleep?”

“Not well.” He never slept, except for a few hours in the early morning. He handled it well, never complained, but he was strained. According to him, it started in his thirties. I sometimes wondered if it was my fault.

**traducido del inglés por  
MAYI ELOÍSA MARTÍNEZ**

*desde MADRID*

enero del 2018.

“Te ves bien”, me dijo, “como una recién nacida”.

Mi cara se ruborizó. El apartamento había sido renovado recientemente y no había agua caliente en la ducha ni tampoco tenía mucha presión, así que mis días comenzaban con un baño de agua fría. Me refrescaba la mente.

Colin siempre sabía qué decir, lo tenía preparado al igual que mi café. Así empezaban nuestras mañanas: a las ocho, más o menos, él saltaba de la cama y corría a la cocina a preparar la cafetera italiana. Lentamente yo entraba en la ducha, dejaba mi ropa en el piso y sentía cómo se me ponía la piel de gallina. Ese día, cuando terminé de bañarme, me puse ropa ligera y salí hacia él.

“Puedo decir que has dormido bien, mi gordita”. Al principio me empezó a llamar así de manera irónica, pero luego se convirtió en un verdadero término de cariño. El mejor tipo, uno que era tanto una broma privada como un gesto sincero.

“Gracias, gordito”, respondí, “¿cómo dormiste?”

“Mal”, respondió. Nunca dormía, excepto por unas pocas horas temprano en las mañanas. Lo manejaba bien, no se quejaba, aunque se le notaba tenso. Según él, comenzó a los treinta años. A veces me preguntaba si era mi culpa.

If I strained him.

The apartment was on the third floor and it had three rooms: a bedroom in the back, a bathroom in the middle, and a main area in the front with a kitchen, dining table and couch. Everything was clean, white, and Ikea-fied. Two small abstract prints hung on the wall near the dining table, and a paper lantern hung over it. A partial wall divided the kitchen from the living space, and in front of it was a television that got local channels. Light came in from the front of the main room, where three floor-to-ceiling windows faced the street.

In the kitchen area, Colin loomed with his full person over the small stovetop. He warmed milk in a saucepan and added some honey and cinnamon. He liked to tinker with it. At thirty-eight, his hair was starting to grey at the sides, but his boxer shorts ended far above his knees, giving him the appearance of an old-fashioned schoolboy. I liked to hug him from behind, face against his spine, chest in his lower back. Sometimes his height made it awkward to embrace. He'd have to stoop to kiss me, or I'd have to stand on my tip-toes.

He poured a mug of hot, sweet coffee, the milk bubbling at the edges. "Test it first," he said. His hair was mussed, eyes a bit squinty. I thought to myself that I hated his self-sacrificing side, the part of him that got out of bed before me, made coffee for me, put on a pleasant face for me even when he was more tired than he had ever been. I thought I detected a hint of superiority in it. Then I thought this interpretation of his psyche was maybe ungenerous.

"Delicious," I murmured.

Si yo lo presionaba.

El apartamento estaba en el tercer piso y tenía tres habitaciones: una habitación en la parte de atrás, un baño en el medio y un área principal en la parte delantera con cocina, mesa de comedor y sofá. Todo era limpio, blanco, Ikea. Dos pequeñas impresiones abstractas colgaban en la pared cerca de la mesa del comedor, y una linterna de papel colgaba sobre ella. Una pared parcial separaba la cocina de la sala de estar, y frente a ella había un televisor con canales locales. La luz entraba desde el frente de la sala principal, donde tres ventanas que iban desde el piso hasta el techo daban a la calle.

En la cocina, Colin se asomó detrás de la pequeña estufa. Calentó la leche en una cacerola y agregó un poco de miel y canela. Le gustaba experimentar. A los treinta y ocho años, su cabello comenzaba a ponerse gris a los lados, pero sus calzoncillos terminaban muy por encima de sus rodillas, lo que le daba la apariencia de un colegial a la antigua. Me gustaba abrazarlo por la espalda, tener mi cara contra su columna vertebral y mi pecho en la parte baja de la espalda. A veces su altura hacía que abrazarnos fuera incómodo. Él tenía que agacharse para besarme, o yo tenía que ponerme de puntillas.

Vertió una taza de café caliente y dulce, con la leche burbujeando en los bordes. “Pruébalo primero”, dijo. Traía el cabello despeinado y los ojos algo entrecerrados. Pensé que odiaba su lado abnegado, la parte de él que se levantó de la cama antes que yo, me preparó café y me puso una cara agradable, incluso cuando estaba más cansado de lo que nunca había estado. Creí detectar un toque de superioridad de su parte. Entonces pensé que esta interpretación de su psique era quizás poco generosa.

“Delicioso”, murmuré.

“Are you going to be productive today?” he said.

“Don’t be condescending.”

“Well, are you looking at Instagram or not?”

“What does it matter, when my job is idiotic?” I couldn’t help being dramatic.

He didn’t take the bait. He sat down on the couch and turned to his own phone. He read dry news articles, always long and factual and written by centrist-leaning men.

This was how our mornings turned from delightful to mundane.

Our routines were parallel. He sat at his Macbook every day, coding for twelve or fourteen hours, yet, he didn’t make any money. Every Monday through Friday I sat near him, using my laptop for the same amount of time, making money all the while, but doing nothing.

I worked at a content marketing agency, which meant I wrote longform, lightly researched articles on topics such as “9 productivity hacks using your calendar app alone,” or “Why you should use these colors in your next digital ad.” The idea was that companies would publish the posts to their blogs and gain search traffic while also building up reputations for thought leadership. It gave me some glee to think about how the strategic thinking of tech leaders could be attributed to blasé twenty-five-year-olds, but mostly it was unbearably dull. Still, I felt guilty for hating it. I didn’t want to seem ungrateful. The pay wasn’t great, but I had my freedom. I could write

“¿Vas a ser productiva hoy?”, preguntó.

“No seas condescendiente”.

“Bueno, ¿estás mirando Instagram o no?”

“¿Qué importa, cuando mi trabajo es una estupidez?” No pude evitar ser dramática.

No mordió el anzuelo. Se sentó en el sofá y se volvió hacia su propio teléfono. Leyó en seco artículos de noticias, siempre largos y fácticos, escritos por hombres de inclinación centrista.

Así fue como nuestras mañanas pasaron de encantadoras a monótonas.

Nuestras rutinas eran paralelas. Se sentaba en su *Macbook* todos los días, codificando doce o catorce horas, sin embargo, no ganaba nada de dinero. En cambio, cada lunes a viernes yo me sentaba cerca de él, usando mi computadora portátil por la misma cantidad de tiempo, ganando dinero constantemente, pero sin hacer nada.

Yo trabajaba en una agencia de marketing digital, lo que significa que escribía artículos largos y ligeramente investigados sobre temas como “9 trucos de productividad usando solo tu aplicación de calendario” o “Por qué deberías usar estos colores en tu próximo anuncio digital”. La idea era que las empresas publicaran los artículos en sus blogs y ganaran tráfico de búsqueda, a la vez que construyeran una reputación de liderazgo intelectual. Me alegró imaginar en cómo el pensamiento estratégico de los líderes tecnológicos podía atribuirse a los displicentes jóvenes de 25 años, aunque en su mayoría era insoportablemente aburrido. Aún así, me sentía culpable por odiarlo. No quería parecer desagradecida. La paga no era mucha, pero tenía mi libertad. Podía escribir

from anywhere. I felt incredibly grown up.

Colin had left a comfortable position at one of the Big Four tech companies years ago to venture out on his own in Silicon Valley. Since then he had created at least three failed startups. These nosedives failed to puncture his determination. He buoyantly proclaimed he “had needed the time” to become a better software developer. He wasn’t a born engineer; he was more of a dreamer, or schemer. He was working on something to do with international shipping. All I knew about his work was what he told me. It allowed him freedom to travel and gave him a survivable income, with which he was able to pay his portion of the rent. The apartment in Madrid belonged to his older sister, who, unlike us, spoke Spanish and knew people in the city.

After about an hour of scrolling and sipping coffee, I finally got up. I was wearing dainty pyjama shorts, with a tiny lace bow at the front. I was wet between the legs. Perhaps just sweat. I thought about trying to lead Colin back to the bedroom, but I knew he would reject me, and the thought of that made me tired and a little depressed. So I went to pee, wiping myself carefully, and got dressed. I looked at myself naked in the mirror. I never dreamed of looking like a celebrity, but I desired to be compact, to look like a person who had no qualms about her body, who had more serious things to care about, like water crises or art restoration. Someone who moved through the world without doing any damage to it. Approving of what I saw, I put on a plain black t-shirt, a fresh pair of underwear, and the new jeans I had bought before leaving.

Returning to the bathroom, I brushed my teeth for a full two minutes using the electric toothbrush Colin had

desde cualquier lugar. Me sentía increíblemente madura.

Colin había dejado un cómodo puesto en una de las renombradas empresas de tecnología “*Big 4*” en *Silicon Valley*. Desde entonces, había creado al menos tres *startups* fallidas. Sin embargo, estas caídas en picada no lograron perforar su determinación. Proclamó con fuerza que “necesitaba tiempo” para convertirse en un mejor desarrollador de software. No era un ingeniero nato; era más bien un soñador, o un conspirador. Estaba trabajando en algo relacionado con el transporte marítimo internacional. Todo lo que sabía de su trabajo era lo que me dijo. Le permitía viajar libremente y le daba un ingreso de supervivencia, con el que podía pagar su parte del alquiler. El apartamento en Madrid pertenecía a su hermana mayor, que, a diferencia de nosotros, hablaba español y conocía agente de la ciudad.

Después de una hora de navegar y tomar café, finalmente me levanté. Llevaba unos shorts cortos ligeros de pijama, con un pequeño lazo de encaje en la parte delantera. Estaba húmeda entre mis piernas. Tal vez solo por el sudor. Pensé en intentar llevar a Colin de vuelta al dormitorio, pero sabía que me rechazaría, y el pensar en eso me hizo sentir cansada y un poco deprimida. Así que fui a orinar y me limpié con cuidado. Me miré desnuda en el espejo. Nunca soñé con parecer una celebridad, pero deseaba ser compacta, parecer una persona que no tuviera reparos en su cuerpo, que tuviera cosas más serias de las que preocuparse, como las crisis con el agua o la restauración de arte. Alguien que se moviera por el mundo sin hacerle ningún daño. Aprobando lo que vi, me puse una camiseta lisa negra, unas pantaletas limpias, y los nuevos *jeans* que habíamos comprado antes de mudarnos.

Volví al baño, me cepillé los dientes durante dos minutos usando el cepillo eléctrico que Colin me había

given me. He said I had bad breath. He was practical like that. After he mentioned it, I also started carrying gum with me everywhere. The fake sugar gave me stomach aches, but I felt more secure in close conversations, which seemed like a bad tradeoff. I splashed water on my face, rubbed cream on my cheeks, and brushed my hair.

“Wow,” he said from behind his laptop when I walked back out into the main room. My appearance was plain, I knew, but he treated me like I was a goddess, albeit one he couldn’t bear to touch. “Those jeans look incredible.”

“Thanks,” I said. “All for you.”

My friends and family acted like our relationship was some kind of scandal. My mother frequently texted me “Good morning!” or “Good evening!” in place of asking if I was alive and safe. There was the age difference, plus we had met online when the swiping apps were just becoming fashionable. When we moved to Spain, they viewed it as a de facto kidnapping. But I didn’t see it that way. In my view, my life changed the night we met, and nothing before or after that was ever so swift or simple. Which is like kidnapping, I suppose.

I sat down across from him at the kitchen table. I was opening my laptop when I realized he was still staring at me. But his eyes were vacant, tuned in to an idea like a movie projector behind my head.

“You’ve got a funny look on,” I said.

“I’ve just thought of something,” he said.

dado. Dijo que tenía mal aliento. Era así de concreto. Después de que lo mencionó, también empecé a llevar chicle conmigo a todas partes. El azúcar falso me daba dolores de estómago, pero me sentía más segura en las conversaciones íntimas, lo que parecía un mal negocio. Me salpicaba agua en la cara, me frotaba crema en las mejillas y me cepillaba el pelo.

“Vaya”, me dijo desde atrás de su computadora portátil cuando salí de nuevo a la sala. Mi apariencia era sencilla, lo sabía, pero me trató como si fuera una diosa, aunque no podía soportar tocarme. “Esos *jeans* se te ven increíble”.

“Gracias”, dije, “todo para ti”.

Mis amigos y mi familia actuaron como si nuestra relación fuera un escándalo. Mi madre me escribía frecuentemente “¡buenos días!” o “¡buenas noches!”, en lugar de preguntarme si estaba sana y salva. Había una diferencia de edad, además de que nos habíamos conocido en línea cuando las aplicaciones de citas se estaban poniendo de moda. Cuando nos mudamos a España, lo vieron como un secuestro de facto. Pero yo no lo veía así. En mi opinión, mi vida cambió la noche en que nos conocimos, y nada antes o después de eso fue tan rápido o simple. Lo que es como un secuestro, supongo.

Me senté frente a él en la mesa de la cocina. Estaba abriendo mi *laptop* cuando me di cuenta de que todavía me miraba. Pero sus ojos estaban vacíos, sintonizados con una idea como un proyector de películas detrás de mi cabeza.

“Tienes una mirada extraña”, le dije.

“Acabo de pensar en algo”, respondió.

February, 2018

The first part was a personality test. To get you hooked, Regard asked a series of confidential questions about your desires, and satisfaction level with those desires. Colin walked me through the screen mockups in Photoshop.

*Rate the truth of this statement in your answer: In your personal relationships, you feel like your needs are being met to a satisfactory level.*

*All the time*

*Most of the time*

*Sometimes*

*Almost never*

*Never*

After you answered forty or so questions, it would spit out a quippy, yet vague sentence: *You're longing for love, but your strongest relationship is with your longing.* Then the call to action: *To learn more about your results, sign up for a confidential therapy session.*

The tagline was *Regard: Get what you need.*

Once the user had registered and paid, Regard prescribed solutions. The user would be paired with a therapist, and assigned a premade pathway on the app, which included guided meditation sessions, quizzes, and chat. For an upgrade fee, you could have your therapist on-call for as

Febrero, 2018, Madrid

La primera parte fue un test de personalidad. Para engancharte, *Regard* hacía una serie de preguntas confidenciales sobre tus deseos, y el nivel de satisfacción de estos. Colin me guio a través de las maquetas de la pantalla en *Photoshop*.

*Valora la veracidad de esta afirmación en tu respuesta: En tus relaciones personales, sientes que tus necesidades están siendo alcanzadas a un nivel satisfactorio.*

(A) *Todo el tiempo*

(B) *La mayoría de las veces*

(C) *A veces*

(D) *Casi nunca*

(E) *Nunca*

Después de responder a unas cuarenta preguntas, te lanzaría una frase cursi, aunque vaga: *Anhelas el amor, pero tu relación más fuerte es con tu propio anhelo.* Entonces eso era lo que llamaba a la acción: *Para saber más sobre los resultados, inscríbase en una sesión de consultoría paga.*

El lema era “*Regard*”: Consigue lo que necesitas.

Una vez que el usuario se había registrado y pagado, *Regard* prescribía soluciones. El usuario sería emparejado con un terapeuta, y se le asignaría un camino preestablecido en la aplicación, que incluía sesiones de meditación guiadas, pruebas y conversaciones por chat. Por una tarifa mensual, se podía tener a un terapeuta

long as you wanted.

The therapists were real. As of late January, Colin had signed on two to work on the project sight unseen. They were his friends' therapists in San Francisco. Colin had offered them equity in the company, which had no revenue or funding yet and thus was valued at \$0.

"You know you can't do that for every therapist you bring on," I said.

"Of course not. They're the lucky ones." He grinned to show he wasn't fully serious.

"I thought you were working on your shipping service."

"I was. Now I'm not."

"Why focus on desire?"

"Because it's literally sexy," Colin said. "It's taboo to talk about our desires. Especially the less savory ones. That'll be the marketing objective: to normalize desire."

"That's brilliant," I said. "Almost noble."

"Why almost."

"Because you think words like 'normalize' are bullshit."

He smiled. "'Normalize' is okay. It's 'problematic' that irks me."

"You also think therapy is bullshit," I said.

disponible para cuando uno lo necesitara.

Los terapeutas eran reales. A finales de enero, Colin había contratado a dos para trabajar en el proyecto sin saber bien en qué se estaban metiendo. Eran los terapeutas de sus amigos en San Francisco. Colin les había ofrecido participación en la empresa, que no tenía ingresos ni financiamiento todavía y por lo tanto estaba valorada en 0 \$.

“Sabes que no puedes hacer eso con cada terapeuta que traes”, dije.

“Por supuesto que no. Ellos son los afortunados.” Sonrió para demostrar que no hablaba totalmente en serio.

“Pensé que estabas trabajando en tu servicio de envío”.

“Yo estaba. Ahora ya no lo estoy”.

“¿Por qué centrarse en el deseo?”

“Porque es literalmente sexy”, dijo Colin. “Es tabú hablar de nuestros deseos. Especialmente los menos apetitosos. Ese será el objetivo de marketing: normalizar el deseo”. “Eso es brillante”, dije. “Casi noble”.

“Por qué casi”.

“Porque crees que palabras como “normalizar” son una mierda”.

Sonrió. “Normalizar” está bien. Es ‘problematizar’ lo que me molesta”.

“También crees que la terapia es una mierda”, dije.

“That’s not true. You turned me on to it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Interesting choice of words.”

“I think this app can help people. People who struggle. People like us.” He could be so earnest. Deep down, I think he was.

“And how are we doing?”

“We’re in Madrid,” he said. “We’re winning.” He gestured to the wall. The three French windows offered vertical glimpses into the street. It was midnight. At eye level, neighbors across the way were watching a television program. They had a small dog that sometimes barked from the balcony. Snow fell in weak, soft flakes. Down below, people moved in and out of the Milagros hair salon. It was a family business and operated at odd hours. They were immigrants. Caribbean, maybe. Their skin was darker and they spoke with different rhythms than the Spaniards. Kids played with the rubbish left on the street: mattresses, broken bowls. Up above, the sky was opaque and purple. It occurred to me that life was rarely ever fully happy or fully sad in the moment. It was only in retrospect that such summaries were applied.

“We haven’t had sex since we left California” I said.  
“That was two months ago.”

Colin just said, “Shall we get some food?”

I had been waiting hours, but didn’t want to give him the satisfaction. “I think I’m too tired.”

“Eso no es verdad. Tú eres la que me excita con eso”.

Puse los ojos en blanco. “Interesante elección de palabras”.

“Creo que esta aplicación puede ayudar a la gente. Gente que lucha. Gente como nosotros”. Él podía ser tan idealista. En el fondo, creo que lo era.

“¿Y cómo vamos?”

“Estamos en Madrid”, dijo. “Estamos ganando”. Hizo un gesto hacia la pared. Las tres ventanas francesas ofrecían vistas verticales de la calle. Era medianoche. A la altura de los ojos, los vecinos de enfrente estaban viendo un programa de televisión. Tenían un pequeño perro que a veces ladraba desde el balcón. La nieve caía en escamas débiles y suaves. Abajo, la gente entraba y salía de la peluquería *Milagros*. Era un negocio familiar y funcionaba a horas extrañas. Eran inmigrantes. Del Caribe, tal vez. Su piel era más oscura y hablaban con ritmos diferentes a los españoles. Los niños jugaban con la basura que quedaba en la calle: colchones, cuencos rotos. Arriba, el cielo era opaco y púrpura. Se me ocurrió que la vida raramente era completamente feliz o completamente triste en el momento. Solo en retrospectiva se podía resumir a eso.

“No hemos tenido sexo desde que dejamos California”, dije. “Eso fue hace dos meses.”

Cuando Colin acaba de decir: “¿Compramos algo de comida?”

Había estado esperando horas, pero no quería darle la satisfacción. “Creo que estoy demasiado cansado.”

“A snack?”

“Okay.”

“You’re always up for a snack,” he teased.

“Maybe I’m the snack.”

“You are, you’re looking like a snack in those jeans.”

“They’re just normal jeans,” I said.

Colin’s sister’s apartment was located on a quiet street in the Chamberí district. People around us were upper middle class locals, for the most part, except for the immigrants. One street over from ours was Calle Ponzano, which was known for its suite of bars where young professionals in their twenties and thirties gathered with friends. Madrid was a city of bars. A real restaurant was rare. For us, it worked out because Colin wanted to stretch his budget, so we ate tapas and drank cañas like everyone else.

The night he showed me the mockups was a Thursday, so at midnight, Ponzano was still pulsing with activity. Handsome young men in hunting jackets called out to their friends down the block. A couple deboarded a scooter. Women in heeled black boots smoked on the sidewalk. We assessed the options:

fluorescent-lit cafeterias where old men and raw seafood mingled by the windows

overpriced places with gin-tonic specials and white-and-black tiled floors

“¿Un bocadillo?”

“Bien”.

“Siempre estás dispuesta a comer algo”, bromeó.

“Tal vez porque yo soy el bocadillo”.

“Lo eres, te ves como un bocadillo en esos *jeans*.”

“Son solo *jeans* normales”, dije.

El apartamento de la hermana de Colin estaba en una calle tranquila del distrito de Chamberí. La gente que nos rodeaba era de clase media alta, en su mayoría, excepto los inmigrantes. Una calle más allá de la nuestra estaba la calle Ponzano, conocida por su conjunto de bares donde jóvenes profesionales de entre 20 y 30 años se reunían con amigos. Madrid era una ciudad de bares. Un verdadero restaurante era raro. Para nosotros, funcionó porque Colin quería estirar su presupuesto, así que comíamos tapas y bebíamos cañas como todos los demás.

La noche en que me mostró los bocetos de la *app* era un jueves, así que, a medianoche, Ponzano seguía palpitando de actividad. Jóvenes guapos con chaquetas de caza llamaban a sus amigos de la cuadra. Una pareja se bajó de un *scooter*. Las mujeres con botas negras de tacón fumaban en la acera. Evaluamos las opciones:

(A) cafeterías con luz fluorescente donde los ancianos y los mariscos crudos lucían iguales a través de la ventana

(B) lugares sobrevalorados con especiales de gin-tonic y pisos de baldosas blancas y negras

We settled on (C) a nondescript bar with a red awning. Inside it was buzzing. At every one of the Ponzano places, food, drink and ambiance took a backseat to social activity. We spotted an empty high top and moved in. While Colin went to the bar, I took in the scene.

A couple seated nearby was sharing a fried squid sandwich. The woman was very pretty in a retrograde way that I couldn't help but admire. She had long brown hair and wore a black leather miniskirt and a bright pink sweater which hugged her curves. Her companion was much uglier. He was bald and short and dressed like a square. She draped her bare legs over his lap and laughed hysterically at something he said. Crumbs of batter dripped from the sandwich between them.

Colin arrived with a beer for himself, a glass of white wine for me, and a plate of ham. "What's up with that," I said, gesturing to them with my shoulders.

"Good lord," he said, then smiled. I took a sip of wine and my body unclenched. "So what do you think?"

"What do I think about what?" I said dreamily.

"The app."

I took a bite of ham. A string of fat caught in my teeth. Since arriving in Spain, I had started losing weight in a passive way, which pleased me. "Oh. I'm impressed, definitely. I think it could be a good idea."

"Could be?"

Nos decidimos por (C) una barra antiestética con un toldo rojo. Dentro había buena vibra. En cada uno de los lugares, la comida, la bebida y el ambiente de Ponzano pasaron a un segundo plano bajo la actividad social. Vimos un rincón vacío y nos fuimos para allá. Mientras Colin iba al bar, yo me adentré en la escena.

Una pareja sentada cerca compartía un sándwich de calamares fritos. La mujer era muy guapa, de una forma retrógrada que no pude evitar admirar. Tenía el cabello largo y castaño y llevaba una minifalda de cuero y un suéter rosa brillante que abrazaba sus curvas. Su compañero era mucho más feo. Era calvo, bajo y lucía como un cuadrado. Ella le cubrió el regazo con sus piernas desnudas y se rio histéricamente de algo que él dijo.

Colin llegó con una cerveza para él, un vaso de vino blanco para mí y un plato de jamón ibérico. “¿Qué piensas de eso?”, dije, haciéndole un gesto con mi hombro.

“Dios mío”, dijo, y luego sonrió. Tomé un sorbo de vino y mi cuerpo se aflojó. “¿Dime qué te parece?”

“¿Qué pienso sobre qué?”, dije con sueño.

“La *app*”.

Le di un mordisco al jamón. Un hilo de grasa quedó atrapado en mis dientes. Desde que llegué a España, había empezado a perder peso de forma pasiva, lo que me agradó. “Oh. Estoy impresionada, definitivamente. Creo que podría ser una buena idea.”

“¿Podría ser?”.

“What are the pathways?”

“I’ll need to hammer that out with experts. Then I’ll need to raise money, hire a few people.”

“Do you really think an app can work for this sort of thing? What about the human aspect? The value of meeting face-to-face?”

“Not everyone prefers that. Especially when it comes to sensitive stuff like sex drive.”

“I would prefer to talk to someone in person.”

“Not everyone’s like you. Nor can everyone afford that. Additionally, you don’t really have issues in that department.”

“True. Well.” I was tired. I had spent all day working on a blog post about how to design video thumbnails for social media. A group of five crowded around the table next to ours. There were three men and two women, all dressed in colorful, fine fabrics. They spoke animatedly and laughed easily. I wondered what their jobs were. Finance, probably, or law. Maybe one or two worked in advertising or at large telecom firms. Ordinary, well-paid jobs. I envied them.

“Let’s talk about it more later,” Colin said.

“You read my mind.” I smiled sleepily, crushing my eyelids together.

“¿Cuáles son los pasos a seguir?”, pregunté.

“Tendré que discutirlo con los expertos. Luego necesitaré recaudar dinero, contratar a algunas personas”.

“¿Realmente crees que una aplicación puede funcionar para este tipo de cosas? ¿Qué hay del aspecto humano? ¿El valor de reunirse cara a cara?”.

“No todo el mundo prefiere eso. Especialmente cuando se trata de cosas sensibles como el impulso sexual”.

“Preferiría hablar con alguien en persona”.

“No todos son como tú. Ni todos pueden permitirse eso. Además, tú no tienes realmente problemas en ese departamento”.

“Ciento. Bien”. Estaba cansada. Había pasado todo el día trabajando en un blog sobre cómo diseñar vídeos en miniatura para los social media. Un grupo de cinco personas se arrimó alrededor de la mesa junto a la nuestra. Había tres hombres y dos mujeres, todos vestidos con telas coloridas y finas. Hablaban de forma animada y se reían fácilmente. Me pregunté cuáles serían sus trabajos. Finanzas, probablemente, o derecho. Tal vez uno o dos trabajaban en publicidad o en grandes empresas de telecomunicaciones. Trabajos ordinarios y bien pagados. Los envidiaba.

“Hablemos de ello más tarde”, dijo Colin.

“Me leíste la mente”. Sonreí adormilada, aplastando mis párpados.

## Translator's Foreword

Mayi Eloísa Martínez has a gift for inhabiting the secret lives of others. Her debut novel, *Apartamento 11* (Apartment 11), which won Chile's prestigious Barco De Vapor prize in 2019, is a tale of a city and a family in crisis as seen through the watchful eyes of a 9-year-old boy. *Case Studies* is her first book of poetry.

Born in Caracas in 1993, Martínez relocated with her family to Santiago in 2014, where she has been active on the literary scene, participating in several poetry workshops and earning a diploma in Children's Literature from Universidad Diego Portales. Before moving to Chile, she began a course in psychology at the Universidad Central de Venezuela; those two years had a direct impact on the formation of this book. Based on a mix of personal experience, studies of patients and pathologies, and observations of people in both of the cities she's called home, *Case Studies* is a polyphonic journey through the neuroses, anxieties, traumas, and relationships that form our personalities.

As a translator, I took to Mayi's work immediately. Each of the characters in *Case Studies* has a secret to tell, and those secrets ripple through their bodies, stopping them on the street, paralyzing them at the shrink's office, causing them to retreat to their bedrooms or cry out for their mothers. Occasional encounters with animals make them consider the strangeness of being human. Their voices are distinct and their stories unlinked, but the particularity of each person's loneliness gives them a kind of solidarity: through these poems, the voices call out to each other.

Martínez's language is accessible and spare, yet has an inscrutable quality, lending it a shine that reflects or

deflects depending on the light. The greatest challenge in creating an English version was on the word level - the most obvious choices sometimes were too solid, not allowing the light to bounce. A simple word or phrase, while evocative enough in Spanish, was antiseptic in English. In certain cases, I employed phrases rooted in the body to get a point across. In "Staying alive" I translated a bird's movements as "he hugged the corner" instead of "he stuck to the corner." In "Queen of Spades," the phrase "to suffer through the day" becomes "to ache through the afternoon."

Loneliness is inescapable, and often silent. "What does the isolated human say?" one character asks. In this collection, Martínez gives us the possibility of an answer.

Case Studies is set to be published in Spanish by Queltehue Ediciones in 2020.

**MAYI ELOÍSA MARTÍNEZ**

*desde SUJETOS*

La mejor idea es no tener hijos

No tener cuerpo

No tener pies

**translated from the spanish by  
MELANIE BRODER**

*from CASE STUDIES*

The best idea is to not have kids

Not have a body

Not have feet

## Staying alive

El pájaro herido está en mi baño  
huye de mí corriendo rápido y agitando sus alas,  
no puede volar.

Yo lloro.

Lo veo con la puerta entreabierta,  
si lo agarro y lo libero se lo terminarán de devorar los  
gatos.

Se le arruinó la vida.

Se le acabó la vida.

Morirá en el piso de mi baño,  
yo lo enterraré en el patio, cerca de mi perro.

Oigo cómo emite sonidos por momentos.

Quisiera saber qué dice,  
qué decide.

Le pido perdón.

Me agacho a su altura,  
se pega más a una esquina de la pared del baño.  
No me mira,  
debe creerme un gato más.

Tengo que irme por cuatro horas,  
sé que al regresar estará igual,  
peor  
o muerto.

## Staying Alive

The injured bird is in my bathroom  
fleeing me chasing him flapping his wings  
he can't fly.

I cry.

I watch him through the cracked-open door,  
If I grab him, free him, the cats will end him.  
His life is ruined.

His life's over.

He'll drop dead on my bathroom floor,  
I'll bury him in the backyard, by my dog.  
Now and then he lets out a chirp  
I wonder what he's saying  
what he's debating.

I ask his forgiveness.

I crouch down to his height,  
he hugs the corner of the bathroom wall.  
He won't look at me,  
must think I'm another cat.

I have to leave for several hours,  
knowing when I get back he'll be the same,  
worse,  
or dead.

## Animal exótico

Creía en la penetración anal como medida preventiva,  
se llamaba animal exótico

y la conversación siempre la empezaba hablando de la  
espuma de la cerveza,  
diciéndole “la amarga belleza”.

Reía,

provocaba aplausos,  
prefería las peleas.

Decía que enamorado tomaba menos,  
que se ponía a pensar en la muerte.

Constantemente,  
le gustaba meter su dedo en su ombligo  
y darle vueltas,  
muchas vueltas.

Hasta que ardía tanto que creía que se rompería,  
pero no se rompía.

Esa era una de sus soluciones a la vida,  
soportar el ardor.

Desearía ser un animal exótico.

## Wild Animal

He tended to think of anal sex as a preventative measure,

He went by Wild Animal

and started every conversation with a comment about beer foam, always

going on about “the bitter beauty.”

He'd laugh,

provoking applause,

preferring punches.

He'd say that in love he drank less,

that it made him think about death.

Constantly,

he'd place a finger in the center of his belly button

and take it for a spin,

endless spins

until dizzy with heat he thought he might break

but he didn't break.

That was one of his solutions to life:

to sustain the burn.

He'd like to be a wild animal.

## Sombra espinas

No, no se quiere bajar del columpio,  
grita que quiere ir más alto.

Bostezo y empujo.

Soy como el pez de su pieza,  
la miramos dar vueltas,  
subirse a los muebles,  
Somos solo espectadores .

No tenemos qué decir.

Esperamos que sea viernes para que venga.

El domingo cuando se va, nos miramos entre nosotros,  
viendo el reflejo del otro.

Cambiamos de roles:

un hombre en el fondo de la pecera,  
un pez fetal en el piso

A su madre no le gustan los peces.

## Shadow bones

No, she won't get off the swing,  
she shouts that she wants to go higher.

I yawn and push.

I'm like the pet fish in her bedroom,  
together we watch her twirl,  
scale the furniture.

We're only spectators.

We don't have a say.

We look forward to Friday, when she comes.

On Sunday, when she leaves, we meet each other's gaze,  
one a reflection of the other.

We switch roles:

a man in the depths of the tank,  
a fish curled fetal on the floor.

As for her mother, she doesn't like fish.

## Metamorfosis

La lejanía me dice hola  
y yo callo.

Aún no saludo a nadie,  
el dispositivo me muestra la vida de los demás seres.

No tengo qué decir,  
se permuta el movimiento de mis manos,  
los ojos me son inútiles,  
el día es rítmico y ruidoso,  
no sé qué espero.

Tengo palabras fósiles,  
pesadas en mí.

Déjenme en cama,  
quiero chupar teta  
y llorar hasta que me carguen,  
me cambien  
y me envuelvan en mantas.

## Metamorphosis

The distance says hello  
and I shut up.

I haven't said hi to anyone yet.

The device shows me the lives of other beings.

I have nothing to say,  
my hands break out in rapid motions  
but behind my eyes, there's nothing.

The day beats on and blares,  
I don't know what I'm hoping for.

My words are fossils,  
weighing me down.

Can't you all leave me in bed,  
I want to suck on a tit  
and cry until you cradle me,  
change me  
and swaddle me in blankets.

Ayuda

la beba,  
la beba,  
trae a la beba.

Huir

con palabras cortas,  
las únicas que saben.

Explicar:

País

Policía

Alarma

Abandono

Hospital

El cuerpo está acá.

Al cuerpo lo lloran en otra tierra.

Help

the baby,  
the baby,  
bring the baby girl.

Flee

with simple words,  
the only ones they know.

Plead your case:

Country

Police

Alarm

Neglect

Hospital

The body is over there.

They mourn the body in another country.

## Encuentro

Me reconocí porque tenía mi cara y mi cabello, pero versión arrugada y gris.

Me había visto a mí misma varias veces caminando por Los Leones, íbamos

ambas en la misma dirección, pero una siempre se desviaba.

Ambas solas, ambas usando siempre ropa similar, ropa cómoda, ropa india.

Hoy me encontré conmigo misma en el Starbucks de Suecia, estaba comiendo con un hombre, sentí alivio.

¡Tengo un amigo! ¡No estoy sola!

## Sonreímos

Pedí un té Chai Latte con leche de soja,  
Igual que yo.

## Encounter

I recognized me—she had my face and hair, only wrinkled and gray.

Several times I saw me walking around Los Leones, both of us

on our way to the same place, until one peeled off.

Always alone, we dressed alike, in matching outfits, comfy fabrics, tie-dye patterns.

Today I ran into myself as usual at the Starbucks on Suecia, eating

with a man, what a relief.

I have a friend! I'm not alone!

We smiled

I ordered a Chai Latte with soy milk,  
same as myself.

## Figura fondo

Estoy en la fotografía de esa ciudad,  
me desfiguro ahí,  
como un trozo de algo.

Pero llámame persona,

un transeúnte más,

un acento

Sé sobre el tiempo,

escucho conversaciones,

me gustaría saber menos,

soy texto.

Un par de oraciones consecutivas que hablan del no sentir.

Dime:

¿Qué dice el humano aislado?

## **Background Figure**

I'm in the photo of that city,  
distorted over there,  
like a piece of something.

But call me a person,  
another passerby,  
an accent

I know about time,  
I listen to conversations,  
I'd like to know less,

I'm text.

A pair of sequential sentences that speak of not feeling.  
Tell me:

What does the isolated human say?

## Probabilidades

Entonces,  
Jesucristo no vendrá a salvarte.  
¿Quién es ese?  
¡Ah,  
el de libro grande y azul!  
Pero  
prefiero  
esos tomos negros,  
aunque  
posiblemente,  
Don Quijote tampoco vendrá a salvarme.

## Probabilities

Well,

Jesus Christ won't come to save you.

Who's that?

Oh,

him, from that old blue book!

Still,

I prefer

those black tomes,

although

it's possible that

Don Quixote won't come to save me either.

## Reina de espadas

Tus manos sobre tus rodillas tiemblan  
y sentada padeces la tarde,  
piensas en el niño pequeño que se sentaba a tu lado.  
No sabes dónde está.

Pronto te cambiarán el vestido azul de las grandes flores  
por aquel negro que te negarás a usar  
y  
tendrás aquellas ganas de llorar que se mezclan con un  
dolor de garganta,  
pero  
nada pasa,  
sientes tan solo cómo te toma de la mano una mujer.

Todo está bien mamá.

## Queen of Spades

Your hands tremble atop your knees  
stuck in a chair, you ache through the afternoon,  
thinking of the little boy who used to sit by your side.  
You can't remember where he's gone.  
Soon enough they'll change you out of the blue flowered  
dress  
into that black one you hate  
and  
you'll feel a desire to cry along with a tender sore throat  
but for now  
nothing happens,  
only the sensation of a woman taking you by the hand.

Everything's fine, Mama.

## Translator's Foreword

¿Tiene sentido leer un texto sobre la dinámica racial en el sur de los Estados Unidos, y las externalidades que tal coyuntura aún mantiene en las comunidades del estado de Alabama, escritas por alguien que no es parte de esa historia? ¿No se vuelve esa ajenidad una condición de imposibilidad para ese intento? ¿Y no es esa imposibilidad evidenciación de una injusticia que entonces se vuelve recurrente y revictimiza? El texto “El carnaval de Mardi Gras en Mobile” escrito por Vera Carothers resuelve esas disyuntivas, una por una, de un modo regio.

El texto de no ficción que se traduce a continuación, “El Carnaval de Mardi Gras”, forma parte de la de tesis de grado que la autora, Vera Carothers, presentará ante la Universidad de Columbia en el contexto del máster en escritura creativa que sigue en dicha casa de estudio. El proyecto comprende una colección de ensayos personales y crónicas aún sin título.

Vera es escritora de ficción y no ficción, de origen estadounidense y argentina, y productora de radio. Actualmente cursa un máster en escritura creativa en no ficción en la Universidad de Columbia. Nació en Washington DC; y es trilingüe en inglés, español y francés.



## VERA CAROTHERS

### MARDI GRAS IN MOBILE

Everyone in the crowd outside the convention center looks as if they might be related—the young women in satin and taffeta dresses, the boy-faced men in tailcoats, even the dames with powdery blow-outs and walking aids. I'm surprised to find myself wearing a floor-length dress, about to go inside. The night air feels warm and limp like wet wool. It's February and the start of a new Mardi Gras season in Mobile, Alabama.

This is the birthplace of Mardi Gras—a celebration that dates back to the early 1700s, when the city was the capital of French Louisiana. The first parade—a group of drunk men walking through the streets at dawn with cowbells, hoes, and rakes—occurred in 1830. These men formed a group drolly named the Cowbellion de Rakin Society. Today, there are over forty mystic societies, members-only groups which operate similarly to fraternities, except that during festivities, revelers wear masks to disguise their identities. Each society puts on its own Mardi Gras ball. Getting an invitation is no easy feat. You must be invited by a society member and in the oldest societies, in order to join, you must have ties either by blood or marriage.

**traducido del inglés por  
RODRIGO CORTÉS MUÑOZ**

**EL CARNAVAL DE MARDI  
GRAS EN MOBILE**

Todos quienes están fuera del centro de convenciones parecieran emparentados: las mujeres jóvenes ataviadas en vestidos de tafetán y satín; hombres con rostros de niños, quienes visten trajes de cola; incluso las damas con peinados de peluquería apelmazados ayudándose de bastones. Yo misma llevo un vestido largo y me apresto a hacer ingreso al lugar. El aire de la noche se siente cálido y azumagado, así también es posible percibir la humedad ambiente. Es febrero, y comienza una nueva temporada de carnaval de Mardi Gras en Mobile, Alabama.

Mobile es el lugar en el que se inicia la tradición de Mardi Gras. Una celebración que comienza a principios del mil setecientos, cuando la ciudad era la capital de la Luisiana francesa. El primer desfile, compuesto por un grupo de hombres ebrios que caminaban por las calles al atardecer cargando cencerros, azadones y rastrillos, tuvo lugar en mil ochocientos treinta. Éstos formaron un grupo excéntrico llamado la *Sociedad Cencerrística de Rakin*. Actualmente, hay más de cuarenta agrupaciones festivas, cuyos integrantes se relacionan como si fueran fraternidades universitarias con la salvedad de que, durante las festividades, los celebrantes utilizan máscaras que ocultan sus identidades. Cada agrupación es responsable de su propia fiesta. Obtener una invitación no es una tarea fácil. Para que ello ocurra, una debe ser invitada por el o la integrante de una agrupación; y en el caso de las comunidades más antiguas, el invitado debe tener algún tipo de ligazón sanguínea o política.

I have neither. My invitation came from a fan of the oral history project I work for, StoryCorps. Along with two co-workers, I am spending a month in Mobile as part of a year-long road trip across the country. As part of my job, I have attended sports games, theatre performances, fairs, and conferences, but this is my first ball.

A few nights ago, I watched the 2008 documentary *The Order of the Myths*, made by filmmaker Margaret Brown, the daughter of a former Mardi Gras queen. The film follows two sets of Mardi Gras “royalty”: the king and queen of the all-white Mobile Carnival Association, and the king and queen of the all-black Mobile Area Mardi Gras Association. For the first time, the black king and queen attend the sumptuous coronation ceremony of the white royalty, one of the most important moments of the Mardi Gras season. Although there have been black mystic societies since 1940, the celebrations are as deeply segregated as the rest of Mobile. In 2004, the first “integrated” society was formed but as of 2007, it only had one white member.

Images from the film return as I step into the ballroom. Images of men in flesh-colored masks staring unsmilingly at the camera. I read online that members of mystic societies conceal their identities during Mardi Gras so that they can “revel with abandon.” This light-hearted anonymity feels tainted when white men in masks start to talk about race. “We don’t have a race problem in

Yo no cumplía con ninguna de las dos condiciones. La invitación que recibí me fue enviada a través de un seguidor del proyecto de narración oral histórica para el que trabajo, *StoryCorps*. Es por ello, que junto a dos colegas llevamos ya un mes en Mobile, como parte de un proyecto mayor que consiste en un viaje por los Estados Unidos por el espacio de un año. En este contexto, he asistido a eventos deportivos, obras de teatro, ferias y conferencias. Ésta es mi primera fiesta organizada por una sociedad festiva.

Pude ver, un par de noches atrás, el documental “The Order of the Myths”, del año 2008, cuya autoría corresponde a Margaret Brown. Ella es hija de quien fue reina en una de las tantas versiones del carnaval. El registro sigue a dos “realezas” que participan de la festividad: por una parte, la reina y el rey de la Asociación Festiva de Mobile, agrupación enteramente blanca; y la reina y el rey de la Asociación festiva de Mobile para el Carnaval Mardi Gras que aglutina solo a personas negras. Pese a que han existido agrupaciones de personas afroamericanas desde el año 1940, las celebraciones entre los grupos se encuentran separadas, como si tales fueran prolongación de la estratificación que cruza a la ciudad. En el año 2004, se formó la primera sociedad festiva mixta, pero desde el año 2007 a la fecha, tiene solo un integrante blanco.

Las escenas del documental se vuelven vívidas y me es imposible no recordarlas al tiempo que ingreso al salón de baile. Imágenes de hombres con máscaras coloreadas de color carne y taciturnos miran directo a la cámara. Leí *online* que miembros de las sociedades festivas ocultan sus identidades durante el carnaval de Mardi Gras, a fin de poder disfrutar de la festividad sin ningún tipo de restricción. Ese gesto simple de anonimato se ve interrumpido cuando un grupo de hombres blancos, utilizando máscaras, comienzan a hablar de temas raciales. “No tenemos problemas raciales en Mobile”,

Mobile,” one says. At the bar, I see a group of men wearing white masks, white boots, white spurs. They stop me and my co-workers as we walk by. “Take a round of tequila shots,” one man says, more a command than a question. “No, thanks,” we say. “Come on, it’s on us,” another drawls. We choose not to argue. I’m keenly aware that we are three Northern women, that we don’t belong here at all. The shot burns down the back of my throat.

Since I’d arrived in Mobile, I’d noticed that Mardi Gras only emphasized how divided the city was into white and black. Even though the city’s population is more than half black, the bars and restaurants where I eat and drink are mostly white. At parades, the spectators clustered around metal barricades are black or white depending on the block, but never both. And the parade routes that wind through the mansion-lined downtown district never reach the streets of lower-income black neighborhoods, where houses are modest, paint peels and weeds choke the cracks in the sidewalk.

In the film, Dora Finley, the founder of a local African-American history organization, calls Mardi Gras the “last stronghold of segregation” in the city. She tells a story of a white man and his wife who were visiting Mobile during Mardi Gras the previous year. The man excitedly told her that he could get tickets to a ball from his employer. She describes his disappointment when she told him that his wife, who is black, would not be welcome at a ball run by

dice uno de ellos. En el bar, veo a un grupo de hombres utilizando máscaras blancas, botas blancas y espuelas blancas. De hecho, mientras intentamos avanzar uno de ellos nos detiene y me insta, junto a mis colegas, a tomar una ronda de cortos de tequila. La invitación no es sino una orden. “No, gracias”, decimos. “Vamos, nosotros invitamos la ronda”, uno de ellos insiste de manera tarda. Elegimos no confrontar al grupo. Estoy consciente de que somos tres mujeres del norte de los Estados Unidos, que no pertenecemos a este lugar. El alcohol destilado, entonces, quema mi garganta.

Desde que llegué a Mobile, he podido darme cuenta de que la festividad de Mardi Gras no hace sino enfatizar cuán dividida se encuentra la ciudad entre blancos y negros. Pese a que los habitantes de Mobile son más que en su mayoría negros, los bares y restaurantes que visito son lugares concurridos por blancos. Así, también, en los desfiles, los espectadores que puedo observar tras las vallas papales, son negros o blancos dependiendo del barrio por el que el desfile avanza, pero nunca el público es diverso. Las rutas que utilizan los desfiles pasan por el frente de las mansiones del centro de la ciudad, pero nunca se permiten ingresar a los barrios negros de bajos ingresos en los que las residencias son modestas, la pintura se descascara, y la hierba se apodera de las hendiduras y grietas del pavimento.

En la película, Dora Finley, la fundadora de una organización afroamericana que investiga sobre cuestiones sociales y su historicidad, se refiere al carnaval de Mardi Gras como el último bastión de la segregación racial en la ciudad. En una de las tantas escenas, ella relata la historia de un hombre blanco y su mujer quienes visitaron Mobile durante el carnaval. El hombre, en su relato, animadamente; cuenta a su mujer que intentará obtener entradas para el baile a través de alguno de sus empleados. Aunque luego viene la decepción al enterarse que ella, quien es negra, no será admitida en el lugar,

a white mystic society. Finley refutes the claim that the black community prefers segregation. “Everybody wants to say, ‘they like it like that.’ Well, because we don’t have a choice,” she says. She doesn’t express anger, she puts it lightly, but she stares at the camera to make sure we understand the gravity of what she is saying. It is this restraint that makes me hold my breath until the scene cuts.

I look around the ballroom. The party is “global” themed. My table is supposed to be “Caribbean”—plastic tumblers in the shape of pineapples filled with rum, colorful paper umbrella straws everywhere. I do a quick headcount of the non-white people in the room. Surely, things have changed since 2007? I count dozens of people before realizing that every single one of them is a server, or bartender, or the janitor, who sweeps confetti as couples dance around him. I catch one of my co-worker’s eyes and grimace. She returns the expression, as appalled as I am. Around us, middle-aged men hold their wives close on the dance floor as an all-black soul band plays hits from Otis Redding and Marvin Gaye. The crowd already smells like starched sweat, whisky and old perfume. Not knowing what else to do, I slug from my pineapple-shaped tumbler full of rum.

The show begins. A *tableau vivant* of white women dressed as “Orientals.” They sway to the faux-Chinese music. They wear red dresses and carry parasols. Their

toda vez que la fiesta es organizado por una comunidad blanca. Finley decididamente rechaza la aseveración de que la comunidad negra en Mobile prefiera la segregación. “Todo el mundo quisiera decir, ‘les gusta de esta manera’. La verdad es que no tenemos más opción que ésta”, asevera. Ella no expresa rabia al decirlo, al contrario; al intervenir lo hace de manera casual. Pero a través de su gesto, al mirar fijamente la cámara, ella quiere que nosotros entendamos la gravedad de lo que está diciendo. Ese ademán contenido me lleva a aguantar la respiración hasta que la escena termina

Estoy en el lugar y miro alrededor. La fiesta tematiza cuestiones globales. La mesa que me corresponde, de hecho, se supone nos recuerda el Caribe. Así hay, por doquier, vasos plásticos con la forma de piñas llenos de ron y bombillas imitando pequeños paraguas. Cuento arbitrariamente el número de personas no blancas presentes en el lugar. ¿Habrán cambiado las cosas desde el año 2007? Sí, cuento docenas de personas no blancas en el lugar. Tales y cada una de las que están ahí lo hacen como empleados, mozos, camareros, o como el conserje, quien tiene por función arrojar confeti a las parejas que bailan cerca de él. En ese instante, miro a una de mis compañeras y no puedo evitar hacer un rictus. Ella me devuelve la expresión evidenciando estupor. Alrededor de nosotras, hombres de edad media llevan del brazo a sus mujeres a la pista de baile. La banda de *soul* compuesta por músicos negros toca hits de Otis Redding and Marvin Gaye. En el lugar, el olor a almidón de las vestimentas se confunde con el del sudor de los asistentes, el aroma del whisky y perfume de los asistentes de mayor edad. Sin saber muy bien qué hacer, sorbo del vaso con forma de piña lleno de ron.

Comienza el show. Un *tableau vivant* de mujeres blancas vestidas a la sazón oriental irrumpen bailando al compás de lo que pretendería ser música china. Visten indumentarias rojas y llevan parasoles. Sus rostros están

faces are painted white and they wear short black wigs. The crowd claps and smiles. It gets worse. A “global” procession parades around the room: Native American costumes, “island people” costumes, Japanese costumes. These could be stills from a how-to video on cultural appropriation: “What Not to Wear.” How is this happening in 2017? I want to shout, but I don’t. Instead, I nudge my co-worker and mouth “wtf” but my boss intercepts me—“remember, we are representing StoryCorps,” she says. I drink more rum.

I think about the most shocking moment from Brown’s documentary. Toward the end of the film, she reveals that the white queen she’s been filming is a direct descendant of a wealthy business owner who commissioned the last slave ship to enter the U.S. before the end of the slave trade. In 1860, fifty years after the U.S. government banned the importation of enslaved Africans, the *Clotilda* transported 110 young men and women from Benin to the shores of the Mobile Bay. The captives were forced to evacuate and hide in the swamp as the ship captain burned and scuttled the vessel to destroy evidence of the voyage. Neither the businessman nor the ship captain was punished, due to the outbreak of the Civil War. After emancipation, the freed Africans founded Africatown, where they preserved their language and tribal customs for generations. The film’s other protagonist, the queen of Mobile’s most prominent black mystic society, was born and raised in Africatown. Her

maquillados de blanco y usan pelucas. El público aplaude y sonríe. Esto va de mal en peor. Lo que pareciera ser una procesión multicultural hace su ingreso en el lugar. Se trata de personas vestidas como nativos americanos, con disfraces japoneses e isleños. Cada una de las escenas que se suceden podría formar parte de un tutorial sobre cómo realizar una apropiación cultural. El título del registro podría ser, de hecho: “Cómo no hacer una celebración”. Me preguntó si lo que acontece ante mí está, de hecho, sucediendo en el año 2017. Quisiera gritar. No lo hago. Busco la atención de mis compañeras y les gesticulo inaudiblemente, “qué chucha es esto”. Mi jefa, interrumpiendo la comunicación del escozor, me responde con la siguiente frase: “Recuerda que estamos aquí representando a StoryCorps”. No me queda más que seguir bebiendo del vaso con forma de piña lleno de ron.

Pienso en el momento del documental de Brown que más estupefacción me causó. Hacia el final del registro, ella nos revela que la reina blanca que ha seguido durante la filmación es descendiente en línea recta de un hombre acaudalado que mandató el último barco que trajo esclavos y que recaló en las costas de Estados Unidos. En 1859, cincuenta años después de que el gobierno de los Estados Unidos prohibiera la importación de esclavos africanos, el buque *Clotilda* transportó 110 mujeres y hombres jóvenes desde Benin a las costas de la bahía de Mobile. Quienes venían a bordo fueron obligados a evacuar la embarcación y esconderse en la ciénaga cercana, pues el capitán quemó y hundió el buque destruyendo cualquier tipo de evidencia. Ni quien había mandatado el viaje ni el responsable de la embarcación fueron sancionados debido a la eclosión de la Guerra Civil. Luego de la emancipación cursada desde el gobierno central, los africanos libertos fundaron Africatown, lugar en el que preservaron sus costumbres tribales y sus lenguajes por generaciones. De hecho, la otra protagonista del documental, la reina de la asociación negra más importante en Mobile, nació y se

grandpa's grandpa was one of the people brought over on the *Clotilda*. Before she poses for a picture with the white queen on the day of the coronation, she sits at her family's kitchen table with her grandparents. When she tells them who the white queen's family is—"Her people is the people who brought the *Clotilda* ship"—they exclaim, "oh yeah, that's right," but express no judgment or anger. She repeats, as if to herself, "My people was on her people's ship."

When the two queens finally stand side-by-side, the black queen smiles for the camera with her hands clasped in front of her. In an interview afterwards, she sounds grateful that the white king and queen recognized her for the first time. She says this is a landmark in the history of Mobile. "Maybe they will come some year to our coronation, if they don't have anything else going on," she says. "I don't know, but maybe, I don't know." The scene is striking, the doubt and quiet resignation in her voice laying over the image of the two queens side-by-side. I can't get it out of my head.

crio en Africatown. El abuelo de su abuelo fue uno de quienes venía en el *Clotilda*. Antes de posar para una fotografía con la reina blanca el día de la coronación, ella al tiempo que se sentaba junto a sus abuelos en la cocina de la casa, les contó qué ligazón familiar tenía la reina blanca. “Sus ancestros son quienes trajeron a los esclavos a bordo del *Clotilda*” dijo ella. Cuando sus abuelos escucharon esa afirmación, simplemente respondieron “ah, sí, de verdad”. No expresaron ni rabia ni emitieron algún tipo de juicio. En la filmación se la ve repitiendo para sí. “Mis ancestros venían en ese barco”.

Cuando las dos reinas estaban una al lado de la otra, la reina negra sonrió a la cámara con sus manos entrelazadas en frente de ella. En una entrevista posterior, ella se muestra agradecida de que la reina y el rey blanco la hayan reconocido como tal por primera vez en la historia del carnaval. Ella dice que ese gesto es crucial para la historia de Mobile. Ella añade “quizás, vengan alguna vez si es que no tienen otra cosa que hacer”. “Quizás, no lo sé, no lo sé”, agrega. La escena es potente: la duda y la resignación silenciosa en su voz se superpone a la imagen de las reinas de pie. No me la puedo sacar de mi cabeza.

## Translator's Foreword

Rodrigo Cortés Muñoz (b. 1978) is a Chilean lawyer specializing in international law. His first novel, *Buganvilia* (*Bougainvillea*), won a prestigious Latin American novel prize, the Premio Revista de Libros de *El Mercurio*, in 2018. He began writing the book during a period of burnout from a decade of working with homeless children addicted to sniffing gasoline on Santiago's poor South Side. Inspired by socially conscious poets in Chile, like the great Gabriela Mistral, Cortés writes from the desire to force what he calls the “two Chiles” into dialogue: the poor neighborhoods and the affluent ones, where he himself lives.

The poems presented here are part of “Germán Carrasco,” an unpublished collection that pokes fun at the persona of the “grand Chilean poet.” Carrasco, a real poet, appears throughout the collection as a recurring character. He stands in for what Cortés considers the outsized ego of Chilean poets. But he also serves as a mirror for Cortés’s own relationship with ambition and ego. Contradiction is a key theme uniting the collection; contrasts in tone and register build the particular sensibility that provide a through line for these poems. Contradiction also characterizes Cortés’s biography. He is a lawyer and a poet; his poetry is distinctly Chilean but diverges from the tradition of tragic poetry in Chile; he critiques the Chilean literary world but is also a part of it; his poems are funny and sad.

The main challenge in translating Cortés’s work was translating his layered perspective on the world he describes. A reader familiar with Santiago will be surprised by how Cortés moves easily across a city that is polarized by class and race. They will experience shock at reading street and prison slang mixed with a highly educated register. I had to figure out how to bring

some of this reading experience to a foreign audience. For some place names, I added stealth glosses like “the Andrea supermarket” in poem one and “Mt. Leonera” and “Altamira Books” in poem two. For others, I relied on the momentum of the poem and the humor to carry a reader past unknown landmarks. I also had to find a way to bring some of the impact of the slang into the English. In the first poem, the common slang word “weonx” (Cortés chose the gender-neutral version) appears ten times. It was impossible to find one or two words that could replace the elastic “weonx,” which in English could mean dude, idiot, man, motherfucker, or any number of things. In the end, the solution to “weonx” was a triangulation between three words: “they,” “motherfucker,” and “guy,” plus the addition of a plethora of “fucks” and “shits” throughout to enhance the vulgarity.

The poems are funny. They use humor to defeat sadness and rage. I hope you enjoy them.

# RODRIGO CORTéS MUÑOZ

## POEMAS

### UNO

antes, cuando estaba en el colegio, para subirme el ánimo, iba a los Teletrak.

El que quedaba al lado del *Andrea*, en plaza Ñuñoa. No me dejaban entrar

con uniforme. Pero yo le decía al dueño que estudiaba en un colegio inglés. Del *ABS*.

Y cantaba el himno de Inglaterra. Y al dueño del Teletrak como que le gustó.

Le daba “caché” al local, me dijo. Nunca supe bien qué era “caché”.

Pero lxs weonxs botaron el Teletrak. Y pusieron una compraventa de autos. Y construyeron

caleta de edificios. Y cambió el barrio, se llenó de weonxs. Y le empezaron a decir Ñuñork

a la plaza Ñuñoa, y le sacaban fotos al boliviano del negocio de la esquina Y lo comparaban

con Bukowski. Si en este país hay weonxs pa’ todo. ¿Qué hace uno con la pena?

Encontré otro Teletrak.

En el 31 de Vicuña Mackenna. Al lado del Jumbo.

Los weonxs hicieron cagar el Teletrak ahora para el estallido.

**translated from the spanish by  
VERA CAROTHERS**

**POEMS**

**ONE.**

Back in high school, to cheer myself up, I'd go watch people place bets at the Teletrak:

That one next to the Andrea supermarket in Ñuñoa Plaza. They wouldn't let me in with my school uniform on. But I'd tell the owner I went to a British school. Part of the British Schools Association.

Then I'd sing God Save the Queen. And oh, how the Teletrak owner loved it.

It gave the place *caché*, he said. I never really knew what *caché* meant.

But they shut down the Teletrak. And put in a used car dealership instead. And built

a fuckload of buildings. The area changed, it filled up with douchebags. They started calling

Ñuñoa Plaza “Ñu York” Plaza and took pictures of the Bolivian guy at the corner store,

saying he looked like Bukowski. Yep, there's every kind of motherfucker in this country.

How do you deal with sadness?

I found a different Teletrak.

At 31 Vicuña Mackenna. Next to the Jumbo.

But they burned down the Teletrak during the protests.

En Londres lxs weonxs también tienen pena. Allá los Teletrak se llaman Betfred. Yo tenía mi favorito. A dos cuadras de la London School of Economics.

Y se llenaba de weonxs de la LSE y de Kings College. Y de wenxs que trabajaban en Clifford & Chance y en Freshfields Brickhaus Deringer. Todxs los weonxs abogadxs. Todos los weonxs con caleta de pena.

Yo puse una regla, porque en Londres se toma caleta. El weón que daba jugo, “era”.

« The big egg give juice, was».

Y la escribí con un plumón en una cartulina rosada. Y la pegué al lado de las teles.

“Was”, decía yo. Y al weón, entre todxs, lo echábamos del local.

“I am not there, was”, aprendieron a decir lxs weonxs allá.

Si a las finales, no hay nada más universal que tener pena.

In London they're miserable, too. Over there, the Teletraks are called Betfreds.

I had my favorite one. Two blocks from the London School of Economics.

It would fill up with guys from LSE and Kings College. And who work

at Clifford & Chance and at Freshfields Brickhaus Deringer. Every last guy was a lawyer.

Every last guy was really fucking sad.

In London they drink a fuck-ton, so I made a rule: *El weón que daba jugo, era.*

Which means, “If you’re shit-faced, *fuck off.*”

And I wrote it literally in Sharpie on pink poster board: “The big egg give juice, *was.*”

And I put it up by the TVs.

“*Was,*” I’d say. *Fuck off.* And we’d all throw the motherfucker out.

They all learned to say, “I am not there, *was.*”

Which means, “I don’t give a flying fuck.”

Yep, in the end, there’s nothing more universal than being miserable.

## DOS

Tengo un microondas que uso como despertador. Lo puse sobre la caja en el que venía.

No hay mucho que calentar en mi casa, la verdad. Y tampoco hay muchos muebles.

Vivo en un departamento de dos pisos que enfrenta el Parque Bustamante. Duermo en el

primero. En lo que sería el living. En el suelo. Sobre una colchoneta *Mammut* con la que alguna

vez fui a al Leonera. No llegué. Casi me desmayo. En el primer intento me fui al suelo. Perdí el

conocimiento. Por la puna. Es por el oxígeno. En el segundo, lo mismo. Eso de que la tercera es

la vencida pareciera más bien un cliché.

Eso digo siempre cuando alguien intenta conocerme más. “Yo tengo mucha más necesidad de

oxígeno que la gente normal”. Las personas entienden que soy especial, entonces.

Lo del microondas fue una confusión. Yo estaba sentado en las bancas del Drugstore. La que

enfrenta a la Altamira. Alguien me saludó. Preguntó que cómo estaba. Él, añadió, que andaba

feliz. Lo estaba, de hecho. Algo tiene la gente feliz. Me dieron ganas de ser así.

—Me caso—le respondí.

—¡Felicitaciones, Rodrigo!

## TWO.

My microwave is my alarm clock. It sits on the box it came in.

There's not much to heat up at my place, to be honest. And there's not much furniture.

The two-story apartment I live in faces Bustamante Park. I sleep on the first floor in what's

supposed to be the living room. On the ground. On a Mammut sleeping pad I once took

to climb Mt. Leonera. I didn't make it to the top. Almost fainted. Fell hard on the first try. Lost

consciousness. It was the altitude. Lack of oxygen. Same thing the second time around. I let third

time's the charm remain a cliché.

Whenever someone tries to get to know me better, I say: "I need a lot more

oxygen than normal people." That way, they understand that I'm special.

The microwave thing was a mix-up. One day I was sitting on a bench outside the strip mall

in front of Altamira Books. Someone stopped to say hi. He asked how I was doing. He said that

he was doing well. He looked it, actually. There's something about happy people. They make me want to be like them.

"I'm getting married," I said.

"Congratulations, Rodrigo!"

—Gracias.

—No me ha llegado el parte—añadió con extrañeza.

Él me había invitado al suyo. Un compañero de colegio casado con una compañera de colegio.

Tuve que enviarle un parte. Inventar una iglesia, una novia, unos padres. Una fiesta. Una lista de regalos.

Voilà.

A ella le puse Almendra. Por Spinetta. dieron ganas de ser así.

“Thanks.”

“I never got the invitation,” he said, taken aback.

He'd invited me to his wedding. An old classmate who got hitched to another old classmate.

I had to send him an invitation. Make up a church, a fiancée, parents. A party. A gift registry.

And that was that.

As for her, I named her Almendra. For Spinetta.

## TRES

A mí me cae bien Germán Carrasco. Y creo que escribe bien. Me gusta su poesía.

Pero es medio mula —él, no su poesía—. No como Clint Eastwood —éste es un intertexto—.

No es que Germán Carrasco quiera ser como Clint Eastwood.

En algún sentido, Germán Carrasco es nuestro Clint Eastwood.

Germán Carrasco hace un taller de poesía. Personalizado. A la persona. Privado. Uno y Germán Carrasco.

Con él. En su taller. Sentado en su silla. Cerca de Santa Isabel.

A las 10.00 de la mañana. Yo llegué a las diez de la mañana. Clavado. Yo soy

clavado. Y Germán Carrasco me abrió la puerta y me preguntó quién era.

Así como si yo fuera la persona que tomara el estado del agua.

“Vengo al taller”, le dije.

“Ah”, respondió.

Como si tuviera más presente que ese día y a esa hora tomaban el estado del agua.

Como si mi poesía no importara.

O peor, como si el agua fuera más importante que la palabra.

Nada. Germán Carrasco me hizo pasar. Me senté en su taller.

Y había un montón de *post it* pegados por todas partes.

## THREE.

I like Germán Carrasco and I think he writes well.

I'm into his poetry.

But he's kind of full of shit—him, not his poetry. He's no Dirty Harry.

It's not that Germán Carrasco wants to be Clint Eastwood.

In some ways, Germán Carrasco *is* our Clint Eastwood.

Germán Carrasco does this poetry workshop. Private.

Tailored to you. Just you and Germán Carrasco.

There with him. In his study. He's sitting in his chair. Near Santa Isabel station.

At 10 in the morning. I arrived at 10 in the morning on the dot. I'm punctual.

Germán Carrasco opened the door and asked who I was. Just like that, as if I was coming to read the water meter. I'm here for the workshop, I said.

Oh, he said.

As if all he had in mind for that date and time was someone coming to read the water meter.

As if my poetry didn't matter.

Or worse, as if water was more important than words.

Anyway. Germán Carrasco let me in. I sat in his study.

There were post-its stuck all over the place.

Como queriendo dar la impresión que Germán Carrasco tiene caleta de ideas.

Esa fue mi impresión: “Loco, Germán Carrasco tiene caleta de ideas”.

Yo ya le había enviado mi texto a Germán Carrasco. Pero el día del pico lo había leído.

Yo había llevado una copia impresa. Y fue bueno, porque ese día se cortó la luz.

Al menos en el taller de Germán Carrasco. Y le entregué la copia.

Y la comenzó a leer.

Ahí. Conmigo enfrente.

Y fue como si me dijera: “Loco, hasta la cuenta del agua es más buena que esta huevá”.

Y como que de repente se cansó. Y me empezó a hablar de poesía norteamericana.

Yo le dije que me gustaba Bertoni. Y como que se enojó.

Igual sabe Germán Carrasco.

Finalmente, llegamos a la página cuatro. “Se agotó la hora”,

me dijo. Así como jadeando. Porque la poesía es un torbellino.

Cuando me iba, le di la mano. Si igual es Germán Carrasco.

E iba saliendo de la puerta, y apareció un jovencito, como de mi porte.

Esmirriado.

Sí, me preguntó por el medidor del agua.

As if to give the impression that Germán Carrasco is full of ideas.

That's what I thought: "Shit, Germán Carrasco is full of ideas."

I had already sent my writing to Germán Carrasco.

But he'd read it the day hell froze over.

I'd brought a hard copy. That was lucky, because the power went out.

At least at Germán Carrasco's place.

So I handed him my copy.

He started reading it.

Right there. Right in front of me.

Like he was saying: "Shit, even the water bill is better than this pile of crap."

Then, well, he got tired. He started going on about North American poetry.

I told him that I liked Bertoni. And then, well, he got pissed.

But he knows what's what, Germán Carrasco.

Finally, we got to page 4. Time's up, he said.

Like he was out of breath. Because poetry is a whirlwind.

On my way out, I shook his hand. After all, he's Germán Carrasco.

I was walking out the door and this guy showed up, young, about my size.

Scrawny.

Yep, he asked me where the water meter was.

## CUATRO

¿Cómo tratar a un cuñado adolescente de dientes chuecos y mirada perdida que viste una polera Lacoste que claramente no es Lacoste y que me pregunta con insistencia desesperante algo que realmente no entiendo pese a que los dos hablamos español pero él en un nivel casi primitivo donde “casi” tiene que ver con que la hermana de él es la mujer de mi vida?

Se me ocurrió matarlo. Esa sería la parte fácil. Decirle algo así como “Oye, Claudio, vamos por unas cervezas después del partido de básquet”. Él aceptaría con un “Qué salado, Ro”. Nos juntaríamos y en el escampado que hay detrás de la cancha y ya atardeciendo le cortaría la cabeza. Lo rociaría en parafina, y como en Uruguay la práctica de los asados durante el período de carnaval es una costumbre, nadie sospecharía ni del momento y ni del olor.

Pero ella lo ama. Mucho más que a mí. A mí no me ama. Ella ama a su hermano como nunca he visto a nadie. A ese casi-primitivo de dientes chuecos que no se da cuenta que yo me doy cuenta que la polera que viste no es Lacoste. Y ese es mi problema.

Aunque hay otro y más grave: ella. Ella es mucho más peligrosa que yo. Certeza y precisa al tiempo de dañar. Fría e impávida como una estatua ante el dolor. Torticera y silenciosa cuando se lo propone. Y claramente sospecharía de mí. Creo, además, que advierte mi forzada impostura: “¡Qué buena, Claudio. Jugaste muy bien hoy!”. O derechamente mi zalamería: “¡Te queda muy bien esa remera, y es Lacoste, ah!”.

Así que tengo un dilema. Yo lo quiero matar. Yo le temo a ella. Ella lo sabe. Que le temo y creo intuye que quiero

## FOUR.

How do I deal with a teenage brother-in-law with bad teeth and bloodshot eyes who wears a Lacoste polo that clearly isn't Lacoste and with annoying persistence asks me something I really don't understand even though we both speak Spanish, though he speaks at an almost primitive level where "almost" has to do with the fact that his sister is the love of my life?

I thought about killing him. That'd be the easy part. Saying something like, "Yo, Claudio, let's get some beers after the basketball game." He'd accept with a "Sick plan, Ro." We'd meet in the clearing behind the court and as the sun was setting I'd cut off his head. I'd coat him in wax and since everyone in Uruguay barbecues around Carnival, neither the timing nor the smell would arouse suspicion.

But she loves him. Much more than she loves me. She doesn't love me. She loves her brother like no one else. That quasi-Neanderthal with bad teeth who doesn't know that I know that his polo isn't Lacoste. And that's my problem.

Still, there's another problem and this one's worse: her. She's much more dangerous than me. Firm and precise when it's time to strike. Cold and impassive as a statue in the face of pain. Malicious and mute when she wants to be. And she'd definitely find me out. Besides, I think she sees through my act: "Nice one, Claudio! You played great today!" Or my obvious flattery: "That shirt looks good on you, bro, and it's Lacoste, eh?"

It's a real dilemma. I want to kill him, but I'm afraid of her. She knows it. That I'm afraid of her and I think she

matar a su hermano. La amo, la verdad. Ella lo sabe y se da cuenta. Que la amo y de mis imposturas. Sabe además que yo sé que ella no me ama. Aunque, y ese “aunque” me mantiene en vilo y con vida, creo que podría llegar a hacerlo. Y ella lo sabe, yo lo sé. Hasta mi cuñado se da cuenta: “Ro, mi hermana está re enamorada de vos”. Lo que no sé es si él sabe que eso me hace feliz y así lo invito a la cancha todos los domingos y a unas cervezas después del estadio o quizás me lo dice porque sabe que quiero creerle y que en ese querer creerle soy capaz de invitarlo todos los domingos al estadio y a unas cervezas.

also suspects I want to kill her brother. Truth is, I love her. She knows it, she can tell. That I love her and that I'm putting on an act. She also knows that I know that she doesn't love me. However, and that "however" keeps me hanging on, I think she could start. She knows it, I'm sure. Even my brother-in-law can tell: "Ro, my sister is like, crazy in love with you." What I don't know is if he says this because he knows it makes me happy, and so I'll invite him to the game on Sundays and out for beers after, or if he says it because he knows I want to believe it, and in wanting to believe it, I'm capable of inviting him to the game every Sunday and out for beers.

## CINCO

Mis hormigas no se comen las hallullas  
que compro en el Supermercado.

No sé si ello tiene que ver conmigo o con el  
Supermercado.

Mis hormigas, en algún sentido, deben  
percibir mi ánimo por estos días.

Mis hormigas quisieron comerse un shampoo de coco  
que alguien distraídamente dejó en la cocina.

Creo que las hormigas se preguntan si ese gesto,  
haber dejado un shampoo de coco en la cocina  
distraídamente,  
es un acto fallido de alguien que la verdad quiere regresar.  
O más bien, un gesto lastimoso de quien constató  
el estado de mi cocina, en la que no hay refrigerador.

Yo converso con mis hormigas. Les leo poemas de Ezra  
Pound. Y cada noche, les cuento cómo me fue en el día.  
Mis hormigas opinan, a veces, cosas como que mi inglés  
se  
ha ido deteriorando en Chile. Yo les respondo que no  
tengo  
con quién hablar.

Mis hormigas me preguntaron dónde compré las  
hallullas.

Les mentí. Dije “Le Fournil”. No quise decir en el  
Supermercado. Aunque creo, mis hormigas saben que no  
soy

## FIVE.

My ants don't eat the *hallula* rolls  
I buy at the supermarket.  
I'm not sure if it's because of me or the supermarket.  
My ants must be picking up a little  
on my mood these days.

My ants wanted to eat the coconut shampoo  
that someone accidentally left behind in my kitchen.  
I think the ants ask themselves if this gesture—  
accidentally leaving coconut shampoo in my kitchen—  
is someone's Freudian slip, someone who actually wants  
to come back.  
Or rather, the pitying gesture of someone who noticed  
the sorry state of my kitchen, which doesn't have a  
fridge.

I talk to my ants. I read them poems by Ezra Pound.

And every night, I tell them how my day went.

My ants speak their mind sometimes, things like how my  
English  
is worse since I came back to Chile. I tell them I don't  
have anyone to practice with.

My ants asked me where I bought my *hallula* rolls.  
I lied, saying, Le Fournil bakery. I didn't want to say  
from the supermarket.  
But I think my ants know I'm not a classy

una persona sofisticada.

Ayer me comí una hallula, y unté el pedazo en el shampoo de coco.

Por ese solo momento, me di cuenta, mis hormigas detuvieron su marcha incansable, para ver si efectivamente era capaz.

Y sí. Me comí tres hallulas y todo el shampoo de coco.

sort of person.

Yesterday I ate a *hallula* and dunked a piece in the coconut shampoo.

For that one moment, I noticed, my ants stopped their indefatigable march, to see if I was actually going to do it.

Yes, indeed. I ate three *hallulas* and all of the coconut shampoo.

## Translator's Foreword

“Save the Cat!” es un libro de Blake Snyder en el que se plantea una forma para desarrollar y analizar guiones cinematográficos. Sin entrar en detalles, una de las cosas que propone es que la impresión que da un protagonista al inicio de una historia diste de la que da al final. La idea es que esta transformación de su imagen sea positiva y se base en gestos pequeños, capaces de eclipsar lo malo que este haya hecho antes. Como ocurre en el *viaje del héroe*, se trata de un cambio redentor y/o de enriquecimiento moral.

Óscar Matallana es un joven escritor nacido en Bogotá y criado en Miami. En su prosa suelen ocurrir situaciones insólitas en las que, además, participan animales con comportamientos tan humanos como curiosos. Esta particular forma de narrar hace que sus relatos muchas veces parezcan fábulas, pero con un toque de realidad y adulterz que los hacen más duros y reflexivos, y menos moralizantes.

“Tu gata” (cuyo título en español comentaré luego) parece a primeras una historia surrealista y de humor absurdo: trata de la difícil convivencia de una persona con una gata parlante y molesta, cuya dueña, compañera de cuarto de le protagonista, ya no forma parte de sus vidas por circunstancias que quedan sin explicar. Sin embargo, aunque la premisa del cuento pueda resultar arbitraria, lo cierto es que es toda una reflexión sobre la pérdida y su consecuente dolor; en cuanto la dueña de la gata deja de estar, tanto le protagonista como la gata se verán enfrentados a un vacío que les tocará llenar, y muchas veces sus intentos por hacerlo molestarán al otro. “Tu gata” es una historia sobre un duelo, o más bien, una historia divertida sobre un duelo. Matallana en este cuento plasma situaciones graciosas dentro de un contexto sensible sin llegar opacarlo. Aunque hay más

risa que llanto, ambos tienen su lugar en este relato; y vemos cómo lo triste puede ser gracioso y lo gracioso, triste.

El cuento de Matallana juega también con la moral de sus personajes y las apariencias: en un inicio, le protagonista parece una persona inocente, atormentada por la gata, y esta, por su parte, se nos muestra como un personaje desagradable y egoísta. A medida que leemos, nos damos cuenta de que el protagonista no es tan bienhechor y que la gata sólo busca superar su dolor y arreglar la vida de la única persona que ha quedado a su cuidado.

El título de este cuento en inglés es “Save the Cat”, pero su traducción literal al español pierde todo el trasfondo que le brinda su referencia a Snyder. Es por esto que decidí dejarlo como “Tu gata”, que si bien no soluciona esta pérdida de significado, al menos resalta un poco la melancolía que lo precede.

## **OSCAR MATALLANA**

### **SAVE THE CAT**

Since you left, your cat drew a picture of me. She did it the other morning: me cracking an egg into the pan. I think I look sad in it, and that's why I keep the picture around, I look at it and wonder how your cat saw me, how she sees me, and if there's ever any judgment in that. She made it by gutting an old printer cartridge that I'd had hidden away in a drawer in my office, claws and ink against computer paper.

She's almost a perfect roommate. Mostly keeps to herself. Keeps busy. She wakes me in the morning, makes sure I don't watch too much TV or read too much, which is important, and she broke me and my boyfriend up. Every day she picks up a new hobby.

We each cope differently, it could be mania for her. All last week she was learning to play piano. I woke up one morning and the Claude Debussy in the living room was how I knew it was time to wake up and take an allergy pill.

I know I used to complain a lot about that. When you wanted a cat, I used to whine that I was too allergic and that cats are horrible. I would say that it wasn't allowed in my room. That I was never going to handle its litter. That you would have to make sure cat hair wasn't just everywhere all the time.

“Clair de Lune” and my morning routine of vacuuming the couch before making breakfast. Your cat is clumsy

**traducido del inglés por  
RICHARD OSSANDÓN VERA**

**TU GATA**

Después de que te fuiste, tu gata hizo un dibujo de mí. Lo hizo la otra mañana: era yo rompiendo un huevo en la sartén. Creo que me veo triste en el dibujo y por eso aún lo tengo. Lo miro y me pregunto cómo me veía ella, cómo me ve ahora y si es que me juzga al hacerlo. Lo hizo destripando un cartucho de tinta de una impresora vieja que había escondido en un cajón de mi oficina, a garras y tinta contra el papel bond.

Es casi una compañera de cuarto perfecta. La mayor parte del tiempo se preocupa de sí misma; se mantiene ocupada: en la mañana me despierta, se asegura de que no vea mucha televisión o que lea mucho —lo cual es importante—; e hizo que mi novio y yo termináramos. Todos los días elige un nuevo hobby.

Lo hemos afrontado diferente, ella se ha entregado a las manías. Estuvo toda la semana pasada aprendiendo a tocar piano. Una mañana desperté y por Claude Debussy supe que era hora de levantarme y tomar un antialérgico.

Sé que solía quejarme mucho por eso. Cuando dijiste que querías un gato, yo alegaba que me dan mucha alergia y que son horrendos. Te decía que no iba a ser bienvenido en mi cuarto, que nunca me iba a encargar de su arena, que tú tendrías que asegurarte de que su pelo no estuviera siempre por todas partes.

Con “Clair de lune” empezaba mi rutina matutina de aspirar el sofá antes de preparar el desayuno. Tu gata

at piano. She just doesn't have very much reach. You'd think she would use all four paws to play but she's a purist when she sits at your old Casio keyboard that doesn't have a stand or a seat. I would never just listen to a professional recording of Debussy, but your cat rushing through it is endearing even when she can't comfortably play chords or octaves. Her piano playing sounds hollow because of it, and because she has it set to the Honky Tonk sound setting, but it makes me glad she's there.

She isn't good at everything she tries. Her drawings are the best, by far, they're virtuosic, they have that uncanny quality that makes art beautiful and worthwhile. She's a dilettante when it comes to everything else. She doesn't really have a musical ear, she can't sing, and her composition is contrived and formulaic. It's just so funny that your cat, of all cats, wouldn't have an ear for music. She tried deejaying for a bit, I think, but you only have one turntable, so she was just scratching your records with the needle and her claws

I don't want you to think, as I did, that your cat is pretentious with her choice of hobbies. At first, she would just play Super Nintendo and I would watch. After your cat dragged your old Nintendo out from your closet to the living room, I thought about all the little fights you and I had about asking before using your things. Not fights. Text messages mostly, or sticky notes. It was easy to set up it was just A/V cables and one power cord, but you were always the one who had to run the wires behind the TV stand and connect the right HDMI cable to the right slots. Your cat was pretty good at Super Mario Kart somehow and aside from that the only other game you had was Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon: Another Story, which she got stuck in because we couldn't read Japanese.

es torpe con el piano. Y es que simplemente no alcanza bien las teclas. Quizás pienses que usa las cuatro patas para tocar, pero no, es una purista cuando se sienta en tu viejo teclado Casio sin un banco o una silla. Nunca he escuchado una grabación profesional de Debussy, pero tu gata se ve entrañable acelerando las piezas, aun cuando no puede hacer acordes ni octavas cómodamente. Por eso, cuando toca se escucha algo vacío. Eso y el hecho de que tiene el piano configurado con un sonido como de música de bar. De todos modos, me alegra que esté aquí.

No es buena en todo lo que intenta hacer. Lejos, sus dibujos son lo mejor, son magníficos, de esa calidad excepcional que hace que el arte sea hermoso y valga la pena. Pero no es más que una aficionada cuando se trata de cualquier otra cosa. La verdad, no tiene oído para la música, no puede cantar, y sus composiciones son forzadas y de originalidad dudosa. Me parece gracioso que, de todos los gatos, la tuya no tuviera oído para la música. Creo que trató de ser DJ un tiempo, pero tú sólo tienes un tocadiscos, así que se limitaba a rasguñar tus vinilos con la aguja y sus garras.

No quiero que pienses, como yo en su momento, que tu gata es pretenciosa al elegir sus hobbies. Al principio, ella jugaba Super Nintendo y yo la miraba. Después de haber arrastrado tu vieja Nintendo desde tu clóset hasta el living, pensé en todas esas pequeñas peleas que tú y yo teníamos por no preguntar antes de usar tus cosas. No eran peleas en realidad, sino más bien mensajes de texto o notas adhesivas. La Nintendo era fácil de instalar, sólo había que poner esos cables tricolor y el del enchufe, pero tú siempre eras quien pasaba los cables por detrás del mueble de la tele y conectaba el HDMI correcto en la entrada correcta. No sé porqué, pero tu gata era bastante buena en el *Super Mario Kart*. Fuera de ese, el otro juego que tenías era *Bishoujo Senshi Sailor Moon: Another Story*, en el que no pudimos seguir avanzando, porque ni ella ni yo sabemos japonés.

We only did that for a little while. Your parents picked up a lot of your things, including the Nintendo. Your Nintendo was originally in the closet where you kept your old prom dress and baby pictures. The things that your parents made you take when they moved out of your childhood home, that they didn't want to throw away but that they also couldn't make room for in the condo. Your parents are nice. They wanted to pay your part of the rent for a little while, but I told them it was okay, our lease was running out soon anyway and I could handle it for now, probably my boyfriend would help. Your mom still offers to send money and I usually don't accept it. They moved all your stuff out, including the bed, but they left your cat. There were rules in the condominium about pets and children. I moved the litter box to your room, and now it's the only thing in there. They weren't sure what was yours and what was mine in the living room. They let me keep the Casio and the TV and the couch and the record player and your guitar.

At first, I thought it would be nice to have the apartment to myself, because now there wouldn't be anyone to catch me doing things. No one to catch me coming home drunk with fast food. No one to catch me watching the Real Housewives of Beverly Hills. No one to catch me eating or cleaning, when I least expect it. No one to catch me coming out of the shower. No one to catch me on my way out. To wish me luck. But your cat still does.

One evening my boyfriend came around to watch a movie, and your cat saw the perfect opportunity to break us up. It wasn't a trap or anything. She had us both sit across from each other, really look into each other's eyes, not through them, and talk. Which I hated obviously. I know you never liked my boyfriend, but he was mostly nice for a boy. He never talked down to me or

Eso nos duró poco, sin embargo. Tus padres se llevaron muchas de tus cosas, incluida la Nintendo. En un principio la consola estaba en tu clóset, donde también tenías tu vestido de graduación y las fotos de cuando eras bebé; cosas que tu padres hicieron que te llevaras cuando te mudaste de la casa donde creciste. No querían tirarlas a la basura, pero tampoco pudieron hacer espacio para ellas en la casa del condominio. Tus padres son buena gente. Querían pagar tu parte de la renta por un tiempo, pero les dije que estaba bien así. Nuestro contrato de arriendo estaba por acabarse de todos modos y por el momento yo podía hacerme cargo; probablemente mi novio iba a ayudar. Tu mamá sigue ofreciéndose a enviar dinero y yo, por lo general, trato de no aceptarlo. Tus padres se llevaron todas tus cosas, incluida la cama, pero dejaron a la gata. Había reglas en el condominio en cuanto a las mascotas y los niños. Llevé la caja de arena a tu cuarto y ahora es lo único que hay ahí. Tus padres no estaban seguros de qué era tuyo y qué era mío en el living. Me dejaron quedarme con el teclado, la tele, el sofá, el tocadiscos y tu guitarra.

Al principio, pensé que sería bueno tener el departamento sólo para mí, porque entonces nadie me pillaría haciendo cosas. Nadie me iba a ver llegando al departamento caminando en zigzag con comida chatarra. Nadie me iba a descubrir viendo *Lo que callamos las mujeres*. Nadie me iba a sorprender comiendo o limpiando cuando menos lo esperase. No iba a haber nadie que me pillara saliendo de la ducha, ni nadie que me atrapara saliendo del departamento. Nadie me iba a desear suerte. Y sin embargo, tu gata aún lo hace.

Una noche vino mi novio a ver una película y tu gata vio la ocasión perfecta para hacernos terminar. No se trataba de una trampa ni nada. Nos hizo sentarnos de frente, mirarnos fijamente a los ojos y hablar. Obviamente, odie eso. Sé que nunca te cayó bien mi novio, pero creo para ser hombre era buena persona. Nunca me levantó

condescended to me. He was smart and liked the same movies and books as me. He had the capacity to be sweet. These are all things that I told him. The issue was that we didn't trust each other. After my father died, and you know, all the recent things, I just felt like I couldn't talk to him. I felt like he had an utter lack of empathy, and all of my worries just went right over his head. He didn't understand me, and he couldn't even try to comfort me, I was trapped. The truth is: he's a child, sometimes, who can be impossible to even speak to and it always comes back to his relationship with his mother and step-fathers who were never that affectionate toward him. These are all things I said. On the other hand, he didn't trust me because of the one or two times in our relationship that I slept with someone else.

Your cat mediated the whole thing, splayed out on the living room floor, and it went pretty smoothly. She was playing your records quietly in the background while my boyfriend and I talked. They were all mostly scratched now. The irony of hugging and breaking up to a crackly, poppy "Knowing Me, Knowing You" by ABBA was unbearable to me and that's why I started crying when he left. On his way out the door he waved apologetically, awkwardly, at your cat, and I closed the door behind him. It was amicable, the break-up, I think your cat would agree. She had the impression that him and I could still be friends. Not great friends. Sometimes you stretch an elastic too much and it doesn't snap but it also doesn't bounce back either. This is the kind of thing she says to help.

The biggest fight your cat and I ever had was over you. She said I was using you. I said that was impossible. She said that we're all entitled to cope in our own ways. Some people cry, some people get angry, some people make jokes. I kept trying to swat her off the couch and

la voz ni me consintió. Era inteligente y le gustaban las mismas películas y libros que a mí. Tenía la capacidad de ser dulce. Todo eso se lo dije. El problema era que no nos teníamos confianza. Después de que mi padre muriera y, como ya sabes, todo lo que pasó luego y lo que está pasando, realmente me sentía incapaz de hablar con él. Lo sentía completamente falto de empatía, pasaba por alto todas mis preocupaciones. Él no me entendía y ni siquiera podía intentar contenerme; me sentía en un callejón sin salida. La cierto es que es un niño, y a veces es imposible hablar con él porque está traumado con su madre y sus padrastros que nunca lo quisieron tanto. Todas estas son cosas que dije. Por otro lado, él no confiaba en mí por esas una o dos veces que dormí con alguien más durante nuestra relación.

Tu gata medió todo el asunto, se recostó en el piso del living y todo fluyó holgadamente. Puso tus discos a sonar bajito mientras mi novio y yo hablábamos. Todos estaban ya muy arañados. Fue irónico abrazarnos y terminar la relación mientras se escuchaba de fondo “*Knowing Me, Knowing you*” de ABBA haciendo ¡pop! como palomitas en un microondas. La verdad es que me fue insoportable y por eso me puse a llorar cuando se fue. Mientras salía por la puerta, le hizo un gesto torpe a tu gata; movió la mano para despedirse y a la vez parecía pedir perdón. Yo cerré la puerta tras él. El término fue amistoso, creo que tu gata estaría de acuerdo. Ella tenía la impresión de que él y yo podríamos seguir siendo amigos, no grandes amigos, pero amigos. Pero aunque a veces puedes estirar mucho un elástico sin que se rompa, no vuelve a ser el mismo. Es el tipo de cosas que tu gata dice para ayudar.

La discusión más grande que tu gata y yo tuvimos fue por ti. Una noche, dijo que yo te estaba usando. Yo le dije que eso era imposible. Ella dijo que todos tenemos derecho a sobrellevar las cosas a nuestra manera. Algunos lloran, otros se enojan, otros hacen chistes. Mientras discutíamos, comencé a intentar sacarla del sillón a

sometimes I would catch her in such a way where she would fall off. She'd always land on her feet though. I didn't hit her. I just swatted at her, kind of hard. It happened a few times that night and she kept trying to talk to me, but I didn't want to keep having this argument. But arguments pass.

She can do everything I can't do, like forgive. And she's a cat. I'm more of a dog person, if anything. I'm not allergic to dogs, for example. And she never wants to do what I want to do, or watch what I want to watch, and her latest hobby is finally just being a cat and gnawing at the cuffs of my pants. It's horrible to become used to your roommates.

She hardly even draws anymore.

If I had to draw your cat from memory it would just be a circle with eyes and whiskers. Maybe a triangle for a nose, a three on its side for the mouth. But your cat doesn't look like that. Sometimes I catch her doing something stupid and ordinary like eating from the tin or playing a C major scale, and I wish I could draw her the way she drew me.

manotazos y a veces la pillaba de tal manera que la botaba. Sin embargo, caía siempre de pie. No la golpeaba. Sólo le daba manotazos, aunque un poco fuertes. Eso pasó un par de veces esa noche y, no obstante, ella seguía intentando hablar conmigo. Yo no quería mantener esa discusión, pero las discusiones son cosas que pasan.

Ella puede hacer todo aquello de lo que yo no soy capaz, como olvidar. Y es una gata. Yo soy más una persona de perros, por decir algo. Al menos los perros no me dan alergia. Ella nunca quiere hacer lo que yo, o ver lo que yo quiero; su último hobby es, por fin, ser una simple gata y mordisquear la basta de mis pantalones. Es horrible acostumbrarte a tus compañeros.

Ahora ya casi ni dibuja.

Si tuviera que dibujar a tu gata de memoria, haría sólo un círculo con ojos y bigotes. Quizás dibujaría un triángulo para la nariz y un tres al lado para la boca. Pero tu gata no luce así. A veces la encuentro haciendo cosas estúpidas y ordinarias, como comiendo de un tarro o tocando una escala de Do mayor. Entonces me gustaría poder dibujarla como ella me dibujó a mí.

## Translator's Foreword

Albumin is a protein produced by the kidney that circulates in the plasma of your blood. Albumen is the white of an egg. And the distance between those two words is an uncanny space in which poetry grows.

Richard Ossandón Vera is a young queer Chilean poet, obsessed with the white space between the classic and the contemporary. Effortlessly pulling from poets like Sappho, Gabriela Mistral, and Alejandra Pizarnik, his poetry is precise and challenging, obsessed with vivid images, while fighting to maintain a multiplicity that makes the language abrupt and beautiful.

The challenge of translating his work is that at times the images are clear and the language is subtle and vague. At times the question as a translator was whether to dress the language up for heightened affect or whether to keep it in the barest language possible.

Ossandón's poetry is political, obsessed with gender, religion, capitalism. Once, as he looked over my translation of his work, I learned, through a mis-translation of what seemed a simple line, that the imagery of the land being overtaken by corporations is an allusion to Chilean Nobel Laureate Gabriela Mistral's poetry, in which the land is female, and that capitalism stripping and dominating the land is both feminist and communist imagery that is meant to empower us to take it back. Would there be a way to do that in English?

And despite the severity of the subject matter, there's clear joy in Ossandón's work. The irony of using Sappho as an epigraph: "Honestly, I wish I were dead." The pleasure of playing with the definitions of the word Albumin (as a protein, as a human solution, as an

artificially-derived medicine) and Albumen (as an egg white) and the often difficult to translate wordplay that further grows from the two. Joyful experimentation with language where Albumin is made into a living character, one with desires, with personal tragedies, with the aspiration to be a classic Greek character like an Oceanid. Poetry in which you blame Albumin, until you at least wonder whether it may have all the answers.

# RICHARD OSSANDÓN VERA

## ALBÚMINA

Era de albúmina

No terminé mi nombre  
cuando lo puse bajo el almácigo

y crecí como la hiedra  
desnuda buscando un muro

para pintar con sangre espesa  
lo que no cuajó

Mi labranza corte profundo  
todo el suelo fue un ladrillo que inventé  
todo sueño fue el raspado de una piedra  
inconcluyente

**translated from the spanish by  
ÓSCAR MATALLANA CORREA**

## ALBUMIN

### Age of Albumin

I did not finish my name  
when I sowed it beneath the seedbeds

and I grew like the ivy  
nude    wanting a wall  
to paint with thick blood  
what did not curdle

My tillage        a profound cut  
                    all the ground was brick I conceived  
                    all dreams were the scraping of a stone  
inconcluding

## Cuestión de propiedad

De quién mi nombre  
y de quién la huerta

ellos unidos confabularon la cuestión  
cantaron desde lejos:  
de quién el hombre y  
de quién la tierra

de Albúmina

## Matter of Property

To whom does my name belong  
and      to whom the orchard

together they colluded on the matter  
sang from afar:  
to whom the man and  
to whom the earth

To Albumin

## Endecha de albúmina

Quedaba poco y nada por crecer  
cuando todo pasó  
y venas se propagaron repetidas

cuatro paredes chorrearón  
unidas en sí mismas tomadas  
de sus extremos

unos dibujos muy rupestres  
después fueron testigos de la matanza

## Albumin's Lament

There was little or nothing to grow  
when it all happened  
and veins proliferated repeated

four walls dripped  
unified held to themselves  
by their extremes

a few too rocklike drawings  
were witness then        to the slaughter

## Albuménide

Todas las noches fueron de Albúmina  
aluminiscente albumínico

(algo pasado estuvo con nosotros todo el tiempo)

Alba ocasión        ocaso  
occidado occidente  
(la muerte del sol)                  y la sangre

albúmina qué has hecho    esta es la herida  
albúmina hasta cuándo     hasta que muera  
albúmina por qué quiero llorar

## Albumenid

Every night belonged to Albumin  
albuminescent albuminic

(something past was with us always)

A chance dawn                    dusk occupied  
occident occidized  
(death of the sun)                and blood

albumin what have you done    this is the wound  
albumin how much longer                    till death  
albumin why do I want to cry

## Apoptosis

Me resiento a vivir  
yo que hube perdurado las enseñanzas  
lo que me fue dado  
me resisto

No la sed de Dios mata al cordero  
toda esa bondad mata a cualquiera  
desamparando el desamparo y aun así  
todo se le quita a alguien más

la vida no me pertenece

## Apoptosis

I resent living

I who have preserved the teachings

everything given to me

I resist

The thirst of God is not what kills the lamb  
that goodness kills anyone

abandoning the abandonment                    and even so  
everything is taken                from someone else

life does not belong to me

Aleluya

Cuando Pedro

—¡Hombre, no lo conozco!

Cuando Santiago

—La paz sea contigo

Cuando Tomás vio la sangre

supo que no sería sólo una cicatriz

la misma imagen para siempre

todo se guarda en la memoria

Hallelujah

When Peter

“Woman, I don’t know him!”

When James

“Peace be with you”

When Thomas                saw the blood  
                                    he knew it would not only be a scar

the same image forever  
all is saved in memory

## Apostólica

Entonces caminé como si no pasara nada

toda la vida supe lo que quería  
pero cuando él estuvo frente a mí ya no pude

un plato rompiéndose en mi boca  
un cuchillo saltó de mis manos  
la saliva se le caía cuando hablaba como  
cristales que van a dar al piso  
y hieren los pies

## Apostolic

So I walked as if nothing had happened

all my life I knew what I wanted  
but when he was before me I no longer could

a plate breaking in my mouth  
a knife leapt from my hands  
the saliva would fall when he'd speak like  
crystals that will hit the floor  
that injure feet

**Albumen**

Absorto en caminar con la espalda recta

Esas que llevas atrás no son las manos

albúmina por qué quiero morir

**Albumen**

Absorbed in walking with your back straight

What you hold behind you aren't your hands

albumin why do I want to die

## Apostasía

Nunca más el tedio de lo que canta el ángel  
lo que nos hace humanos ya ha caído  
me bosteza oscura y precipitó como sal  
estos cuerpos creados fueron amor

y cuando nos dividieron no hicieron más que amarnos  
no hicimos más que dividirnos cuando nos confiaron  
a Dios

## Apostasy

Never again the tedium of what the angel sings  
what makes us human has already fallen  
it yawns at me darkly and precipitated like salt  
these created bodies were love

and when they divided us they did nothing but love us  
we did nothing but divide ourselves when they entrusted  
us  
to God

## Apóstata

Amanece y de las velas una borra  
cirios lentos quedaron titilando en la nuca  
de anoche  
la amarga perorata del padre  
de un lado a otro el fuego el sol titila, se anuncia  
hace chispas de un puñado de sal  
y en mi memoria

confieso que he pecado  
oh, Ave María  
sin pecado concebida

## Apostate

The sun rises and by candlelight they are erased  
slow votives remained flickering at the nape  
of last night  
the bitter ranting of the priest  
from one side to the next the flame the sun flickers,  
heralds itself  
it makes sparks from a fistful of salt  
and in my memory

bless me for I have sinned  
oh, Hail Mary  
full of grace

## Religiosa

*Oscuro*

estas cuatro paredes  
tragán la luz con el reverso

todo lo que tengo *oscuro*  
es este patán encima  
retorciéndose

Ya le di cuanto quería  
beber de mí  
sacar de mí  
hablar de mí

## Religious

*Darkness*

these four walls  
swallow the light with their backs

all I have *darkness*  
is this idiot on top of me  
twisting himself

I already gave him all he wanted  
to drink from me  
to take from me  
to speak of me

Misal

albúmina  
por qué quiero morir?

**Missal**

albumin

why do I want to die?

*Aunque quiera decirlo  
de pronto  
para qué*

*para qué esta boca  
que  
se mueve  
alterna                    sin sentido*

*yo lo busco  
para  
decir  
(para que alguien me  
diga)  
nuevamente  
que perdí*

*Although I want to say it*  
          suddenly  
          why

why this mouth  
that  
moves  
parallel        senseless

I find him  
to  
say  
(to be  
told)  
yet again  
that I lost

*Señor*  
hoy sus brazos  
pudieron ignorarme

lo que él dice  
es sólo  
el movimiento  
de unos labios

la saliva en tropel  
se desbarata  
en su boca

*Lord*  
today his arms  
could ignore me

what he says  
is the mere  
movement  
of those lips

saliva in droves  
is broken apart  
in his mouth

*NO*  
más su dulzura  
dentro de los huesos

quiero florecer  
estas flores  
en silencio

afuera ah  
alimento nada más  
esta pobreza

con agua de tus  
labios florecer  
me parece  
algo tibio

*NO*  
more of his sweetness  
within my bones

I want to flower  
these blossoms  
in silence

outside oh  
only nourishing  
this poverty

with water from your  
lips flowering  
seems like  
something warm

( Ríos  
como babas  
separan al hombre  
de este hombre)

*(Rivers  
like drool  
separate the man  
from this man)*

*Es verdad*

todo lo guardo  
en la memoria

*The truth*

I save all  
in memory

*Pero* hablamos  
nuevamente  
de su boca

de su boca diciendo  
labios que se mueven

para decir de pronto  
que se van  
que se  
van  
callando

*But let's speak  
once again  
of his mouth*

*of his mouth saying  
lips that move*

*to say suddenly  
that they're going  
that they're  
going  
silent*

## Ritual de albúmina

Albúmina                    esta es la herida  
de todo lo que sangra  
aquí adentro  
Dios se pudre                    corteja una sombra  
que luego del amor lo ha abandonado

albúmina alba  
más clara que el agua  
más espesa que el aceite  
en lo que puedo decir me he convertido  
este demonio que araña su espalda  
tratando de encontrar lo que le duele

albúmina la sombra  
no osa oscurecer estas patrañas

lo que él dice ya fue revelado  
a quien debía  
lo que puedo pedir                ya lo pedí  
a este Dios sin amante

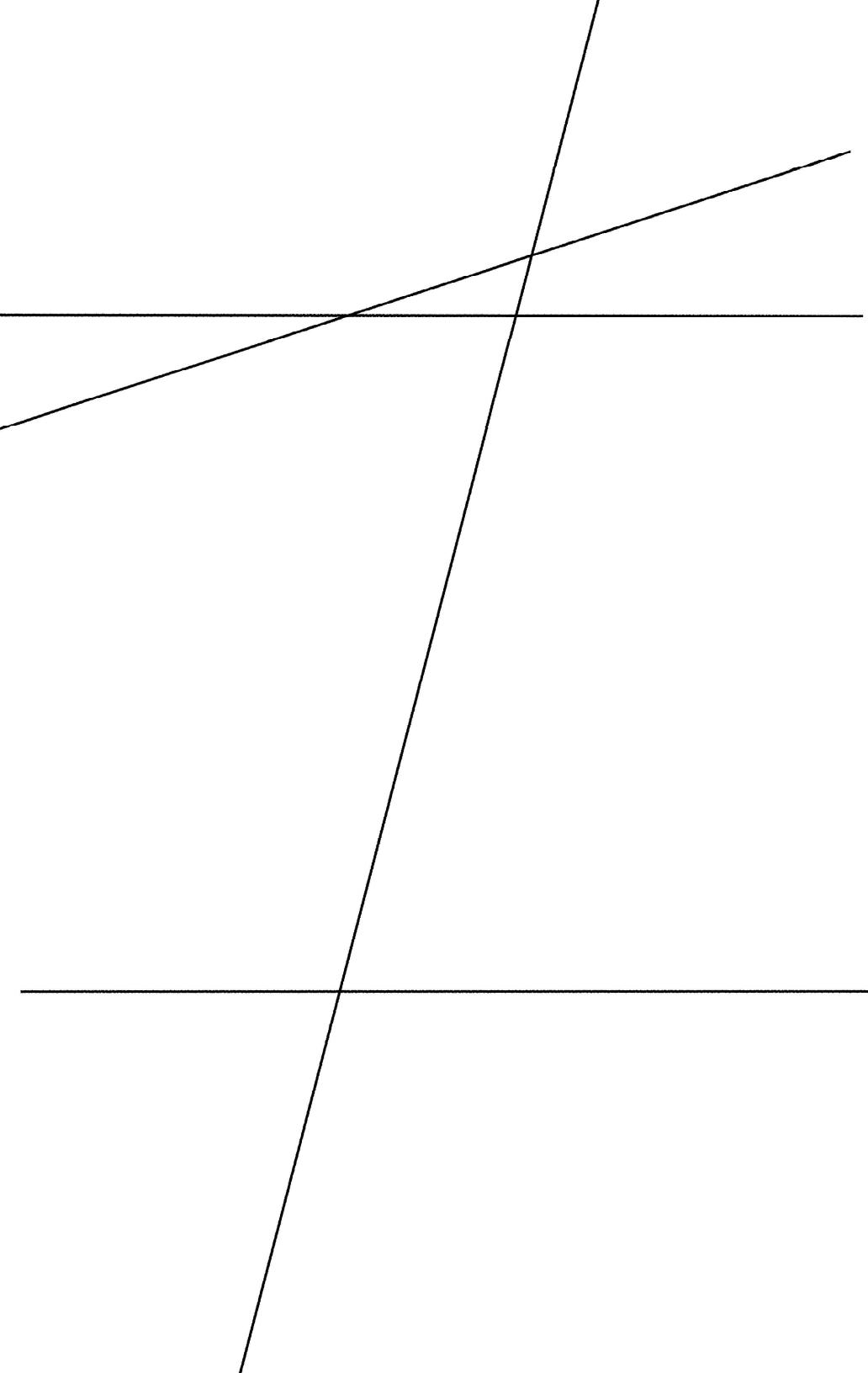
## Albumin Ritual

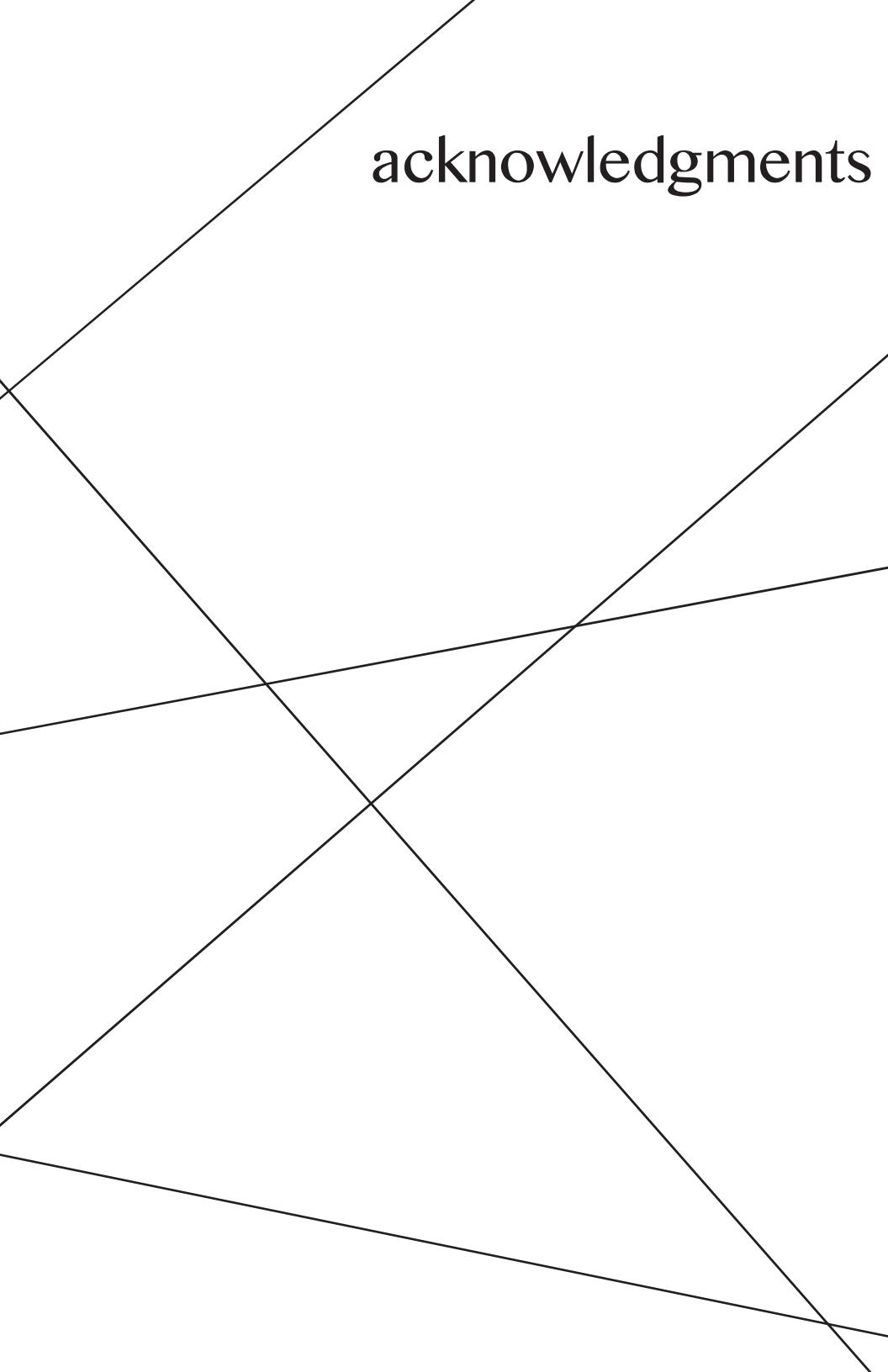
Albumin        this is the wound  
of all that bleeds  
here inside  
God rots away        courts a shadow  
that abandons him after love

pallid albumin  
clearer than water  
thicker than oil  
what I can say I've become  
this demon that scratches his back  
trying to find what hurts him

albumin the shadow  
dare not darken these tall tales

what he says was already revealed  
to who should know  
I've already asked        what I can ask  
of this God with no lover





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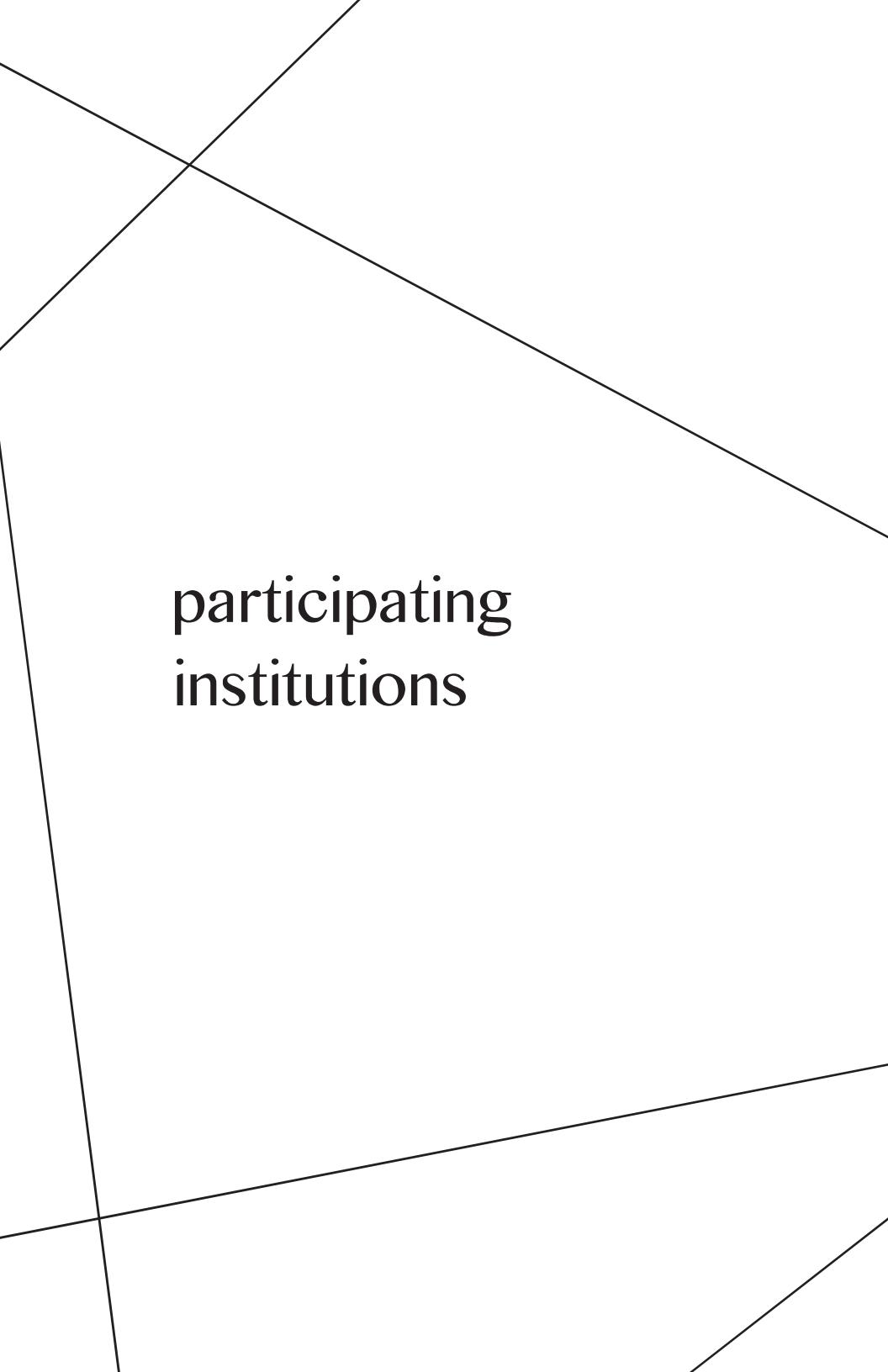
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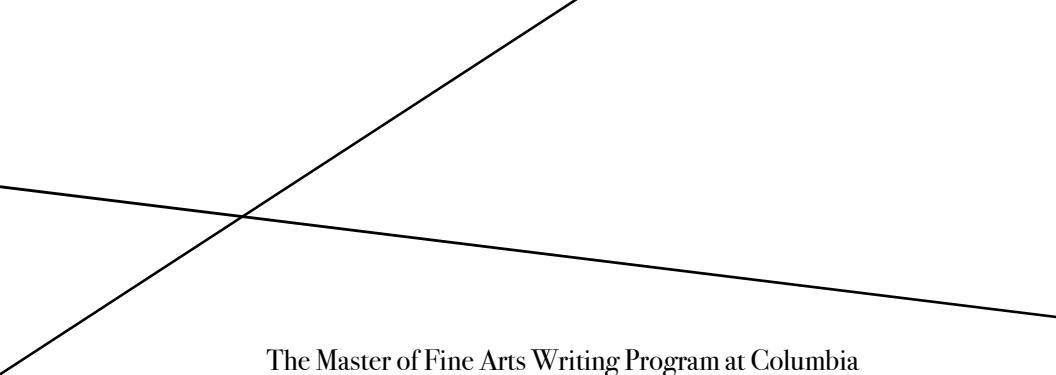
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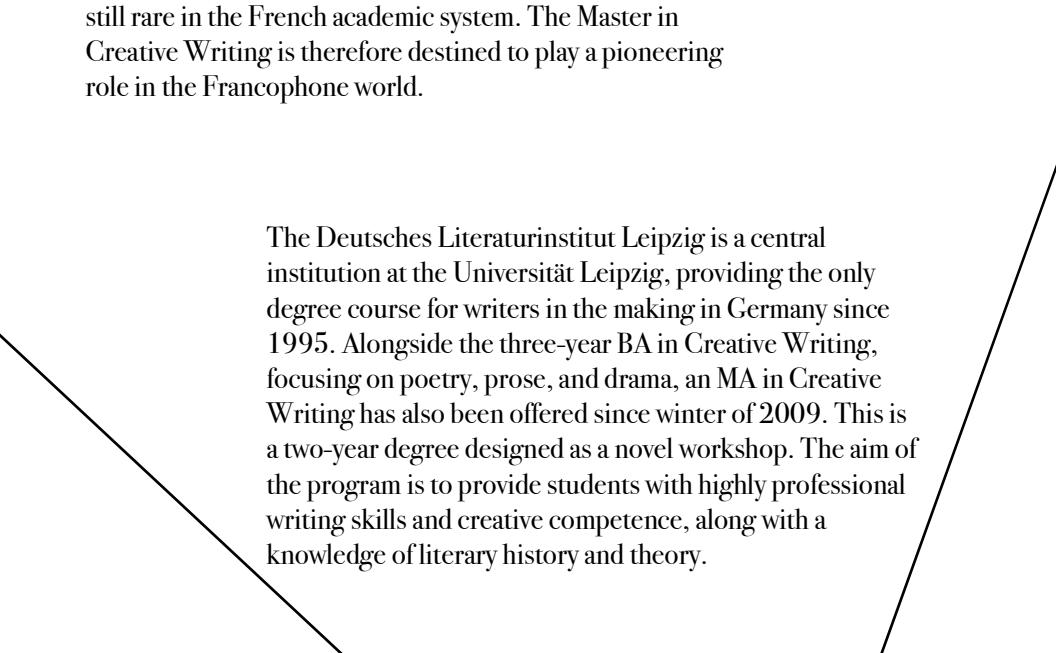
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# participating institutions

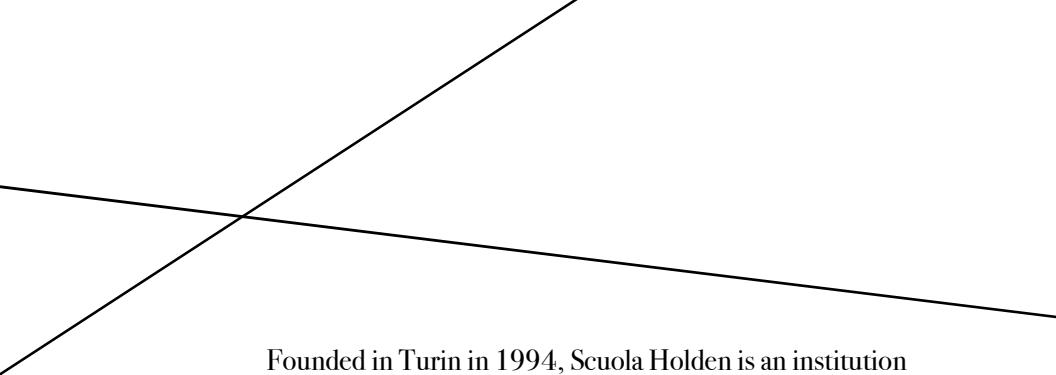


The Master of Fine Arts Writing Program at Columbia University School of the Arts was founded in 1967, and is one of the foremost creative writing programs in the United States. Students in the Program pursue degrees in fiction, poetry, or creative nonfiction, with the option to pursue a joint course of study in literary translation. The Program is distinguished by the intellectual rigor of its curriculum, the eminence of many of the writers on faculty, and the significant number of its alumni who have gone on to become eminent authors in their own right.



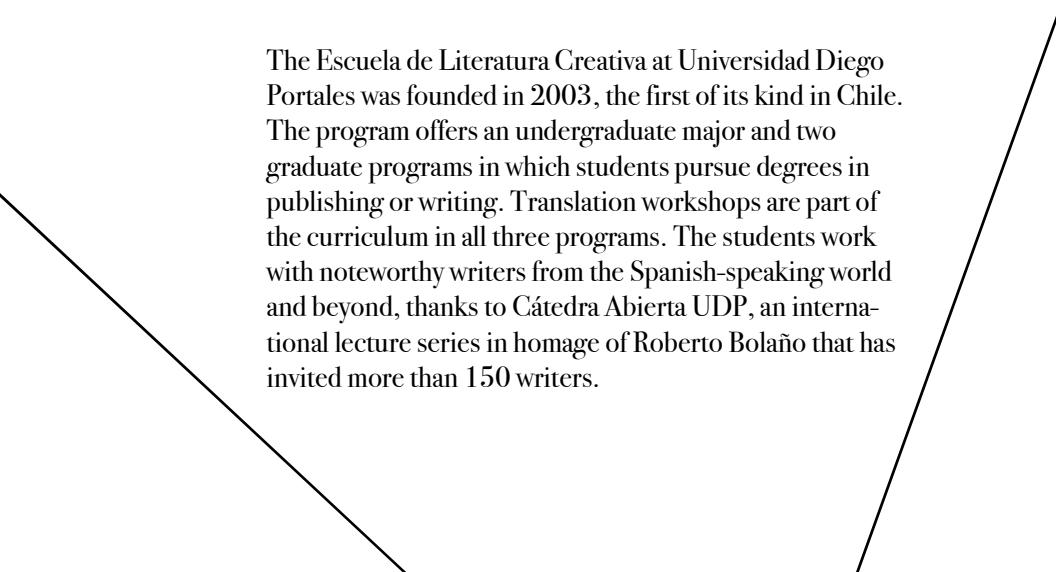
The Master in Creative Writing at Université Paris 8 was founded in September 2013, with the goal of allowing students the opportunity to start or continue a work of literary creation. While programs of this type are common, especially in the United States and Great Britain, they are still rare in the French academic system. The Master in Creative Writing is therefore destined to play a pioneering role in the Francophone world.

The Deutsches Literaturinstitut Leipzig is a central institution at the Universität Leipzig, providing the only degree course for writers in the making in Germany since 1995. Alongside the three-year BA in Creative Writing, focusing on poetry, prose, and drama, an MA in Creative Writing has also been offered since winter of 2009. This is a two-year degree designed as a novel workshop. The aim of the program is to provide students with highly professional writing skills and creative competence, along with a knowledge of literary history and theory.



Founded in Turin in 1994, Scuola Holden is an institution devoted to training storytellers through courses spanning multiple disciplines of writing and performing arts. Scuola Holden also serves as a cultural production center in Italy by way of collaborations with schools, universities, book-shops, publishers, and festivals throughout Italy and Europe.

Established in 2011, the MFA in Creative Writing at Instituto Vera Cruz focuses in two areas: Fiction and Nonfiction, with secondary concentrations in Writing for Children and Young Adults and Creative Writing Methodology. Vera Cruz was founded in 1963 and started offering undergraduate and graduate courses in 2005. The MFA has 80 students now enrolled in an intensive two-year course, with a faculty of award-winning and recognized writers. It is among the most renowned in Brazil.



The Escuela de Literatura Creativa at Universidad Diego Portales was founded in 2003, the first of its kind in Chile. The program offers an undergraduate major and two graduate programs in which students pursue degrees in publishing or writing. Translation workshops are part of the curriculum in all three programs. The students work with noteworthy writers from the Spanish-speaking world and beyond, thanks to Cátedra Abierta UDP, an international lecture series in homage of Roberto Bolaño that has invited more than 150 writers.

