

ellipsis

Volume 1 | Short-story anthology

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Volume 1

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Juliana

Ellipsis. The power of writing

True, This! —
Beneath the rule of men entirely great,
The pen is mightier than the sword. Behold
The arch-enchanters wand! — itself a nothing! —
But taking sorcery from the master-hand
To paralyse the Cæsars, and to strike
The loud earth breathless! — Take away the sword —
States can be saved without it!

EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON

In 1839, the British author, poet and playwright Edward Bulwer-Lytton coined the phrase “the pen is mightier than the sword” in his play *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy*. The line quickly gained fame and has now turned into one of the best-known metaphors to portray the concept of communication being stronger than violence.

In the complex world we are living now, the phrase is more relevant than ever. Literature reminds us that the written word is one of the most direct and trustworthy paths to dialogue, where it becomes necessary to know and understand each other in order to build bridges and new horizons.

Writing holds an immense power. The power to tell stories, the power to enter the intimate world of characters who serve us as mirrors to understand our lives through theirs.

The power to erase barriers and borders of human beings in the magical act of reading a story. The power to imagine new futures or other possible worlds.

Ellipsis is the British Council Mexico literature programme which aims to provide new opportunities for emerging writers and editors in Mexico. The project was implemented for the first time in Mexico in 2018 in collaboration with Hay Festival in Querétaro, where a selected group of participants applied via an open call. The authors and editors participated in professional mentoring sessions with renowned English-language writers, in sessions taking place during various literary events as part of Hay Festival Mexico. In addition, programme participants received the support of prominent Mexican writers and editors, Gabriela Jauregui and Eduardo Rabasa, for the consolidation of their first editorial work, which you now have in your hands.

British Council works towards the creation and development of skills and networks providing new opportunities, particularly for young people and emerging talent able to develop new audiences whilst fostering a more open, prosperous and diverse society.

It is a great honour to present *Ellipsis*, the first short-story anthology, which holds the story and the stories of 12 young people who are truly committed to the power of writing.

MARÍA GARCÍA HOLLEY

Foreword

It is a rare thing to be allowed into the process behind the scenes. Artists have studio visits, filmmakers have their making-of, but what about the authors of a book? You can't very well sit on their shoulders as they type. And indeed to be allowed to see the stories behind the stories is risky business—one full of generosity, for it is a process willing to show its imperfections. And thankfully so, because as celebrated Nigerian novelist and poet Ben Okri has said, “The fact of storytelling hints at a fundamental human unease, hints at human imperfection. Where there is perfection there is no story to tell.” These pages do indeed tell us plenty about human error, about our own imperfections and our quest for story. They do so by serving as the container for several stories at the same time: stories that are in the process of making and becoming.

Firstly, it tells the story behind the scenes: that of four women and two men, students, writers, struggling with their own art, looking to find their voice, staring at the blank page, fingers full of hope and expectation.

It also tells the stories of six young editors in the making, eyes avid and sharp, working to find the stories within their peers' stories: the story of editing and putting together a book.

Finally, this book itself shares those stories with you: the end point of a long process. In these happily imperfect pages you will find a baroque time travelling machine revealing the

past rather than the future; a contemporary retelling with a dark twist of the classic fairytale of *Donkey Skin* set in rural Mexico; a vivid narration of the relationship between a son and his late mother in a plant-filled house; a brother whose sister has a mental illness and still manages to pull himself out of his own potential private nightmare thanks to his swim meets; a couple and a very peculiar thief who steals from them; an ex strip club waiter at the apogee of a macho culture and witness to a successful blackmailing scheme. Here you have six different time periods, settings, voices, uses of language—six micro world views.

I was witness to parts of the writing process, but I also shared my thoughts on writing and storytelling with these authors early in their process, gave them a couple of experiential and experimental texts about writing itself by Annie Dillard (from *The Writing Life*) and the wonderful Samuel R. Delany (from *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*). My friend and colleague, Eduardo Rabasa followed the other side of the process, with the editors.

It is your turn to bear witness. For that is a crucial part of story: leaving trace, yes and also bearing witness of those traces, knowing how to listen—as active readers you are, now too, a part of this.

GABRIELA JAUREGUI
Mexico City, Spring 2019

Patricio S. Alejandro

Edited by

JULIETA HERNÁNDEZ

Patricio S. Alejandro

Poet and fiction writer. Winner of the Certamen de Literatura Joven de la UANL (2017) with the book *Gafas de sol para noches sin estrellas* [Sunglasses for starless nights]. He has published his work at the literary magazine *Papeles de la manuscopia*, and the online journal *El guardatextos*. He is currently finishing a BA on Hispanic Literature at the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León.

Julieta Hernández

Student of Hispanic Literature. Only upon arrival at Murcia University, after having lost herself for a while on what is known as the “what to do with your life” category, did she find out that courses such as Journalism Design would lead her interests towards editorial design and publishing; then she went back to Guadalajara and confirmed these were indeed her main professional interests, thanks to the opportunity given to her by the publishers at Pollo Blanco.

The Regular

There's no schedule. As long as the bribes and the clients keep coming, I keep working after two. It's seven a.m. on a Saturday and we finally got rid of the stragglers. Business as usual. I do a line because there's no way I'll make it home without it: blessed be its whiteness and splendor. Pedro says he'll close up all by himself for two hundred pesos. I fork them over without a second thought.

Rubí, Atenas, and Estrella—their real names are Martha, Daniela, and Blanca—leave the last private rooms. Blanca makes me an offer; I pass. At my age, and at this hour, all I want is my own bed and a nice dinner (or breakfast, rather). I say why don't we go for some tacos, because most of the clients show up around one a.m.—my lunch hour—so that's when we have to hustle. She tells me to go to hell and I hit the road.

I go to the corner store for a bottle of water. Between the summer heat and the smog, this place becomes a bona fide branch of hell. Waiting to pay, I glance at the newspapers and see his face on the front page of the weekend edition. I haven't heard from him in years. Eight, to be exact. Which is a lot, considering how much you have to move around in this business, going from bar to bar, from strip club to strip club, running into the same clients who fall in love with the livestock.

He'd always come in, order a beer, and request me as his waiter. Some people came to think I was his lover, that La Negra was just a front. Oh, La Negra—I don't think I've ever

seen another ass like that. A rough diamond on top of each leg. And don't get me started on those tits; anyone would get lost in them. I remember when she got here. She was from Venezuela. God, there's nothing like a South American beauty. Things were already going to shit there. I remember how, when he hired her, Don Julián—RIP—wanted to bone her right away. Fresh meat.

The first time I saw the guy, he wasn't with La Negra. He came in really early on a Wednesday, like four p.m., way before things heated up around there. He had all the chicks to himself, like a rooster in a henhouse. He ordered a bucket of beers and all the girls started trying to seduce him, one by one. All in vain until La Negra showed up. They talked for a while—who the hell knows what about, but he spent a long time with her, paid the tab, and left.

By two in the morning, when we were all heading home, he was waiting outside. La Negra waltzed up to him and they were gone. Quite the Don Juan. The dude was maybe twenty-two. I never knew his exact age and I didn't give a shit, but he looked like a kid. After that, he came every Wednesday and Saturday for the next few months—about ten, until Don Julián got killed—and always asked for me to wait on him. *Heeere comes the regular, bro*, my co-workers would say when they saw him walking in. The regular: that's what we called him, because we didn't know his name. *Just call me boss*, he'd answer when I asked him. Fucking kid.

I kept asking La Negra what his name was, but she was pretty reserved. Smart, too. She had a line from a poem inked on her arm, *Se olvidaron de mí, me dejaron aparte*, by some lady named Rosa Castellás, something like that, and as soon as you asked her about the tattoo she'd start going on about writers and intellectuals and reading and blah blah blah. The drug war was at its peak in those days, and sometimes she tried to tell us why the whole shitshow was happening and why everyone

was freaked out, and she'd say stuff like media distortion and other big words I can't remember. Years later I heard she'd studied communications at the Central University of Venezuela. Which cleared up some things for me.

Anyway, the actual reason why I waited on the regular was because he left good tips, like half the full amount, sometimes more. And he never finished what he ordered, so I'd re-sell it and make more money. My own personal ATM. Wednesdays were weird days. He'd show up, order a beer, and order a pitcher for La Negra. And it wasn't like he came for the royal treatment or anything like that. They'd just sit there, deep in conversation, and they'd stay like that for a couple of hours. Face to face, like a shrink and his patient.

When he came on Saturdays, though, he'd order a bottle of something, vodka, tequila, rum, whatever, like Pancho Villa. He'd come around ten and he'd only look at La Negra from a distance. He'd watch her with all her clients, who were, for obvious reasons, the guys with the most money: businessmen, politicians, narcos. He never left until La Negra did. And they never left together.

There was only one time when he really talked to me. It was on September 16th, on the bicentennial Mexican independence. He'd never come on a Thursday before. *He must be here to celebrate*, I thought. I sent for La Negra, and it was different this time: she sat in his lap, they talked for maybe five minutes, he gave her a kiss, and she left. The regular gestured to me and I went over to ask what I could do for him.

Have a seat. Don't say a word, man. What are you looking at, huh? Bet I look pretty young, right? Like I already told you, you don't need an age or a name. I don't know yours and I don't want to know. If you know what's good for you, you're going to listen to me and do as I say. I've been coming here for ten months and you've never stepped out of line. You're Robin and you never even noticed. See that sweet piece of ass over there? That's La Negra. She's quitting her job. Know

why? Because she knew what to do. She knew how to listen and follow orders. Here, have a beer, have a cigarette. No one's kicking you out unless I say so. And if you've got any sense, you're going to quit tonight, too. Because I bet you'd like to stay alive. Know what's on this USB? It's got millions in millions in important people's dirt. Remember the guy who came in last Saturday? The fat dude with the loose tie and Coke-bottle glasses? He's a PRI party legislator here in town. Three kids and a third on the way, two mistresses and a bastard with a hooker from Madero Boulevard. Wife doesn't know a thing. Remember the lady lawyer supposedly gunned down by narcos last August? Well, it was actually the asshole with the huge forehead who showed up in sunglasses three weeks ago. Our mayor. She was going to air out his dirty laundry. You have to stay alert, you never know what might happen. See this little black thing? It's a microphone. You put it wherever and it records everything. Easy. High-res. Fits anywhere: keychains, watches, packages, lingerie. Yeah, this mic means I've got a ton of enemies. But everything that's been recorded is already digitalized, and if I don't wake up tomorrow, the info goes straight to all the local and national papers. If you're gonna play dirty, you have to do it right. You can't go around showing off like all the idiots who hang out at places like this. Look at me: I dress causal, go easy on the booze, zero girls. I'm talking real straight with you here, but when I make an appointment with those fuckers, I show up clean-shaven, hair slicked back, talking like a powerful hombre in a three-piece suit who's come to close a deal. I'm a businessman. In my own way, sure, but that's what I am. I just make a different kind of investment. And if you're going to invest, you have to know what you're doing. People think I'm here by chance, that I picked La Negra because she's fine as hell, but no. There's a little over fifty cabarets in this city, which isn't to say whorehouses. Of all those, ten are pretty posh. Of those ten, three of them have the hottest girls. And of all the girls in those top three, there's only one who's both hot and badass. La Negra. Because apart from being drop-dead gorgeous, she has a crazy memory. She's smart as shit. I wish I'd gone to college like her, but man does the government fuck with you, both here and

there. It fucks with you and fucks with you and fucks with you and it's constantly finding more fucking ways to fuck with you. To trick you. To swindle you. Whatever you want to call it. I used to work in a business. Five thousand pesos a month, one thousand fifty per week, nine hours a day, Monday to Saturday. It kicks your ass. Don't get me wrong, I'm not lazy; I like working. But with those fucking hours and salaries, how do they expect a guy to live? The owners make off with millions of pesos every month. They could just distribute those millions among the folks who work for them, to pay us more and make it easier to provide for our families. But no, they want to drown in money. Screw thy neighbor. And you see them in church on Sundays, praying, asking for an end to violence and poverty, when they're the triggers. Hypocrites. That's why I nab 'em here. I'm telling you, man, if you don't stay in school, this is it. My dad, rest in peace, he taught me that. But he wasn't too sharp. He had a year and a half of calm before it blew up in his face. For showing off. He got involved with the bad guys. After a month, he had the latest-model SUV; after eight, we were living in one of those gated communities. You know how it goes. People feel superior when they've got a fucking wall around them. If they only knew. So that's how my dad got killed. They took out the watchman for being snobby, then shot up the house. My dad was sitting outside with a beer. Took eight bullets. Great men learn from their fuck-ups, but the best men learn from other people's fuck-ups. That's what he always said to me. You always have to stay alert, on guard, tracking what happens. If I hadn't been paying attention, for example, I wouldn't have realized that Julián's a cokehead. That shit saves your life. Sonrics came by three months ago. You know who he is, right? He left without paying. He squealed to La Negra. Said Don Julián owed him a shit-ton of money. Two months ago some friend of Julián's showed up, supposedly the director of the Santa Catarina security department, saying he'd have Julián's back if there was any trouble, yadda yadda. So Billy shows up the day before yesterday, who's Sonric's right-hand man, and said they were heading for Sonrics' safe house in General Treviño, and when they came back they'd stop by for his money,

and if not, adiós, kaboom. And so Don Julián, the moron, he calls his buddy from Santa Catarina. He blows the whistle, and bam: head-to-head with some army bros. They fucking destroyed them. They killed like twenty-five guys. And in Ciudad Mier, Sonrics and Billy took off. They wiped out just one soldier. But they're not stupid, those two. They know who they're sharing info with, they know where there's beef and where there isn't. Tomorrow, if not tonight, Don Julián and this whole shithole are gonna have more bulletholes than my dad. In case you don't believe me, a bunch of other clients here are supervisors at a call center downtown. Husbands, family men, all whore-addicts. I offer them the peace of mind that comes from their wives never finding out and they do me favors in return. I have texts and calls about the entire clusterfuck. Don't be an idiot. If peace of mind can be sold, then it's just a matter of finding someone who can pay the price. So hurry up, man. Go on. Quit. I'll be right here.

So I did. I went up to Don Julián and I quit. He was pissed, but he didn't really care. When I went back to the regular, I was freaked out. We left through the back door, and he took out a gun and a manila envelope. He handed it to me and tucked away the piece. He said I deserved it and gave me a firm handshake and took off. There were fifty thousand pesos in that envelope. And just like he said, the whole place was shot up the next day. Grenades and everything. They razed it to the ground. No survivors.

I didn't work for the next few months. I was still scared that something else might happen. Days after that, Billy was caught in Juárez. A few months later, on Valentine's Day, Sonrics was arrested in Guadalupe. I thought that meant it was all over, but no. Months later, an armed commando assassinated the head of the Santa Catarina security department. And that was that. I had another job by then.

A year later, maybe more, I recognized those jeansheathed diamonds: it was La Negra. She wasn't La Negra anymore. She wasn't a hooker anymore. She wasn't even

Venezuelan anymore. She was hosting an entertainment program on national TV and married to a businessman. I was happy for her. I never had the balls to do what the regular did; I have two kids and I'd never put them at risk. True to his word, though, I got spared at least three shoot-outs.

And here I am today, having breakfast at the best barbacoa taco stand in town, in my opinion. And there's my regular on every front page of every newspaper, endorsed by all the city's millionaires and even by Cardinal Robelio Cordera López himself: there he is, the new candidate for state governor.

Ana Brambila

Edited by
DIANA MICHEL VARELA

Ana Brambila

Writer and scriptwriter. BA on Creative Writing by the UACM and a diploma on Creative Writing by the Sogem. She has an interdisciplinary background that includes theatre and folk dance studies. For her, writing is a relief that allows you to enter unreal worlds, and her work focuses on genres such as science fiction, horror and fantastic literature. She loves music and film, and hopes to carry on with her studies, specializing on cinema, so that she can take her stories to the big screen.

Diana Michel Varela

BA on Latin American Literature. She is finalising an MA on Literary Studies at the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez, focusing her research on contemporary and regional Mexican Literature, and more specifically on contemporary work from the region of Nuevo León. She is attending the Diploma on xxth century Mexican Literature given by the INBA, as well as the Workshop for spectators in Ciudad Juárez, given by the Centro de Investigación y Documentación Dramática Norteamericana.

Knauss*

Once upon a time, there was a man who believed he had built a machine that could sketch the future. “Knauss,” as he had named the machine, began as a structure made of 10,000 pieces set under the lid of a pianola. Its gears generated the necessary force for the added parts to move by themselves, keeping time just like a clock.

To make his creation work, the man inserted a key that unblocked the mechanism, moved the caliper needles connected to the lid, and pulled a crank to the left of the pianola. This key had for a handle a wrought iron circle with an hourglass at its center; when the cogs began to turn, the accumulated energy activated the hourglass and the sand began to fall, to pass just like the seconds. Only when the user stopped experiencing time as waiting did the machine start doing its work:

Engineered constellations danced harmoniously, making the sound of a percussion orchestra. The rhythm reached a three-part mechanical arm, and the only finger, a fountain pen, came to life; it dipped itself in a little inkwell, which moved slowly toward the middle of the pianola, slipped onto an enormous roller of perforated paper, and read the notes of a tune that it then reproduced.

* Friedrich von Knauss (1724-1789). A German clockmaker, mechanic, and inventor who built a range of clocks with mechanisms that could, in a simple way, play musical instruments, write short sentences, or carry out other individual, specialized tasks. Various sources indicate that Knauss was the first inventor to create a completely functional machine capable of automatic writing.

Perhaps this was his way of overcoming the pain, of erasing any trace of the music that pierced his chest, of the memory that drove him to sear his insides with rotgut every night. The only one among his inventions that, despite its failure, helped him to pass the time.

He still remembered the night when he'd staggered clumsily into that rich old lady's parlour and crashed straight into the pianola to the sound of laughter, looking for somewhere to sleep. Later, half-conscious, it dawned on him where he was, since the sight of that musical contraption caused him unbearable distress: a cocktail of sorrow and drunkenness.

He was sure that the image of the pianola's owner would appear at any moment as an evocation of his memories: perched on the stool lit by the street lamps, as she had every night before her death. He had not yet overcome losing his beloved; the memory of her body in that space where now there was only a void, was unbearable. For some time, the man had wanted to get rid of that musical object, but he kept it nearby because, like all of the junk that surrounded him, it brought him memories of a glory now lost: the success of those little mechanical birds he'd designed and wound up.

That night, he was no longer sure he wanted to keep it. He had charged at the device, throwing punches, since someone had to share his pain at the loss of all that he loved in the world. If he could somehow hear the pianola's out-of-tune cries, perhaps that noise would save him from the dirges in his head, which did nothing but poison his present.

At dawn, with swollen knuckles and an appalling hang-over, the man discovered that this rage had not disappeared, and that the pianola hadn't stirred from its place. If the memories of the woman he'd once loved were not there, that meant that they would return the following night, to find him hanging from a rope.

What if he were to condemn everything to silence before that inevitable end? With the cackle of a madman, he

rummaged around in his boxes of tools, and found the right pliers. He opened the soundboard and cut the strings with the malice of a serial killer. This was how he began his new project: by torturing an antique pianola. The new mechanism's pen now moved across a different paper, tracing one fine line followed by another, more complex one; then, the line was smudged, the screws loosened, and the pen went flying.

The principal goal was for Knauss to create something by himself; his early sketches, though, were incomprehensible lines, so the man had to readjust the machine several times, adding further cogs, to teach him to draw. Each element had a role: the cogs drew straight lines, and wheels drew curved ones; some parts sketched the basic shapes, and several others worked on the shading.

It was necessary to give each group a specific direction: the biggest pieces followed the illusion of the pole star's path; others inherited their size from patterns to scale according to the movement of the planets; some, much smaller, were created only for musicality, since they clack-clacked to the rhythm of a magical idea of time, as distinct as it was incomprehensible. Some little pieces even tinkled like tiny glass bells, to transmit momentum to the next structure.

Something inside the man had also changed. The lethargy that had consumed him was now a feverish energy that shone in his eyes, kept his muscles active, and knocked forcefully at the pit of his stomach until it woke him in the middle of the night. What did it matter if he slept a couple of hours, if he could stay standing several nights in a row?

After a few weeks, he noted his progress: Knauss was doing his first drawing with more than four elements. He was close, he could feel it... A knock at the door?

"Master Sebastián, I'll leave your food outside the door. Miss is worried about you."

“That line right there is marvelous. Bravo, Bravo! What’s next?”

It made no difference to the man if he ate the food, or if the bread went moldy while languishing in some corner of his room.

“Master Sebastián, Miss wants to know if you’re going to come out and meet the guests.”

He talked to himself, and waited... the fact that he’d added 25,000 pieces in unusual, unnecessary places made for enormous progress, so that the machine’s drawings looked more and more comprehensible. Knauss had developed a surprising talent: he created a kind of fire-driven box that reached the moon, like a drawing by a little boy.

“Master Sebastián, Miss wants to know if you can fix the lock in the door, like you said you would last week.”

Thanks to Knauss’s drawings, the man could see pictures in miniature, like those made by cameras, which, after a blink, captured what was in front of them.

“Master Sebastian...”

The picture was always different, no matter how the question was asked.

In his dreams, his invention spoke to him: its voice was like that of the woman he desperately wanted to forget, but he paid no attention. Fantasy or not, he wished only to find the will to go on.

Do you think I’ll die one day? You will. But first, you are destined to achieve great things.

When the man woke up, he would religiously return to the mechanism, open the pianola’s lid, take his wrenches, and begin the inspection process over again.

“Please... You must take a bath.”

Will I achieve my great destiny before it’s too late? Yes, even now you know that my answers are a clear demonstration of your great ingenuity.

He assembled, disassembled, switched out pieces...

"Master Sebastian, please, open the door."

These were the answers he had always sought; the magnificent destiny that awaited him, despite the trials that had plagued him for so long, his only success in this mountain of errors.

It mattered little whether or not he could control Knauss after turning the handle. His design was becoming incomprehensible even to him, but he didn't worry, since every once in a while, when he stepped fondly on the pedals, the mechanism still sung to itself with a music that he had dedicated himself to drawing out of it.

"What's going on? What's all that noise?"

"I don't know, Miss, he won't come out."

Sometimes, the man's fingers failed him out of exhaustion, but the things Knauss murmured helped him regain his dexterity:

Focus. That screw in the Gg system could ruin everything.

Sometimes, when he opened his eyes in the middle of the night, he could almost see the machine shutting down by itself.

What comes next, Knaus? What will happen to me?

The machine began to draw faster than a human hand. The pen took long gulps from the inkwell, then brushed across the large strip of paper made especially for it.

Just as the man was about to discover the answer, he would wake up. Or was he really falling asleep? What happened around him seemed more and more blurred; a world different from the one he had built behind the dilapidated door to his room.

Is this what the future holds, Knaus? Sometimes there was no answer.

The machine, however, drew more and more. Piles of landscapes with exotic fauna; animals that walked with

horns on their legs; others that had eyes on their arms, and that stretched them out when they wanted to see, as if they were about to take flight.

Will I be able to see this one day?

Each of the machine's illustrations was more surprising and unimaginable than the last. The man was sure that as soon as he found an order to explain them, he would have the true sign that Knauss not only did surprising things, but that his significance was momentous.

Perhaps one day, one day, if he worked hard enough, he'd be able to translate human intelligence into a pile of gears. At that moment, he had only his fantasies.

"Master Sebastian..."

The moment for time to be annulled grew closer, and the man's impatience lessened as he carried the paper rolls back and forth, filled the well with his landlady's ink, and inserted the key and turned its handle...

"Come on, now!"

A triangle? Dawn on a riverbank?

Clack, clack, clack.

He needed to know, to find the answer to a single question. Clack, clack, clack.

He pulled the paper off the roll as soon as he could see the machine's strokes. The inventor studied the image. The fragments of answers appeared in different sizes: some were remarkably small, while others were almost a meter in length. The man tried to place them in a correct sequence, in endless lines.

Knauss, can you hear me?

The art coming from the machine was not only beautiful, but revealing. The man grew addicted to going back over the answers and finding a place for the new page. The pictures soon filled the surfaces of the walls, but there was still no clear answer. He knew he was forgetting something important, but what?

It took him a long time to recognize it, but one day he knew.

“Sebastián, it’s Dr. Jiménez. Can I come in?”

The ink was still fresh on the paper and a little smudged, but the image was clear: a girl sitting under a mulberry tree. Just like the apple that allowed Newton to understand gravity, the mulberries dropped in a purple shower towards the little girl, who awaited them with a smile.

When he recognized the image, the man felt for a second as if his soul had left his body. His legs buckled; he fell to his knees, wrapped in a long strip of paper that the machine continued to eject from its roll. The man had only taken a piece, but Knauss seemed to have something more to say. Was he talking to him again? No, he never would, he was only spinning through the new roll the man had worked so hard to make.

Did the machine have any idea of all that he’d suffered to make that paper? Could it imagine what it had cost him to wait for the shredded pieces of unwanted books to dry again so that he could make his roll the perfect width? Knauss was only a stupid machine, a mechanism that had never given him answers about the future. The man knew now: the images were never about what would happen tomorrow or in two thousand years. Everything Knauss had written and drawn referred to things in the past, to a specific, earlier time, his childhood, and to images from a place he knew perfectly — his imagination.

The sequence of the girl with the tree and the shower of mulberries had provided the answer: Knauss’s drawing showed his sister in his aunt and uncle’s cabin, where they had gone after their parents’ death; the little girl used to lean against the tree, jostling it so that the ripe mulberries would fall into her mouth.

After his sister’s death, the man had dreamed endlessly of the same image: a place where she was alive and where he

invented an atomizer that could drop mulberries into anyone's mouth without their having to bruise their backs.

Why hadn't he noticed that what the machine reproduced was just fragments of his memory? Knauss began to shudder frenetically, his valves squeaking and smoke shrouding everything around him. The man's basement room seemed to fill with fog. On the floor above, the maid had detected the smell of burning and was knocking loudly on the door, wanting to know what was going on, but her cries were drowned out by the machine as it began to shake uncontrollably.

At that moment, he could still do something; find the problem that would soon set fire to the pianola's wood; remove the key suddenly to activate the brakes on the machine. Despite this, he couldn't move. He found himself observing the machine with empty eyes, the drawing of the shower of mulberries torn to shreds in his hands.

Perhaps he'd fallen asleep and it was just an imagined failure, perhaps it had just been the reflection of a dream... wasn't that what life was, too?

All he wanted was to die, to drown in paper or suffocate in the smoke from that useless machine that was about to explode like all the rest of his inventions, like the explosion that had killed his betrothed.

The roll kept turning: the mechanical arm that held the pen moved so quickly it was a blur; a mountain of ideas and events unfolded before his eyes so rapidly that in the end they vanished. The machine had had to remind him of them.

He no longer had to focus on what was expressed on paper, since he recognized the sketches of wings perfectly: an analysis of the drawings of Michael Angelo as he searched for the perfect mathematical formula of the human being, to create the invention that would allow him to fly. He also remembered the fragments of the story of Icarus that his aunt would tell him to lull him to sleep despite the pain of

his broken arm, from when his wing prototype failed and he crashed into the apple tree that almost killed him.

He should have studied the product of his invention beforehand; just as Newton had understood when he discovered gravity, the drawings of people with wings gliding through the air, the shower of mulberries and machines that told stories with the turn of a handle, alluded to a particular time in his past.

Sebastián didn't stop the ink, he let the paper finish wrapping around him and awaited the final answer, the one that came after its analysis of a utopian world. One sentence, the last line of the great poem that was his failure, the fruit of his ignorance of how his own invention worked.

When it was drawn, he also knew that his heart would stop, proving that the machine had told the truth; as soon as he discovered his own ignorance, he would die.

Your past was always the present that built your future.

Where had that voice come from? From the machine, or the man's fantasies?

Knaus, are you there? Can you hear me?

The machine stopped, then spat out a pair of screws. It hadn't exploded, but the pieces that came out broke part of the structure of the pianola. There was nothing to be done.

When the maid managed to get through the door, Knauss was adding his final strokes: the machine had been programmed to draw the future, but, having begun in the past, it arrived in the present, to the sketch of a man lying in a mountain of rolls of paper. The individual had no face, but the machine had to tell, in a final stroke, the story of a man who once believed he had built a machine that could draw the future. It must do so before dying with its creator.

The man in the drawing was completely covered in paper and could no longer move, just like Knaus's pen, which was gradually slowing down. The tinkling of the smallest parts could be heard like a farewell song, while louder cogs shook laboriously one last time. Then... the hourglass shattered.

Julia Bravo

Edited by
GISELLE GONZÁLEZ

Julia Bravo

Hispanic Literature student. She is currently working on an educational project that is structured around identity and territory of the totonakú community of the Sierra Norte of Puebla. She decided to study literature because that's what her main influences during her teenage studied. As time went by, she found the healing power of writing, the possibilities of reading as a collective act and the importance of feminisms.

Giselle González

Hispanic Literature student. She is a permanent writer for the digital magazine *Primera Página*, where she writes a column called "La ciudad de las damas" [The city of ladies]. She is interested on popular narratives, Mexican literature from the xixth century, feminine literature, the new technologies of the publishing world and community work. She finds that editing is a way of creating bridges between writers and readers.

Odara's Box

"They only got my sister's Mac, Mom's jewelry, and a few gadgets from the kitchen. Oh, and the box where I kept my rings, along with some old ticket stubs and receipts. They did a terrible job picking their target. Maybe they thought we'd have more valuables, given the size of the house. But they were wrong. Almost all my rings were fake."

"But you're okay, you and your family?"

"Yes, thank you for asking."

Thank you for asking? What kind of response is that? Odara wondered as she whisked the cake batter. It seemed like a conversation two people who barely knew each other might have, an indifferent exchange of pleasantries.

"Lucía's angry, but she had everything backed up on an external drive. They didn't take much. Just our peace of mind."

It had been months since the last time they were alone together. When she had invited Ella over to her house to make a cake for the party, Odara never imagined she would agree, but she did, bowing her head slightly and closing her eyes with a reserve uncommon to her, adopting the posture of a man who responds to a goodbye with, "Go with God." She even agreed to skip her last class so they could get an earlier start, though that might also just have been because she was afraid nightfall would catch her in a home where she no longer felt safe.

From the corner of her eye, Odara watched Ella hold the cake mold in her left hand and coat it in butter with the

index and middle fingers of her right. As she sprinkled the flour around its entire surface, she said, "I thought you'd run away with the award for worst pastry chef with your sifting technique, but this..." she held the cake mold out with both hands to show Odara the irregular patches of flour, "I'm stealing back a few points with this."

"Wow. That's hideous."

"As ugly as sin?"

"As ugly as the Devil."

"As ugly as a man in loafers?"

"As ugly as stubbing your pinky toe."

"As ugly as someone raising their hand in class and saying, 'This isn't so much a question, as it is a comment...'"

"As ugly as a parallel world where *Pedro Páramo* is called *Whispers*."

"..."

"What? Too much?"

They laughed. Odara knew that at times like those there was a price to pay for holding Ella's gaze: it was worth it, to see her big teeth and the wrinkles around her nose, and hear her raucous, melodious laugh, but after a few seconds Odara would invariably feel a jab in her stomach, a deep-seated pain that would surface to remind her of reality, and which destroyed any attempt to find a space of reprieve where she could imagine what might have been or what might even, in those moments, still be salvaged. And so, just like that, Odara decided to step out of the ring and turned away. This time, she looked at the floor; as their laughter died down, little flashes of light caught her eye. They were the same socks Ella wore to Joss's party: silver sparkling against black. Without considering the consequences, Odara asked:

"You've had those socks for a while, haven't you?"

"I only wear them on special occasions," Ella replied, not missing a beat. Cutting, cold. That's how she was.

The day they met, Odara knew her life would be profoundly altered by her relationship with Ella, though in fact it was months before they became friends. Odara understood the first time she saw her why rumors had been flying about Ella's arrival since the end of the previous semester: she was truly beautiful. Of course, it had never been just that, but without that defensive move, she risked revealing more about herself than she was willing to admit.

He woke up with a gasp, as if someone had punched him in the gut. In the night's shadows, he could make out his father's panicked face. He had no idea what was going on, but he took his hand and let himself be led into the living room. His mother was slumped on the dark green couch, her hands tied and a gag in her mouth. Heavy breathing, the butt of a gun making contact. Blood on Dad's temple. The three of them, cornered. On their knees. Grab everything you can and make it fast, assholes. You—keep it the fuck down.

There were four of them, their faces disfigured by the black stockings they'd pulled over their heads. Grotesque, diabolical expressions. It didn't take them long to clean out the house, but the fear made time expand like warm play dough. The child thought that maybe this waiting was like torture, that maybe for people called before the Inquisition, time doubled or even tripled before they died. He had gone on a school trip to the museum two days earlier.

His room was last and at some point one of the men approached him.

"Come with me."

The gag muffled his mother's screams while his father gripped her leg in a gesture of calm resignation. Paradoxically, the child breathed a sigh of relief. At least something was happening. For better or worse, something was happening.

He had never been very patient.

The child walked into his room. He tried to take a few mental snapshots because he knew it was the last time he would see it like that.

“Pick one toy and one book. Choose carefully. Think hard.”

It occurred to the child that the thief sounded a lot like his parents when they would take him to pick his gift before Christmas. As usual, he was impatient but not indecisive, and he grabbed a stuffed rabbit wearing pajamas and his Encyclopedia of Dinosaurs.

History repeats. Now the child is a thief.

But, for obvious reasons, he doesn't empty the houses out. The child, who now is an adult, believes this irreversible event was what sent his parents to an early grave. Years of hard work and saving were followed by overwhelming poverty. No one sets out to become a thief, but he often asks himself if there's any other way to survive, really.

The child who is now an adult only takes valuables: televisions, computers, jewelry, cash. More than a thief, he considers himself a scout, a spy: he spends weeks studying the residents of the house he's chosen as his target, when they come and go, what kinds of locks they have, whether they have a dog, if they're close with any neighbors who might get worried if they noticed “something unusual in the Pérez family's routine” or might think to themselves, “What's that noise coming from Andrea's place?” He always has someone with him when he goes in.

There is, though, one thing he always does alone.

He has never forgotten the man with the stocking pulled over his face. He has wondered his whole life whether that strange thief did the same thing with every kid, or if there had been something particular in him that had inspired mercy. So he feels a sense of responsibility to return things that

get “misplaced”: that is, those objects that aren’t worth any money but do have sentimental or symbolic value for their owners. He tries to do it as soon as he can, because people usually move away, or install security cameras, or cover the perimeter of their homes with metal spikes or broken bottles. Nothing complicated, nothing that would put him at risk.

He waits in the shade of an elm tree on the corner across the street. He knows no one is home. In his hands are the box with rings inside it and a slim lever with a curve at one end. When he steps away from the tree he feels the sun burning his eyelids. The intense contrast makes it hard to see the creeper that climbs to a balcony off one of the bedrooms. He forces the lock on the sliding door and steps into a room with a twin bed, the same one he took the box from. The child who is now an adult wonders where he can put the unadorned shoebox where it won’t be obvious that he’s been inside the house again, somewhere the girl can find it, like someone who thought they’d lost something forever but really just forgot where they’d put it.

He looks through the objects in the box one last time, to make sure everything is there. Rings, ticket stubs, receipts. An old scapular and a locket with a picture of two teenagers inside. The savings are for him. The photos for her. The locket for him. When he gets to the bottom of the box, he finds a couple of pages torn from a notebook and folded in half. He can’t help but read them.

Ella:

You’re asleep. And I, like whenever you’re lying next to me, am wide awake. It doesn’t matter if there are five or six of us at a sleepover—by chance, or through some deliberate effort on my part, or maybe because you also want it to be that way, I always end up next to you. I check my breathing, afraid it will sound uneven, as if my body were revealing my secret. I’ve worked up the nerve to look at you a few times but always look away, afraid you aren’t asleep and can feel my

uncomfortable presence.

But I can't help thinking that the night is calling us to something better.

I think about the night, after the rain. Do you ever think about it, too? Even if it's only once a month? After Joss's party you invited me to stay at your place, so I wouldn't spend so much on a taxi. You said we should walk a little first. It was really late when we left, the world was completely still. The witching hour, your favorite. We started walking and were the only people out. It had rained all night, and it seemed like the water had cleaned the streets, for a little while at least, of all trace of the bitter moments that weigh a place down.

The moon was shining on the houses and parked cars. As you walked, you ran your fingers along the wet window bars and turned to look at me every now and then. At one point I thought that, if this was all a product of what we were, then nothing was off-limits. We crossed a border that was beyond reality. Did you feel it, too?

Nothing seemed out of line. We stopped at each majestic tree whose roots broke through the concrete of the sidewalk. Laying our hands on them, we meditated. Maybe we were just drunk, but near the Angel's Trumpet in the Plaza de Santa Catarina you stopped in your tracks and said, "The night is calling us to something better."

A long silence.

I wasn't sure how to react, or even how not to look away. I know it was disappointing. We didn't talk until we reached your house, we took off our shoes without talking. A sense of shared embarrassment hung in the air. We've never talked about what happened.

Ella, you don't cause me pain. I don't feel afflicted or nostalgic, but whenever we see each other, it does frustrate me to think about how I've been able to live so long without sharing more. As if I were self-inducing an amnesia of you that worked from day to day, but not when we're alone together. Then, I'm gripped by the fear that I have been living a cursed version of what should be my life, a secondary one that isn't my best life, but is simply an acceptable one. I don't want my life to be just acceptable, Ella.

When I think about us, the images in my head are tinted sepia. It's never happened with anyone else. We could be so happy. We've lived between silences and intuitions for so long that it's worth the gamble, just once. Maybe this is all a useless attempt to describe something that can't be described but I want to try, because if I get hit by a car tomorrow, it would be a shame for none of this to have gotten out. And

because my thoughts belong to you, somehow.

A thump. Someone's in the house. Time to get out of there, not a second to waste. The box sits on the corner of the desk, half open.

"I can't believe it! We achieved the impossible: we burnt the bottom and the batter is still raw on top." Ella said, smiling despite her frustration.

"Seriously?"

"We can always throw in the towel and go to a bakery."

"Do you have any money you could lend me? I only have like eighty pe..."

A metallic sound.

"Is anyone else home?" Ella whispered.

"... No."

"Relax, there's nothing to worry about."

"..."

"Want me to go check?"

"Get real, Ella, I'm not going to let you go alone."

"Pass me a knife, we'll go together. Quietly. Bring your phone and have 911 dialed."

"That's your plan? What if he has a gun?"

"There's no one there, it's probably just a rat. No one's unlucky enough to have two break-ins back to back."

"What if they came back for something?"

"You said yourself you don't have any valuables, didn't you? Come on, it's fine."

They began to climb the stairs. With her free hand, Ella reached for Odara's. She's never done that before, Odara thought. They weren't very affectionate people in general, and sometimes taking someone's hand was more intimate than a kiss on the cheek. She wished it had happened under different circumstances.

"Where did the noise come from?"

"From my room, I think."

“Okay. Wait for me here.”

“And then what?”

“And then nothing, there’s no one there. Something probably just fell, or it was the floor creaking.”

Ella turned the knob carefully and, when the door was halfway open, slipped inside. She saw the box on the floor. Relief. She immediately felt her muscles relax and the hand with the knife unclench, opening by inertia like a flower. Confused, she saw that the door to balcony was open and noticed a small object made of iron, the curtains moving in the breeze, and a photo of the two of them on the floor. On Odara’s bed were a few pages torn from a notebook with her name on them.

Elías Domínguez

Edited by

FERNANDA LOUTFE OROZCO

Elías Domínguez

Language student. Comes from a rural community, south of Mexico, where he grows a small allotment of chiles and tomatoes. He spent some time in Portugal, a place that he remembers with nostalgia. Lover of Ibarra's writing. His days go by between reading and watching short films. His favorite word in Spanish is "tree" [árbol]. One of his texts can be read on the blog of *Revista de la Universidad de México*.

Fernanda Loutfe Orozco

Literature student. She was born in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, and currently lives in Cholula. Her essay "La locura en el arte" [Madness in art] was published by the literary magazine *Los no letrados*. She likes reading since she was little and, because of this, wants to dedicate her life to edit and translate novels for young adults.

Candelario

Candelario wakes to the sound of his cellphone alarm. He yawns and stretches his arms while the eyes of his mother, always smiling, gaze at him from the portrait on the night stand.

His long legs slowly emerge from the bed one after the other. He stands and walks down the wide, gloomy hallway full of family photos of different shapes and sizes until he reaches the kitchen. Occasionally, as he passes the dark, wood door to his mother's room, he shouts good morning. He enjoys this, it's like making her emerge from the depths of one of the neatly arranged, wood and bronze-framed portraits that hang on the wall, to infuse the air with her scent of lemon jam and give him a good morning kiss.

Candelario can smell the scent of his mother, that scent that fills the whole house, reaching the depths of his soul, though it's been over five years since Doris stopped hanging portraits, not by choice, but because the candle of her life sputtered out.

Candelario sits at the rectangular table built from two long planks of white ceiba, listens to birdsong that manages to pass through the tightly closed window, and waits for the water to heat for coffee.

Doris came from the coast, where the earth meets the sand. At twenty-one, with black hair and a smile that enlivened even the greyest days, she found herself under a different sky. Doris had to abandon the ocean to look for work in Elvares, a town where the sky is bluer than cobalt, and the

ground rises and falls dramatically. There, she met Heberto, a man who owned cattle and fertile lands. Candelario is the fruit that sprang from their love.

At home, Heberto always demanded the food of his childhood; very rarely would he eat anything Doris had brought from *there*, which was how, when the subject arose, he referred to her sandy homeland.

Doris, who was always a woman full of life, learned her mother-in-law's recipes to perfection: dishes bursting with flavor and color her husband loved so much that if he'd had to choose between two tamales, one made by his wife and the other by his mother, he wouldn't have been able to tell which was which.

Candelario finishes his coffee, smells the bottom of the cup and the kitchen's air. His mother taught him to breathe in every nook and cranny of life.

He goes from the kitchen to the hallway bathed in light and adorned with clay pots bursting with aloe plants. He sits down in a wicker seat, still in good condition despite the humidity. In another half hour, he'll go see Estela.

Doña Amalia's restaurant is tiny and painted a bright shade of fuchsia. A strong scent of orange juice brightens the day of anyone passing by. There are six tables, each with four blue chairs, and a sign that says "TACOS 10 PESOS."

Estela is a wide-hipped girl with delicate hands and skin beautifully bronzed by the sun of her childhood. She fell in love with Candelario because when her skin first brushed against his, she felt a warmth so pleasant that she wanted to keep feeling it forever.

The little restaurant's specialty is orange chicken tacos.

After breakfast, Candelario always wants to know more about this girl he finds so pretty. He wants to know how much those enchanting little hands have been through. He always spends the rest of the morning talking with his beloved, in a

combination of mischievous glances, laughter, and tickles. Only when a customer comes through the door and orders something, do they pause. But today, Candelario hasn't seen Estela's gapped teeth, nor the playful expression she sometimes shows.

While Doña Amalia attends to a little old man, a friend of hers, Estela signals at Candelario to follow her. He rises as if propelled from his chair, and enters the warm place that has witnessed their great love so many times, the little back storeroom, nothing more than a space with a dirt floor and unplastered walls, that serves as a cellar for broken chairs.

When there are no longer eyes to see them, Estela throws herself onto Candelario's shoulder. She embraces and kisses him for a moment, then brings her mouth close to his ear: her period hasn't come, she is full of dread, and doesn't know what they'll do if what she fears the most comes to pass.

When he hears Estela's fears, Candelario trembles. He doesn't know what to say. The money he earns from his job as an English teacher is barely enough for his meager personal expenses. Doña Amalia calls for Estela, interrupting her tears. She manages to tell Candelario that she'll see him at dusk in the park.

Candelario goes home sooner than he had expected. He has lived in the same house all his life, built from a mix of his parents' ideas, and combining the best of both: his mother's passion for plants, and his father's taste for wide, open spaces.

Candelario closes his eyes. The warm smell fills his mind with memories of sunny July afternoons strolling along the stream with his mother. His mother is there with him. His mother smiles.

He sits in front of the wood-framed mirror and looks at his face. It seems to him that his twenty-eight years have gone by crudely. The only thing the face he sees conserves

of itself are the happy eyes that were there in the years of laughter and jokes with his mother, a time that passed and never returned.

When the sky takes on its evening hues, Candelario knows it's time to go to Estela. He loves his Estela; he adores seeing the innocent beauty spot on the tip of her nose, but neither of them is ready for anything more.

Candelario walks through the humid courtyard full of daylight and vines that cover the wall, closes the tall, rusty iron gate, and leaves the house.

To reach the park in downtown Elvres from his house, he has to cross a narrow path shaded by flame trees that paint the sky yellow in June.

Candelario walks along the path and contemplates his surroundings. Everything is so green, a shade of green that saturates his eyes and makes him taste the leaves in his mouth. Candelario sees everything just as his mother did, in wonderment. She was always surprised at everything around her.

He reaches the park, where children run around and shout. He waits a while for Estela to arrive, then sees the pretty girl in a burnt orange dress that accentuates her bronzed complexion. Candelario opens his eyes, bright green like the view from the path, and Estela appears before him with a lovely smile, reminding him of the best moments they've spent together. For a few seconds, Candelario loses himself in admiring her hands. Then, the two embrace and sigh.

After a week, they decide that it's best to live together. Estela goes to live at Candelario's house, and Candelario begins to share the bed he's slept in all his life. In that bed, Estela sleeps uncomfortably. Twenty days of married life feel like twenty years.

At four in the afternoon, Candelario gets home from work tired and hungry. He walks through the courtyard and is filled

with horror when he sees that part of the vine has gone, filling the space with sickening light. In the hallway, the pots of aloe have been moved and dusted. Candelario hurries inside and finds the kitchen windows open, letting in the warm afternoon air. Everything has been tidied and the house is full of this abrupt brightness. He searches desperately for his mother's smell in the air, but there is nothing there. The natural fragrance of lemon jam that permeated the house is gone. Mother has gone to who knows where.

Candelario roams through the large house's rooms in search of Estela. He finds her on top of a stool, passing a cloth over one of the portraits in the gloomy corridor. She shows him her gapped teeth cheerfully. In response, she receives a disdainful expression Candelario can't wipe from his face.

Estela knows every last inch of Candelario's body, but she is ignorant of much of his inner life. His blood boils with anger, anger that finds release through his eyes. Candelario makes no complaint about the changes to the house.

Candelario leaves the house and follows the sound of the wind as it shakes the mango thickets beside the stream. He reaches the hut where the elderly Doña Eduvijes lives, a friend whom his mother used to tell of the sea's many shades of blue. Fifteen minutes later, Candelario emerges from the squat hut, with a sprig of basil and some strips of cinnamon in the back pocket of his linen pants.

Back at home, he quietly makes a cup of tea.

Before bed, Candelario wishes Estela goodnight with a grave expression. She responds with teary eyes, asking the reason for his seriousness. Candelario says that it's nothing, that he's had a hard day at work. He also tells her he's made her a little tea to help her sleep. She drinks. They go to sleep.

Two days later, things seem to be going better. Candelario comes home with new topics of conversation, while Estela cares for her pregnancy, and the ferns she has planted and placed by the door. The tea routine goes on for almost a week.

It's almost eight in the morning when Estela begins to feel the pain in her womb, closes her eyes, sweats, cries, and gnashes her teeth. After almost two hours of torture, large clots of blood leave her body, and she feels an immense relief inside. Though she still feels mild cramps, she understands what has just happened and the freedom this means for her.

As soon as he opens the gate when he comes home from work, Candelario finds a note that Estela has left on top of a small flower pot:

There's nothing keeping me at your house anymore. There's nothing to worry about, my dear Candelario. I forgive you for giving me that unsweetened tea to "help me sleep." I'm going back to my mother's house.

Your Estela

Candelario puts five lemons on a plate, chooses one and tears at it with his thumb nail. His mother arrives straight away to wish him goodnight. Candelario laughs, speaks, and looks at himself in his mother's eyes. Tonight, Candelario sleeps happily.

Carla Durán

Edited by
PAULA BUZO

Carla Durán

Literary studies. She has participated as a speaker on Academic forums dedicated to the field of Humanities. She writes monthly for the cultural magazine *Bicaalú*. Her short story “Blim” was shortlisted for the V Premio Endira Cuento Corto, and will be published shortly.

Paula Buzo

Resident of Mexico City. BA on Communications and currently studying an MA on Editorial Production and Design. She collaborates as an editor and proofreader at several publications dedicated to culture and science. She is also a big fan of musical theater.

Think of Me

Sarita was with me when my wife died. She held her hand as Regina said, "Dear, if you ever marry again, your next wife better be prettier than me." That was her vanity speaking; she just didn't want another woman warming her side of the bed. I made my promise lightly: with my wife in her deathbed, I was in no state to think about new marriages or other lovers. But I had no way of knowing what loneliness can do to a widower, either.

Within a month, her request had me checking out other women to see if any of them met such a requirement. No one our age came close. When Regina was young, she stopped everyone dead in their tracks. Her large, long-lashed eyes radiated a kind of divinity onto the rest of her exquisitely sensuous form. She grew frail soon after our wedding. Like a flame in the dark: small, quivering, but bright in the shadows. Her first wrinkles finely ornamented her face. Even in her coffin, death-blached, she was a sculpture. There was no forty-something woman more beautiful in all of Amealco.

That's why I made her my wife in the first place. I'm a simple man, really: I've never cared much about my own appearance, and I view daily showers as an idle excess. I don't buy expensive clothes nor wear out the ones I have by washing them too often. Regina could have overlooked a guy like me. But I'm hardworking enough to stand out. I dared to pursue her because I was a cultured young man.

Ever since I was a child, my parents taught me to take care of business and its returns. They got their start selling

lumber, which they transported by donkey. When they left the trade, they took the very last beast of burden and tanned its hide. They kept this pelt as a memento of their origins and the value of hard work; later, so did I. Thanks to their teachings, I was able to give my wife a roof over our heads and food on the table: the result of the long hours I spent working at my shop, the best-stocked convenience store in town.

My father would give me some money every Sunday, depending on how much I'd worked during the week. Instead of buying marbles and candy, I'd head straight for the newspaper stand in search of something to read. Over time, I amassed some collections of literary classics and art history texts. Without books, the sight of the flowering fields would have been enough for me. But literature piqued my thirst for beauty.

It's an unusual feature among people of my social status. More than anything else, though, I was a man. That's why I spread the donkey hide over the back of my reading chair: to distinguish me from the beasts. A donkey is barely aware of itself and its needs. If he mates, it's because he has to; no degree of loveliness would ever make him desire a particular partner. I prided myself on my own fineness, on my appreciation for all things beautiful.

I was determined to marry Regina. Since she didn't know Goya from Adam and had never read Dumas, she was spell-bound by everything I told her when we went out on the town. I didn't need her to be interested in the same things as I was; I just needed to see her. Which is why I felt so empty when she was gone. Novels were no substitute for the pleasure I took in her womanly virtues.

Maybe I could have settled for a less beautiful woman after Regina. But her dying words made her my benchmark. I stopped limiting myself to women my own age; perhaps, if I focused on younger girls, I'd find a winning candidate. That's when Sarita caught my eye.

I couldn't yet be sure how her face would age. But you could tell that, like Regina's, her beauty would endure over time. She'd reached womanhood only a few months prior. The buttons on her blouse had begun to strain against her chest. Her newly broadened hips made her clumsy; she'd bump into the corners of furniture that had never gotten in her way before. A wholly feminine delicateness began to bloom in her.

Spurred by vanity, women heed the details of their appearance, which is what makes them so pleasing and rewarding to behold. But my wife, who'd been taught that vanity was a sin, would fill with shame if she hovered at the mirror for even ten minutes. I liked to catch her fixing her hair in the middle of the day. Sarita, by contrast, could spend entire hours engrossed in her reflection.

Sometimes I thought she confused windows with mirrors and that she liked the rain only because it let her glimpse herself in puddles in the street. Regina always scolded her for that. "What are you looking at yourself for?", she'd say. "Do something useful and make me some tea for this headache I've got." "Quit combing your hair and pass me the cough medicine." "Come help me get dressed instead of making faces in the mirror." And as much as Sarita would have liked to keep looking, she'd jump up immediately to help.

That was her only task: to take care of Regina. Other girls her age didn't have so much responsibility, but she never complained, not once. They loved each other, even though their relationship was that of a patient with her nurse. Without a trace of disgust, Sarita would leave her homework unfinished to hold Regina's hair when she had to vomit. Then she'd tuck her in with equal tenderness. "Thank you, sweet girl," my wife would say fondly.

After Regina's death, Sarita was left unmoored. She had nothing to do but go to school. I started asking her to come

with me to the store. It was good for her: this way, she wouldn't have to spend the afternoon alone without anyone who needed her, and I could keep her close by, although she never helped me. Insolent, she'd stare at her reflection in the display case, purse her lips, smile, let down her hair, braid it, unbraid it, paint her eyebrows...the sight of her made me smile until my upper lip curled over my gums and bared my silver-plated bottom teeth. When she noticed me looking at her, her face would grow serious and she'd stare straight ahead.

I hoped Sarita's evasiveness was just because of loyalty to Regina. All women respect a widower when his wife's body is not yet cold. But the situation was Sarita was far more sensitive. My taste for beauty had never caused me any trouble until then. With Sarita, though, my indulgent contemplation meant I could no longer pride myself on being a civilized man. Our connection was complicated. One false step and the bond would turn into a noose.

There was no sin with Regina. I asked for her hand, her family granted it willingly, and only after the wedding did I take her as my wife. She captivated me because the world arranged and rearranged itself around her to showcase her loveliness; it brought the universe into harmony. But Sarita's beauty was violent. It incited me to wage war on all the laws and customs of righteous men. When I rested my eyes on the narrowest part of her waist, I burned with an eternal fire. She'd caught me looking at her desirously on more than one occasion. Her chest rose and fell to the swift beat of perdition, and we both felt trapped by her beauty.

Even so, I kept seeking her out, and she always slipped away. If I asked her to come with me to the store, she'd go to the bathroom every half-hour. If we went to buy merchandise, she'd busy herself with some product out of reach from where I was loading supplies. If I asked about school and her

friends, she'd respond in monosyllables. In order to avoid making me smile, she stopped letting me watch her study her own reflection.

Maybe that would have been enough for me to stop insisting on keeping her close by. But Sarita had some provocative oversights I'd grown attached to. Sometimes, when I asked her to organize something in the store, she'd bend over without realizing that her school skirt rode up and showed her panties. On laundry days, she'd come in with her blouse all wet, her bra tight against the damp clothes. Every morning she'd pluck a lavender sprig, rub it across her neck, and close her eyes as if overcome by the pleasure of its touch, as if yearning for a mouth to devour her.

By no means did I find these gestures wholly satisfying. Instead, I became obsessed with them, and they prompted bold fantasies on my part. For a long time, my chief vice was the thought of her in her bedroom after taking a shower. She always took ages to get dressed, and I was sure she must spend at least part of that time in front of the mirror, naked. Behind closed doors, how carefully might she inspect her own skin? Plagued by this thought, I decided to get careless. I walked in on her without knocking. There she was, studying herself in profile, stroking her flat belly. It was over in the blink of an eye—she instantly wrapped herself in the towel she'd left on the floor. I apologized as I closed the door, but I couldn't help but smiling.

Part of me wanted to put an end to it all, to pluck out my own eyes so I couldn't even see her. But pleasure strangled reason. Numbed, I happily surrendered to my sentence. Now I think that if I'd gone blind, I would have sought her out with my hands instead. I would have touched her with the excuse of needing to find my way in the dark. Her beauty consumed me as none other ever had. It blackened my soul. And out of the rot came the desire for a kiss.

I didn't think of possessing her mouth with my tongue. I wanted less than that. The touch of her lips on my cheek would do. I thought that this would smother my passion, at least for a few days; I'd have that kiss to relive, to satisfy my thirst. But I didn't want to ask her for it. It would be better if she offered it to me, if for some reason she gave me this pleasure as a gift.

I bought her a pair of silver hoop earrings. Sarita had worn the same studs since she was a baby. It was time she had some proper woman's jewelry, and considering how much she liked to dress up, her eyes were sure to shine when she saw them. I started fantasizing about the kiss she'd plant on my skin in thanks for the gift, and a greater evil took root in me. I thought that the gift would make her indebted to me, and if she didn't respond with spontaneous gratitude, then I'd make her fully aware of her debt.

I sat down in my armchair, just as I did every night. But instead of picking up a book, I called her over. When she opened the box, she forgot that she no longer saw herself in the mirror before me, and so she ran to the one in the living room to put on the earrings and pull her hair back into a ponytail. The silver grazed her neck and jaw. I was struck by the thought of her perfuming her own skin with lavender. I wanted to smell her. I called her back and had her sit on my lap.

I felt her slender hips between my hands and settled her onto my thighs. She sat straight upright, facing away from me. I parted her hair with my hands and sank my nose into the back of her neck. The lavender bloomed. She didn't turn around.

"Aren't you going to thank me?"

She responded with a murmur.

"What about a kiss?"

I pulled her around so she was facing to one side. She timidly brought her lips to my cheek. I couldn't resist turning my

head so that our mouths met as if by accident. I would have settled for a dry, puckered, silly little girl's kiss, I would have let her go, but her wet mouth seared my skin. It meant transgressing the very law of God, but her lips made me forget the holy writ.

I slipped my hand under her skirt. Her thighs were firm, white, without a trace of future varicose veins. She squeezed them shut, but I pulled them apart again with an adamant caress. Her warm flesh led me to touch her over her panties. Sitting in that position, though, I directed my hunger toward another part of her body.

Her breasts rose slowly and fell with a shudder. They promised both the tautness of her youth and a woman's welcoming softness. I unbuttoned her blouse. Her chest, freed now of its childish clothing, reminded me of Regina on our wedding night. They both had a dark raised birthmark on the left side. I stroked it nostalgically. Sarita's skin was revealed before me like a photograph, new and familiar at the same time.

She didn't move. But beautiful women don't need to do much; they're skilled at receiving masculine hands. That's how my wife was. She always let me do what my pleasure dictated, and once in awhile she'd let out a delicious moan. Sarita made a sound like a plea; I chose to ignore it. I was lost in her body. Overtaken by my lust for her skin, I could only indulge the whims of my own.

I took her delicate hand in mine and made her feel me through my pants. Regina's hands had been thin like hers. Swimming in pleasure, I intermittently imagined Sarita as my wife. If my conscience urged me at any point to restrain from carrying on, I talked myself out of it, justifying my actions with the gift I'd given her. I unbuttoned my pants, completely detached from logical thought. I continued, needing nothing from her at all. Her touch was enough. I didn't release her until I was finished.

I hadn't intended to get so far with Sarita, but she hadn't done much to stop me. If she'd resisted with the violence of her provocations, it would never have come to this. My ardor recognized her curves as queens and sovereigns, surrendering to them without any concern for propriety. But once I'd been satisfied, I wasn't sure what to do with my sin.

I pulled her off my lap and set her aside so I could stand up. I wanted to rest, to hide under the covers. Sarita lay there like a crumpled rag in a corner of the chair. She was trembling, her blouse disheveled, her wet hand extended across her legs. I got dressed as if to indicate that she should do the same, but she kept shaking and didn't get up. I lifted the donkey hide from the back of the seat and covered her up so she wouldn't catch cold, but there was nothing else I could do.

I was opening my bedroom door when she called out. She walked toward me. She pulled her hand, still moist, out from the blanket I'd given her.

I turned and left her there. I had nothing to say.

I never saw her again. Not her, not the hide. I'm not sure if I heard her leaving through the back door; I didn't try to monitor her movements.

She took everything I held dear: her body, my desires, and the donkey pelt. It would have been less painful if she'd set the house and store on fire before she went off. I'd rather be dead than alone and impossibly far away from what I once was.

I wanted to imagine her running off with some nice boy who would understand what she'd been through and give her a comfortable life: one of a respectable lady, a triumphant Cinderella. But I've heard rumors that she works at "La Yegua", it destroyed all the happy endings I'd envisioned for her. Today, I'm plagued by thoughts of Sarita sitting in the laps of strange men who sink their noses into the nape of her neck and lick her skin and touch her without shame, as I wish I could have done. And they ask her to call them "daddy."

Ghada Martínez

Edited by

JULIO VILLANUEVA

Ghada Martínez

Creative writing and literature student. As far as she can remember, she recalls wanting to work with books, from which she has learned that there are many things that need to be subverted. She is convinced that in order to write one has to bleed a bit (or a lot). She mainly writes short stories and wants to end up owning all the letters that compose the word “writer”. She agrees with José Emilio Pacheco on that “since before Scheherazade, fictions are a way to postpone the death sentence”.

Julio Villanueva

BA on Hispanic Literature. He has an interest on alternative editorial processes, as well as on the interaction between words and images. He is currently working on a PhD about the editor as an active agent in the creation of literature and hopes to do an MA soon on Publishing.

Juliana

Juliana's screams wake me and before I know what's going on I'm banging my fists on the door to her room and yelling for her to open up. My parents are right behind me. The door stays closed and the sobbing gets louder. We cry, we speak gently to her, we beg. Please, open up. Nothing. Only screams: howls, gurgling, shrieks, as if someone were sand-ing her vocal cords. I plug my ears against the terror and we end up kicking the door down. The heat from the room hits our faces. We find her clawing at the floor; Mom runs to wrap her arms around her. My parents struggle with her, checking her from head to toe, and Mom sticks two fingers down her throat to force her to vomit: nothing comes out but saliva and bile. She calms down and my parents stare at one another in shock. I stand in the doorway, trying to bring my heart rate back to normal.

Her books are strewn all around, her bookshelves knocked over; the lamp and mattress are on the floor with a bunch of little things, among shards of glass and broken objects. Strips of wallpaper hang from her blood-streaked walls. Juliana is lying across my mother's legs, Mom is brushing the damp hair from her forehead. The room smells of sweat and a fly circles around the lightbulb dangling from the ceiling. I look at my sister's reddened face, her puffy eyes, the white marks left on her cheeks by her tears, the thread of saliva hanging from her chin. I hold my breath and look at her hands, her bruised knuckles, the raw skin of her fingertips, the pieces

of fingernail she didn't manage to tear off. Go get a glass of water. I step out of the room and exhale.

It's four in the morning. When I return, Mom is on the phone and Dad is trying to pick up the things on the floor. Juliana is sitting on the edge of her bed; I hold the glass out to her and she doesn't look up, but she takes it and raises it to her lips, though her hand is shaking so hard that half the water spills out. I pretend not to notice. An ambulance comes before long, and I only manage to give her hand a little squeeze before they take her away. My parents go with her. Make sure the door and all the windows are closed, lock up behind us. I say yes and when they go, the first thing I do is close my sister's door and turn on all the lights in the house. My heart is pounding and I try to breathe without making a noise. I carry a blanket to the living room and lie down with my eyes wide open, never turning my back for a minute on her room. I hear something fall and less than five minutes later a cramp twists my insides and sends me running to the bathroom.

When I return, I look around to see what fell but don't dare get up from the couch. The fear is yellowish, like the light in my sister's room; it smells like sweat and stares at me from behind a curtain of black hair. I clench my jaw and try to hold back my tears, but it's useless, and so I cry until my eyes are so swollen I have to keep them closed. I wish Milo were here to calm me with his warmth; he'd lick my face and wag his tail, and we'd curl up together. I'm always a spectator; it's always Juliana and that pain I can only observe, which can only be struggled with, that's all. I'm worn out. How much more of this. How much longer.

It's Saturday and my family returns at ten in the morning. Juliana arrives with both hands bandaged, walks to her room without looking up, and shuts herself in. My parents make their way to the kitchen, make coffee, then sit at the table. I

approach them silently and listen as they whisper. Fractured knuckles... I told you... At least this time... Just her fingers. No more doctors... If something happens, it's your fault, then. I join them for breakfast. They're pale and have dark circles around their eyes; when they see me coming, they fall silent and focus on their food. I get up from the table and knock on my sister's door. She doesn't answer. I knock again and she still doesn't answer or open up, so I decide to go in. I find her lying in bed with earbuds in. She looks at me and stretches out an arm, inviting me to lie down with her. I do, and she passes me one of her earbuds. We listen to music together until we fall asleep.

The first thing I see when I wake up are the marks that cover her arm. I can't remember ever once being hugged by my sister without one of her scars brushing against my face. Falls, scrapes, cuts, scratches, bites, fractures: whatever it takes to keep her from hurting, from thinking; anything, to feel calm again. Juliana is more afraid of being left alone with herself than she is of seeing her guts splattered across the floor. My parents figured it out when she was still little, when it was more obvious that she was doing it on purpose. She broke her arm the day I was born, and that's what our relationship has been like all these years. She was six and my parents still have no idea what happened during the twenty minutes they left her in the hospital waiting room. Neither do I. Fourteen years later, she still refuses to talk about it, and all I've ever been told has been the same story of how my parents heard her screams—always her screams—in the hallway and saw her forearm dangling from where it was split, right at the middle, the stark white bone peeking out through her skin.

When I started school, there was an incident with a kitchen knife; when I learned how to swim, she was in the hospital; when I fell from a tree at my grandparents' house

and needed stitches above my eye, Juliana started seeing Dr. Vázquez; when I won first place at a swim meet, my sister took a whole bottle of sleeping pills; when I asked my dad for a bicycle, he said no, we had more important expenses to worry about, medical bills. On my last birthday, I found Juliana burning her finger with the lighter we were going to use for the candles on my cake; my parents did everything they could to convince the guests it had been an accident.

I hear her snuffle beside me. Want to watch a movie? No, I have to clean. Come on. I tickle her ribs. No, go ahead, I'll be there in a minute. I get up and try to distract myself with movies and videogames. It used to be easier to make her laugh or convince her to go for a walk. Her hair is all tangled, she sleeps all day, and her breath stinks. In her room, her books gather dust and she just gets more and more tired. She doesn't apologize anymore for what happened to Milo, my black lab; we had to give him away after she beat the crap out of him, one night when she wasn't feeling well. The anger and frustration nag at me.

Dad goes to the supermarket and Mom stays home to take care of us, that is, to take care of her. It's noon and time has slowed to a crawl. I decide to go to the pool for a little while. Mom nags me for wanting to go out, she says I should stay close in case something happens, but I'm determined to put the whole thing out of my head for a while. Eventually, she gives in. Be careful. I take the bus to my swim school and am immediately soothed by the smell of chlorine and the blue tiles when I step inside. The woman at the reception desk reminds me that I'm two days late with my dues.

There's almost no one there on Saturdays, so I change in peace and sit at the edge of the pool to dip just my feet in; my toes make circles in the water. There are only four other people there: an older woman, a little boy with his mother, and the instructor. After a while I jump in and the cold water hits

me with a jolt. I focus on my breathing and on my floating body; I relax the muscles in my back and stretch my arms and legs as wide as I can. I look down, my restless feet far from the bottom, the lines between lanes, the way the blue tiles blur the contours of the pool. I feel the pressure in my ears and hear, as if through a thick wall, the low frequency sound waves that travel in water.

I do my regular routine. A few laps in each style; I try to clear my head. Five strokes, inhale, legs always in motion, hips raised. Five strokes, me and Juliana running on the beach and holding hands as we step into the sea, inhale; feet always kicking, Milo's yelps, hips raised. Lifting my arms all the way out of the water, pushing all the air out of my lungs. Five strokes, not right now, son, we have to take care of your sister, inhale; legs straight. The fog in my goggles; the model airplane Dad, Juliana and I spent three hours putting together, it was a sunny day; stretch those legs. Five strokes, inhale; I reach the other side and stop. I try to bring my breathing back to normal. I close my eyes, scabs and locks of dark hair. I'm out of air, I stick my head out of the water and rest my forehead on the lip of the pool; my shoulders hurt and I can feel my legs trembling. When I get home, I find Mom asleep on the couch. I carefully open Juliana's door and see that she's asleep, too, then shut myself in my room. Dad still isn't back.

It's been nearly a month and Juliana has behaved. Yesterday I peeked into her room and saw her dusting her shelves and digging around in her books. Two days ago, she went to the park with me. Today we're getting a visit from Aunt Marlene, who's just back from Peru. Dad is thrilled and can't wait to see her; he hasn't seen his sister in a year. There's a festive spirit in the house and Mom is running back and forth, making sure everything is in order. Juliana is sitting on the couch with her earbuds in, flipping through a magazine. Mom tells us she's going to the store to pick up a few things for the

meal. My sister looks up at her in terror. Her eyes open wide, reveal her distress.

"I'll just be a minute. I'm coming right back," Mom says, looking at her steadily.

Juliana nods, and I see her bite the inside of her cheek. I still haven't told my family about the swim meet I'm going to compete in, still haven't told them how proud I am.

I'm in my room when I hear Aunt Marlene arrive; I jump out of bed and run to say hello. My sister follows in silence. I'm excited to see my aunt; she's always in a good mood and she brings us presents from the places she goes. Since she's always traveling, she also has lots of stories to tell. She's happy to see me and gives me a big hug. She greets Juliana with less enthusiasm and I feel a pang of satisfaction. We spend the afternoon together, peaceful and happy. Around six, my aunt says she needs to get going, but my parents convince her to stay for coffee. While the two of them scramble around in the kitchen, my aunt and I chat quietly. My sister is in her room.

"How have you been?"

My throat burns and I swallow hard. I don't know why, but my eyes feel hot. I look up to hide my tears. Aunt Marlene gently pats my back.

"You know it's not your fault."

Aunt Marlene gives us the souvenirs she brought us from Peru: mine is a miniature version of Machu Picchu. She leaves in a flurry of embraces and promises to visit again soon. I get the feeling that she hugs me tightest of all.

I go to bed early, but I can't fall asleep. After a few hours I have to go to the bathroom, so I get up. Listening hard, I make out the sound of Juliana's muffled sobs. I freeze. The idea of passing her door on my way to the bathroom terrifies me. I'm afraid she's left it open. I wonder what she's doing; I imagine her pulling the skin off her ankle, biting her hands, or eating her hair. I feel an intense pressure

in my lower abdomen; I want to cry. I clench my fists and bury my face in the pillow, breathing angrily. If only Juliana weren't always whining... if she didn't always hurt herself... if she weren't so irrational. I start scratching my thumb, picking at the little hairs, until I feel blood on my fingertips. I get scared and clutch my thumb with my other hand. I try to think about something else and before I know it, I'm scratching again. I close my eyes and let out a sigh of resignation. My legs are wet and my clothes feel soggy. I undress and hide them under my bed, put on a clean pair of pants. I lie down again. I plug my ears.

I wake up late. Today is the day. Maybe I'll win a medal, maybe we'll be able to have dinner together and talk about the meet. I remember what Aunt Marlene said and call Ricardo and two other friends to invite them. We'll see each other at six; the swim meet is at six thirty. The sun is shining and I'm in a good mood. I eat breakfast with my parents; Juliana doesn't join us at the table. Mom and Dad say they're going out, I'm not paying attention when they tell me where. Call us if you need us. We'll be back for you soon. I spend the afternoon in my room, watching television and playing video games. The house is silent. It's five thirty-five. I get my swim gear ready, grab a sweatshirt, and knock on my sister's door to say that we need to get going, that Mom and Dad will be back soon. She doesn't answer. I knock again and enter. Her room is empty: the bed is made, everything is in order. I feel a weight on my chest and look for her; she's not in the kitchen, or in the living room, or in the back yard, and I didn't hear her go out.

When I get to the hallway, I stop. At the far end, the bathroom door is locked. I walk toward it silently, sliding my fingers along the wall. Fear, a response developed over time, creeps up my legs and body, all the way to my scalp. It's 5:43. I knock.

Juliana? It's 5:48. A familiar impatience settles into my stomach. I knock again and no one answers. I try the knob, but it's locked. I start picking at my thumb and scratch open my scabs. My finger throbs in time with my pulse. I'm distracted by the sound of a key in the front door, it's my parents. Ready? Dad shouts. Be right there, I answer from where I stand. What about your sister? Mom asks from the doorway. She went on ahead, she said that she wanted to pick something up and would meet us there. I squeeze my thumb and feel the blood run between my fingers. Mom looks at me hard for a second, then sighs. I'll call her on the way, let's go. Are you nervous? She smiles and tousles my hair, then wraps an arm around my shoulders. We get into the car and I watch my mother call Juliana two, three, four times. I hear my sister's voicemail pick up from the speaker on Mom's phone. It's 5:55.

Maybe I'll win a medal.