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ANALYSIS AND TRANSLATION OF THE BOOK *METALES PESADOS* BY GUILLERMO BARQUERO FROM SPANISH INTO ENGLISH FOR EDITORIAL COSTA RICA

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to inquire into the textual analysis and the effects of the translation methods and procedures used in the translation of the book *Metales Pesados* by the Costa Rican author Guillermo Barquero from Spanish into English for Editorial Costa Rica during the first quarter of 2023. As part of this research, textual data were gathered and analyzed to obtain decisive results that influenced the translation process. In this way, the most suitable translation methods and techniques were chosen to express the same message of the source text, faithfully. Subsequently, a Spanish-to-English translation glossary was elaborated with the most complex, challenging, and obscured terms. Finally, the color-coding system made it possible to identify and evaluate the various translation techniques used and ascertain their effects.

Resumen

El presente estudio tiene como objetivo primordial indagar sobre el análisis textual y los efectos de los métodos y procedimientos de traducción implementados en la traducción del libro *Metales Pesados* del autor costarricense Guillermo Barquero del español al inglés, para la Editorial Costa Rica durante el primer cuatrimestre de 2023. En el marco de esta investigación, se recopilaron y analizaron datos textuales para conseguir resultados decisivos que incidieron en el proceso traductológico. De esta manera, se eligieron los métodos y técnicas de traducción más idóneos para expresar fielmente el mismo mensaje del texto de origen. Posteriormente, se confeccionó un glosario del español al inglés con los términos más complejos, desafiantes y oscuros. Por último, el sistema de códigos por colores permitió identificar y evaluar las diversas técnicas de traducción que se utilizaron y, de este modo, constatar sus efectos.

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Chapter I

Introductory Framework

This section facilitates an outline that helps to establish the key aspects of this research; the problem statement, general objective, specific objectives, research question, justification, antecedents, and scope.

1.1 Problem Statement

Culture is an indispensable component of society that characterizes a specific group of people or a particular time and is transmitted from generation to generation. According to Mckelvie and Pappas (2021), it is said that “culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts” (para. 2). This means that culture is in everything that surrounds human beings and is involved in what they do, think, feel, and speak. Another significant constituent of culture not explicitly mentioned by the previous authors and related to art is, undoubtedly, literature. As per Manguel (2019), it is stated that reading literary works is often considered an idle or fruitless activity for certain people; however, it has an unparalleled social benefit as it makes them more empathetic and more open to listening and understanding others while teaching them to recognize their own emotions and feelings and to cope with their everyday situations (para. 4).

In this way, every short story, novel, play, or even poem, regardless of the time it was written, has a life lesson and moral teaching for its readers. In addition, Manguel claims that perhaps it is literature and its intrinsic ability to make people more empathetic, which can save them from themselves (para. 6). Literature is, undoubtedly, a beneficial resource for anyone to deal with the world’s ever-changing situations and to develop academically, cognitively, culturally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Furthermore, great implicit advantages are

associated with reading. Accordingly, Moawad (2019) declares that it helps to improve physical health, strengthen the brain, increase concentration, build vocabulary, prevent age-related cognitive decline, decrease stress, and help people to live longer (para. 4-28).

To promote culture, when it seems to be increasingly forgotten and taking into account all the countless benefits of literature and reading, it is a must to share with other people, who do not have the same values and do not speak the same language, the vast treasure that is hidden within the pages of a literary work that has not been translated before and that is part of Costa Rican books, nowadays. Such is the case of the book *Metales Pesados* by Costa Rican author Guillermo Barquero, which comprises an anthology of ten short stories whose author's rights are owned by Editorial Costa Rica. So far, this book is only available to Spanish speakers. A hard copy can be purchased at Editorial Costa Rica's bookstore or Libreria Internacional. Besides, an electronic version in PDF format is also offered through Editorial Costa Rica's website, where similar literary works can be found. As for Editorial Costa Rica's production department, it is undeniably necessary for them to market and translate its national literary works into other languages, especially English, which has become the world's bridge language today. Regrettably, this situation implies a literary, social, and economic impact on Editorial Costa Rica and the author, and a cultural loss for Costa Rica.

Thus, with this translation, they will render more literary works, expanding their book offerings to an international audience, boosting Editorial Costa Rica's and the author's prestige, and raising the readers' interest in Costa Rican literature and culture. As mentioned previously, it will also implicitly contribute to their academic, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Similarly, the translation and analysis of this book will benefit both Universidad Internacional de las Américas and the translator since this will pave the way for other national translators and even

upcoming translators from the same university to opt for translating other literary works of this publisher. In turn, the translator will also be listed in the final credits of the book in English.

Therefore, the research question related to this problem is: What is the effect of the procedures and methods used to translate the book *Metales Pesados* by Guillermo Barquero from Spanish to English for Editorial Costa Rica?

1.2 Objectives of the Investigation

1.2.1 General Objective

To analyze the effect of the procedures and methods used to translate the book *Metales Pesados* by Guillermo Barquero from Spanish to English for Editorial Costa Rica

1.2.2 Specific Objectives

- To translate the book *Metales Pesados* by Guillermo Barquero from Spanish into English for Editorial Costa Rica
- To apply various translation techniques to the book to achieve an accurate target text
- To evaluate the effect of the translation techniques applied to the book
- To create a glossary with the most relevant terminology found in the book

1.3 Justification of the Study

Translation and textual analysis are part of an everyday process carried out by large companies for their documents, such as contracts, manuals, forms, and spreadsheets, or by publishers for their literary works, such as novels, short stories, poems, plays, and essays. Besides that, Lopez (2019) states that there would be a lack of knowledge of new studies, technological

advances, and a language gap between people without translation (para. 2). In addition, Morel (2019) affirms that,

The translation is necessary for the [sic] spreading of new information, knowledge, and ideas across the world. It is necessary to achieve effective communication between different cultures. In the process of spreading new information, translation can change history. It is the only medium by which certain people can know different works that will expand their knowledge of the world. (para. 9) This means that translation is an essential form of communication for sharing knowledge with others who do not share the same language.

Whichever book or documents are to be translated, it must be considered that the target audience is highly interested in understanding their content in their native tongue or in a bridge language such as English, which will enable them to accomplish a task or carry out a specific activity. On the other hand, it is irrefutable that every translation also involves various interests, which may be economic, social, cultural, religious, academic, etc. For this reason, and in this case, it is, therefore, imperative to translate and analyze this literary work since several interests and factors are at stake, such as communicating a message in another language, fostering Costa Rican culture, arousing interest in literature and reading, disseminating new knowledge, having higher revenues, boosting the prestige of Editorial Costa Rica, the author, and Universidad Internacional de las Américas.

Moreover, this research will benefit a group of people and institutions. First, Editorial Costa Rica will acquire the translation of *Metales Pesados*, which is a first-edition book that has never been translated into another language. By doing so, they will render more literary books into English and market them through their website, attracting an international audience, making

them known overseas, and increasing their revenues. Subsequently, the author will be known internationally, and his prestige will grow. Eventually, a literary work in English will be available to foreigners, arousing their interest in Costa Rican literature and culture.

To conclude, the strategies for translating and analyzing this literary work are based on various translation techniques and methods, which will be applied in the most suitable way to attain a faithful literary translation. As for textual analysis, numerous technical procedures will be used to carry out an exegesis of the text as a preliminary step of the translation process to determine this literary work's particular characteristics.

1.4 Antecedents

This section presents the background information related to the translation and analysis of certain literary works and documents by reviewing historical, national, and international studies to have a broad perspective on the relevance of this research. To begin with, it is vital to review the history of translation to reflect on the approaches and thoughts of those early pioneers who achieved great feats and changed the world's course.

The first known translation piece is, undeniably, the Rosetta Stone, an ancient fragment of granodiorite. According to an article from TrueLanguage (2021), a decree on behalf of the pharaoh Ptolemy V is engraved on it, dating back to 196 B.C. Despite the unremarkable message engraved on that stone, the surprising fact is that a single translation could decipher all the mysteries of Ancient Egypt. Likewise, the text is written in three different writing systems, which are Egyptian hieroglyphs, demotic script, and ancient Greek (para. 1). In addition to that, Fernandez (2021) mentions that this stone revolutionized Egyptology studies since it made it possible to decipher a language that had not been translated for centuries and thus provided an understanding of the hieroglyphs of Ancient Egypt. So, the scholars used the ancient Greek text,

a tongue they already knew and read, to translate the meaning of each Egyptian symbol (para. 3). For this reason, this antique stele represents a milestone within the history of translation.

Besides, human writing is also recounted when referring to the history of translation. The pioneers of translation were not highly recognized, and some were even forgotten. One example of Barreto and Bustos (2012) is Jerome of Stridon, or simply Saint Jerome, who is considered the patron saint of translators. September 30 is commemorated as Translator's Day in honor of his legacy. Between 382-392 A.D., he translated the *Bible* from Greek and Hebrew into popular Latin in the version known as *the Vulgate* for Pope Damasus I, which completely changed the history of translation (p. 30). Moreover, in an article from OnlineTraductores (2020), it is stated that Saint Jerome has been considered the father of the church as his *Bible* translation helped to spread the Christian faith around the world (para. 3). During the Council of Trent in 1546, this sacred text was recognized as the source of all Christian words. After that, there were only minor adaptations and improvements to the original translation (para. 6). Because of the translations made by these people, a literary work can be made available to many more readers, helping to spread culture and knowledge and even changing the world's fate altogether.

Then, several research studies have been carried out internationally, which address literary translation to highlight culture, values, customs, and knowledge. Literary translation is a field that has been widely studied in Spain. Consequently, one of the research studies that focus on culture is that of Luarsabishvili (2016), who considers it a phenomenon that encompasses three defining characteristics: reproducing the values in the target culture, possessing intertextual features, and linking the translation with the time of both the creation of the source text and its transfer to the target culture (p. 366). This hypothesis was based on translating the Spanish novel

Niebla by Miguel de Unamuno into Georgian. He chose this literary work because the Spanish author expresses his time and clings to people's daily life and their painful situations (p. 370).

Another relevant point of this study was that the text had already been translated before, and several reasons made it necessary to translate it again, such as creating different values in the target culture, neologisms, and terms that are rarely used. In addition, he wants the readers to be familiarized with the text using a new translation and mentions that retractions contribute to the development of the target culture (p. 372). Therefore, this research shows that literary translation, whether a new translation or a retranslation, has an educational purpose, which allows for transmitting the characteristics of the source culture, recreating the values in the target culture, and stimulating the growth of the target language literature.

A second study that addresses literary translation and culture, but with a focus on a more specific field, is that of Pascua (2016), who points out that literary translation for children tends to be often overlooked in Spain (p. 623). In her opinion, translations are a way of introducing authors from other places, customs, and cultures. There is no need to demean another culture just because it is different. It can even be a great learning experience for kids about values, customs, and ways of thinking. This hypothesis is based on a Ph.D. thesis derived from one of her favorite stories, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, which Marià Manent translated in 1945 during a time of censorship (p. 625).

Additionally, she states that a concept was established during the 1970s for children's literary works, focusing on the relevance of text and pictures (p. 625). She also mentions that a common mistake is to separate children's and adult literature into different genres since the distinctions lie in the linguistic aspects and the types of readers. Therefore, when dealing with children's literature, she establishes three indispensable characteristics that must be considered:

the children's point of view, the natural reading of the translation, and the synchrony between the text and the images (p. 626). In conclusion, literary translation is crucial for integral human development because, no matter the readers' age, everyone can learn new cultural and social aspects, even if they are different from their own, and acquire new knowledge for life.

Finally, some research on literary translation and culture has been conducted nationally. As regards Albaladejo (2010), literature is not one of the most distinctive aspects of Costa Rica; nevertheless, there have been well-known Costa Rican authors like Aquileo Echeverría, Joaquín García Monge, and Carmen Lyra (p. 74). He also mentions Joaquín Gutiérrez, one of the most outstanding writers in Central America. He translated four plays by William Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, *The King*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*) and works by Mao Tse Tung from English into Spanish (p. 75). Likewise, Joaquín Gutiérrez's literary works were a mixture of literature, politics, and social situations. Among his most remarkable works are *Manglar*, *Puerto Limón*, and *Cocorí*. He says that the writers of the 1940s believed that literature could play a critical role in promoting social change (p. 76).

Then, it is stated that *Puerto Limón* was translated into German with the title *Die Glut und ihr Schatten* (*The Glut and its Shadow*). Several features should be highlighted, such as maintaining the "local color" by using borrowings from both Spanish and English, preserving the colloquial register, and simplifying the verbal paradigm (p. 80). In addition, he points out that the target language is enriched by the need to recount cultural realities that do not exist or are not found in the target culture. In conclusion, translation serves as a bridge between languages, cultures, and societies. For him, it was a resource for social awareness, so writers thought they could contribute to changing society in the 1940s (p. 83). On the other hand, his translation of *Puerto Limón* brought a piece of Costa Rica to Germany through a universal message that

conveyed the same social impact without impairing the artistic and aesthetic value of the literary work.

Another research that highlights the impact of culture and history through literary translation is that of Soto (2014), who indicates that translation is not a new activity in Costa Rica but has been performed since the end of the 19th century with the efforts of many Costa Ricans who translated foreign texts (p. 548). It is stated that Ricardo Fernandez Guardia is one pioneer of national translation since he translated original versions from English and French into Spanish during a period in which the country was searching for its national identity (p. 549). His translation focuses on historical and Costa Rican-related topics (p. 559). Likewise, his literary work *Cuentos Ticos* was published in 1901 and was translated into English. His first translations appeared in *Revista Nueva*, *Revista de Costa Rica*, and *Pandemonium* (p. 558).

Furthermore, she points out that Samuel Lopez said there is a strong connection between history and translation. Therefore, certain past events would not be known without translation (p. 549). That is why translations of literary works are used as sources that enrich, innovate, and reincorporate new elements (p. 553). In this way, it is important to pay tribute to those unknown Costa Rican translators who contributed significantly to national translation and sought to preserve history and culture, such as Ricardo Fernandez.

1.5 Scope

In this research, it is fundamental to delimit the objectives in order to have a clear angle of the results that are expected to be achieved. Therefore, the attainable parameters are the following:

- Fully translate the book of *Metales Pesados* from Spanish to English for Editorial Costa Rica

- Apply a series of translation procedures and strategies to the book in the most suitable way to achieve a faithful literary translation
- Evaluate the effects of the translation procedures and techniques that were employed
- Elaborate a glossary with the most pertinent terminology found in the book

Chapter II

Theoretical Framework

This section provides the necessary information to comprehend the translation process and textual analysis by presenting the theoretical background, primary concepts, and fundamental resources which will be used for this literary translation. First, the theories of textual analysis, along with translation procedures and strategies, will be explained. Lastly, the translation glossary, its importance for the translator and the readers, and how they are elaborated will be addressed.

2.1 Text Analysis

Before starting any translation, it is paramount to have a profound knowledge of the source text to make the best decisions during the translation process and achieve a successful target text. As stated by Seresova and Breveikova (2019), before starting the translation process, the first step is to read the text thoroughly, which allows for recognizing the meaning of the words and their relationship with the sentences, the paragraphs, the individual parts, and the entire text. After that, the second one is to carry out the textual analysis to recognize the particular features of the text (p. 617). Additionally, Nord (2012) mentions that this process allows the translator to address basic texts that often have semantic or syntactic errors in his professional practice (p. 48) and to determine certain stylistic traits of an author's way of writing (p. 51). On the other hand, she points out that the text analysis cannot be based on a set of questions but rather on the categories with which the world is understood and, thus, the text's context and historical situation (p. 53).

2.1.1 Text Styles

Apart from translating the source text message into another language, it is, therefore, crucial to identify the style to which the text belongs to determine its form of expression, intention, and aesthetic characteristics. In this regard, Newmark (1988) declares four types of literary and non-literary texts: narrative, description, discussion, and dialogue (p. 13). The first style is narrative, consisting of a dynamic sequence of events in which the author focuses particularly on verb-nouns or phrasal verbs (p.13). This style is often found in fiction and nonfiction stories since these verbs help to recount a series of events that take place in the text.

The second style is the static description, which emphasizes linking verbs, adjectives, and adjectival nouns (p. 13). It helps to describe people, places, or objects in the text. The third style is the discussion, which treats ideas and emphasizes abstract nouns (concepts), verbs of thought or mental activity, logical arguments, and connectives (p. 13). It is mainly used to elicit debate, arguments, and controversy by using certain verbs that support an idea or present a viewpoint. The fourth style is dialogue, emphasizing colloquialisms and phrasal verbs with a social or emotive function (p. 13). It is used to initiate or sustain social relationships rather than to communicate information.

2.1.2 Stylistic Scales

Another feature that should also be considered when carrying out a textual analysis is the stylistic scales of the text, as these assist the translator in identifying the type of readers the target text will address and the precise vocabulary that will be needed during the translation process. As Newmark (1988) states, there are three stylistic scales: the scale of formality, the scale of generality or difficulty, and the scale of emotional tone (p. 14).

2.1.2.1 Scale of Formality

Based on Newmark (1988), the formality scale is broken down into eight categories: officialese, official, formal, neutral, informal, colloquial, slang, and taboo (p. 14). The following are the examples that he provides per each. For the first category, which is officialese, the example he gives is “The consumption of any nutriments whatsoever is categorically prohibited in this establishment” (p. 14). Besides, the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d) defines it as the type of language used in government documents, which has a formal and obscure character and is frequently hard to understand.

The second category is the official language; his example is “The consumption of nutriments is prohibited” (p. 14). Longman Dictionary (n.d) defines it as the language the government officially approves, studied in school, and used for legal and official papers. The third category is formal language, which he exemplifies as “You are requested not to consume food in this establishment” (p. 14). According to an article from Touro University (n.d), it is less personal than informative and is used for professional or academic purposes. It does not use colloquialisms, contractions, or first-person pronouns (para. 2).

The fourth category is neutral language; his example is “Eating is not allowed here” (p. 14). Regarding Boeree (n.d.), it has a completely standard grammar that favors nobody, a limited a-priori basic lexical items, word-building by compounding, and phonetic spelling (para. 1). In this way, it is used in everyday language, both in spoken and written form and is easily understood. The fifth category is the informal language, which he exemplifies as “Please don’t eat here” (p. 14). According to an article from the University of Technology Sydney (n.d), it is more casual and spontaneous. It is employed when contacting friends or family, either in written or spoken form. For example, when writing texts, e-mails, or business correspondence (para. 3).

The sixth category is colloquial language, and the example given is “You can’t feed your face here” (p. 14). Regarding Sparks (2022), it is a common and natural language that makes use of colloquialisms, which are words, phrases, or sayings usually found in informal contexts and associated with a geographical area (para. 1). The seventh category is slang, and the example associated is “Lay off the nosh” (p. 14). As the Collins Dictionary (n.d.), it is characterized by using informal words, expressions, and meanings. It is employed by close acquaintances or who share the same interest. The eighth category is taboo, which he exemplifies as “Lay off the fucking nosh” (p. 14). For McLeish (2022), it includes words that are mostly considered immoral or inappropriate in everyday language and should be avoided in polite conversation. These are typically swear words, profanities, or offensive expressions (para. 2).

2.1.2.2 Scale of Generality or Difficulty

The scale of generality or difficulty helps the translator to define the source text’s complexity level. The following list is provided by Newmark (1988), in which this scale is classified as simple, popular, neutral, educated, technical, and opaquely technical. The first category is the simple level, which refers to basic texts with terms that are difficult to understand. For this, he suggests the example, “The floor of the sea is covered with rows of big mountains and deep pits” (p. 14). The second category is the popular level. Here, the text makes use of common and everyday vocabulary. This style is exemplified as “The floor of the oceans is covered with great mountain chains and deep trenches” (p. 14).

The third category is the neutral level, in which the text context could be more complex and simpler. An example of this style is “A graveyard of animal, and plant remains lies buried in the earth’s crust” (p. 14).

The fourth category is the educated level, which refers to educational or instructional texts used for teaching in schools, high schools, or universities. This style exemplifies “The latest step in vertebrate evolution was the tool-making man” (p. 14). The fifth category is the technical level, where the vocabulary is specialized and can be found in product manuals, user guides, and repair handbooks. In this regard, Liu and Lei (2020) mention that this vocabulary comprises words and phrases that are known and used in a specific profession, trade, or subject area (p. 111). An example of this style is “Critical path analysis is an operational research technique used in management” (p. 14). The sixth category is the opaquely technical level. As he says, this style is understandable to an expert only, so these texts are quite complex, and the vocabulary is highly specific. This style is exemplified as “Neuraminic acid in the form of its alkali-stable methoxy derivative was first isolated by Klenk from gangliosides” (p. 14).

2.1.2.3 Scale of Emotional Tone

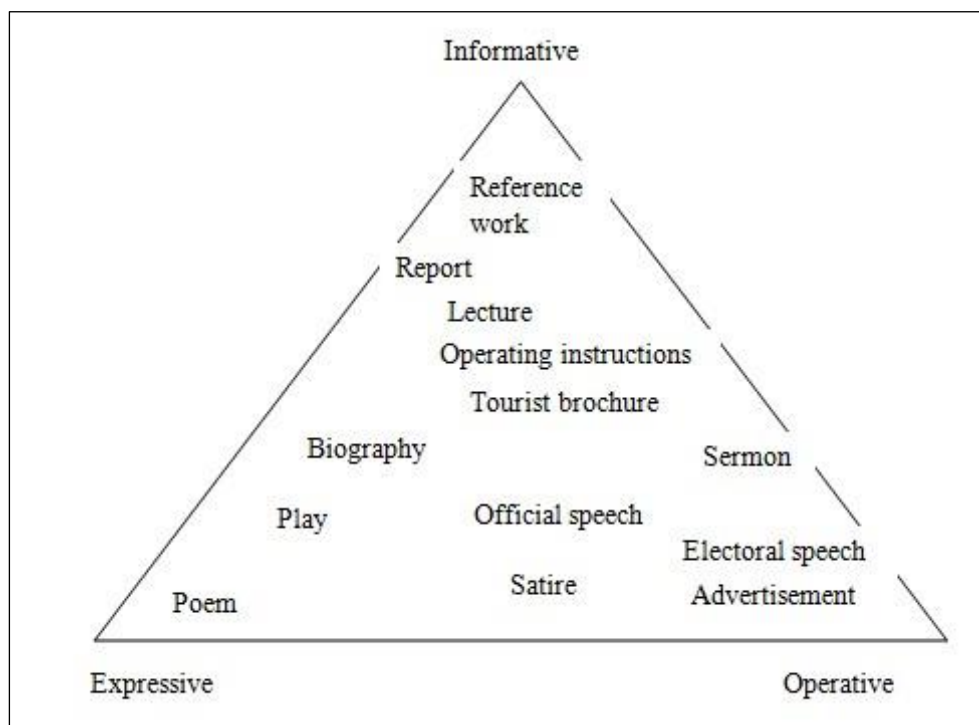
The emotional tone scale helps the translator to identify the vocabulary with which the text is written. Following Newmark (1988), this scale is categorized as intense, warm, factual, and understatement (p. 14). The first category is the intense tone, which concentrates more on transmitting the message through intensifiers. He exemplifies it as “Absolutely wonderful... ideally dark bass...enormously successful...superbly controlled” (p. 14). The second category is the warm tone, in which the text has a lighter vocabulary. An example of this tone is “Gentle, soft, heart-warming melodies.” The third category is the factual tone, which is a mixture of both intense and warm tones, as it intends to transmit the message with a lighter form of expression. For this tone, the example is “Significant, exceptionally well judged, personable, presentable, considerable” (p. 14). The last category is the understatement tone, which is considered cold, and the example associated is “Not...undignified” (p. 14).

2.1.3 Text Function

The text's function gives the readers an insight into what the text is about and what the author wants to communicate to them. For this reason, the translator must identify the source text's function to replicate the same effects. In this regard, Newmark (1988) cites Karl Bühler's functional theory of language, adapted by Roman Jakobson. Therefore, three main text functions related to translation are informative, expressive, and vocative (p. 39). According to Munday (2016), text types are classified depending on their main function. For each of these, Katharina Reiss offers a few examples of what she denominates "textual varieties" or, more commonly, "genres," which are often related to them (p. 116).

Figure 1

Reiss's text types and text varieties



*Figure 1 shows the text types and varieties that Katharina Reiss described with their corresponding examples. Taken from *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications* 4th edition by Munday, J, 2012, p. 116.*

On the other hand, as stated by Venuti (2004), if there are three main text types as the basic way of written communication, it should be taken into consideration that they are not only written in their “pure” form (p. 164). This means a text can have multiple textual functions, but one will always be predominant.

2.1.3.1 Informative

In translation, informative texts are concerned with transmitting information and any subject of knowledge. As Chen and Zhang (2020) stated, Katharina Reiss affirms that this dimension focuses on communicating facts, information, knowledge, opinions, etc. The language is logical and referential. Therefore, the text’s main focus is the content or topic (p. 34). Similarly, Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014) claim that the principal purpose of informative texts is to convey information to the readers. In this way, the translator should concentrate on establishing semantic equivalence and only then move on to other types, such as connotative or aesthetic. A few examples are reference works, business letters, official documents, and academic articles (p. 79).

According to Newmark (1988), the informative function focuses on external situations, the facts of a topic, and the reality outside the language, encompassing the reported ideas or theories. He also affirms that the informative text format is standard: a textbook, a technical document, a scientific report, an article in a newspaper, or a research paper. In addition, he classifies the informative text function based on four points of a scale of language varieties, which are the following. The first category is the formal or non-emotive technical style for academic papers, focusing on Latinized words, literal language, jargon, etc.

The second category is the neutral or informal style with defined technical terms, which uses first person, dynamic, active verbs, and present tense. The third category is the informal, warm style for popular science and art books, which uses simple grammar structures and basic vocabulary. The fourth category is the familiar non-technical style of popular journalism, emphasizing short sentences, colloquialisms, and unusual punctuation (p. 40-41).

2.1.3.2 Expressive

In translation, definitive texts are based on the author's way of thinking so that they are used to express emotions, feelings, thoughts, viewpoints, opinions, etc. Hence, this text type is exemplified to various extents by novels, poetry, short stories, songs, and biographies (p. 56). As for Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014), Katharina Reiss states that this text type comprises an aesthetic factor, as the author exploits the expressive and associative possibilities of the language to communicate his thoughts artistically and creatively. This means that when the translator deals with such texts, the main concern should be to try to reproduce a similar aesthetic effect and the semantic content of the source text.

Regarding Newmark (1988), the expressive function focuses on the speaker's mind and the writer. It is used to express feelings regardless of any response. For him, this text type has three characteristics in terms of translation, which are the following. The first characteristic is serious imaginative literature in lyrical poetry, short stories, novels, and plays. Thus, poetry is the most personal manifestation, and plays are intended for large audiences. The second characteristic is the authoritative statements, which derive their authority from the high status of the reliability and the authors' linguistic competence. In other words, they have the personal "stamp" of their authors. Some examples are political speeches, documents written by ministers or party leaders, legal papers, etc. The third characteristic is autobiography, essays, and personal

correspondence, which contains personal effusions when the readers are in a distant environment (p. 39-40).

2.1.3.3 Vocative

In translation, vocative texts focus on persuading the readers to think, feel, behave, or even refrain from doing something. As affirmed by Baker and Saldanha (2009), Katharina Reiss claims that this text type is also known as appellative or operative text, which refers to advertising and is intended to evoke behavioral reactions of the target readers that are the same as those of the source text readers (p. 116). In addition, Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014) indicate that operative texts include messages intended to persuade the readers to act in a certain way, such as purchasing a specific product or voting for a particular political party. In other words, the content and the form of these texts are subordinated to the extralinguistic effects they are intended to attain. The translator's main objective should be to reproduce a target text with an equivalent persuasive impact to the original. Examples are political manifestos, advertisements, and sermons (p.117).

According to Newmark (1988), the vocative function emphasizes the readership, the addressee. It is so-called because it urges them to react somehow to the text. He also mentions that this text style has been given many names, such as operative, pragmatic, conative, or instrumental. For him, some examples of this text type are instructions, publicity, propaganda, persuasive writing, and popular fiction. In addition, he explains two factors that all vocative texts have, which are the following. The first factor is the relationship between the writer and the readership, which appears in different forms of address, infinitives, imperatives, subjunctives, passives, titles, etc. All of them are involved in establishing asymmetrical or symmetrical

relationships of power or equality, command, request, or persuasion. The second factor is that these texts must be written in an easily understood language (p. 41-42).

2.1.4 Translation Methods

Since the very beginning of translation, a quandary has always been present and continues to be one of the challenges faced by the translator daily: literal translation versus free translation. As Newmark (1988) points out, this debate of message versus form or sense versus words has existed since at least the first century B.C. (p. 45). Accordingly, several translation methods are more convenient depending on the text type and its particular characteristics. Likewise, drawing attention to the difference between translation methods and translation procedures is vital.

In this regard, Moragwa (n.d.) states that translation methods are applied to the entire text to be translated. However, translation procedures may be numerous and varied within the same document (para. 5). The two main translation methods that Newmark (1988) describes are semantic translation and communicative translation, both of which achieve the main objectives of translation by being accurate and economic (p. 47).

2.1.4.1 Semantic Translation

Semantic translation attempts to reproduce the exact contextual meaning of the source text by following the forms and structure of the source text. In this respect, Fawcett (1997) affirms that this translation method is intended to replicate the semantics and syntax of the source text as closely as possible (p. 114). In addition to that, Hartono (2020) mentions some characteristics of this translation type that are based on Newmark, which are siding with the original author, being oriented to the semantic structure and syntax of the source language, and

being frequently rigid, detailed, complex, but shorter than the source language and related to the original culture (p. 69-72).

For Newmark (1988), semantic translation is the personal, individual, author- and meaning-oriented, over-translated, more complex, more awkward, with a formal vocabulary, less digestible, and inferior to its original to reproduce the pragmatic impact. He also states that this method is used for expressive texts and that the cultural components tend to be transferred in an intact form (p. 47). Besides, Newmark (1988a) states that the translator must continue to respect and work on the source language text form as the only material basis of his work and maintain the original culture (p. 39).

Concerning Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014), a semantic translation attempts to reproduce the form of the original as closely as possible to the norms of the target language. It also pays greater attention to reproducing the author's original thoughts in the target text rather than trying to reinterpret the source text in a way that favors the target audience. Besides, it will treat the original words as sacred, even if this implies the reproduction of inconsistencies, ambiguities, and errors. For this reason, it is often appropriate for literary, technical, and scientific texts (p. 151).

2.1.4.2 Communicative Translation

Communicative translation attempts to reproduce the original text's effect on the target text as closely as possible. In this way, under-translation is preferred as the text is simpler. In this regard, Fawcett (1997) states that this translation method aims at the equivalence of effect (p. 114). Besides, Hartono (2020) points out that this translation type emphasizes the principles of communication, both of the readership and of the translation's purpose. For him, it is concerned with the readers who expect to avoid any difficulties and obscurity in the translated text; however, its downside is the loss of some meaning of the source language. He also mentions

some characteristics of this method that are based on Newmark, which are reader-centered, cultural content is adapted to make it more accessible to readers, effect-oriented, easy to read, more natural, smoother, simpler, clearer, and more direct (p. 95-97).

As per Newmark (1988), communicative translation is social and often better than its original, focuses on the message, tends to be untranslated, to be simple, clear, and natural. He also states that this method is used for informative and vocative texts (p. 48). Besides, Newmark (1988a) states that in this translation approach, the readers do not anticipate complications in the target text. They expect a bountiful transfer of foreign elements into their culture and language where necessary (p. 39). As per Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014), this translation approach is typically oriented toward the target language readers' needs. For example, a translator who translates communicatively will treat the source text as a message and not merely as a string of linguistic units, maintaining the source text's function and reproducing its effects on the new audience (p. 21).

2.2 Translation Procedures

In the same way that various translation methods can be found, numerous translation procedures can also be used. As Hurtado (2001) explains, these procedures are visible in the translation product and are used to reach the translation equivalence. They also comply with five fundamental characteristics: they affect the translation result, are classified in comparison with the original, refer to textual microunits, and have a discursive, contextual, and functional character (p. 268). Furthermore, she points out that since the proposal of the translation procedures by the pioneers Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), other scholars have taken them as a basis for their studies and have incorporated more translation techniques, such as Mallblanc (1961), Vazquez-Ayora (1977), Newmark (1988), Ballard (1987), etc. (p. 268).

In this way, Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) propose that the translator use two translation methods: direct translation and oblique translation. Consequently, direct translation refers to those instances where it is possible to transpose the message of the source text element by element and includes borrowing, calque, and literal translation. On the contrary, oblique translation refers to those cases where certain stylistic effects cannot be transposed into the target text because of structural and metalinguistic differences. This method comprises transposition, modulation, equivalence, adaptation, and compensation (p. 31). This study covers these procedures along with others proposed by other authors, such as amplification, omission, explicitation, punctuation changes, and sentence inversion.

2.2.1 Transposition

Transposition is a grammatical shift that replaces a word class with another without modifying the meaning. According to Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014), it is one of the seven translation procedures proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet. It is included in the oblique translation, as it does not imply a direct transfer between the parallel source language and target language categories or concepts. In addition, it is described as the process of substituting one-word class with another without altering the meaning of the original message (p. 190-191).

Similarly, Delisle et al. (1999) declare that it is also known as recategorization, as the equivalence of meaning or sense is achieved by changing the word class or part of speech of a word or phrase (p. 171). In this regard, Vazquez-Ayora (1977) explains that transposition aims to achieve natural expression in the target language regarding lexis, structure, and statement. He also defines it as the procedure by which a part of speech in the source language text is replaced by a different part in the target language (p. 265). Consequently, he lists various transposition types such as obligatory and facultative transposition, transposition of determinants and particles,

cross-transposition or chiasma, etc. (p. 270-286). Ultimately, Newmark (1988) determines that this translation procedure is the only one that deals with grammatical structures, and most translators apply it intuitively (p. 88).

2.2.2 Modulation

Modulation is used for altering the form of the source text through a semantic or perspective change. To Hurtado (2001), this translation procedure changes the viewpoint, focus, perspective, or category of thought about the original text so that it can be lexical and structural. For example, the Arabic equivalent of “You are going to have a child” literally means “You are going to become a father” (p. 270). As affirmed by Venuti (2004), this procedure is a variant of the message form, done by changing the point of view. Like transpositions, modulations are free or optional and fixed or obligatory. He also claims that the modulation that transforms a negative expression into a positive one is, in most cases, optional but is closely linked to the structure of each language. Therefore, he explains that with fixed modulation, the translator with a good command of both languages freely employs this technique as they know the frequency of use. On the contrary, free modulation implies a single solution that is necessary and not optional (p. 89).

Munday (2016) stated that it changes the source language’s semantics and point of view so that it can be obligatory or optional. He also affirms that Vinay and Darbelnet emphasize this translation technique as a good translator’s keystone, whereas transposition shows a good command of the target language. Correspondingly, he indicates that modulation at the message level is classified into several forms, such as from abstract to concrete or from particular to general, explicative modulation or from effect to cause, from whole to part, from part to another

part, reversal of terms, the negation of opposite, from active to passive, rethinking of intervals, and limits in space and time, and change of symbol (p. 90-91).

2.2.3 Omission

Omission removes linguistic elements from the source text during translation and is related to the language economy. According to Nida and Taber (2003), this translation procedure is based on the fundamental principle of achieving the text's naturalness as some words or expressions need to be left out in the process of transfer from one language to another, such as redundancies or allusions (p. 168). As stated by Vazquez-Ayora (1977), this translation procedure is part of the oblique translation and is often taken for granted and misused. For him, the mediocre translator believes that he has to translate all the words of the source text without forgetting any of them, which implies overloading the target text with strange and unnatural elements (p. 358-359). Besides, it is based on the linguistic principle of economy and the requirement of natural equivalence that is often mandatory in the target language. Likewise, he takes up the ideas proposed by Eugene Nida and Vladimir Prochazka, who consider that equivalence would not be natural if it had unusual, alien, or incorrect elements of the spirit of the language (p. 361). He gives examples, such as removing the verb to create literary figures, eliminating meaningless elements, suppressing abusive redundancies and simple repetitions, etc. (p. 361-373).

2.2.4 Amplification

Amplification involves adding linguistic elements to the target text to make the translation natural and accurate. For Hurtado (2001), this translation procedure involves introducing clarifications not included in the source text, such as information, explicative paraphrases, notes,

etc. It is also opposed to omission and economy. For instance, the translation of the Arabic word “Ramadan” would be translated into “the month of fasting” for Muslims (p. 269). Similarly, Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) indicate that this technique is used to remedy a syntactic deficiency or highlight a word’s meaning, in both cases filling a gap in the lexicon or the structure (p. 192).

Following Vazquez-Ayora (1977), amplification, or expansion, is one of several processes that complement the main methods of stylistic execution and is integrated with them in the dynamic process of transferring the message integrity to the target language (p. 334). It is defined as a procedure in which more monemes (lexemes and morphemes) are employed in the target language to convey the same idea of the source language (p. 337). Some examples are “We are dancing to the accordion,” which is rendered into “Bailábamos al son del acordeón” or “The plant in Bogota” to “La planta que opera en Bogota” (p. 335). He also points out that it is opposed to economy and, therefore, to conciseness as well.

Consequently, he states that it is not difficult to notice the changes these prepositions had from English to Spanish and that this translation technique can affect not only prepositions but also other grammatical categories, such as adverbs, pronouns, verbs, and nouns, etc. (p. 335). In English, prepositions have a more semantic force, so it is required to use analytical turns that extend the expression into Spanish (p. 336). Finally, it is easy to perceive that the Spanish version is naturally longer, and the English version is shorter and more economical (p. 336). This indicates that when translating a text from English to Spanish, more amplifications can be found in Spanish and, conversely, there are more reductions when rendering from Spanish into English.

2.2.5 Explicitation

Explicitation is a semantic amplification since more linguistic elements are needed in the target language to convey the same message as in the source language. Regarding Munday

(2016), this translation procedure refers to implicit information in the source text that is translated explicitly into the target text. This could occur on the level of grammar (for example, the English source text shows the word “doctor,” but it is explained that the person is male or female in the target text because it is necessary to indicate the gender), semantics (for example, the explanation of an element of the source culture such as Thanksgiving), pragmatics (for instance, the explanation of some idioms such as “it is easy to be a Monday morning quarterback”) or discourse (such as increased cohesion in the target text) (p. 92).

As per Hurtado (2001), explicitation involves introducing implicit information in the original text and, for example, indicating in French the patient’s gender when translating “his patient” (p. 260). According to Vazquez-Ayora (1997), this translation procedure is a different form of amplification primarily based on semantic reasons. It is used to express in the target text what is implicit in the source text context. Therefore, the purpose of this procedure is both explanatory and specifying. These implicit elements may be related to linguistic habits, language characteristics, or due to cultural aspects that are familiar to the source message’s receiver (p. 349). He also specifies that translating some elements explicitly does not mean expressing openly what is subtle and disguised in the original text and intended to be so, such as reticence, suspension, ellipses, opacity, etc. (p. 351).

2.2.6 Literal Translation

Literal translation consists of reproducing the source text’s linguistic system exactly as it is but transforming the linguistic elements of which it is composed. As to Delisle et al. (1999), it is a translation strategy in which a target text is produced while preserving the formal characteristics of the source text but generally conforming the target language grammar (p. 154). Following Lopez and Minett (1997), Vinay and Darbelnet define it as a word-for-word transfer

from one language to another that respects the target language's linguistic conventions. They also declare that this strategy is rarely successful when translating from English to Spanish (p. 255). Likewise, they point out five reasons proposed by them whereby this procedure may not be successful: a) due to a change of meaning (e.g., "to have green fingers" that is "tener buena mano para las plantas"), b) because no meaning is obtained (e.g., "to go Dutch" that is not "volverse holandés" but "pagar a medias"), c) due to structural reasons (e.g., "she ran out screaming" that is "salió corriendo y gritando," d) due to a lack of metalinguistic correspondence (e.g., "rubbish!" that is "¡no digas tonterías!"), and e) due to a change in language register (e.g., "sister-in-law" that is "cuñada" and not "hermana política") (p. 257).

According to Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014), this technique is generally appropriate for translating numerous technical texts while providing language learners useful insights into the target language structures. Literary translation also has its champions, such as Nabokov, who describes it as the reproduction as faithfully as possible of the associative and syntactic capabilities of another language and the exact contextual meaning of the original. He also states that only this technique can be considered true translation (p. 96).

2.2.7 Punctuation changes

When translating from one language to another, punctuation changes are an aspect that is often taken lightly but can impact the target text's comprehension and, thus, the translation product. As Newmark (1988) points out, punctuation is a fundamental aspect of discourse analysis. It provides a semantic hint of the relationship between sentences and clauses, which may differ from language to language. For this reason, he advises spending time during the translation process to carry out a separate comparative check of the punctuation of the source and target text (p. 58).

As per Lopez and Minett (1997), Francisco Marsa indicates that, concerning punctuation, the risk is not to write incorrectly but to induce errors. Therefore, they remark that there is a strong tendency toward a form of lax or open punctuation in English, which consists of punctuating what is strictly necessary. However, a form of closed punctuation in Spanish is strictly grammatical (p. 145). Finally, they list a series of distinctions between English and Spanish punctuation marks. For example, English sentences are shorter and are separated by periods, but Spanish sentences are longer and are usually separated by subordinate elements (p. 87). Then, concerning certain conjunctions, the comma has many differences between the two languages, as it is usually used in English before “and” or “or,” and it can be omitted before “but,” “because,” “if,” and “although” (p. 146-158).

2.2.8 Compensation

Compensation is used when a linguistic element of the source text cannot be translated, and the lost meaning is expressed elsewhere in the target text. As stated by Hurtado (2001), this translation strategy attempts to introduce an information element or stylistic effect somewhere else in the target text that could not be included in the same place where it appears in the source text (p. 258). As Vinay and Darbelnet (1995) state, it can thus be explained as a technique that preserves the text tonality by introducing a stylistic variant in another part of the text, which is the element that could not be rendered in the same place by the same means. This procedure conserves the text’s integrity while giving the translator complete freedom in the translation process. He also declares that this procedure is part of all other translation procedures (p. 199).

According to Vazquez-Ayora (1977), it is based on the difficulty of finding the right and natural equivalence and on the loss of content or nuances that a version experiences (p. 374). He also says that translation is often confronted with losses and gains, advantages and disadvantages,

concentrations and dilutions, and economies or amplifications, which can only be remedied using this translation technique (p. 377). Based on Cragie and Pattison (2018), it is an approach used differently. It aims to reduce translation loss. Therefore, it is a matter of choice and decision. It also mitigates unacceptable translation loss by the calculated addition of a less unacceptable loss. In addition, they explain that this procedure has three categories: compensation in mode (a broad category of “substitutions,” which includes: making explicit what is implicit (or vice versa)); substitution of literal meaning for connotative meaning (or vice versa); and substitution of the concrete for the abstract (or vice versa) (p. 69). Furthermore, they point out that successful compensation relies on the translator’s ability to recognize potential translation loss resulting from source text factors such as untranslatability, ambiguity, poor text quality, neologisms, and metaphor, as well as to find a way to address the gap created by translation loss (p. 70).

2.2.9 Equivalence

Equivalence uses different linguistic elements to convey the same reality. With this translation procedure, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, names of institutions, or interjections can be translated successfully. Regarding Haywood et al. (2009), the term “equivalent” or “equivalence” is taken as a synonym of “sameness.” Therefore, this strategy helps the translator to produce a carefully fabricated approximation of some main properties of the source text in the target text (p. 32). Besides, Fawcett (1997) affirms that Vinay and Darbelnet define it principally as translating idiomatic expressions when two languages refer to the same situation differently. He also claims that it is based on language knowledge, so the translator knows or does not know how to translate idioms such as “as thick as two short planks.” Therefore, if the translator needs to spot an idiom and translate its element separately, this will be over-translated.

Considering Vazquez-Ayora (1977), it is the extreme case of a procedure of modulation that is lexicalized. This is also part of oblique translation or dynamic correspondence and can be used for idioms, figures of speech, set phrases, proverbs, sayings, locations, and all sorts of unified groups. In this way, he also points out that the translator must do constant and extensive research due to the need for dictionaries of these forms of expression and the persistence and emergence of fashionable ones (p. 314). Among the examples he gives are “God bless you!” that is “¡Salud!” or “What a hell of a fellow!” that is “¡Qué tipazo!”. Finally, it is mentioned that it would be confusing and incomprehensible to analyze the meaning of the semantic components of the expression (p. 315).

2.2.10 Adaptation

Adaptation consists of replacing cultural realities or scenarios for which there is no reference in the target language. As Munday (2016) asserts, this translation procedure implies changing the cultural reference when a situation in the source culture is not found in the target culture. For instance, Vinay and Darbelnet propose that the cultural connotation of a reference to the game of cricket in an English text could be better translated into French by referencing the Tour de France (p. 91). Likewise, Pym (2014) mentions that this procedure is employed to maintain natural equivalence and refers to different things with vaguely equivalent cultural functions. Therefore, cycling is to the French what baseball is to the Americans or gardening is to the English what having lovers is to the Italians (p. 13).

Per Shuttleworth and Cowie (2014), it is a term proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet to describe one of the seven translation procedures. It is classified as a type of oblique translation, which means that it does not depend on the existence of structural and conceptual parallels between the source and target language. It is also a tactic to be adopted when the situation

referred to in the source text does not exist in the target culture or does not have the same importance or connotations as in the source context, as it works by substituting the elements of the source text with elements of the target text that in some way have the same function and are, therefore, “equivalent.” He mentions that they claim that adaptation represents the extreme limit of the translation, as it implies a considerable degree of reformulation (p. 4).

2.2.11 Borrowing

Borrowing implies a conscious choice that involves using the same word or expression in the target text as found in the source text. As per Hervey and Higgins (2002), this translation procedure transfers an element of foreignness into the exotic target text. Borrowings are most frequent in texts on history or legal, social, or political matters, where a definition is usually inserted to use the source language word as a loan word in the target text. They also say it is pertinent to be careful when translating source language words that have become target language loan words, as they may be used differently in the two languages (p. 36).

Following Hartono (2020), words or expressions from other languages are used. It is a borrowed word or a borrowed phrase taken directly from the source language. For example, “lobby” is taken from English and used in Spanish (p. 11). He also mentions that Newmark considers it a naturalization procedure, which transfers and adapts the pronunciation and word formation (p. 12). E.g., familiar English words borrowed from other languages are ballet (French), fest (German), patio (Spanish), and karaoke (Japanese) (p. 13).

In this sense, Hurtado (2001) states that it is incorporating a word or expression from another language the way it is. It can be either pure (unmodified) like the English word “lobby” or naturalized (transliterated from the target language) like “gol”, “fútbol,” “líder,” and “mitin”.

In this way, pure borrowing refers to Vinay and Darnelnet's borrowing, and naturalized borrowing agrees with Newmark's naturalization strategy (p. 271).

2.2.12 Calque

Calque incorporates a foreign word or structure into the target language, but the elements that compose it are translated literally. For Cragie and Pattison (2018), this translation procedure is used to translate a word or phrase that reproduces the original (figurative) image in the source language and has become a useful and identifiable form in its own right, the target language. For example, the word "skyscraper" (each element of the compound noun is rendered to form a similar compound word in the target language, e.g., "rascacielo" in Spanish) (p. 67).

As Lopez and Minett (1997) argued, Vinay and Darbelnet proposed that this translation procedure corresponds to a class of borrowing in which the syntagma is borrowed from the source language. However, the elements that constitute it are translated literally. A distinction is made between the calque of expression that follows the syntactic structures of the target language (e.g., "week-end" to "fin de semana") and the calque of structure that respects the novel syntactic construction in the target language (e.g., "science-fiction" to "ciencia ficción") (p. 242). They also affirm that this procedure avoids foreignness and enriches the language that accepts it. Therefore, borrowing is a phonic and morphological adaptation, but calque is a construction. Lastly, they point out that calque can be produced at all linguistic levels, including lexical, orthographic, typographic, and syntactic calques (p. 243).

2.2.13 Sentence Inversion

Sentence inversion is mainly a change in syntax and word order to accomplish naturalness in the target text and shift the emphasis through stylistic elements. According to Hurtado (2001),

inversion means transferring a word or syntagma to another place in the sentence or paragraph to produce the normal sentence structure in the other language (p. 260). In this regard, Baker and Cheung (2009) declare that it refers to the procedure by which the elements that constitute a sentence are organized differently from the general rules of word order of the language in question (p. 362). This means that the order of the words in a sentence may vary between the two languages.

As Vazquez-Ayora (1977) claims, inversion is a displacement in which a single element or configuration can be moved to any other place in the sentence or paragraph. He also indicates that Spanish has greater freedom to change the order of the elements in a sentence than English and French. A few examples he cites are “The phone rang” to “Sonó el teléfono” or “¿Vendrá usted mañana?” or “¿Usted vendrá mañana?” (p. 248).

2.3 Glossaries

One of the steps the translator must take during the translation process is to prepare a translation glossary, which is a key instrument that enables him to enhance the translation quality, shorten turnaround times, ensure text consistency, and lower the translation project costs over time. Following Lionbridge (2013), a translation glossary is a resource or a document that assists the translator in reducing inconsistency problems. It is usually a lexicon, a terminology base, or a terminology collection. This section will explain the significance of glossaries for the translator, their relevance to the translation process, and how they are elaborated. Besides, novice translators working with small projects can get started using a spreadsheet. In contrast, larger companies need more automated and specialized tools to handle their terminologies and translations (para. 5).

2.3.1 Relevance for the Translator

Translation glossaries are not only intended to provide the readers with a guide to understanding the most important and obscured terms of the text but also, as stated by Lionbridge (2013), to assure the translator that each time a key and specific word appears, it is translated consistently and correctly, such as technical terms. Furthermore, they help to standardize project terms, avoid ambiguity, and obtain uniformity of style, because if, for example, a group of translators works on a related document and use the same terminology, they can be sure of using the appropriate word (para. 3). For instance, “brochure” and “leaflet” are synonyms. However, only one must be chosen within the target text. Otherwise, it will be consistent, accurate, and clear for them.

2.3.2 Relevance for the Translation Process

Regarding the translation process, there are several significant strengths to be highlighted about glossaries, which greatly benefit the translator and translation agencies nowadays. Per Intertranslations (2020), productivity increases since the translator do not have to render certain terms already included in the glossary. Then, project turnaround times are reduced as equivalent terms are more easily found. In addition, costs are minimized because these terms are contained in the glossary, saving time and costs for future translations. Ultimately, terminology consistency is ensured, as the translator uses acceptable terms and produces a high-quality translation (para. 7-9).

2.3.3 How to Create a Translation Glossary

Creating a glossary may not be difficult, but many steps must be followed to do it successfully. According to Gapper (2008), the following steps are necessary to elaborate a

translation glossary. The first step is to determine the glossary's nature. To do so, it is useful to consider these questions: Who is the glossary for? How is the target user? What will be the primary purpose of the glossary? Furthermore, where and how will the glossary be used?

The second step is to define the glossary content. At this point, it is required to identify which terms can be included such as abbreviations, acronyms, initials, sector or industry-specific jargon, keywords, etc. Next, it is essential to consider what information can be included for each term, such as the term itself, its grammatical category, definition, description, its counterpart in the target language, synonyms, antonyms, etc. Then, if applicable, it should provide information on terms such as the field of study, geographical area, pictures, genre, etc. The third step is establishing the format, which involves determining how the terms will be arranged, such as the font, the page size, the color scheme, etc. (p. 76-77).

Chapter III

Methodological Framework

This section presents relevant information on the research approaches, data collection instruments, and resources that will be used to accomplish the objectives of this study. Thus, it includes the necessary instruments for textual analysis and displaying translation procedures.

3.1 Research Approach

To conduct successful research, it is imperative to consider the research approach, which determines the foundations and the necessary steps to obtain reliable and convincing results. As Walliman (2011) indicates, research is a broad term to designate an activity that consists of discovering, more or less systematically, strange things. A more academic definition is that research implies discovering things nobody knew. In this way, different research approaches provide ways of collecting, classifying, and analyzing information. If the right approach is chosen, it will be possible to persuade others that the deductions and findings obtained are valid and that the knowledge is solid (p. 7). Furthermore, he states that data can be classified into two categories depending on their characteristics, which can be reported in numbers or presented in words only. Consequently, three major research approaches are identified: quantitative research, quantitative research, and mixed-approach research (p. 71).

3.1.1 Quantitative Research

The qualitative approach refers to strategies, procedures, and tools for comprehending frequencies, patterns, and trends and testing theories through statistical analysis. Therefore, the results are expressed in numbers or graphs. Regarding Creswell (2014), this research approach tests objective theories by assessing the results of different variables, which can be

measured using data collection instruments to analyze numerical data through statistical and mathematical procedures (p. 4). As per Walliman (2011), these numerical data can be extremely simple, such as counts or percentages, or more complex, such as statistical tests or mathematical models (p. 72). Examples of quantitative data collection instruments include surveys, questionnaires, and polls.

3.1.2 Qualitative Research

Qualitative research refers to strategies and techniques for collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to comprehend opinions, experiences, and concepts. Following Creswell (2014), this research approach is used to explore and comprehend the meaning that people attribute to a social or human concern. It involves proposing questions and procedures, collecting data in the participant's setting, analyzing data inductively from particular and general themes, and the researcher's interpretation of the meaning of the data (p. 4). For this reason, the results are expressed in words.

To Walliman (2011), human activities and attributes such as ideas, customs, and beliefs cannot be researched or measured accurately. Therefore, this type of data has a descriptive character. However, qualitative data is more valuable than quantitative data. Their richness and subtlety provide a better understanding of human society (p. 72-73). Examples of qualitative data collection instruments comprise observation, interview, and document analysis. In this case, this research is mainly based on this approach as data is collected and analyzed through a textual analysis of the book *Metales Pesados* while the translation procedures are applied to evaluate their effects using a color-coding table.

3.1.3 Mixed Methods Research

Mixed methods research integrates elements of both quantitative and qualitative research to answer the research question. According to Creswell (2014), this research approach is used to inquire into quantitative and qualitative data, integrating the two forms of data and using distinct designs. The basic principle of this form of inquiry is that the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches provides a complete understanding of a research problem (p. 4). It can also help to provide more comprehensive insights than a single research method by taking advantage of the benefits of both approaches.

3.2 Research Design

When conducting research, starting with a plan that defines a strategy for collecting, analyzing, and evaluating data is necessary. As regards Walliman (2011), once the research objectives have been defined, it is essential to determine how to achieve them through the research design. Likewise, he declares that the research design provides a framework for data collection and analysis and then indicates which research method is the most appropriate (p. 13). For him, several types of research designs are suitable for different types of research projects. Therefore, the most common ones are historical, descriptive, correlational, comparative, experimental, simulation, evaluation, action, ethnological, feminist, and cultural (p. 9-13).

In this study, a descriptive research design will be implemented because, as McCombes (2019) declares, it is intended to accurately and systematically describe a population, situation, or phenomenon (para. 1). It is used to recognize characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories. Therefore, it is helpful when little is known about the topic or problem. Before researching why something occurs, it is necessary to comprehend how, when, and where it happens (para. 3-4). Examples of this type of research design are surveys, observations, and case studies.

3.3 Information Sources

Information sources are useful instruments that help to satisfy information needs, especially when researching. According to an article from the University of Minnesota Crookston (n.d), it is stated that it can often be classified as primary, secondary, and tertiary. These categorizations are based on the material's originality, source proximity, or origin. As a result, they help to determine whether the information is first-hand or relates to someone else's experiences and opinions, which is second-hand (para. 1). Each category is explained below.

In this regard, an article from UC Merced Library (n.d) explains that primary sources give first-hand observations or direct evidence about a subject under investigation. Witnesses or recorders have created them during or close to the event. Some examples include books, interviews, speeches, diaries, journal articles, newspaper articles, etc. (para. 1-2). It is described that secondary sources are works that examine, analyze, or interpret an event, period, or historical phenomenon. Moreover, they often attempt to describe or explain primary sources. Some examples are journal articles, biographies, documentaries, research websites, etc. (para. 3-4). Finally, tertiary sources are also referred to as reference works. As Ryan (2022) points out, they are used to give an overview of the information collected from primary and secondary sources and do not present original interpretations or analyses. Some examples include dictionaries, encyclopedias, databases, biographies, abstracts, etc. (para. 1-2).

3.4 Analysis Categories

This study is based on a qualitative approach. It requires using a series of variables and measurement instruments, which can be grouped into four categories: translation, translation procedures, translation glossary, and text analysis.

3.4.1 Translation

The translation is the process of expressing in one language what has been previously expressed or written in another. It is performed by a translator or translators, in a particular sociocultural context (p. 6). Regarding Hatim and Munday (2004), it is defined as transferring a written text from the source language to the target language. As for Newmark (1988), it is transferring the meaning of a text into another language as the author intended the text (p. 5).

3.4.2 Translation Procedures

Translation procedures are a series of techniques implemented by translators during the translation process to transfer the source text message to the target text as naturally as possible. Concerning Tronch (2022), Molina and Hurtado define them as techniques that help in analyzing and classifying how translation equivalence works (para. 2). Additionally, it is mentioned that Delisle declares that translators can use them when transferring elements of meaning from the source text to the target text (para. 3). He also mentions that there have been several definitions and categorizations of translation procedures by other authors since Vinay Darbelnet came up with the first seven translation techniques: borrowing, calque, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation (para. 1).

3.4.3 Translation Glossary

A translation glossary is a collection of key terms of the source text with their equivalents in the target language. They consist of significant terms in the source language and their counterparts in the target language (para. 5). According to Varda (2022), it can be referred to as a tool or document that helps to mitigate consistency problems and ensure quality standards.

3.4.4 Text Analysis

Text analysis is a pre-translation step that allows the translator to identify the source text's particular characteristics and understand it in depth. As per Newmark (1988), a series of aspects need to be considered when analyzing a text, such as text styles, stylistic scales, and text function (p. 13-14 and 39-42).

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

Data collection instruments are key tools carried out during the research process, which provide validity and reliability of data collected for comparison, analysis, and decision-making. According to World Sustainable (2020), these instruments are vital to the research phase. Therefore, choosing the appropriate tool will allow for collecting information capable of responding to the objectives and will be the basis for obtaining adequate and valid data (para. 1-2). Likewise, the three main instruments used in this study are the textual analysis table, the translation glossary, and the color-coding table.

3.5.1 Text Analysis Table

The first data collection instrument corresponds to the textual analysis table, which is based on the characteristics proposed by Newmark on textual analysis and was discussed in Chapter II. Following Newmark (1988), textual analysis is used to determine the text's intention and how it is written to choose accurate translation methods and to pinpoint particular and recurring problems (p. 11). In other words, it enables the translator to recognize the source text's specific features and, therefore, helps to determine the most suitable translation procedures. In this way, the main elements of textual analysis are presented in the following table.

Table 1*Text Analysis Table*

Text Analysis Element	Book Title
Text Style	
Stylistic Scale of Formality	
Stylistic Scale of Generality	
Stylistic Scale of Emotional Tone	
Text Function	
Type of Translation	

Table 1 shows the text analysis that will be used to determine the main features of the source text—the researcher's creation.

3.5.2 Translation Glossary

The second data collection instrument corresponds to the translation glossary, including the most relevant, complex, and obscured terms found in the source text during the translation process. It will ensure the translation is consistent and accurate, avoid ambiguities and provide a uniform text style.

For this study, the following Spanish-to-English translation glossary will be used, which includes the source language term, the target language term, the grammatical category, and the definition.

Table 2*Translation Glossary Table*

Source Term	Target Term	Grammatical Category	Definition

Table 2 shows the Spanish-to-English translation glossary that will be used to collect the most relevant, complex, and obscured terms from the source text—the researcher’s own creation.

3.5.3 Color-Coding Table

The third data collection instrument is the color-coding table, which is a multicolored graphical representation highlighting nine translation procedures. This color system will make it possible to identify and evaluate the effects of these translation techniques to be used during the translation process. Therefore, the following table shows the corresponding colors for each.

Table 3

Color-Coding Table




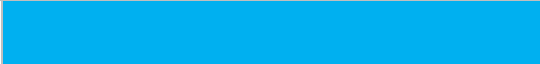

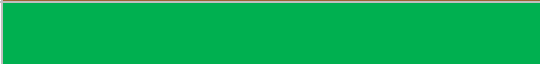



Translation Procedure	Color scheme
Transposition	
Modulation	
Omission	
Amplification	
Explicitation	
Literal Translation	
Compensation	
Equivalence	
Adaptation	

Table 3 shows the color schemes representing each translation procedure—the researcher’s creation.

3.6 Collection Data Process and Data Analysis

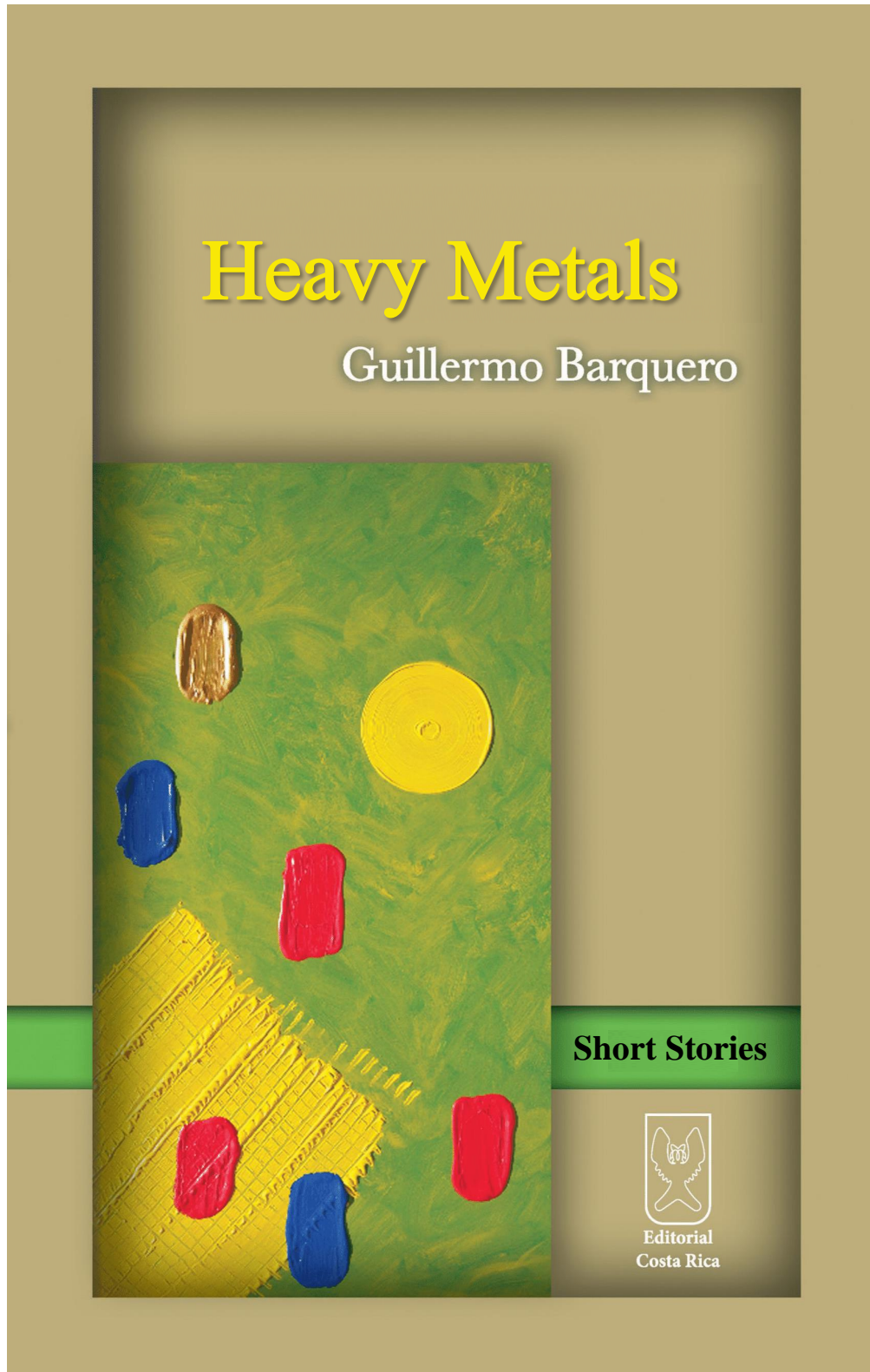
As part of this research, it is necessary to define a series of steps to be carried out before and after the translation process to collect data, analyze the text characteristics, and then translate the message from the source text to the target text in a successful way. The first step to be taken is a general and specific reading. Newmark (1988) states that both types of reading are necessary to understand the source text. In this way, general reading is used to get the gist of the text, and it is required to consult other resources, such as specialized textbooks or encyclopedias to comprehend the subject and the main concepts. On the other hand, close reading focuses on facts and details, such as words in and out of context (p. 11). Afterward, data should be collected through the previously mentioned tables, so that the first one will provide information from the textual analysis, which will be the basis for making decisions that will impact the translation process by identifying relevant aspects, such as the text style, the scale of formality and generality, the scale of emotional tone, the function of the text and the type of translation.

After that, the translation process should be started using the different translation techniques that were previously mentioned, and the third table corresponding to the translation glossary should be completed with the most relevant, complex, and obscured terms of the source text. Then, when the literary book is fully translated, it is necessary to revise it to ensure that the style, formality, tone, and author's intention are properly conveyed in the target text to deliver it to Editorial Costa Rica. Finally, thirty paragraphs will be chosen to analyze the translation procedures used during the translation process using the color-coding table.

Chapter IV

Translation

4.1 Translation from Spanish into English: “*Metales Pesados*”



Heavy Metals

Guillermo Barquero

Heavy Metals



Editorial
Costa Rica

EMPIRE OF FIREBREATHERS

For Christian Aguilar

His appearance was the same as usual but slightly paler. The only important thing about the room was the immaculate whiteness, perfectly medicinal. I shook his hand, and I thought I had touched a block of ice. We joked about the hospitals' coldness, the nurses' deference or excessive bitterness, their white pants, and the underwear they wore. That first day I visited him, we didn't talk much about his disease.

The same night, I was informed over the phone that the day before his admission, he had felt weak and almost dead. He paled, went into a laboratory, and asked for a blood test. Within two hours—they usually take a couple of days to deliver the results—the lab manager called him and told him she had seen something irregular in the blood smear under a microscope. He wasn't alarmed by that oddity, so he waited several hours before going for the results.

When he arrived, an emergency hospital admission order had already been issued for him. He thought it was a joke or an exaggeration. He was admitted. As he told me over the phone, he had looked at himself in the room's mirror when he had his clothes changed. He felt that he was suddenly 40 years older, that he was haggard, and that his skin had become a reptile's hide. We didn't talk about the disease itself, but about its possible seriousness, which neither of us called it uncertainty, but it really was.

The following day, I entered the white rooms of the hospital again. I got lost twice in a row—intricate corridors and wrong directions that were more bearable thanks to the coffee with milk from a coffee vending machine. Eventually, I got to the room where Gabriel was admitted, Masculine Oncology 2.

Some of the sick people were talking dispiritedly, while others, as I waited in an

oncology room, were resting heavily and pallidly in line with the seriousness of the entrance sign.

Gabriel was reading *The plague* by Camus. “Leukemia,” he told me without showing any surprise. My face, I hope, was one of total impassivity. I asked him about what it was next—whether chemotherapy, radiotherapy, or none of the previous ones. I didn’t know more than that. Gabriel gave me several explanations he himself didn’t understand. He mentioned the names of two doctors, who had just been introduced to him and two hospital wings whose names I didn’t hear.

He leaned back until he reached the green metal handle of the bedside table, put the book away—I could see that a whole, small library had been brought to him—and took out a magazine with a glossy cover, which looked as if it had just been bought—*The Art of Machines*. His father, Don Gabriel, had brought it to him, so that he entertained himself with something lighter than books, which wouldn’t let him recover well as he had tried to explain to him.

“Yes, leukemia.” When I left the room, and within the following days, I read a couple of articles about leukemia, which didn’t allow me to define it as I wanted. It is a disease of many faces, all complex and so nuanced at the same time that it can’t be framed as one would do with kidney stones or blindness.

In blindness, the person doesn’t see. If it is partial, he sees a little, but there isn’t much to say if it is total, as he sees nothing at all whatever the causes. Leukemia is a multi-headed monster that undermines the patient’s cellular systems. White blood cell, red blood cell, and platelet counts are lowered. The patient suffers from symptoms related to these deficiencies. There is anemia, opportunistic infections, and excessive bleeding.

I imagined Gabriel bleeding from his nose in his bed while reading *The Plague*. He

called me that second night. On the other side of the receiver, apart from his voice that seemed to come from a grave, nothing could be heard but the wind blowing or a tiny noise from the line. It was too late to be calling from a hospital. He had been allowed to use his cell phone. We talked about leukemia like two strangers referring to episodes in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

I told him the little I knew trying to explain what I had gotten from the articles, which hadn't been much. He gave me his opinion, what he had heard from the doctors, and what he had read in a little booklet he was given when he was admitted. We agreed that neither of us knew much. What we were sure of, we agreed, was that his condition was serious, although neither of us would say it bluntly.

He told me he was having trouble falling asleep. A 12-year-old boy—he didn't even notice his name, just his date of birth on the head of the bed—was moaning constantly in pain, saying that his kidneys were going to explode and that he was dying. When he closed his eyes, hushed lamentations flooded the silence of the room of Masculine Oncology 2.

I couldn't visit him for five days. Work matters. We talked on the phone every night. We joked as we did in the olden days of school and high school. I forgot Gabriel was on the other side, with dying and very sick or hopeless people. He seemed to forget it by carelessness or simple deliberation. He claimed his condition wasn't as bad as that of the rest. Well, some were better, but most were terminally ill and greenish beings. He said that again and again.

He read almost all the time. He had finished reading *The Plague* and was with something by Oé, which had him fascinated. He hadn't started chemotherapy, yet. He didn't know why, but he said that should be the acid test. "You finish chemo, and you're saved," he told me one night. We changed the subject several times avoiding uncomfortable, circular conversations that

brought up the subject of the disease and the treatment, which was more deadly than the disease itself.

He asked me when I was coming. He talked about an article in the magazine *The Art of Machines*, which he read after eating and when he intended to rest his eyes from the unchanging landscape outside the window. He needed few things to entertain himself—several thin wires, a flattened piece of metal, and a magnet. I asked nothing. He just told me to buy him those things, and then we would talk about it.

When I entered the room again almost a week later, I was welcomed by the ghost of Gabriel, who was identical to the one of the first day of admission, but with a deeper gaze, intensely blue cheekbones, and perfectly adapted to the ambiance of someone with leukemia in an oncology room. We hugged. Something we almost never did. We joked as expected. The nurses walked pass from left to right in that corridor with three seats. We talked about the underwear they wore under their white pants.

He mentioned chemotherapy, and I referred to leukemia as a chronic and extraterrestrial malady. I had read a couple of other things that ended up confusing me. I brought him the things he had requested without asking any questions.

In the room, he showed me an article about the history of slot machines, from the old, noisy, and heavy mechanical models with little apples on the screen to the modern electronic equipment, which clumsily and robotically imitated the previous ones. A whole issue of *The Art of Machines* was dedicated to the slots. Gabriel explained nothing. He simply put the magazine and the bag I brought him, in a drawer of the shelves.

He had almost finished reading Oé's book and would continue with *Alcools* by Apollinaire. He told me with no irony that he had no choice but to gorge himself on books. He

wasn't in a position to reject literary genres.

I would visit him all the days I could. I told him some days would be impossible for me, as there would be important matters at work. We talked two days later. He called me at eleven-thirty at night. Anyway, I was writing two letters on my computer, so he hadn't woken me up or interrupted me.

He told me he sweated and had started the treatment or a preliminary phase to condition his body. I imagined him hairless and in the form of a big, bald, yellow, sickly egg. His voice didn't sound sick, though. We talked about books, boredom, the moans of the 12-year-old boy, the nurses, and the fucking, thankless life.

I could visit him until six days later. I expected Gabriel to be ruined and vomiting blood. He managed to convince me to visit him though I told him I didn't want to bother him. I found that Gabriel was intact, slightly paler, and with all his hair. He noticed my reaction and explained the hospital's periods and delays. Also, he hadn't experienced the treatment's violent phase.

We sat on the bed in the room of Masculine Oncology 2. The medicinal and sedative smell of the rest of the building had pervaded. The 12-year-old boy played with a little, electronic device. He looked at me when I entered. I imagined his moans.

"This was simple before," Gabriel told me as he took the magazine in his hands. It was crumpled and looked like an issue from 30 years ago. I asked him what was simple before. "Cheat at the slots, get all the bucks out, and make them breathe and puke," Gabriel answered. He opened the furniture's metal drawer that was next to his bed. He showed me a mechanism that looked like a grasshopper made of wire, which was menacing, white, and interspersed with the metal plate and the magnet. "This is what I asked you for," he said. I shrugged.

“With something like this, the former cheaters got all the coins out of the machines,” he explained, “it is a simple mechanism of small pulleys raised by the wires.” He showed me the magazine article’s diagrams. “Interesting,” I said and thought. “Very interesting.” “They didn’t even have to pull the machine’s lever,” he said, “they did it to pretend sometimes.” “And Apollinaire?” I abruptly changed the subject. He read *Zone* and then, more out of curiosity than boredom, closed it and continued scanning the slot machine article.

He took out a rectangular sheet of paper from a notebook with a list of items I should bring him as soon as possible. Certainly, it had to do with the machines. We didn’t set any dates and only agreed to talk when possible.

Two or three days went by and...nothing. I imagined Gabriel being undergoing the chemotherapy’s violent phase. If there was a particularly violent one within such atrocity. I had read more medical articles and had found it all too sinister. I dreaded calling Gabriel and hearing a corpse talk, breathe, and lament his damn fate.

The phone rang, and I thought I was dreaming. No idea what time it was, but it was a cold early morning in the middle of February. Gabriel’s voice was unchanged. We didn’t even talk about how late it was. He told me he couldn’t sleep, not so much because of the moans of the 12-year-old boy, who had been somewhat quiet the last few days, but because of his internal ones. He felt his organs were going to explode.

He vomited several times a day, or had unbearable heaves, which were nauseating overturns of a body that felt as if it were filled with lead. He asked me about the items on the list. “Which list,” I told him. I was half sleep. “The one from the last time,” a Gabriel, who didn’t look like the one with the unbearable vomiting and heaves, said. I told him I had bought everything. I told a half lie. I had been unable to get an anti-reflective plastic sheet he had asked

for. No big deal. I hung up. We agreed to see each other in the afternoon of the next day.

Gabriel was reading the magazine when I entered the room. I was greeted by two men, whom I barely remembered. The 12-year-old boy looked at me and looked like a little dog in the rain. Then I came across another Gabriel, who was wrinkled, 200 years old, with a salty tongue, glasses on, gloomy and wise.

After we embraced with difficulty, —his body ached, especially his right side—we went into the details I guessed to be less scabrous about the treatment and the disease’s development, which were extreme weakness, feeling like a piece of glass about to crack, spots on the body, and blurred vision. We stopped talking as Gabriel put his index finger on the magazine page. “Do you have all the materials?” he asked gently as if he were an elderly man. I took them out of the little plastic bag. He checked what I had bought, nodded, and looked focused. In effect, he told me that it was all he needed.

“When the slot machine technology advanced, instead of the obsolete and predictable mechanical system, casino owners, especially in the state of Nevada (Las Vegas is there), devised the detection system of the deposited coins through a kind of thin and very precise laser beam, which is impossible for any cheater to fool.” Gabriel said that it was nothing and that he knew exactly the vulnerability mechanism of that technology, which was old-fashioned per se.

“With the materials, I would have it ready in a couple of days.” I asked him how to test the efficacy. He told me that it didn’t matter, but to build the small mechanism in detail, which would be difficult to detect under long-sleeved shirts. “The anti-reflective plastic would do all the work by barely blocking the light beam path and fooling the machine. Just like that.”

I thought it was quite reasonable; although, I asked him again about the practical importance of the whole affair of electronic insect-shaped mechanisms and slot machines in

Vegas. Gabriel remained silent. He looked at the gray landscape outside the window—a lot of rusted tin roofs. It was a room overlooking an old downtown residential area. I ran out of damn questions.

For Gabriel, the mechanisms had no practical importance. They were ghosts to palliate his fear and disgust in his anesthetic midnight reverie. “When I leave, I’m going to know more about all this than anyone else. We’re going to the Hotel Palma casino. I’ll loot all the machines, and you’ll keep half of the dough,” Gabriel said smiling.

Of course, he meant it. “I just need to get to know how the old models worked to get to these,” he said pointing with his pale, long, index finger to the shiny sheet. “When I’ve got everything clear, we’ll go away, leave the bench empty, drink guaro all night long, and have a few cigars.” I liked the idea in spite of myself. I asked him if he didn’t have another list of materials he needed. We hugged goodbye. He felt pain again.

I called him just for the second time since he was admitted. It wasn’t too late, but I didn’t think he was going to answer. After saying hello, I didn’t think he was going to talk to me immediately about the most modern slot machines, which were equipped with all sorts of electronic, mechanical, and computer mechanisms. “They were real and almost invulnerable computers.” He added more materials to the list he had given me last time.

He told me about the bone marrow, which created the defective and aberrant-shaped cells and spat them out into the blood. He made a comparison between his body and a slot machine while guffawing. I didn’t remember his exact words, but I found it funny, as well as worrying. His voice was low and comatose when he calmed down.

I imagined him too old and hurt to be alive. “We’ll conquer the damn firebreathers,” Gabriel said, “that’s what they call the most modern ones in Vegas; the fi-re-breath-ers. Imagine

what we're going to do with the ones here, which are second-hand junk." We said goodbye to each other. I saw myself looting, with Gabriel watching my back, all the casinos in the country, buying all the drinks, and choking on every meal.

I visited him again a few days later. I entered the room, but didn't find him. I went into the garden outside the room of Masculine Oncology 2 and that of Cardiology, where the sick people rested. Some smoked, which wasn't strange or shocking but laughable. A nurse had told me I would have to wait for Gabriel.

Anyway, I thought he wouldn't like my visit. I hadn't been able to get him all the things on the list. I think some of them didn't even exist and others weren't sold separately, but only in bigger kits. Noon and mid-afternoon went by. I phoned Gabriel. The hold sound was repeated until there was no dial tone. I called back again three or four times. Nobody answered at home. I left the hospital.

I returned. He couldn't see me. He was in a serious condition as the nurse told me. "Serious?" "Yes, serious," she managed to tell me. I left the hospital again. I called him on his cell phone at night and in the early morning. I also phoned the room of Masculine Oncology 2, but nobody answered. "Serious" was the only word the nurse repeated like a malevolent litany.

It took me 15 minutes less than usual to get to the hospital. I sweated. I entered the room directly without asking for Gabriel. I was greeted by the same two men as always. The 12-year-old boy played with his little, portable device. He greeted me and his face was calm. Gabriel's bed was arranged, perfect, and empty. None of the sick knew anything. I opened the drawers and the books were still there. *The Art of Machines* was still there. "No, sir. I think his condition got worse," a guy I had never seen before told me. I thanked him for the information.

I got to the coffee vending machine at the end of the corridor. It only accepted coins. I

opened the backpack I carried. Nothing. I went through the pockets of my jacket. Among the keys, I managed to set aside six golden coins, which were all of them the same. I looked at them carefully. Some of them would feed those dirty, worn-out slots in their empire of little, multicolored screens. One of those would make them spit fire—little rumbling flames that would hit the metal tray giving life to someone after lowering the lever.

And there would be no need for mechanisms in the form of mechanical insects made of wires and anti-reflective plastics. And Gabriel wouldn't be needed for this, and everything would continue as it was.

FABLE OF SMALL TEMPTATIONS

Margarita, my assistant, has just told me in a neutral and impersonal tone that Alberto hanged himself. As I was busy with a lab test and couldn't even take off my gloves, I barely managed to mumble a few words and to ask her in a disorderly manner all sorts of details she didn't know or wasn't interested in.

The last time we saw each other was at one of those lunches, characterized by huge round tables, annoying noise, and somewhat tasty meals. That was on the closing day and after a congress of colleagues from various institutes, when the soporific part of the last lectures was over. We greeted each other effusively, as we hadn't seen each other before, even though we knew we both were out there with our respective research groups forgetting our PhD years.

We ate at the same table, but not side by side. However, I couldn't help thinking about what Alberto had once said, "eating at the same table can lead to lifelong friendships, especially after having pleasant table talks, which are filled with the somnolence that leave you feeling sated."

I still remember some of those who were at lunch that day. I don't know how, but I remember some; even though, we only had a couple of words with one another. I've seen others over the months at events related to the Institute, and we have gotten along well. I became intimately acquainted with Andrea, the famous Dr. Ramirez. We were married for a couple of years.

That day, I, personally, remember that we were offered more types of desserts than anyone could eat. There was a whole range of sweet dishes with strange names and even less determinable appearances. We drank wine and ate a rice-based dish. It was one of those final stages that one calls "good."

After working for an institute for over ten years and having spent a great deal of time completing the required tasks to get the doctorates and postdocs, one deserves, at least once in a while, a decent lunch.

When we stood up, I looked for him to avoid losing him in the mass of half-drunk bodies, meaningless conversations, and coffee served in little porcelain cups. We walked together after we hugged each other as usual. I asked him about the staff at the Research Center. He asked me about the Institute. We talked about soccer, trade magazines, and our parents' deaths, which occurred in very similar circumstances and times. He asked me about women, friends from the "olden days," trips, university lessons, and specialized bookstores.

Under the wine's effect, it seemed like a conversation about late-model cars in the middle of the Amazon jungle. We laughed. I don't even know why. Finally, when the groups with which we had both attended left, everyone did their own thing. We said goodbye to each other effusively. I set out to find my car.

I arrived at the parking lot. I partially remembered the presentations, the research papers, the debates and, as if it had happened before, the lunch, which more than a lunch, was a three or four-day meal.

I opened the car door. Someone called my name. It was Alberto. I called him Albert, like the people who trusted him the most. On second thought, I think I was the only one who called him Albert with an exaggerated emphasis on "bert" as if he were Catalan. I still felt (I'm sure we both did) the red wine's tingle that was of better quality than the average.

Alberto was right. It would probably be a while before we saw each other again, and we had to celebrate that sort of fortuitous reencounter in some way without the workgroups, women (we were both single anyhow), and the academy's rigors, which were sometimes absurd.

Alberto told me he knew that cantina well. I had passed in front of it several times when I had to hand in the documents of the students who were writing their master's theses at the Institute. It was a place with a concrete street that was almost new and of better appearance than the ones in the downtown area. However, that was the only good thing. The houses, the people, the stray dogs, and the streetlight poles when they worked, were filled with a nostalgia of poverty that Alberto seemed to like.

I tried to be on my guard until we entered the place. The walls were very high and made of wood. There was a smell of pee even on the counter, posters of naked women, and old worn-out calendars. It isn't that I would have liked it, but it was an almost exact imitation of the bars we used to frequent many years ago in our early university days.

I wanted to order wine, but when I saw the musty state of the shelves, the cobwebs, and the antique stains on the furniture, I found myself with a dark beer in my hands. I hadn't drunk beer for a long time. The taste from the very first sip was plowing deep furrows in my head.

"The worst thing wasn't that we were in that state, but that the damn place was closed," Alberto said bursting into laughter, which I had almost forgotten. He said a couple of things to the man behind the counter using unintelligible slang. He went on reminiscing old drunkenness with stories he told me as if he had never lived them.

I think that after drinking two beers of a brand I didn't know, which were dark and sweet, we continued drinking from two huge pitchers that the barman poured from an old rusty siphon. I didn't care whether I was drinking wine, beer, rum, or water. We felt more and more distant from the present, as we were living in that past filled with people, places, and aberrant behaviors. To make conversation, it came to my mind to ask for Sofia, who was one of our classmates.

“Yes. How couldn’t I remember her? What a pair of tits she had!” Alberto blurted out with a twangy and lugubrious voice as though he were invoking a dead person.

“She got married twice and had three children. Remember Rodrigo?”

“Rodrigo, Rodrigo...”

“No, not really.”

“Rodrigo, the one who took the lab management course with us again.”

“Oh, yes. Rodrigo Sánchez,” Alberto interrupted showing his yellowish teeth like little fake pearls on a necklace. That was the effect of the dim light that made everyone become gaunt and unfortunate beings.

“Well, he was her first husband. They say her marriage was a complete misfortune, and her second one was almost as bad as Rodrigo.”

“Misfortunes that are sought!” Alberto said suddenly getting into a kind of beer reverie, which was musty and slow-moving.

The place was filled with a din of the voices of those who played cards and a ramshackle jukebox that looked like something out of another time and another world.

The man behind the counter offered us beers. We silently accepted. We got to the point where we were so drunk that it seemed as if we weren’t, and one of us said things to which the other replied with an astonishing calmness as though we had a trivial conversation when leaving the church.

We reviewed about thirty people’s lives, the things each of them had accomplished, the love affairs between fellow faculty members, the published papers, and the vicissitudes of researcher’s lives, which usually ended in encounters at the counter of a seedy cantina.

“How long ago did Dr. Morales die?” Alberto asked. I told him I didn’t know. It wasn’t

that I didn't know how long ago he had died, but who Dr. Morales was. He told me about research, old papers, visits, and awards at Karolinska in Sweden. Of course, I knew what he was talking about, but I wanted to remember nothing related to Dr. Morales, the renowned Sergio Morales.

“Yes, Dr. Morales. I didn't remember him.”

“Didn't you remember him? Alberto asked staring at me with his eyes that looked like tiny fireballs, dazzling with the inebriation that had taken hold of us. I asked the barman for two glasses of whiskey. “Yes, the best you have with a little water, please.” That was a meaningless warning in a place like that, which was filled with aging drinks, dubious importations, and blends of fine liquors (the bottles) and smuggled ones (the contents).

“He died years after that,” Alberto said as if he wanted to tell me something else. In the mirror behind the counter, which was blocked by the bottles and the grime, we looked thinner and puffy-eyed.

Years after that. I thought about that “that” Alberto pronounced, as if he pretended to be careless with a very guttural voice to keep the mortuary ambiance. We remained silent for several minutes taking small sips of whiskey, which tasted like crap. We were engrossed in our own thoughts that were surely different but converging.

“Yes, he fucked me up. He enjoyed his president's wage. Then, he died alone and rotten with cancer.”

“Albert, he isn't to blame for yours,” I said putting Alberto's memory and his even-tempered character, to test despite the invectives he used to hurl against the faculty members and many of the principals of the most important centers in the country.

The second or third glass of whiskey, rum, or vodka—I don't remember, it all tasted the

same to me—was consumed. I started to feel an unbearable pressure behind my eyes.

“Yes, he isn’t to blame. Well, he isn’t the only one to blame. You too, son of a bitch. Both of you agreed to publish the filthy paper without my permission.”

“Albert...”

“Don’t talk shit to me, asshole. You and Morales took advantage of the fact that I had no choice at that moment. Of course, when that series of articles were published, you two were the ‘great experts’,” Alberto shouted putting the words in quotation marks with a grotesque gesture of rabid dog. His eyes not only sparkled, but had shifted to the rest of his face, like the great gaze of a demented god.

I knew what he was talking about, and despite the years that had passed, I realized he hadn’t forgotten even the smallest detail of those stolen research papers. I don’t like those words together, but of course, they are stolen research papers. Dr. Morales knew it, and I did too. Alberto gradually got to know it, like a cancer, which at the beginning seems inoffensive, but ends up exploding from one moment to the next.

“No, Albert. Listen. Morales and I...”

“Stop making stupid comments! Morales and you? Forget it, asshole.”

“Albert, tell me what you’re talking about,” I said stupidly. No salvation was possible. The only thing left for me to do was to keep on lying, inventing subterfuges, and saving myself from something, I didn’t know what, but I sensed it was fatal.

I told him we were very drunk, and that there was no reason to talk about such imprecise matters again. He told me to fuck off about ten times. I insisted it wasn’t a good time to talk about such things. I gave him my phone number, my contact information, and even set a date for a new encounter. I couldn’t divert his attention. Alberto had sinister and confusing features. I

thought at any moment he could pull out a gun and blow my head off.

I realized I was very drunk when, looking for my car in a place I didn't remember, I threw up near the garden of a wooden house, which was old and totally ruined. I felt better. I think I had said goodbye to Alberto hastily looking for a definitive way out. I never saw him again.

A couple of years ago, Margarita told me Dr. Barquero was calling me from the Research Center for American Diseases, known as RCAD. It took me a while to tell her to put the call through. I made up a thousand excuses for not answering in a split second, but I thought about getting out of the problem once and for all and as soon as possible.

"Albert, what a surprise!" I said in the horrible tone in which you talk to a mentally ill person or someone you don't remember and pretend to have recognized.

We asked each other the usual series of questions, one by one and in the same order. As he told me, his job was mediocre. I dissuaded him from that absurd idea by telling him he was a respected colleague, and that I really believed every word he said. He continued to tell me things that were irrelevant—the death of several family members, and the budget problems of centers in which he had no influence whatsoever.

I feared we would have that night's conversation again, which had been cut off at a single stroke and had no resolution. He rather concentrated on references to women we both knew. I don't remember if we talked about all of them that time in that cantina, though I think that's difficult enough.

"Marcela is in Paris doing I don't know what. I think she's doing some research on cattle. I don't really know. I imagine you remember Marcela."

"Marcela Acuña? If that's her, yes."

“How couldn’t you remember her!” Alberto was ironic by putting a strange emphasis on every word. I suddenly thought he was drunk sitting on those long threadbare chairs as he fidgeted nervously with a glass whose drink spilled over the side of his lips, like a child.

“Alberto, we both know that was inevitable.”

“Son of a bit...” Alberto managed to say.

I hung up. I felt a strange tremor. I remembered Marcela as I hadn’t done for a long time. The fact that almost on her wedding day to Alberto we had slept together meant nothing to me at least.

To explain that to Alberto would have required fake-sounding words, useless excuses, and new stories to hide lies (lies for Alberto, but truths for me). It was clear Marcela wasn’t happy. I was just the final instrument that ended up convincing her that her marriage was going to be a crass error.

I started receiving calls from colleagues almost every day and at a rate that seemed abnormal. Margarita always consulted me. I could sometimes answer the phone when I wasn’t in meetings. When I answered, they hung up. That was him for sure, impersonating colleagues who sometimes had outlandish last names—Dr. Rimbagout, Dr. Morelli-Canda, Dr. Riberillo, and some others like that.

Any call and in any office, I passed through at the Institute seemed like a threat from Alberto. I always tried not to answer the phone; however, seeing things clearly, it was difficult for Alberto to call a different phone than the one Margarita answered.

Unfortunately, my fear was being lessened by habit. Two months ago, I answered a call without thinking, in order to put aside reading a couple of articles that were truly incomprehensible.

“Remember Esteban Rodríguez, your lawyer and friend, you bastard?” the voice said. He hung up leaving me with the impersonal beep on the line. No doubt that it was Alberto. He didn’t need to say anything else. As he knew, Esteban Rodríguez had taken away his house and most of his properties, leaving him at the mercy of the research center principals and whatever they wanted to pay him.

I hadn’t wanted to do it, but I had to look for Esteban to consult him about a couple of things related to the Institute’s legal procedures, and also to talk to him about Alberto’s affair, which I knew a little about.

“The law is the law and, especially in property matters, you can’t be flexible or keep special considerations for your fellow students or colleagues. If Alberto knew he couldn’t repay that loan or actually had the Linda Vista property at his complete disposal, he wouldn’t have committed himself to the banks.” Esteban understood I did it in good faith.

“Yes, he hanged himself,” Margarita has just confirmed that to me without showing any surprise.

He must have had his reasons for killing himself.

THE LAST GLACIAL ERA

Iceland is a strange country. From the very distant satellite images, it looks like a big white wart and an infection in the middle of an uninhabitable sea. Its population density is extremely low. There aren't even three hundred thousand people on the big island, which has to be called a country. The literacy rate is impressively high, which is almost 99.9%. That's something unthinkable.

However, as in all places drowning in overrun by fed-up people, there must be murderers who shoot at point-blank range and leave the red pools of their victims' blood on the snow.

I imagine the huge blocks of ice, and the children walking to school, then to high school and later to university, and seeing the wildness of a landscape of frozen rivers, a large central plateau, and millions of mountains that are white and totally dead. It's certainly an unsettling place.

What do they live on in Iceland? Well, they live mainly from fishing, which is the most expected thing in a barren territory surrounded by a sea that must be like a big blue hell. There are certainly big Icelandic iron and aluminum smelting industries, but fishing keeps the island's economic bellows in motion. It must be the only thing alive, apart from the people who walk 365 days a year in their tight winter clothes, which in their case are consubstantial to their glacial nature.

I have to say I learned all this from a lot of bad fucks. Marcela and I were never particularly good lovers. There are surely couples of good lovers, and others who, despite being able to love each other with madness or unusual depth, don't know how to make love.

We belong to this second group, the poor lovers, who are uncomfortable because their bones clash, their muscles are incompatible, and their tendons get cramped, since the other's

body, despite being skinny and lanky, weighs tons. We never learned to fuck.

Over the years, things have only gotten worse, even if neither of us likes the word “worse,” which it is totally pejorative and indicates a general deterioration in the state of things. Something that was good is now *worse*. It doesn’t work conventionally, that is, its mechanisms don’t work, or something prevents the normal functioning of that deteriorated thing.

The situation between Marcela and I isn’t that drastic. We love each other, kiss each other passionately, and bite each other’s lips. I love her white body and her firm small breasts, which point down somewhat as do all natural breasts hang slightly.

I love her abdomen, which, despite not being defined as those of people who exercise, is flat and has in its center a beautiful, deep navel, in which I sometimes stick my tongue. Marcela has very black and curly hair. Her skin, in contrast, looks like that of a ghost or resembles snow, even desolation.

When we set out to live together, we didn’t think about the drawbacks of having bad sex. At first, we slept together every night or afternoon when we could get home early from work. She’s a nurse and I’m a wastewater analyst in a chemical laboratory.

Some nights, we made it twice. A lot of them were good, though I wouldn’t say they were spectacular either. They were a couple of run-of-the-mill fucks. What I loved most about them were the kisses we gave each other before and after finishing, and when I unhooked the clasp of her bra from her back. I had become an expert at unhooking that strap with a single hand, in less than a second, and with just a slight snap of my fingers and the metal.

I liked the moment before I pulled down her panties and I touched under the wet fabric her pink vulva, shaved on the sides as if she were a little girl. The best part was the wet proem. The penetration and the movement could become terribly boring and sometimes painful. Why

deny it?

We always avoided talking about it frankly and alluding to it directly. It wasn't embarrassing, but it wasn't worth spending time talking about how bad those first fucks were, how bad they had always been, and how little prospect of improvement was perceived.

Around eleven at night, in that first period of cohabitation with Marcela, and after having no choice but to have intercourse with little pleasure, we sat on the bed, sometimes sweaty or sometimes dry, as if we were covered with scabs or fish scales in the sun. We smoked, kissed each other's foreheads as though we were fifteen years old, and gave each other little kisses on the lips.

Marcela's mouth is gorgeous. Her teeth look fake. They are perfectly aligned and very white. Her lips are somewhat thick but not excessively so. Kissing each other after all that painful routine was almost as good as unhooking her bra from her back or pulling down her lacy underwear.

After we spent in bed an hour or so wiping our sweat naturally, smoking, and talking about everything except sex, I let her fall asleep in the nude little by little until she looked for the blanket and comforter that had been left behind us, crumpled and unrecognizable.

I had a hard time sleeping. I went to the apartment's dining room. The place was small, but in the middle of that dining room, there was a round table (one of the few new things we bought when we moved in), where I read everything I could find in the library I had gathered since I had been living with my parents, long before I met Marcela and thought about moving in with her.

As I read, I smoked slowly. Sometimes, when I felt a stinging at the tip of my penis, a slight pain like a burst blister, I stopped and closed my eyes. I took a beer out of the fridge,

listened to the night, and read on. I moved from one subject to another; philately and numismatics. That period soon passed me by.

When I was a child, I collected everything. Apart from stamps and coins, I gathered different colored stones, pieces of wood that had hardened over time, and circuits that had been torn out of old TV sets I found in the backyard of my grandparents' house. I didn't want to remember my collections.

I moved on to the world flags. I tried to learn every one by heart. I had made important progress many years ago. Then, things got difficult during that first period when I was with Marcela because several countries had separated into more nations, and there were flags I didn't recognize at all, such as Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Croatia. They all looked alike to me.

As everything that leaves no trace, there were no major features to distinguish them (the shape of the Nepalese flag, the little tree of Lebanon's, and the intricate coat of arms of Swaziland, which were very useful mnemotechnics).

Almost at one in the morning and sometimes, when I was half drunk, I came back to where Marcela was. I kissed her on the forehead. I thought about the sex we had had hours before. I masturbated when possible. Demons came out of my urethra.

I thought of Marcela, who was next to me and a series of women I had once seen or their body parts I barely remembered from movies. They must have been monumental fucks and sex goddesses who lubricated like big machines in a car factory or volcanoes of vaginal lubricant.

When I opened my eyes while gasping, I touched Marcela's curly black hair with the hand I hadn't used. I cleaned myself and tried to doze off. Mentally, when I couldn't fall asleep, I went over the data I had read in books and encyclopedias.

We avoided talking about sex, the painful penetration, the use of lubricants to help in

what it was so difficult. When we had coffee sometimes in the mornings, I thought of Marcela's vaginal opening and imagined a horrendous carnivorous plant gnawing on my prick's flesh, which resisted the attack though it was bleeding and wallowing in its misfortune of being dying.

We kissed each other on the lips. I touched her breasts. When she came out of the shower, I caressed her vulva. She touched me. We went to work as if we had never slept together in our lives, horny and like clumsy teenagers.

Despite knowing perfectly well that we would have sex without pleasure, we couldn't stop night after night. Over the months, the sex act lasted longer as we had to stop again and again. I started using a condom to avoid hurting my penis that was reddening and stuffed into that thing that looked like a surgical instrument. It went in and out of Marcela's body with difficulty, who preferred not to moan and stopped me with one hand on my bony hips, so that I wouldn't push my half-erect cock too far inside.

Most of the time after giving her oral sex and when the penetration began, I felt the dryness of the hot stabbing walls. The movements of both were clumsy and seemed like the attempts of a pubescent or the infertile imaginations of a child who senses that it is necessary to move, but doesn't know what the movement is or what it is for.

Months later, I told Marcela to wear one of her nurse uniforms. We weren't big fans of porn, but we knew there were women who acted as nurses, demons with whips, teachers, and schoolgirls in their striped skirts. What we had on hand were Marcela's white uniforms, whose thin fabric revealed her tiny, arousing underwear. Her outfit seemed to work.

Not only were the prolegomena good the first time, but we could also finish the sex act almost painlessly. The second time was the same as the first one. It took less time, but it wasn't bad. From the third time on, all the months of clumsiness, pain and impossibility came back.

Again, we just had bad sex, which the nurse uniforms—Marcela had gotten a sensual outfit, which comprised a semi-transparent shirt and a mini-skirt that came halfway down her buttocks from an adult shop—couldn't make any better. The sex was again unexciting, and I would even say nefarious.

Despite the pain, the bleeding, the rashes, the dryness, the little cries and moans that weren't exactly of pleasure, we made it every night. We were in love. It had been a year since we had moved in together. I tried to masturbate more often to last a short time during the sex act, to ask a few questions, to kiss a lot, and to touch Marcela's breasts constantly. She was still beautiful to me. She hadn't lost her beauty just because we had bad fucks every day.

One day, I knew Marcela would arrive late to the apartment because of urgent things she had at the clinic. I went downtown for a beer at one of those gringo bars, adorned with basketball team pennants and multiple flat screen TVs, all with different programs.

It was a Thursday afternoon. The place was desolate. On the TV in front of me, they had a news channel on. The journalist announced what it was to come after the "commercial break" (a ceremonious phrase of international TV stations). In the next segment of the rolling news, impressive satellite images of various places on Earth were presented.

Minutes later, a fellow showed up talking next to a huge screen, on which photos of places that were hard to recognize were displayed—Oceania, Central America, Eastern Europe, the Bering Strait, and Southern Africa. At the end, before the satellite image of the whole planet (the division of day and night between America and Europe could be seen), the big, white wart appeared—Iceland.

"This is the remote Iceland," the fellow said, who seemed to be an expert from NASA or some European space agency. I thought I was seeing a folded hand, mummified by the ice that

would have covered it for thousands of years continuously. It really was remote as the fellow had said.

I had already had two beers, and I thought that was a drunk thing. I thought of Iceland as an image of a white misshapen mass on a black background like a strip that was forcibly transplanted onto the planet. Of course, I knew nothing about that country at that moment. Just that it was a very white, uncomfortable wart, and that's all.

That evening, I went out with Marcela. We had several beers. Since we almost never got drunk together, we began to strike up a meaningless conversation at the bar. Between saliva and the smell of dry re-humidified cigarettes, we joked that mouths are bad ashtrays that stink like they had garbage in them. We promised to fuck like monkeys or rabbits when we got home. I imagined the first trickle of semen coming out of my urethra, that first colorless trace of the animals that sense sex or mating.

Marcela smiled and told me she also was wet. "I'm going to shove it up your eyes," I told her. She smiled stupidly. We looked like idiots. When I was about to finish drinking my fifth beer, I asked her if she knew Iceland. "No, I've never been there." We laughed. "I know, but maybe you know it from books or on TV." "I don't know. I think it's an enormous island country." "What continent is it on?" I asked her. "It isn't from America. It must be from Asia," she answered. "Maybe you're right," I told her.

Alcohol wasn't the usual sweet and powerful aid. It wasn't also the disgrace it becomes sometimes, or even the submission to something that fits in a 12-ounce bottle and seems to have ounces and ounces of relief that ends up in a urinal and the mouth with the unbearable taste of vomit. I hadn't vomited for years because of drunkenness. Those vomits are providential.

In bed, we kissed like the first times we were together. We made little moans. We

touched each other like teenagers. We were still drunk. The preamble was a stain of voluptuousness, lubrication, and a desire as big as a blind man's fist. We promised to introduce all the parts of one together with the other. We were ready to have wet and efficient sex.

During the penetration, I felt the walls of Marcela's vagina enclose and bite my member. It had dried up. We didn't stop and rather banged each other like dogs or porn actors. When I orgasmed, I saw the black, painful specter on my penis in the dark.

In the light of the nightstand lamp, the smell of iron, the profuse bleeding, and the image that looked like that of a cold-blooded murder appeared.

My member ached. Marcela touched a spot below her navel without moving her rag-doll expression. She wiped off some blood. Her whiteness was impressive to me. It resembled a big block of Antarctic ice, cold and inhospitable, with a red glowing interruption. I thought of Iceland. That's where it all began.

In 1972, a chess genius, Bobby Fischer, faced the Russian world champion Boris Spassky defending his title against Fischer, who was 29 years old. It was the most important and broadcasted chess game in history. Fischer fucked the Russians, rebuffed them multiple times, and showed off his capricious nature.

Fischer, in the last two years of his life, lived in exile in the same city where he beat Spassky—Reykjavik, Iceland's capital city. In the encyclopedia photo, the two men appear face to face. It is noticeable the Russian's nervousness, his hands on his chin, and the feeling of losing the game. Outside, the cold was unbearable and the black sky was insufferable. Spassky's humiliation was excruciating.

There must have been something magnetic or very repulsive about Iceland. Its name says it all—literally means “land of ice,” an almost uninhabited redoubt and a wart in which the few

inhabitants per block think only of frozen blood and stasis. Icelandic is a language that comes from Old Norwegian, or it is more like its twin. In fact, any Icelandic person, due to the extreme preservation effect of the language over the centuries, could read Old Icelandic texts without major difficulties.

It looks like a phenomenon of corpses under the ice of a static attitude *in extremis*. The Danish and American invasions couldn't change the Icelandic's form at all, though they had wished it. Their tongues froze in the white desolate sea of the great glacial canyon that silences everything. The hole is black and inhospitable on the inside, and bites, tears, and flakes the skin on the outside. There, nothing can flourish.

On the fourth evening of intense reading about Iceland, I felt Marcela's hand on my shoulder. She asked me to talk. I asked her if she knew the singer Björk and her nationality. She didn't know that. "Icelandic," I told her. It's weird, but she's Icelandic. She stared at me speechlessly. She looked like a big glass of milk or a dairy blob that would have appeared inside a semi-transparent, braless gown.

Again, she told me we had to talk. "You know we have some problems." "What kind of problems are we talking about?" "Arturo, you know what happens every night." We talked about the blood, the unbearable pain, the desolate landscape on the sheets, the stains of another body's dirt that doesn't corresponds to us, doesn't belong to us or doesn't stimulate us.

I knew what was going on, but I don't know the causes even now. I called Marcela a dry bitch and a groveling whore the following nights. I had never insulted her before. We started yelling at each other continuously. The irrational hatred invaded the apartment, which was filling with a whitish veil, solidified like snow over the days. When I realized, she was no longer here.

It was like penetrating a white and icy alley in Skagafjörður, a village in the confines of the Icelandic universe, walking under the snow, feeling the bullet impact of some thug escaping from the Iceland's perfect life and its unreality of a wrinkled stain on the planet.

There, despite the high standard of living, there must be murder. People who kill others out of greed, boredom, or madness, and those who quarter, shoot, and leave a red trail on the snow, which will have to be cleaned by someone to restore the order of what doesn't change and what has no choice but to remain immutable. And if no one cleans it, it will be left for the snow that covers everything.

PATCHES

“Clara, it’s me, Arturo. I can’t feel worse. My whole body aches. I don’t know if I have some incurable ailment, something merely physical, but I know I’m dying from soul pain. Clara, alone, in this shitty dump, I only think of those days we had and enjoyed. Today, they are becoming only memories. Their remembrance is a dark torture. You must find all this talking grotesque as you know me like the back of your hand. Clara, Clarita, I’m lonelier than...”

The cassette tape stopped. She didn’t understand how he had managed the little time available to say so many things. She realized, almost immediately, that he said little, but he left air gaps between the words that were difficult to ignore, like little hisses or syllables uttered with the corners of the lips arched upward, as a little cheerful clown in a bad vaudeville show.

She reached the phone, pushed the DELETE button, and imagined herself stabbing Arturo’s lips and removing him as if he were painted in oil paints and hadn’t dried, yet. She would apply him brushstrokes and fill him with solvent until he disappears. She played the cassette tape back, and what appeared was silence.

She reached the mirror that was in the bathroom and adjoining her bedroom. The tiles were white and the light was fluorescent. In that immaculate landscape, the little square of one and a half by one and a half inch looked like a natural facial patch. She could see the edges of the adhesive tape more closely, stuck like an albino mole to the skin.

She was surprised to have left home four hours earlier. She was so nervous and clumsy that she bumped her heel against a table leg, gave the taxi driver the wrong address, and didn’t put the cassette tape backwards just because the answering machine didn’t let her. She had gotten a shot until she felt as if she had an extraterrestrial body that left her ready for the scalpel cut with

which the kind Dr. Morales had removed that little, pear-shaped tumor (less than two inches in diameter).

She had also crossed the streets on which people were going crazy after the work day (which she had taken off due to any mishap with the surgery) and got back in her apartment seeing what that black lump had been reduced to. All she had to do was to wait for the biopsy result.

The next day, she got a couple of kisses, all on the other cheek, the one that didn't have the little piece of white adhesive tape and that had previously had that black thing on it. Luis, the security guard, told her that such bump could be dangerous in one of those conversations that start with how cold and rachitic the day is, and end with possible diseases that will invade, corrupt, and make the body look like a dummy of cancer or tuberculosis.

After Luis had alarmed her, she had checked what she had always called, since she had seen it appear, a tender and round "mole", and some hours before the surgery, it seemed to scream out its true, atrocious name— "wart", "tumor" or "chilblain." The three possibilities never ceased to terrify her.

In the afternoon, seeing that things at the bank weren't as catastrophic as she had foolishly thought they would become due to her absence from the previous day, she asked for vacations— six long days to rest and recover from the surgery that didn't need too much care either.

She arrived home in the evening, later than she would have liked. "But I'm on vacation. What does it matter?" she said to herself. She pushed the PLAY button. The plaintive voice was slow to appear.

"Clara, my sweetheart, you don't know what it's like to go out to the street and feel that the buildings are coming down on you, and that people look at you as if you were a piece of

cock, stained, dirty, and useless. Here, within these peeling walls, I'm an outlaw from the Middle Ages, a leper who can't have contact with others because he transmits his infections and all his grime to them. He fills them with the disease. I'm barred from contacting others, and all because I don't have you, Clarita, Clarita of my love, my life, my..."

He ran out of time in the middle of a sentence. She thought he could manage time better, write down what he would say, practice it, time the words, and try to cram them into what the cassette tape would let him.

She wound the cassette tape back and listened to what Arturo said again. His voice didn't sound sick but feigned sickness. It was clear his desire was to provoke pity. She knew it and was also completely sure he himself looked deliberately for that little, dog tone in the rain. She found it cute, but a bit exaggerated.

It started to itch under the adhesive tape. Dr. Morales had told her that when that happened, she should remove the little white square to let the air do its cleaning job. She followed the instructions to the letter. She was a well-behaved child. She thought that would pay off, though she didn't know in what way or under what guise. In the bathroom mirror, which magnified everything, her flattened skin looked like a graft rather than a mutilation.

The biopsy result would take a week and a half at the most, according to the doctor's undaunted previsions. It itched unbearably, but she preferred to endure rather than to scratch and damage her skin, which was somewhat pinker than the rest of her face.

When Carmen's words, her department co-worker, joined those of the security guard of the building, emphasizing the possible danger of the bump on her skin, she searched for information on the Internet using the keywords "mole," "wart," "patch," and "skin."

She made combinations that referred her to millions of results, whose queries had seemed

to her as a task, which were both, stupid and infertile. She had to choose at random the queries from the websites with the most serious names. It was difficult for her to discriminate which ones would be useful.

“Each person has ten moles at least, which develop in childhood and adolescence,” she read. That seemed a modest number to her. Without verifying them at that moment (she was in the office), she could count up to fifteen little brownish spots, distributed in some parts of her body she remembered well. She had a pair of moles on her buttocks in an asymmetrical distribution and also had some near her right elbow, as well as on her nape.

She had a little mole that was lighter than the rest about an inch below her navel, which looked like a drop of muddy water that had partially dried up. And so, she counted them until she reached the formation that had no clear edges on the right side of her face and near the base of her nape.

In one of the countless queries, she made during the minutes of her break, she had read moles are marks of beauty in some cultures, but of ugliness in others. The article didn't mention in which ones each of these things happened. She went to the bathroom that was at the end of the corridor, where the cubicles began and where she spent eight hours a day receiving and delivering bills, checks, and vouchers.

For the first time, she had dared to type the term “cancer” along with the previous words of her queries. She got almost two million results when combining it with the word “skin.” When adding “mole,” she only got about 50,000 results. That had relieved her, as it meant that fewer moles ended in skin cancer.

Again, she placed the adhesive tape over her tiny surgery. The phone rang. She wasn't up to answering noisy appliances at the start of her vacation. She closed the bathroom door,

undressed, and took a shower.

When she had forgotten the call she received two hours ago at eleven at night, she reluctantly pushed the PLAY button. She knew it was Álvaro when she was on her way to the answering machine.

“Remember when you used to call me Alvarito and tell me: ‘Alvarito, my love, let’s kiss each other as if we were two teenagers’? Remember those words? Remember that lunch we had under that tree near the School of Architecture when you made spaghetti with spinach? Those details can’t be forgotten, Clarita. They make you sick when they are remembered. They are patches in life and small rashes like moles upon the time that passes us by. Clarita... Clarita...”

His last two pauses had taken away valuable seconds. She didn’t want to wind the cassette tape back. All that talking about moles and patches didn’t seem appropriate at that moment. She thought if she were him, she would evoke more determining or perhaps hotter moments. When she thought of the word “hot,” she imagined how many results would pop up on the Internet—maybe millions, billions...

“Men, when they try to be tender, often become pathetic beings,” she thought, “they are only sincere when they talk about sex, sperm, ejaculation, and all that.” She thought it wouldn’t be a bad thing if he talked about something he was really passionate about, the sheets with the smell of the sweat from the two of them together, the oily smell, and things like that, which aren’t as mellifluous as that lunch under the foliage of a tree.

On the third day of her vacation, she was really fed up with getting out of bed every five minutes, going to the kitchen to get a glass of water, picking up the phone, starting dialing Dr. Morales’ phone number, and stopping halfway through. She was also tired of opening a book she had left halfway through barely reading a paragraph, watching TV, or rather changing channels

to have a feeling of movement and action she knew was illusory.

She no longer wanted to reach the bathroom mirror and see the little white patch, which she used less and less hours per day as the doctor had instructed her to do. If he hadn't called her, it was because the result wasn't ready yet, or he didn't have the courage to tell someone she was going to die in a matter of two months. That last possibility, before it made her laugh and seemed stupid to her, terrified her.

“How many results can be found using the term ‘cancer’?” — millions with no half measures... That was a word she had heard so much lately, often buried beneath ordinary euphemisms like “malignancy,” “development of dysplasia,” and “abnormal growth.” If she combined all those words, she would be overwhelmed by an unstoppable flood of fruitless queries.

She called three phone numbers she found in the phone book's commercial section. She thought the third one was a good option. To go to a mountain hotel on her vacation, when there was nothing better to do than to wait for Dr. Morales' call, seemed like a brilliant idea. As she lived alone, it wasn't hard for her to get out of the city without having to ask anyone's permission.

She left the answering machine ready to receive some messages from Álvaro. She didn't really want to talk to him, but only to listen to his voice on the imperfect cassette tape, which over time was obscuring the voices and turning the short messages into old, fossilized documents.

As she walked behind the woman with messy hair and blue eyes at the hotel, with whom she had talked days before to make the reservation, she thought that it was just what she needed—a central pond crossed by a kind of Japanese-style bridge, a lot of pine trees that filled

the whole expanse of mountainous land with a dull green, which could be seen throughout the corridor they walked, and the humidity of the heights that was neither too high nor too cold. She felt the wind hit her scar, over which she no longer wore adhesive tape or any other protective device.

She laughed about the keychain in the form of a giant key that the woman gave her. She thanked her, closed the door, unpacked, laid down, and managed to fall asleep inside the cabin's placidity, built apparently recently.

The smell of the wood was very strong and pleasant. She thought about the smell of the bills, which, on the contrary, was deep and dirty. When she woke up, she was half-asleep and looked for a mirror in the bathroom, which was built almost next to the bed.

The cabin was tiny, comfortable, slightly cold but cozy. There, the only mirror was smaller than the one Clara carried in her suitcase. It was round and attached to the wall above the sink. Standing at the right distance, she could barely see the reflection of her skin patch in the mirror with no other part of her face or body that interrupted the view of that skin that was getting pinker every day, more protruding. The scarring seemed normal to her, though she didn't know why. She only looked at the patch inside the circle of the round mirror.

She came out of the bathroom. In bed, she made an enormous effort to try not to take out the information sheets she had once taken from Dr. Morales' office, which talked about melanoma. That word wasn't only evil in the body, but also sounded menacing and worse than "plague" or "leprosy." The ABCD of Skin Cancer or Melanoma was the title of pamphlet article.

Below the explanation of each of the letters, there were images that resembled what the doctor had uprooted leaving her little, pink patch of skin with no sensation. "It's ridiculous and stupid to be in a mountain hotel reading documents of what I came here to forget," she thought.

“Asymmetry. Border. Color. Diameter.” She found the ABCD not difficult to understand. She had seen every one of those abnormal features when she hadn’t even thought of consulting Dr. Morales months ago.

Before she arrived home, she had learned that “nevus” was a synonym for mole, a horrible one. It sounded like the name from some remote part of the universe. And “dysplastic nevus” wasn’t only atrocious, but also, she found it really disgusting and inhumane.

However, “melanoma” was still the top word and the term that no skin wanted to end up with. The ordinary and dysplastic nevi, warts, rashes, and patches of whatever form, all culminated with the hideousness of melanoma.

She learned all that during the hours that went on forever in the cabin. After immersing herself in the pamphlet’s messy readings and the loose sheets, she decided that (she had gathered a series of articles from the Internet, of which she only understood the threats of a quick death, the sun protection factor of the lotion she used at night, and the color changes that the patches of a women’s body undergo, as well as hormonal changes) it was time to leave, go back to the apartment, sit down, wait, go to the bathroom mirror from time to time, and measure the changes in her scar, her pink patch.

She took her things out of the car in desperation. She left a mess in a corner of the living room. When she reached the answering machine, she barely had the energy to push the PLAY button. She listened to a series of short messages, all spoken in the same voice. First, she thought of a bad joke, simple and childish, but then she realized it was one of those mistakes that do nothing more than waste valuable seconds of the cassette tape.

In the end, she knew it was impossible to deny they were a series of professional messages from Dr. Morales, in which he invited her, in the same affable and indifferent tone, to

call him. He said he had important news. “No one with that tone and those words could be calling to give me good news,” she thought.

She let the playback of the cassette tape to continue—five identical monotonous messages. If Álvaro knew how to manage his time when talking, he could do as the doctor did by scattering little, mysterious clues that wouldn’t give him away completely. He could avoid ridicule and unnecessary verbosity.

She dialed Dr. Morales’ office number. His secretary remembered her and asked her about her scar and her general health. Dr. Morales wasn’t there. “Do you know anything about the biopsy result?” she asked. “No, I know nothing, miss” the secretary answered without losing an iota of her shrill and always hopeful voice. “Are you sure?” she asked and then, regretted sounding arrogant and desperate almost at once.

The secretary, who was also Dr. Morales’ nurse, smiled or seemed to do it on the line by repeating she didn’t know anything, but knew Dr. Morales had recent results from several tests. Hers could be there. She agreed to call her later or the next day.

She was 32 years old. In one of the articles, it said that moles’ life cycle was up to 50 years. By the age of 82, all the small, insignificant patches that developed on her skin would be huge warts, marks of old age. If the biopsy result, in contrast, showed she had cancer, she wouldn’t survive the inevitable and often atrocious age patches.

She went to the bathroom and saw the scar that had changed its shape and color under the bright white light. She wished she had the small round mirror from the cabin to only see that pink portion of insensitive skin.

She had trouble falling asleep that night. In the rough water of insomnia that didn’t go away, turbulent sometimes or cloudy and black from time to time, she imagined Dr. Morales

opening, with an eerie and unnecessary ceremony, the envelope containing her sentence.

He touched his coat and raised his left shoulder showing obvious signs of discomfort as if he was going to give her bad news that would make him explode and fragment like a time bomb.

She dreamed, thought, or managed to imagine the millions of results that the word “fear” would have on the Internet. It would probably have more results than any other word in English, even more than “love” or “hate” or more than “disease.” That was almost certain.

“Clara, my love. You have gotten into my body like a cancer. I want everything to go back to the way it was before, and those little memories aren’t only reminiscences, but life lessons. Clara, Clarita of my heart, you have left an indelible mark on this pathetic man I have become. When I met you, I knew I would have a bad time without you and that I would be a nobody in a life doomed to misery...”

It was cut off. The device’s beep had made her wake up. It wasn’t even five in the morning. She pushed the PLAY button again. She gradually woke up with each new repetition. At first, she thought he was an alien trying to communicate.

Then, she thought he was her father, who had died many years ago and had risen from the dead. When she managed to fully awaken, she thought he was just a pathetic being that talked.

What Álvaro knew about cancer! What that imbecile who called her Clara knew about patches invading the body? Mariela no longer liked that little game of ridiculous flirtations of anonymity. She opened the machine, took out the cassette tape, and began to remove the tape from it. The black ball grew malignantly at her feet.

TAKING THE A TRAIN

The first man waits for the train to arrive. It's a hot day, and while he waits, he makes a fan out of a sheet of newsprint—from two days ago. The first man thinks he feels the vibration on the platform, stands up, and adjusts his hat and jacket. False alarm. He sits down again and looks at the time. Despite the heat, he thinks it wouldn't be a good idea to take off his brown jacket.

The second man walks toward the station. His mouth is covered with a white handkerchief. The dust is abundant and malignant. It gets into any cavity in which it finds shelter. The first man moves to make room for the second man, in case he wants to sit down and wait for the train, as well.

The second man is farther than he seems, or so the first man thinks. The latter again moves to his right side to clear the seats of the platform. The chairs are ordinary and old, but they are the only ones available at the station.

The second man arrives at the station. He sweats and scratches his beard. His boots once had spurs, but the fact that they are now bare doesn't make them any less heavy. The first man greets with two direct words. In response, the second man's fingers grasp his hat brim as a gesture of sparing deference.

He prefers to stay standing than to sit next to the first man. They exchange just three words. The first man returns to the position he was in before spotting the second man. The second man is taller than the first one, or the sun's reflection and the relative position of both make him look bulky.

The first man unbuttons a silver metal button, takes out a canteen, and offers water to the second man. This one says no without opening his mouth. He is standing in front of the first man. He only shakes his head and raises two fingers of one hand. The first man thinks the second man

hasn't been well educated, is mentally retarded, or doesn't know the most elementary rules of society.

He uncaps the canteen. The liquid isn't water but an alcoholic beverage that tastes like crap. "It's hot and the process by which it was made is unreliable," the first man thinks. He wouldn't tell the second man it isn't water because he might accept. It's better not to insist in these cases.

The second man opens a little rectangular briefcase and takes out something that looks like a notebook. Nobody writes anything down in that place. The first man is having supreme difficulty in determining what the second man took out of his little leather briefcase. The light is blinding. He thinks about what on earth the second man could possibly write down on that series of sheets bound together by something that must be a dried animal gut.

The second man turns the pages—the first man determines this somewhat more clearly—, shakes his head as a sign of assent, and puts back what he took out before, again. The first man lifts his canteen to his lips, mustering enormous strength to not throw up. The first man hasn't eaten for more than fourteen hours. The last thing he could taste was the morbid meat of a huge bush rabbit. The second man hasn't eaten for two days, but the first one doesn't know that. The second man barely feels it in some part of his abdomen.

The first man, after carelessly thinking about the pros and cons, asks the second man whether he is going to opt for the route of the A train or the B train. The second man neither knows nor understands the question. He partially turns his head to give an answer that rather sounds like a disrespectful grunt. "Do you prefer the route of the A train or that of the B train, my dear friend?" the first man asks putting an exaggerated emphasis on his polite words. "It isn't a matter of preference but of necessity, my friend." "You're right," the first man says smiling.

The first man's stomach hurts, and he's sure it's the effect of what it was in the canteen. "It's pretty hot, isn't it?" the first man says thinking he has crossed a barrier or opened the door to a good dialogue between men. However, the second man doesn't open his mouth. He neither moves nor seems to be alive nor seems to move any part of his body. If he hadn't seen him walking toward him in the hot mirage of the great plain, the first man would have thought he was a ghost, a scarecrow, or a medieval armor (he immediately discarded this last possibility with a displeasure that didn't manage to explain).

The first man adjusts his leather belt, checks the condition of several buttons and rivets without looking at them, touches the holster of his pistol, and wipes the sweat from his forehead. As the first man can barely distinguish, the second man also carries regulated revolver. It's a Colt, but he would be satisfied if it were a LeMat, in case the second man agreed to show it to him and dared to have a meddlesome and purposeless conversation.

The first man is fed up with the second man's silence. He asks him if he finds the route of the A train boring and predictable, to which the second man replies that he doesn't know how to rate something designed by a railroad engineer. The first man worked as a railroad engineer for fifteen years, a long time ago. He no longer designs train routes. He just rides in the coaches and travels peacefully now. He finds the second man's words malicious.

"What do you mean you don't know how to rate something designed by a railroad engineer, my dear friend?" the first man asks leaving the wooden seat on the platform. The second man shows his profile to the first man opening his mouth and articulating some words the first man didn't manage to hear. "I'm sorry. I didn't catch that, my friend," the first man says. The second man shows him his back again, which contrasts with the sun's merciless glare. He doesn't repeat his words.

The first man comes to think he imagined the second man's words, who now touches his leather belt and feels the grips of his revolver. The first man can almost smell the physical threat and violence. Leaning mainly on his right leg, he feels a dense urge to throw up. He sits down again, uncaps the canteen and drinks (he thinks this will neutralize nausea paradoxically).

"Hey, dear friend, do you know any railroad engineer?" the first man blurts out unexpectedly. The second man replies with a "yes" that seems to have come out of some part of his head that isn't connected to his mouth. "I've killed several," the second man continues without shifting or moving any of his four limbs unnecessarily. The first man doesn't know if those words are directed especially at him—in a demonstration of power or in an outburst of unnecessary hatred—so he concentrates on forgetting them.

"I prefer the route of the B train," the first man says immediately as if the previous question (and obviously, the subsequent answer) had never really been asked. "I imagine you're going to Valle Calizo, sir," the first man says. "No, I'm going to Humo." "Humo?" "Yup, Humo," the second man reiterates without changing his voice modulation. The first man doesn't know what sounds strange in the second man's words, but he feels an uncomfortable tickle in his throat as if the second man was hanging him from a distance.

"Humo is neither on the route of the A train nor on that of the B train. I've waited here about five hundred times and taken the train that goes to Humo here," the second man says keeping his composure and pointing neither to the platform nor to the direction of the railroad lines, but to the ground as if the train emerged from the spot where it was.

"No way! The train to Humo doesn't pass here," the first man says fanning himself with his right hand. "There must be a D train or an H train, or maybe there's a Z train or a Y train," the second man scoffs pulling his right heel toward his back to examine his boots without looking at

them. The first man understands his sarcasm.

“Listen, stranger, you’re a miscreant,” the first man says. “Do you mean I’m a crook?” the second man asks turning completely around for the first time since he has turned his back on the first man. He notices the second man has a badly trimmed beard and a cigarette is dangling from his lips. He wonders about the tobacco brand and the manufacturer of the vest the second man sports with astonishing slovenliness.

“I didn’t say ‘crook,’ but what you heard, sir,” the first man says. “A miscreant is the same as a crook if you didn’t know,” the second man replies. “No, ‘miscreant’ isn’t intended to label anyone. It’s just a way of saying careless.” “‘Crook’ isn’t intended to label anyone, man, but we all know what it means,” the second man says. The first man is surprised he hadn’t seen or noticed the second man’s beard before, which was red-haired and ugly.

“So, you mean I’m a crook?” the second man resumes, now turning his navy-blue irises over the first man’s beardless face. “I didn’t mean that. You know it. You were the one who started badmouthing railroad engineers when you know over two-thirds of the population has had that profession at some point in their lives,” the first man says and feels stupid saying it.

The second man adjusts his leather belt, touches his revolver, and shakes his head back defiantly. “We can settle this,” the second man says drawing his revolver slowly. The first man knows the other can’t shoot, since it’s forbidden to kill someone for verbal disputes unless an impartial judge intervenes in the duel. The county’s laws are clear and recent as the first man evokes.

“You know the rules,” the first man says standing up. “I’ve run out of bullets,” he also adds. “What caliber do you handle, my friend?” the second man asks. “Thirty-two,” the first man says wiping the sweat from his forehead. “Thirty-two,” the second man repeats, thoughtfully. “It

isn't common to have a thirty-two," the second man continues, "did you buy it nearby?" "No way. You can only get them in Valle de los Búfalos, B train, and midway station," the first man explains pointing to the parallel lines that seem to extend to infinity.

"That holster is definitely Colt's," the second man, thoughtfully affirmed touching the right edge of his beard. "He must have gotten it somewhere else," he continued. "I already told you, friend. I bought it in Valle de los Búfalos. Besides, it isn't a Colt. It is Webley. Take a look at it," the first man tells the second man bringing the revolver with no bullets closer to him, so that he can see it and confirms he isn't lying.

The second man makes a visor with his right hand to block out the dazzling shade of the sunlight, spits out the remains of the tobacco that has clung to his beard, and frowns in a sign of something the first man doesn't manage to fully understand. "I'd lend you some of mine, but they won't fit in the cylinder of your revolver," the second man says showing a hint of compassion or hopelessness.

"That's it," the first man says seeking by all means a solution to the problem that doesn't involve guns, blood, or men walking in the opposite direction to turn around and justify the reputation of savages that westerners have. "Well, this imbroglio will have to be settled somehow," the second man says putting his two clenched fists on his hips as his personal space was being invaded.

"I can't find which one, can you?" the first man replies. Also, he adds, "I wouldn't use the word 'imbroglio' to describe this situation." "Why not?" the second man asks raising his chin, which seemed to get bigger as an atavistic defense mechanism or as a sign of plain and simple thuggery. "'Imbroglio' isn't the word. That's what I know," the first man says with a slight tremor in his voice.

“Are you a linguist?” the second man asks. “No, I’m not, but I know that’s not the right word.” “And what do you think, language mastermind, is the right word?” the second man asks raising the invisible corners of his lips. The pitch of that hoarse voice doesn’t please the first man. “If I had two guns, I’d gladly give you one.” “That wouldn’t make any difference, anyway.” “Wouldn’t it make a difference?” “No, my lord. We have no judge,” the first man says resignedly.

He realizes on the spot the second man wasn’t listening to him before. “There’s no need for judges.” “Yes, they are needed. That’s in the new Dueling Law. Didn’t you know that, my good man?” the first man asks without mocking. “I would like to know who published that law.”

“It was printed at Orwell’s house, on the C route, and third station to the north,” the first man replies without showing any sign of forced evocation, as if he himself had designed the welter of train routes, which already reaches all the way to H route—much further west and in a less dusty place than the one that houses the first man and the second one.

“Orwell no longer has a printing house,” the second man says. “Yes, of course he has one. He took it upon himself to publish the law,” the first man replies. “There’s no law anymore. Didn’t you know that?” the second man asks with genuine interest adjusting his leather vest on his chest, which has twisted oddly to the right.

“Do you mean it figuratively...?” the first man suspects. “No.” “So?” “I say it because it’s the truth. There’s no such law,” the second man says as he steps dramatically into the shadow of the platform. “Do you know the printer Hamilton?” “Sure.” “Now it’s from his workshop that the dos and don’ts of this place come out,” the second man says without demur. “Hamilton, Hamilton...” the first man takes pleasure in mumbling.

The second man pulls out his Colt and checks the cylinder as if the first man weren’t

absorbedly looking at him. He points his gun at him and tells him that the A train does go to Humo, that duels are allowed without impartial judges, that a train is all trains and all trains can be looted by two guys who barely know each other.

HOTELS' DIRTY LIFE

To the dancer of the Hotel de L'Aveyron

The room stunk. It was the same stench he knew well from hotel rooms—a mix of the sweat of thousands of bodies that have been there and the motors of the small vacuum cleaners, which leave invisible lint. Carpets don't refresh the ambiance. There are accumulations of dust, detritus, insects, and feces of small invisible animals that insensibly pile up over the years.

The spiral staircase was what he might have called “beautiful,” at least “strange,” or better than those two adjectives “strangely beautiful.” He went up the three floors until he came upon the half-golden and half-rusty doorknob.

The room had no number. As he had little money, he didn't find it strange the fellow at reception, professional of small hotels in big cities, that is perfectly nice, friendly, smiling, and sympathetic to those who didn't speak the language well—had given him a key that simply had “Ellie” engraved on it.

The room, as it was one of the last ones in the corridor, couldn't be confused with the rest, which were perfectly numbered. “The Ellie room, sir,” the fellow had told him in his neutral French. He practiced it with the Chinese and the Turks, who didn't even speak two words of the language. He, Manuel, understood a little over two words and smiled when receiving the key, which was tucked into a cold, huge, ridiculous keyring.

He entered, received the unpleasant whiff of the sweat of millions of people—tiredness, love, squabbles, nightly blows of forgotten nightmares—, opened the window and felt the impact of the cold from the outside in his fingers. He had never seen snow and, as he watched the long, ethereal-like flakes coming down from the sky in the third-floor window, he realized he had never felt such cold before, despite the jacket, the black gloves, a ridiculous scarf, and the

thermal underwear he had bought before he left his country.

He touched the heating grille, painted the same cream color as the rest of the room. It was noticeable it hadn't worked for years and had only remained in the room to give the impression of warmth and normality, which was expected in a one-star hotel. He had been in two one-star hotels, but the heating worked perfectly in all of them. Here, it was only the cream-colored grille, mute, and ornamental.

He instinctively took the pack of cigarettes out of the left pocket of his jacket. He still had three left, all somewhat crumpled and perhaps spoiled in his journey from the ten blocks he had had to cross from the room of the previous hotel, which had the same category as this one—only a few euros more expensive.

The lighter in the form of a small revolver was somewhat amusing to him, even though, he had been looking at it for hours and hours the evening before and had studied every of its details (the trigger, the grip, and the small cylinder that didn't turn).

Now in the "Ellie" room, he looked again at the little silver device that vertically emitted its little fusiform flame as if a real revolver had released its lead bullets. He laughed as he lit the cigarette. His face filled with smoke and his eyes, slightly irritated, had to tear up.

He took the can in his hands. As soon as he entered, it was the second thing he noticed after the pungent smell. He thought it had just been taken out of a fridge. That was the good thing about cheap hotels—that one could find a can of beer that someone left as a sort of gift from the previous guest, or as a careless welcoming gift from the hotel's owners.

He hesitated whether to give it back or not, but found his fingers filled with foam as he lifted the metal pull-tab which, in the middle of the silence, sounded like the detonation of a small, harmless hand grenade. He drank and was surprised he wasn't disgusted, since only the

can was merely cold and its content, which was bitter and fragrant, was at a temperature that reminded him of beers that have been at a table for more than half an hour, and they begin to warm up and taste like something else.

They opened the door.

“Water, water,” a man carrying a vacuum cleaner in his hand said. Manuel didn’t understand what the man meant. He was a small black man who smelled like the room’s carpet or had accumulated all the smell from all the carpets in all the rooms he had vacuumed with his gray appliance, which had little, rubber wheels, during that day or in all the years if he had actually been working for the hotel.

“I don’t understand, sir,” Manuel said moving his hands upward and trying to say he could understand, only if the man talked to him slowly. He repeated the word twice, bringing the thumb of his right hand to his lips and making the unequivocal gesture to mean “I’m drinking something.” Manuel understood the man from the hotel was offering him water, to which he accepted bobbing his head up and down.

After bringing a jug that was filled with water and a small clear glass, the man set about vacuuming the room. Manuel took the penultimate cigarette out of the pack and began to smoke forgetting about the lighter in form of a revolver. The vacuum cleaner’s constant and annoying noise made him forget the cold that didn’t cease for a few seconds. He excused himself to the man and left the room.

On the spiral staircase, he heard the vacuum cleaner’s sound drift away. The man’s smell, the carpet, and the image of the futile heating grille gradually faded from his mind. “Images of hotels are erased and have to be erased,” he thought with no insistence as if he were reading it rather than thinking about it.

“What you see and smell in hotels, the smell of the sweat of millions of people, the showers and sinks noises, and the muffled cries of couples, have to perish like the burned photos of an unpleasant and insipid vacation,” he thought before he reached the front door.

The floor was filled with flakes. A large white carpet, which was slippery and dirty due to some footsteps or the natural color of the underlying sidewalk, reflected the last brightness of the day or the bright evenings to which he wasn't yet accustomed.

At that time, he thought it would already be dark in his homeland, or at least the light wouldn't have the consistency of day or night and would be that gelatin of imprecision the sun creates before setting. He threw the cigarette butt on the ground without caring to crushing it to put it out. He laughed at the snow's effect that didn't need a fridge or ashtrays. Snow was an omnipotent thing that would allow neither fires nor putrefaction.

A man passed in front of him and greeted in a way that was neither a gesture nor a word, but an attitude of the whole body. He cowered slightly before he dodged the obstacle that was Manuel, who stood like an idiot at the door of the L'Horloge hotel.

Manuel walked toward the corner, which was just three feet away, slowly putting his foot on the ground before each step. The sidewalk seemed to repel his body like an oil drop on a dead man's skin. He held powerlessly to the irregularities of the old buildings that stood like mummies by the sidewalk.

At the corner, he held onto a small metal railing, which was most likely placed there for the elderly people to hold on before crossing to the front corner. The snowflakes had stopped falling, but he thought the cold was the same, constant and merciless. He imaged himself naked in the middle of the street dying due to the temperature that was surely a few degrees below zero.

The taste of the beer of which he had drunk half— “the man with the vacuum cleaner

would have drunk the rest,” he thought—rose from his half-open mouth to his nose, coagulated by the cold that clung to where the mustache should be, the small patch of skin over his upper lip.

Two fellows came out of one of the corners that led to the spot where Manuel was. He watched the change of the thin layer of snow on the cement and the cars that were parked on the side of the street. The voice of one of them sounded like a cry. He gesticulated excessively as if he had suddenly gone mad from the snow, the cold, or his own cries. Manuel felt the other man’s arm, who was fat and taller than him, and his hand’s skin through a black leather glove.

Both spoke basic awkward French. Although, as absurd as the situation seemed, Manuel understood they said they were from the French Police. “We are from the French Police. We are from the French Police,” the fellow repeated as he shouted and fixed his blue, wild, inhuman eyes on Manuel. He moved the fingers of his right hand in a way that meant “money.” He ordered Manuel to take out the dough frantically.

“I don’t understand,” Manuel said speaking French more correct than the policemen, who were obviously imposters, as well as idiots.

“We are from the French Police,” the blue-eyed fellow said, while the other one didn’t take his gloved hand from his right forearm, which Manuel had been forced to take out of his jacket pocket. He thought about the cigarette he had left and that he didn’t want anything to crumple it.

The blue-eyed fellow kept making the sign for “money” with his thumb and forefinger producing a little snap sound that was like a fourth voice in the afternoon of the half-melted snow. Manuel took out his wallet. The fellow, who held him, let him go and pulled out the two bills Manuel carried.

He arched his eyebrows as if he wanted to ask, “Is that all, asshole?”, to which Manuel

replied by shrugging, which meant he didn't give a shit about what the man thought about the amount of dough he carried.

At that moment, he thought about his passport and the two 20-euro bills he carried inside it, all tucked into his ridiculous, thermal underwear. "That's all. That's all I have," Manuel shakily repeated several times in a different Spanish from what he would have used in any other circumstance.

"Sons of bitches," he said very loudly because he knew they wouldn't understand him and started walking. The blue-eyed man shouted at him something as incomprehensible as almost all the words Manuel had heard or had said in those minutes.

He felt sweat under his jacket and both shirts despite the cold from the outside. He thought that, like the carpets and the sweat of millions of people in hotel rooms, the smell of snow was immemorial and cumulative—wet cement, bodies in constant agitation, and stagnant water before the ice completely disappears, and it is swallowed by the countless sewers of the cities.

Without having time to hold on, and being overwhelmed by the siege of the two men who began to follow him shouting in a language that wasn't French, Spanish, Arabic, or any dialect of the world, he fell to the cold ground. He felt like he hit the frozen skeleton of a mastodon. The two men held him and helped him to sit up as he kept moving his lips and uttering incomprehensible words.

The three of them began to walk together. The few people, who had gone out that January 2nd, didn't show the slightest interest in that motley group of unfortunate beings. Manuel thought about the cigarette, his fate, and the possible content of the pack he carried in his jacket pocket. He abruptly let go of the men's grip as they reached the door of the L'Horloge hotel and thought

fleetingly of a film noir.

The mix of the heat from the sweat on his back, the ice that had drenched him, the sort of faulty heating of the hotel entrance, and the memory of the ice on the cement made the men's shouts and interjections immediately dilute from his ears.

At reception, the friendly man who had a neutral, professional smile—“Is he a Frenchman raised abroad?” he wondered very fleetingly—stared at him after he looked up from a long-crumpled newspaper.

“Is something wrong with you?” the man asked in French. Manuel, despite not understanding every word, comprehended the fellow's question, who smiled as if he had a perpetual motion mechanism in his mouth. “Men always smile in hotels,” Manuel said to himself thinking of the cold ice that melted on his jacket and part of his pants. He also thought about the two fellows, whose voices had already been lost. He tried to say he was fine just by making a simple, childlike, or alienated gesture. The man said something and continued reading the newspaper while still smiling.

The spiral staircase had the same smell as the rest of the hotel and the rest of the landings he had noticed since his arrival in the city. His father had told him they didn't mug in Paris in the same way they were used to and there were no daggers, guns, absurd struggles, or blows.

Parisian thieves were refined swindlers. Manuel was a quasi-victim of a stupid swindle. As he climbed the steps, he just prayed until he found himself in front of the door with a little, handmade sign, “Ellie.”

He touched various parts of his body to verify that his body, his life, his passport, and the cigarette were real. He also carried the keys and opened the door with a kind of annoying and insistent tremor, one of those that usually clings to the body when one is thousands of miles away

from home and in an absurd situation, too.

Inside the room, he was assaulted by the stagnant smell of the sweat of thousands of people who had been there before like him lying in bed, meditating, making love, masturbating, thinking about suicide or passion, praying, or reading. The light coming from the outside, which was dimmed by a kind of curtain or reddish piece of cloth that extended over the dirty glass window, had changed in a matter of minutes.

It was at that imprecise hour that could be that of the first night or that of the first day. He was surprised to see the can of beer on the bedside table just as he had set it down before he left. The rest of the room was almost exactly the same. The guy with the vacuum cleaner had barely tidied up the hooks in a closet that had no doors and had barely managed to change the position of Manuel's scattered suitcase.

He reached the window, and the flakes didn't fall anymore. As he had read on an ad that had orange letters and a black background, which was on one of the streets he had walked down, snowfall was unusual in Paris, especially not on January 2nd. He thought that might also be the last time he would see snow. That didn't distress or sadden him. The damned melted and solidified snow again on his clothes was filling his skin with small sharp spikes, a formless and extensive cold that he had never felt before.

In fact, the smell of the snow, which had almost completely disappeared from the sidewalk and the street, ascended to the window through which Manuel barely looked out.

The ice that became water and then steam or vaporous dirt smelled of so many disgusting or nameless things that he suddenly loathed the photos he remembered of Alpine countries or children playing in the snow and making their hideous snowmen in Canada or the United States.

He thought of the three nights, including that one, he had left to leave the city, the

country, and the continent. He felt more hungry than nostalgic. He didn't carry much money or at least not enough to afford great luxuries. He had been eating poorly. He put his hand in his thick, uncomfortable thermal underwear, and reached to touch his passport.

He took it out. He was surprised to see his photo and almost at the same time the two 20-euro bills that still belonged to him, apart from the coins he had kept from the buses, the metro, and the meals he bought from cheap and insipid food stands.

He thought about the two fellows, and what he would have done if they had really undressed him on the thin layer of snow and left him with no contingency money—“Dough! Dough!” he shouted angrily in his rudimentary French—, of which he thought he would still save some for his return to his country.

When he felt the sweat on his back dry, he looked out the window. The light was unreal. It was less cold. He heard water rushing somewhere and thought maybe it was one of those shared showers in the corridors of cheap hotels.

He tried to add up the number of bodies that would have showered there since the hotel's foundation—he didn't know the exact date of its construction and opening as a hotel, but it would surely be around two hundred years or maybe more—, the amount of dirt that would have been mixed in the drain and in its flow through the drainage in the icy winters and unbearably hot summers. He took off his scarf and turned to the heating grille, whose real name he didn't know.

He didn't know how, but he remembered when the man at reception had told him it didn't work, but he could give him extra blankets and lower the rate. He didn't feel cold, but he thought of the dawn and early mornings, which were eternal in the winter of the gray city when the temperature dropped and the carpets and wallpapers smell stagnated within the hours in which a cigarette was lit. The smell of smoke remained like a gaseous hand trying to suffocate a child.

He looked right, left, and down the street. In his field of vision, a woman walked slowly from one side to the other making a noise as she stepped on the dirty ice, which was now better called water, wet dirt, or grime. On the left side of his field of vision, he could distinguish the two men leaning against one of the facades. He felt a gush of blood rush from his heart to the rest of his body.

He touched his jacket pockets instinctively. In a moment, before he could put his head in and close the small, rectangular window, he realized they had found him from the outside. The sound of rushing water ceased in the distance.

Unintentionally, he found the pack of cigarettes. He noticed the last cigarette by surprise, which was whole and crumpled. It wasn't more ruined than before.

He placed it on the bedside table and next to the beer. He took a swig from the can. The new flavor it had acquired was as disgusting as the room's smell, which was intense during the day and its dissipation. The beer tasted of pillow, saliva, sweat, and bloody carpets.

The passport—he carried the bills with him, folded in his right fist—, the lighter in the form of a small revolver, the belt, the coins, the metro tickets and the crumpled, unrecognizable map of the city looked like the objects of a criminology book, arranged for one of those unsettling photos, in which the corpse's eyes are distorted or covered with a black band later. He closed the room door, walked through the muffled of the corridor and reached the shower.

He cleaned his body that smelled of nothing, or had lost its smell in the winter in which he had never been, or that stank but had been purified by the snow. The water, heated by some electrical mechanism which was implanted like a cancer in the bowels of the old hotel (according to Manuel's blurred opinion, who was focused on thinking about nothing), removed the smell of lint and mites from his body, the coldness of his skin, the sensation of the swindle, and the

disgust of a tourist's trip with little money.

He took his head out of the shower because of the same conservation instinct he had before, which grew with every minute of the day. The two bills, folded and almost unrecognizable, were on top of the towel and next to the deodorant. All was placed on the toilet, which was white and somewhat peeling. He finished showering and thought he had only two nights left.

This one was already gone and extinct. The recent events would be erased during the night, the black night of the Parisian winter, which wasn't the one he had always imagined. It wasn't romantic, literary, seductive, or lyrical. It was cold, foul-smelling, suspicious, and ordinary like a whore of the worst kind or like a purulent infection.

The first thing he noticed when he entered the "Ellie" room was the radical change of light and now it was a real night. He threw the can of beer into a small plastic trash can. The sound from the inside of the liquid that was cooled and odorous by the ambiance made him feel an uneasiness, which was neither hunger nor thirst, but a desire to burn the night away, or to drink directly from a bottle of some cheap red wine, one of those that people drank on December 31st, almost three days ago.

He reached the window. He recalled the blow of his body against the cement that was covered by the snow's flaky skin when he saw the two men in front of the L'Horloge hotel right then. They discussed in hushed voices and, as soon as Manuel leaned out of the window, looked at him as one looks at the full moon, silently and seeking no explanations.

He put his head in quickly because of his instinct again. He thought about calling the police and realized that it would be impossible. He could barely give a couple of vague indications to whoever answered his call. He didn't know the phone number to call.

He didn't know how to use the phone to make local emergency calls—he had barely used the pay phones to call home with the cards showing their use by simple illustrations—he didn't know how to say “tie” in French, “plush jacket,” “maliciously blue eyes,” or “a fellow who was a little taller than me, but much thicker.”

He left the “Ellie” room intending to go down all the stairs until reaching the reception to alert the guy with the immutable smile about the two men. In the corridor, the darkness was already deep. Manuel touched his chest.

He stayed still and was reluctant to go down. He was nervous. He wanted a beer, but a freezing one in a bottle, five thousand miles from there, and at the bar that was located one mile from his home, in San José.

He entered the room again. He looked out the window. The two men watched without batting an eye—the distance was long, but he thought they didn't breathe, blink, or live—until one of them, the short and blue-eyed one, began to shout and utter unintelligible interjections.

He raised his hands and moved them like blades kicking the ground, fixing him with his gaze, and leading Manuel to understand he wanted him to come down because they had unfinished business. Manuel looked at the fellows wordlessly.

He thought of nightmares' substance, the night's smell, which was no longer that of melting snow, but the underlying cement that oozed the centuries of history and the days of small and seemingly innocuous garbage. He turned to the table.

He picked up the lighter in the form of a small revolver and began to fiddle with it grinning like a fool because of the night's dirt. The room, despite of not being heated by the broken-down, ornamental grille, wasn't too cold. He aimed the revolver at the blue-eyed fellow and then pointed the toy gun at the fat man, who was a little taller than him.

He held up one of the fingers of his right hand telling them with that gesture to go fuck themselves. The two men talked to each other. The street was filled with their hushed voices which, from the third-floor window where Manuel watched them, became buzzing noises that released a whitish whiff like demons' words that manifest at night.

A few minutes later, the fat man, who was taller than Manuel, talked slowly toward the hotel window moving his mouth excessively and gesticulating. The hands denoted entreaty and the rest of his body showed some intangible defeat. Manuel, with his head outside the window, watched gestures and movements.

He didn't understand a single word. The man looked like he cried. The trembling of his voice was evident. It wasn't French. It was a deformed French in some colony, or a language that was far removed from any Romance language. The man didn't stop at what it seemed to be a speech that was written and learned decades ago, or a theatrical soliloquy from some minor play.

The blue-eyed fellow looked at his buddy and Manuel alternately like a listless dummy. Manuel thought about the swindlers in Paris, the city life he would leave in a couple of nights, the hotels' smell, and the dirtiness of everything that was touched by others.

He reached the pack of cigarettes and managed to light the white crumpled cylinder using the tip of the small silver revolver. Again, he teared up from the smoke that hit his eyes. He released the puffs to his right side. The man continued with his speech and his pleading gestures releasing his own smoke whiff with every word, as he stood on the sidewalk across the street below.

"We all release the same smoke," Manuel thought, "we take the same steps, touch the same things, and sweat in the same way." He himself would beg leaning against the wall of one of the facades of his city, which was thousands of miles away and in a poorer country than this

one, but just as full of swindles, pleas, and begging hands, or he would see others beg if things went well for him.

He closed the window. He decided to go to sleep, even with the murmur of the voice, distant, and unintelligible. He brought the fingers that held the cigarette to his nose. The smell of burning tobacco was unpleasant. The tall fat man's soliloquy seemed to mix with the sweat of the carpet, the smell of the sheet, and the wood's aged breathing. He felt cold in the early morning.

HEAVY METALS

When Mario Sánchez woke up and saw the light coming in on his right side, he thought, “life is shit” with an artificial drama that made everything even worse.

The day before, Antonio Luján was sitting uncomfortably leaning back in a chair that was about to break apart in his friend Julián Rodríguez’s bedroom, where they always went on Saturday afternoons. Antonio had managed to publish in Barcelona eighteen months before, and that was certainly a big thing, one of those that transcend the small poetry groups and bad workshops, which emerge as soon as they catch on fire.

His friend Julián had managed to feel a little of Antonio’s state of grace. Both of them, in spite of his Latin American fame, had remained faithful to Ediciones Rectangular, which prided itself in publishing the poets who set the course to be followed in the country’s lyrical poetry. The lyrical poetry of the non-lyrical one, the poetry of the streets and the steaming cups of coffee, the murder of metaphors, similes, and all those antics of dead poetry. That was, in short, the motto of Ediciones Rectangular.

Antonio asked Julián where he had gotten that bottle. It was delicious, even if it tasted less and less like something recognizable, as the afternoon wore on and the two of them got drunk little by little, dazed by the rum that ran out. Antonio hit the chair with his clumsy fist as if he asked for explanations from an invisible entity that wouldn’t give them to him.

Julián was leaning toward the table that was filled with books trying to get less drunk than his friend to maintain an inappropriate composure. They had been working on the third issue of the Crucigrama magazine, which gathered the works of active poets of Ediciones Rectangular group or of those who didn’t disagree with them.

The clippings, photos, and collaborations were scattered next to the piles of books that made up a set on which Antonio, from time to time, thought he was going to vomit.

“Fucking magazine,” Julián said taking the photo they would use on the cover—a pile of acetate records out of their sleeves, which were next to a modern sound system as a symbol of incongruity in art. Up to that point they had used all their allegories. They left nothing for poetry. They both laughed. There were still two weeks before the release of that third issue, and the work was well-underway.

Antonio brought the glass of rum to his mouth. It was empty. He fumbled awkwardly for the bottle. It was empty. He lashed out or thought Julián lashed out. Julián had bought the rum, but in that moment, neither of them was in the mood to give a shit about who had bought what. There wasn't more rum, guaro, wine, or beer in the whole house.

The last vestiges of poetry faded from their heads. “More rum, for fuck's sake, more rum,” Julián shouted knowing that they were trapped in alcoholic metal net, and that going somewhere and getting a bottle of rum wasn't within their means, and that it was one of those futile hopes of those who know they were defeated.

“Fuck! We need more, much more,” Antonio said bringing one of his thumbs to his lips as a funnel and indicating they needed to drink more. Julián agreed, though his greatest concern was to not fall apart. The table and the world moved, and an insane agitation moved in the ambiance at half past five in the afternoon.

“Julián,” said Antonio, “remember Mario Sánchez?” Julián recalled and cursed without being able to move his tongue well. “Today he presents a book of poems,” Antonio said and pointed at Julián's bright, trembling eyes. “C'mon, remember we got the invitation the other day.”

“Should we go to the presentation?” Julián asked in a tone that wasn’t contradictory, but that was intended to be. “But if he’s a fucking poet,” he continued, “he isn’t a poet, but a scumbag who makes books with verses and publishes them in any shitty-printing press like a whore.” “I know he sucks,” Antonio replied, “but he always brings good wine to his presentations.”

“Cabernet sauvignon from the Pays d’Oc,” Julián said without being able to hold back an explosive and loud laugh. “Port wine is sweet and fucking good. Fine wines from France. Shitty poems, all bad, metaphorical, and disgusting like bitches hollowed out by lead.” They laughed at the catchy words. “We’ll have to go to that crap,” Antonio said.

They arrived at the Institute of Anglo-Saxon Studies. It was late. The main hall of the venue was one of the five possible sites for book presentations in the city.

Antonio and Julián tried to sit down as far from the front as possible to not have to greet Mario, who said the final words with a big smile and was amply satisfied that Adolfo Rojas, one of the old school poets — “Damn piece of cock,” Antonio had mumbled as he entered because his group thoroughly despised the old poets who wrote with excessive literary figures—had agreed to present his book of poems *Crossroads of a Dead Man*.

“Thank you for being here,” Mario Sánchez said pointing to the audience that was made up of several of his friends, some minor poets, some of his family members, the poets of the Ediciones Rectangular group that were in the background, and the certainly distinguished Antonio Luján and Julián Rodríguez.

He had already read three long and lurid poems and, after the heartfelt thanks to the attendees, he read five additional verses that talked about death, scarecrows, the eyes of those who resurrect, and the luridness of seeing a corpse straight to the empty sockets. No one seemed

to understand a word, but everyone applauded. It rained. The applauses echoed the rain, which crashed against the tin roof.

“Come this way. I have a humble feast for you,” Mario said pointing on his right side to a small room that seemed to be an appendix of the presentation venue. “We will also be selling the book in case anyone would like to have it at once.” It seemed no one wanted to have it.

They all moved toward the rectangular table that contained a large metal tray, which was round and huge, filled with olives, cubic pieces of cheese, irregular pieces of ham, and dried fruits. Everything was placed in concentric and multicolored circles. On another table, a little smaller, there were the bottles of wine that had just been uncorked, large wine glasses, and the fellow who started serving them with his professional posture and unsmiling expression.

The smell of wine almost immediately invaded the venue—dead and crushed grapes. After he shook hands with Mario Sánchez, Antonio, and Julián, out of mere professional commitment as colleagues, went directly to the table with the red wine.

Mario was proud of the attendance of the two poets of the Ediciones Rectangular group; even though, he didn't agree with their methods and didn't belong to the same school. Of course, that evening wasn't suitable for those dichotomies and squabbles of the different poetic devices. The evening of the presentation is white and neutral, where everybody is a friend.

“I told you this motherfucker had good wines.” “I knew,” Julián answered. The guy, who served them, looked at them as one looks at two rabid dogs that are about to die out. They toasted about five times getting drunker and drunker and clinking wine glasses more and more loudly. Mario Sánchez moved among the few people greeting them with his immovable smile and thanking them for their attendance.

Mario got to where Antonio and Julián were. “Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it to both of you,” Mario said with a smile taking a wine glass and raising it in triumph like an Olympic medal. “Dude, my pleasure,” Julián replied turning to Antonio, whose smile was identical to Mario’s, immovable, hideous, red, and absurd. They shook hands and embraced like old friends.

After he signed three copies of *Crossroads of a Dead Man*, Mario Sánchez asked for silence and announced there was a party at his house. “We have to celebrate. Writing a book takes a lot of effort. The drinks are on me,” he said somewhat drunkenly; although, he was fully aware of his words. There were six people altogether, apart from Mario Sánchez. One of them left a few minutes later without saying goodbye.

The presenter had left more than half an hour ago excusing himself that he was tired and he had some work to do the next day. Antonio and Julián held onto the edges of the table that had the wines asking the fellow to pour them more. There was less than half a bottle left. Only two men—poets, apprentice poets, or friends of Mario Sánchez—accepted Mario’s invitation to the party at his house.

Antonio and Julián accepted, motivated by something that was closer to drunkenness than compassion. Antonio recalled awkwardly and briefly the evening in which he presented his first book of poems before he got to publish it in Barcelona. There were few people. There were no wine, only coffee, and soft drinks.

He hadn’t exactly felt sad, but now he thought about it. He didn’t want Mario, despite his disagreements, to feel like that invented image of himself. Julián simply nodded when receiving the invitations. Mario Sánchez embraced them all at the same time without losing his joker smile.

“This son of a bitch has a lot of guaro. At home, he must have liters and liters of that rum you drank up.” “I didn’t drink up anything.” They laughed awkwardly. In front of them, Mario and his two companions, friends, or aspiring poets. They walked and talked about the presentation, the presenter’s praise words, the ambiance, and the rain, which had already ceased.

Mario’s house was a few blocks from the Institute of Anglo-Saxon Studies. The evening was cold. Antonio smoked and felt the smoke was the whiff of his lungs. He thought about a couple of poems he could write until Mario Sánchez’s immovable smile invited him in and interrupted him.

Julián already walked down the hall holding onto some white, peeling columns that were getting out of his hands like rotten fruits. The evening smelled of rot and fermented wine in their mouths.

Mario Sánchez entered the bedrooms of his house, got out of them after a few seconds, and walked from one place to another like a smiling and friendly insect, stunned by the yellow light of a lamp he turned on when came in. His friends talked in a hushed voice. Antonio and Julián expected him to take out the bottles of red wine, rum, or whatever. “Mario, thank you for inviting us,” Antonio said raising an imaginary wine glass.

“Let’s toast.” “Yes, sir,” Mario seconded stopping suddenly. His eyes shone with joy or pride. He opened a black wooden shelf and took out two long bottles whose contents shone in the light. He filled all five glasses. “For the friends who are with me on this special day, cheers.” They clinked glasses. “Shit. This is great,” someone said. Julián lit a cigarette. The phone rang.

While Mario talked, Antonio and Julián introduced themselves to the two fellows they had arrived there with. “We are lifelong friends,” one of them said. “Are you poets?” “We aren’t

poets. We read some things Mario lends us, but we aren't into the field" "Good for you," Julián said smiling unhappily. Antonio offered them cigarettes.

"It's my girlfriend. She's on her way and couldn't attend the presentation," Mario said as he hung up. Antonio and Julián toasted Mario's girlfriend, whom they didn't know. Everyone toasted again. Alfonso thought he would drink all that was left of the bottle and the other one. Then, he would ransack the black furniture until he stuffed himself with everything that was in that shitty house, where that shitty poet lived.

Mario Sánchez's girlfriend's name was Marta. When Mario introduced her to Antonio and Julián, he did so with his immovable smile of a wax sculpture as if he showed a freshly caught giant marlin. Antonio kissed her on the cheek when he met her. Julián shook her hand as if she were a friend. They thought she was pretty. She was thin, short, with long reddish hair, and very white.

They toasted again. There were two unopened bottles on a shelf. Mario had prepared for a multitudinous celebration, which had been reduced to the six of them drinking around the drink table, on which Mario had placed olives, dried fruits, and cheese as he did in the presentation. His smile never wiped off his face. He told jokes to the shadows he saw behind the dim light of the table lamp. Bad jokes.

Sometimes a chuckle or a cough of cigarette smoke could be heard. Someone asked about the music. "Music, music!" Julián shouted, "this is like a wake." "In that furniture," Mario said pointing to three huge columns of CDs, which were almost the height of a ten or eleven-year-old child.

Antonio reached the CDs. He went through the back sides of their boxes and found nothing he liked. Emmanuel. Camilo Sesto. Nino Bravo. La Sonora Santanera. "There's nothing

good here,” he said, “all this is bullshit.” Mario stood up and felt drunk. “What do you guys like?” he asked. “I don’t know, but not this crap.” “They’re not crap. They’re classics.”

“Shit. Stop fucking around, asshole.” “I want heavy metal, metal, something heavy, and not the romantic music that a codger listens to.” “Heavy metal,” Julián insisted with an upset look on his face. “There’s no such music here,” Mario said without stopping smiling. He alternated between looking at Marta, Antonio, and Julián. He couldn’t manage to see his two friends, as they were behind a curtain of shadows.

“I want heavy metal,” Antonio seconded taking Mario by the shoulders. “Take it easy,” Mario managed to say with the shining eyes of a fearful animal. “We can put the radio on. Maybe there’s something good.” “They don’t play heavy metal on the radio. There’s nothing by Sepultura, Carcass, or Terrorizer.”

Julián and Mario remembered all those band names from their teenage years and laughed with twisted drunken faces recalling the kicks and their damaged eardrums from those years. Mario found a CD with hits from the eighties. It started with Dire Straits. “At least, they’re decent,” Antonio said.

They kept finishing the bottles of rum and listening to the music that was no longer music and became an uninterrupted succession of notes that couldn’t be heard by Antonio’s or Julián’s ears. Mario’s two friends were already drunk, smoked marijuana, rolled tobacco cigarettes, stuffed themselves with smoke, and laughed like jackasses. Mario had fallen into an armchair in the living room.

All of a sudden, Julián found himself dancing with Marta, Mario Sánchez’s girlfriend. The music volume was strident. Antonio, shaking and pale, seemed to distinguish John Coltrane within the notes that moved in the gloomy bedroom, underneath Careless Whisper by Wham!

Mario was sprawled out with his eyes closed imitating the posture of an anonymous unfortunate in a painting by Lucian Freud. The glass of rum had fallen out of his hands after the twenty-first or twenty-second toast. The shards of glass looked like enameled bugs on the living room's dark green carpet.

"Are you a poet, too?" Julián asked trying to put his eyes on Marta's. He touched her arm awkwardly as if she had a hoof instead of a hand. "I'm a poet. I've learned a lot from Mario." "What have you learned? What your boyfriend writes is bullshit! You're not going to learn anything from that." "I don't think that's true. He's good."

"He's not good. He's a piece of crap. He writes with a lot of metaphors, allusions to other things, and literary devices that aren't worth a brass farthing." "That is poetry, Julián." "That's not poetry. Those are dead words and artifices of imbeciles who call themselves poets. Nowadays, no one writes like that anymore. Similes and metonymies are no longer used. All of that is pure bullshit. Now, one writes as if one stabbed a dog. Now, one thrusts the heavy metal of a dagger into the flesh without so many puerilities."

He mimicked he was stabbing a dagger in his side. "Mario writes for other reasons. You don't know him." "I don't care about his reasons, but the bullshit he writes on the paper," Julián said tapping the palm of one of his hands with two fingers of the other as if he wrote with blood on a papyrus. "Mario writes so as not to get crazy," Marta assured.

"We all write so as not to get crazy," Julián replied smiling as if he had cooking oil boiling over his lips and with misty eyes. "You don't understand me. His mother died in a car accident and his father shot himself after that. He writes about all those things. You don't know what that is." Julián tried to understand the meaning of each word and to say something

intelligent, or at least something that would reconcile his contempt for Mario with his unfortunate story—something beautiful and human.

He turned to the image of Mario in the half-light, who was sprawled on the armchair with no conscience. He tried to imagine Mario's parents, who, during all their lives, had surely had that same immovable smile of twisted lips that were pointed up like rictus or innocuous images of jokers who were happier than usual.

The music ceased. Mario's two friends had disappeared, but their laughter and angry expressions could be heard from the house's garden. They were smoking and drinking a full bottle of rum. Everything smelled of a hospital or a battlefield. Guaro could be felt in every word and movement.

Antonio searched through the CDs for one that would be of some use. In his listlessness, everything sounded to him like silence and daze. He thought of Leonard Cohen and the sadness of some of his lyrics, then of Deicide, Cannibal Corpse, and all the death metal he remembered from his teenage years.

The heavy metal was what they needed to wake up the world and for Mario Sánchez to revive on his armchair and come out of his death of execrable drunken poet. The memory of the chords of the distorted guitars made him retch unbearably. He saw Julián grabbing Marta's butt, Mario Sánchez's girlfriend, the poetaster.

Julián's eyes moved in their sockets and looked like mollusks. He kissed Marta on the mouth with a heavy leaden tongue. She didn't refuse to kiss him. Their saliva smelled of rubbing alcohol and prosaism. Julián put a hand on one of her butt cheeks. The flesh was soft, or at least softened by the anesthetic sensation.

“What is this shit?” Antonio’s voice said and his hands grabbed the left column of CDs, which was almost half the height of Antonio’s, and threw it out across the floor. The clatter of the broken plastic woke Mario Sánchez up, who fixed his lost and cadaverous gaze on the possible origin of the noise.

“What’s going on? What’s going on?” he shouted with a voice that didn’t come out of his throat but of his ribs, a broken and sticky sound. “What’s happening, dear audience?” he said dreaming he was at the presentation of a book of poems that wasn’t his own.

Antonio kicked the boxes of CDs and crushed the iridescent circles that had been scattered on the floor almost in the half-light. Julián touched one of Marta’s breasts, pulled away from her, and reached Antonio. “This is poetry,” Antonio said, “the kicks and the metal, gentlemen.” The CDs were hard. It was difficult to break them.

Mario tried to come out of his somnolence. He had recovered with his scarce consciousness his imperishable smile. He imagined himself in a landscape at the bottom of the sea, slow and saline. “You don’t know what the end of an empire is,” he said raising a finger that trembled in a sign of death to the impious.

Julián tried to hug Antonio, but when finding the resistance of an electric eel, went back to Marta. He took her by the arm and led her into a room he found after entering a bathroom, waking past a room with exercise machines, passing one with several disassembled beds that looked like stacked bodies, and an indoor garden that smelled of wet roses and rust.

In the living room, Mario Sánchez continued with his slow speech due to the extreme indolence, in which he talked to the dead, to his wrecked mother, and asked his father not to, not to, not to put his head in the path of the lead bullet, and to not let him be left practically alone in the filthy world that has to be reconstructed with the art of verses.

“With the art of verses...” he managed to say and couldn’t hold it in any longer. He threw up on the living room’s floor, a sonorous vomit and a cascade of disgust that got mixed with the shards of ruined CDs and Antonio’s screams, who had also thrown out the other column, the one of Los Bukis, Los Tigres del Norte, and Salvatore Adamo.

Mario’s friends had disappeared or had been transformed into ghosts or stones. Their traces or screams were gone, but only their smell of alcohol and marijuana continued.

Antonio cleaned his forehead. He felt the cold sweat trickling down like small, sharp, and poisonous threads of mercury. He saw Mario give his speech and recite verses he had never heard. Maybe they were by Sylvia Plath or by Rimbaud. They all sounded alike to him at that moment.

Maybe it was a poem Mario was improvising, beautiful and bloody. Antonio forgot about the CDs, the music that didn’t exist in the living room, and the vomit.

He vaguely recalled the presentation of *Crossroads of a Dead Man* by Mario, and of *Instants or Fragments*, which he, Antonio Luján, had written to win a contest in Barcelona, where it had ended up being published, but which had nothing to do with death, unbearable defects or painful episodes that, despite not knowing the story Julián had heard, he sensed in Mario’s sticky mouth.

His book was soulless. He sat on the floor near the house door and tried to cry. He barely did it. Mario Sánchez stopped and fell asleep again with his smile lightly imprinted on the hell of his face. He woke up alone and disgusted thinking life was shit. And he felt his tongue like lead, and his mouth tasted like iron.

VICISSITUDES OF VICE

“...to have a black picture of the world, it is necessary to have previously believed in such world and its possibilities.”

ERNESTO SABATO

He told his mom she was a damn inconsiderate bitch and a fucking addict. However, he loved her very much. Therefore, he didn't mean it, or if he did, he didn't care about the harshness of his words. His mother didn't care her eldest son insulted her at all. All she wanted was the fucking cigarettes and that was all.

Someone mentioned, with the obvious intention of adding fuel to the fire, how was it possible for them to live in such a shitty town, in a place so far removed from everything imaginable and from the last shreds of civilization, if that is what one could call the little market at the entrance of the less unfortunate hamlet, which was next to the main road.

That market—canned goods, bread, eggs, cigarettes, and a few other things—was more than twelve miles away from her home. Her son was the only one who knew how to drive and could get “downtown” in the evening, since the streets were impassable before of mud and standing water.

Now, he is laying down in the dark. As he insulted his mom in the most direct and rude way, he doesn't want or can't get out of the bedroom. If he smoked, he would take the whole packet he had left and light it at the same time to burn down his house and all the surrounding houses, all the same. The same wooden boxes.

His mother's screams pierced the weak panel of the door. She was cursing—
“Motherfucker, who gave birth to you. Get that damn car out and buy me cigarettes. If you want

gas, I'll give you dough," she sighed haltingly by the almighty desire. Distant knocks, ceremonies of destruction, thunders, and his mother's words are heard through the closed door of the bedroom.

He pulls off the three rings he wears on his middle finger and fiddles with them passing them from one hand to the other with his clumsy fingertips. Outside the bedroom, his mother's voice is mixed up with the faltering cry of annoying drizzle.

She tells him again to take the fucking car and go out for the cigarettes. If he doesn't go, she is going to kill him, as he knows nobody else drives, and it's his obligation to do all the household shopping, to which he responds with a cretinous chuckle that sticks unintentionally in the sharp bones of his invisible face.

Once again, he plays with the rings, stands up, and stumbles over the bedside table, which makes the usual sound. Its legs were a little shattered and slightly rusty where they stick to the wood of the table, which was frayed and hollowed out by the humid weather. He doesn't feel like answering. He only shakes his head looking for himself in the imperfect half-light.

He reaches the window and opens it. The weather outside is a mixture of mist and water without any form or base, glued to the houses from an overpowering sky. He touches his face, his beard, and the roughness of his features. He touches his bare chest and his legs with very frizzy and soft hairs.

If he knew how to smoke, he would probably sit on the old windowsill and light the long deep cigarette like a phosphorescent slug in the dark. He would take a couple of drags, very deep, silent, and filled with red embers that would light up his face. He would put out the remaining cigarette butt on the wet edge that overlooks the street.

He hears five knocks that are exactly separated in time like dry chimes—three violent knocks of scrawny knuckles and two dry touches with the door's wood against the middle of the palm of one hand.

His mother screams, tells him it is his obligation to go, and if he doesn't go, she will kill him during the night or she will find someone to do it, and that he knows all places are far away and can only be reached by car. "You damned moron." He doesn't answer.

He turns around and senses (the sound is unmistakable) the metal doorknob that moves like an animal in the dark and hits against the hole someone once made in the door when it was just an extended unpainted piece with no moth holes. He knows his mother's strength isn't enough to break down the door and she doesn't know how to put knives into the edges on the right side of the house's locks. He thinks of the night and the tranquility from the outside, as his eyes get used to the thick penumbra. As he doesn't want to insult his mom again and unnecessarily mistreat her, he only opens his mouth to take a deep breath.

He slowly swallows the air that cooled before nightfall. "Damn you. You're taking it out on me! Just remember we're only your sister, you, and me." That's a lie. His sister wasn't there and had gone out with Manuel, her fiancé, for the rest of the night. Therefore, they are the only two people in the damp old-smelling house.

He imagines himself in a similar night, in a very humid and heavy winter and equally black and gelatinous, taking the cigarette between the fingers of his right hand and letting it hang like a dead man's tongue in the right corner of his mouth, in the corner burned by so many cigarettes and so many of the same, boring, and wet nights.

If he smoked, he would probably be sitting like this, on the same window frame and with the same crack of the wood that slowly yields to the weight of his tall skinny body. He would die

slowly with the weight of the smoke in his lungs, filling him with the certainty that he had to die of something.

His mother's screams suddenly dissipate like rats running away. While sitting, he scratches his legs, which are full of small itches. He doesn't feel anguish, fear, or remorse. The screams come and go— "What the fuck did I bring you into the world for, motherfucker? You're good for nothing. You're just like your dad."

Although, if he were alive, he would probably be warming up the car in the rundown garage tapping the gas pedal a little to push the gas and get the oil moving and warming it up in the winter night's cold.

He is surprised he hasn't seen the rays that appear dimly on the other side of a thing that looks like a mountain or a mound of garbage in the far distance—lightning bolts from some distant storm. The light brings to his mind the embers of the cigarettes he has seen, those of his mother and those of his dead father. He thinks of the delight of a cigarette he has never tasted.

Outside, the noises suddenly reappear, the water droplets hitting the tin roofs, the thunders that could be distant lightning bolts or the barking of dogs that parsimoniously eat garbage, the screams of some beings that are extinguished in the houses' indeterminate penumbra, lost in the village's depths.

If he had a lit cigarette, he would inhale and exhale the white smoke, absorb the particles of gray death, crumple his body into a capricious form on the window frame and tuck into the wood like a bug that was inside the fibers of rancid meat. He would do what his maternal grandfather did. He would release the ashes little by little, very little by little, letting them cram like fragile sausages on the tip of the cigarette to throw them later on the floor and crush them ceremoniously. A smell of rubber start coming from somewhere—the pre-sleep sensations.

His mother became silent some minutes ago, but the insults he hurled at her echo in her empty head, and the insults of motherfucker, good-for-nothing, son of a bitch, fetus, which came from her old and dirty mouth, are still presences in the unscathed darkness. She would burn from the inside and release new bundle of ashes, this time on the old wooden floor that smells like scorpions.

The artificial smell of an imaginary rubber comforts him. His body's position allows him to appreciate the rain's humidity that seems to crackle in the distance like flames.

He would smoke a whole pack and stuff twenty cigarettes into his mom's mouth at the same time to delight her and make her cease her futile effort to utter insults and empty words.

The rain approaches or it is just its sound in the distance like flares of water forming on the other side of what it seems to be a mountain or the pieces of garbage from the village. He called her a wretched whore. He doesn't know why, or he understands it too well, and regrets it. He doesn't want to get out of the bedroom or remove the puny lock on the door. The doorknob no longer moves. The place is peaceful.

From sitting for hours, he feels pain in his spine. He went down stairs and gropes for the forms in the dawn's deep darkness. He is half-asleep. He is fully awakened by the door handle's warmth. In the pitch black, he gets charcoal puff like a plague of flies.

He leaves home moving his arms among a cloud of smoke and dry debris. In the street, dogs are traces of charcoal, which are visible through an artificial light of a new moon. All the houses are the same jumble of ashes and pieces he sees as black. Everything is burned and nobody exists in the village.

The silence is interrupted by the constant crackle of all that is consumed by the fire, which no longer has anything to burn down and used to sound like the pattering of rain. If there had been a hell, this would have been its appearance when it ended.

He steps on something that looks like a charred body. He touches it with his foot to make sure it doesn't move—his mother with her fingers bent as if she smoked, much more calmly.

BANKING PROCESSES

On a calm day, he arrived at an inconvenient time. He barely managed to knock on the door in a fit of madness he knew well. He entered without saying hello and told me he had it ready, as he had just finished it and printed it. The manuscript covers trembled between his possessed fingers.

“With this, the glory,” he told me as if he wasn’t talking with me but to an abstract being that listened to him without moving and without claiming him for his agitation and the time of the early morning. He put the manuscript in my hands and reassured me that what he told me would be his recognition. He left without saying goodbye and made a sign with his fingers announcing a phone call, who knows when.

That was to be his fifth novel. The other four weren’t bad, but they were only about the commonplaces of social complaint, the misunderstood love of art, and oneirism which solves and explains everything. Of course, that was my opinion as a disordered reader, who knew little of literary techniques, but whose opinion Gabriel always sought.

In this particular case, it was about something he knew well—a story of art forgery. I counted the folios—595, which were filled with historical, encyclopedic, as well as artistic references. When I reached the number 100, I saw he tried something new that often worked out well; even though, something told me the work wouldn’t be understood at the magnitude in which Gabriel wanted it to be, starting with the title *The Duchampian Obsessions of Disguise*.

It talked about Rose Sélavy, Henri Rousseau, and the obsession of a multimillionaire who continually forged paintings by Klimt after his wife’s fondness for Van Meegeren, who made up paintings by Vermeer during post-Nazi Europe.

The novel attempted to reach the stilted conclusion through the feverish obsessions of the ten or twelve protagonists that painting (and art in general) was subject to the mandates of money and madness, and never of the genius or the greatness. In three days, I read the whole manuscript, which alternated with a book by Antoni Caralt, a Spanish essayist who talked about something called “the need for self-reference.”

I don't evoke Caralt for encyclopedic purposes or fake Borgianisms, but I have to because I talked to Gabriel about the topic the same day, he called me to have my opinion on his intricate novel.

I answered the phone unhurriedly knowing beforehand it was him and he was desperate. He said hello and just a polite how are you, which didn't take me by surprise. A long awkward silence preceded my words, which sounded absurd and nasal.

I told him it was fine, he had achieved something new, he had evolved, and it would be published at any moment, but... How come there are ifs and buts in between? There was a new silence. I arranged the exact words on my tongue and in my head.

I mentioned, in a faint-hearted neutral tone, Caralt's concept telling Gabriel the novel was all very well, but no one was going to understand it, or at most a few beginners or connoisseurs of art history, specifically painting, starting in the 16th century and ending in contemporary sucesos, installations, and works that are obscure and easily dispensable.

“Well, and what does that Antoni Caralt have to do with all this?” A new silence grew like a bad dream. The thing is that for him a work only has value if it is enough by itself. “I don't understand.” “It isn't difficult, Gabriel.” “A book only has value if it doesn't refer to external elements to be understood and appreciated. That is, it has to be a microcosm that encloses all its explanations, references, and scales of value.”

“I think I understand...” “To understand it, there is no need to look for names in the newspapers or the history of artistic movements in the encyclopedia.” “Exactly, Gabriel.” I felt a kind of hatred that was hidden in his silence and on the invisible side of the phone. He nodded. I guess. He argued parsimoniously and told me that was just a critical judgment of Caralt.

“He has also written novels.” “Yes, but his arguments don’t convince me.” He vituperated, cursed, and denied the usefulness of literature, until the even and sad sound of the phone line was heard that afternoon.

After a week, I had to call him. I don’t know if that was out of remorse or mere curiosity. He told me without letting me talk he had the new manuscript ready, he would bring it to me two days later, and he had solved the problem of self-reference.

I was surprised he took my comment so seriously. Another noise rose lifelessly through the appliance until I showed a sudden interest that was maybe only pity or else impotence, which was a painful heavy sensation. We hung up without saying goodbye as usual.

On the agreed date, the knock on the door was desperate and earlier than the other time. He had a longer beard that hadn’t shaved since some days ago, and his eyes were wild, red, and distant.

He brought three manuscripts—at the moment he crossed the doorstep, I thought they were projects for something new and unexpected—which, when combined, made up the amendment of the first work.

I asked for the number of folios anticipating with a fake smile some expected misfortune. “5625 folios,” he told me with a voice of pride staring at me for the first time like a true madman. I didn’t even ask him if I should read all that incomprehensible farrago because it was almost my obligation.

Again, he didn't say goodbye, but before he left, he told me briefly what the changes in the first manuscript and the new chapters were about, which he said, couldn't be dispensed with.

Only the next day I began to witness what could be inferred as a mockery of Gabriel, but it wasn't. The story had the essential features of the first manuscript, but all the names, artistic movements, places, and schools were changed. As I read them, I noticed all of them, one by one, had been invented by Gabriel.

The new title tried to encompass more than five thousand pages with no possible misunderstandings—The Obsessions of a Fictitious Art Thief. I tried to read the work from head to toe, but it was impossible.

I chose to skip pages by checking through difficult, laborious comparisons that the last name Klee (from the first manuscript) had been changed to Kellener, Mannerism for Umbrism, and Duchamp for Deschaines.

I noticed the story was the same because the novel began with a previous story that served as an explanation of the protagonist's obsessions and ended with a glossary of terms created in the book, family trees, unnecessary theogonies that intended to explain the characters' beliefs, their most trivial behaviors, and many more details that were impossible to remember. His microcosm, his universe that satisfied itself was now immeasurable.

Six months later, I reviewed the list of titles the publishing house had printed, in which Gabriel published. Of course, the book didn't appear.

I glanced at reviews for weeks, cultural supplements, and literary award results for months until I forgot about the novel and Gabriel. There was nothing anywhere. However, I waited for his call in which he would ask for my opinion—it never happened.

After a year or thirteen months, I thought I saw him in the street as I walked along a boulevard near my house. Months before, they had built a large building that was made of glass, instead of the usual walls, which made it possible to see the people through the inside windows—a modern bank.

I crossed the street and noticed it was him earnestly helping the people in line. I thought about it briefly and entered. I would have liked not to have been surprised by his appearance as a proper man with fixed schedules, but he did.

He saw me and signaled me to enter. We had a rather effusive greeting without any admonition or simply a perfect dissimulation of his hatred. We were melodramatic when having an anodyne conversation—family, work, money, and pets—until I dared to ask him what was going on with literature.

“There is nothing new. I’m working on this and maybe later I’ll work in a supermarket or in a garage.” I avoided asking about the novel and his fate at all costs, though I didn’t have to since he told me I could burn that manuscript if I wanted to, as literature had no purpose for him and life’s enormity was immeasurable, even in ten thousand pages.

He referred to the famous phrases from a couple of 20th-century painters’ journals and paraphrased a writer, which I didn’t know, from the 14th century. Eventually, he diligently handed me the bills I asked for.

SACRED STORY

For Umanzor, from a
Schopenhauer episode

He had enjoyed walking a lot before getting his job at the hospital and before buying several late-model cars, which were changed as soon as they were a year old. It was so long before congresses and air terminal travels.

He recalls he liked to walk when he was a student, even when he had joined the clinic in his early days as a doctor. He didn't think it was so bad to walk to the hotel and ask the red-haired girl where room 142B was located, the one used for medical conventions.

The woman didn't have to look for him on the list as she knew perfectly well that he was Dr. Alvarado, the cardiology specialist, who had to give the talk at seven thirty, and that out of deference he had to listen more or less attentively to the foreign colleagues, who were a considerable number of fifteen.

She pointed with her finger, which had a long turquoise enameled fingernail, to the rectangle that was apparently not far away, and gave him a couple of instructions about the best entrance to the corner hall (avoid the noise of a door in disrepair and enter more easily into the space with no chairs that led to the podium).

He never got used to people waiting for him, but he had an unconcealed fondness for being the subject of complimentary attention, the focus of questions and answers that came and went amid sounds of pencils on blank sheets of paper, comments reduced to anonymous uproars and the buttons of voice recorders.

He talked about new ways to eliminate the obstruction of the coronary arteries by presenting the results of his surgical and medicinal methods, which proved to be a promising revelation.

They congratulated him and he congratulated them in the course of the evening, which turned cold and black moving little by little out of the conference rooms. He had some coffee and a few cocktails. He felt good for brief moments and in some others, a devastating drowsiness or a sensation of astonishing invisibility came over him—the fatigue of arriving at half past eleven at night and having had little sleep the previous days.

He went out into a corridor that surrounded a central courtyard, which reminded him of the form of a convent. He smoked a cigarette and lit a second one with it, each one stronger and deeper in his throat. Each one went into him like calming incense.

In the background, some voices mentioned something about a place to go to see the capital, and to see what the nightlife was like in this beautiful tropical country.

As the smoke got into his lungs, all he could think about was that he wanted to be on the apartment bed smoking and maybe with a glass tumbler, rattling the ice cubes as he inhaled and exhaled the ghostly white part of the cigarette.

He put his hand in his pocket and scrutinized slowly. He increased his speed touching the pieces of cloth and lint on his fingertips. He felt a gush of blood in his heart and a rising panic. He suddenly calmed down when remembering his car was in the garage, he hadn't lost his keys, and he would then have to walk.

He said goodbye to those whose names he remembered or whom he had seen at other congresses in other countries. He went down a corridor and arrived unexpectedly at a side exit of the hotel. An elegant man, who was a pale mannequin, opened the iron door for him.

It took him almost ten seconds to locate himself with respect to the street he was on and the route to follow. He checked he had only one cigarette left in the black and yellow packet, which he would smoke in the small bed in the center of his bedroom, while he was half-drunk and happy falling asleep and listening to his heart in the silence.

He walked south trying to make a diagonal path and changing the route to gradually reach the bus station, which was one of the things that would never disappear downtown. There would be men lying on the corners, women waiting with their children and their sad bodies, and old men sitting in front of the big screen of the main television, which was on 24 hours a day and protected by a grayish electrowelded mesh in the penumbra. At least as far as he could remember.

He stopped suddenly seeing the light-blue shoes, the body that almost came into his own, the closeness, the man talking to her, the small sonorous laughter in the deserted street in a black curved part.

He touched the inside of the pocket again, and this time he found with the clumsiness of his fingertips the thin wallet that had the credit cards, bills, papers, a loose ring, and pieces of other lint.

He apologized, and the light-blue shoes moved at the same time as the small thin body that was vulgarly dressed. His thoughts' fugacity simply forced him to turn to the man and then to the woman, whose eyes shone with the gleam of fatigue and the dirty midnight wind.

They both greeted him, and she rested her hand on his forearm apologizing again and showing him the full green of her eyes. The false green of her eyes moved in time with her painted mouth beyond the visible limit of her lips.

The mouths of the woman and the man shone brighter than their eyes, and at once she let her teeth show as she talked and invited him with new touches on his forearm and his shoulder.

He thought briefly about the cigarette and the bed in the middle of the apartment and refused without certainty taking two small staggering steps.

He felt somewhat drunk, just tired, or it was the woman's words and gestures, her breasts through the white and light-blue blouse, her bright eyes, the man's hand on the taxi door handle, her touches on his right leg, almost on the inside of his inner thigh, the bills on the bedside table because the payment was upfront there.

The room revealed a green painting in the center, almost where the pillow had been placed neatly. It was rectangular and perfect on the top of the bed like a child's body. It was rather a green rectangle like a coagulation of light coming from above, from a skylight that was in the ceiling and absorbed brightness during the day, and released the necessary gelatin to see in the shadows at night since Cristal didn't like the small lamp on the bedside table to be turned on.

Someone had led them to the storage room, and that same person had received the money with his greasy hands through a small hole opened in one of the damp and smelly walls. There were scattered clothes on a round table, which were many garments that suddenly seemed to him like pieces of meat. He laughed inevitably, and Cristal asked him if he had ever gone with a whore to a rundown hotel in the capital's downtown area.

He answered somewhat wordlessly taking off his clothes slowly as if he were in his apartment getting ready to go to bed in the middle of the bright room, pulling off his stockings, his complete suit, and his tie, and almost feeling the taste of the whiskey and the fermented cocktails on his tongue.

He pulled off a black ring that he had been wearing since his maternal grandfather had died almost twelve years ago. He undressed completely while he smiled and as Cristal rearranged

the bed, removed a thick comforter, and created awkwardly small unnecessary candle lights in each corner of the room.

He asked her if it was true that “women of the streets” (so he said that almost mumbling) didn’t kiss men, even if they were regular clients. Cristal answered him with the softness of her lips whose pink color had disappeared in some corner of the sheet that had been torn from the edges of the bed’s mattress.

They caressed each other without the passion he had expected along the way and at the moment he paid the taxi driver’s fare, there was a sort of protector or pimp. The green glow didn’t let him see her features in detail; although, he knew very well in the recent memory of the withered street that her face was beautiful, but somewhat gaunt.

He imagined her eyes glowing like those of a cow in the dark, her plastic doll arms, her turgid and nourishing breasts, and her feet that were tucked into ridiculous heels. He felt an impulse of sudden desire as he remembered and touched her body, and as he undressed her on the pretense of an impossible romanticism.

The mix of the green coming from the skylight and the yellow from the candles created the ambiance of a morgue, especially inside his head, which certainly had a different impression from that of Cristal, who was already almost naked—barely wore pieces of clothing on some parts of her body—, picked up the phone and asked for two glasses of whiskey with water and some ice, which Alfonso—his obviously false name—would pay for when they left.

He touched her legs, her breasts, and her face for a few minutes, and simply imagined sex with Cristal—her obviously false name, drawn with her minimal hairs on her dark and thin inner thigh, a seasoned crater in the middle of the flesh of the small woman, who barely rolled around

making little cries, while having her legs closed like a pair of rusty pliers and resisting while being half drunk and half absent.

He blindly and perpendicularly touched Cristal's body at an angle that allowed him to see her from the side, to take her breasts to his mouth, and to touch her back with a desire that was becoming concrete and burning.

Between small kisses, her voice barely came out from the green, white, and yellow ambiance.

"How often do you come here?"

"Never."

"Am I the first one?"

"I walked near the station many years ago. I can't walk now. I always go by car. I had to walk again today."

"I'm in luck then."

He shut her up with avid nibbles on her lower lip. Their bodies were at a ninety-degree angle from each other. The lust had become the preamble on which he simply imagined himself in the street after the sex act was over, the business with Cristal.

"Yeah, I once came here with my best friend from university. Women told us you don't kiss."

"They didn't kiss before. They were whores punished by religion like Jivaros with their mouths sewn, so their souls wouldn't come out like vomit."

He didn't know, with his legs in his restless fingers, if he had heard or imagined her words. It could have been a joke.

He put his fingers outside Crystal's body groping in the dark for her tongue with the tip of his own and touching the lamp with his fumbling fingers until he found a flat worn button. He pushed it. He found Cristal had an awkward resistance, so she folded herself like an insect on the edge of the bed.

The mix of tones—the green from the skylight, the gloomy yellow from the candles, and the artificial filament of the bulb of the small lamp—turned the storage room into a play of shadows— some parts of Cristal's face, her body folded in two like a folding chair on the sand, ornate curtains with wrinkles and torn pieces, which were painted with insipid flowers, and fingers that suddenly split and pieces of bodies stuck in an angular black.

He wanted to see her inner thigh in detail. He moved Cristal's reticent body, which was bathed in lavish chiaroscuros. The sheet, which was yellow (its natural color or that of the ambiance) covered her from her navel to her feet.

His desire had been transformed into something broad and indefinite and into an erection of his whole body. He remembered how much he had paid Cristal, and looked for her feet under the sheet trying to concentrate on the form of her toes, which were erect and moved like snails.

He pulled the sheet off her, while he panted and asked meaningless things slowly. The room was cold. Cristal's smell rose to his nose. She spread her legs like a dogs' instinct. She talked slowly in her sleep and stopped by the sea of shadows.

In complete silence, he listened to her beating heart or had the sensation she had a big one that filled her chest, abdomen, legs, temples, and lungs, which was fundamental, blind, abundant, and filled with blood that stopped. He tried to touch her, but his fingers were of metal at that moment. Crystal kept her head averted and sunk into one of the angled penumbras.

The smell was a stench deformed by the darkness and the creams that had dissipated in the course of the night. He shifted her body moving her to an edge of the bed that faced the lamp's fluorescent light. He prostrated himself with dying words in silence. Cristal covered her face.

His desire unraveled or changed form, broken into a thousand shards. He seemed to pray. He spread her legs as wide as he could. The stench leaped toward his face in the last drawn by the storage room's cold. Cristal tried to pull her inner thigh away from his wounded face for a moment. The stench became constant and green.

His erection slowly disappeared and was driven by something between disgust and an unbearable slovenliness. Cristal kept hiding and mumbling apologies with her dead voice in her throat. He struggled trying to determine the exact form of the flesh between Cristal's legs.

He placed a finger, and she moaned like an animal. The foul-smelling shreds came down on him in a new gush of rot. He turned away stepping into the shadows that grew like outstretched fingers as the lamp was turned off and the light from one of the candles was extinguished.

He knelt beside Cristal's body feeling his own watering. He saw her green eyes didn't cry or move. They looked like those of a porcelain doll, two bright cherries, or two turquoise stones, wet and rigid. He took her by the hands and decided to stop breathing and to extinguish the latency of an omnipotent desire. He saw Cristal like an animal crushed by a car on the edge of a deserted street.

"It's bullshit. It's all bullshit," he told a specter.

“Nobody cares about the rest of the body. Deep down, they don’t care about nothing more than that,” she pointed to her mount of Venus, from which came the smell that became part of the dull stench of the dump.

He decided not to desire her in spite of himself again. He prostrated himself before Cristal and closed his eyes.

“It’s bullshit,” he said looking at various parts converging on Cristal’s vulva.

“It’s just a fucking hole. Everybody likes it. You paid me already. Let’s finish.”

His closed eyes were heavy. He still retained the image of the deformed shreds of her vulva made of hanging, foul-smelling jerkies, a rotten cave that was inside Cristal’s body and was tiny in the shadows.

He forced himself not to desire her and forget he had walked during the night, his car was in the garage, and people had applauded him earlier that day. He forced himself not to desire her, to die as he closed his eyes, and felt the strength of his eyelids burning with fire.

The renunciation of all desire.

He put on his clothes slowly fumbling with the empty wallet carelessly and not thinking about the money Cristal had stashed in a round turquoise purse at all. He sweated slow cold water, which flooded his forehead. She blew out the rest of the flickering candles, and the storage room was once again filled with the greenish algae of a dirty night.

He paid the hotel owner with the bills he had been paid at the hospital two days earlier.

They went out.

It was impossible to talk on the street. Around a dark corner that foreshadowed the bus station’s distant white, Cristal’s hand let him go. He left her behind like a tree. He stepped into

the chiaroscuro play of wires dangling between the lighting poles, many of them unusable. The death of desire.

He thought about the ascetics and the beginning of the saints' exemplary lives. He knew, he no longer desired anything, he could never desire anyone, and he would have to set out on a new and intricate path of dead or mutilated desires.

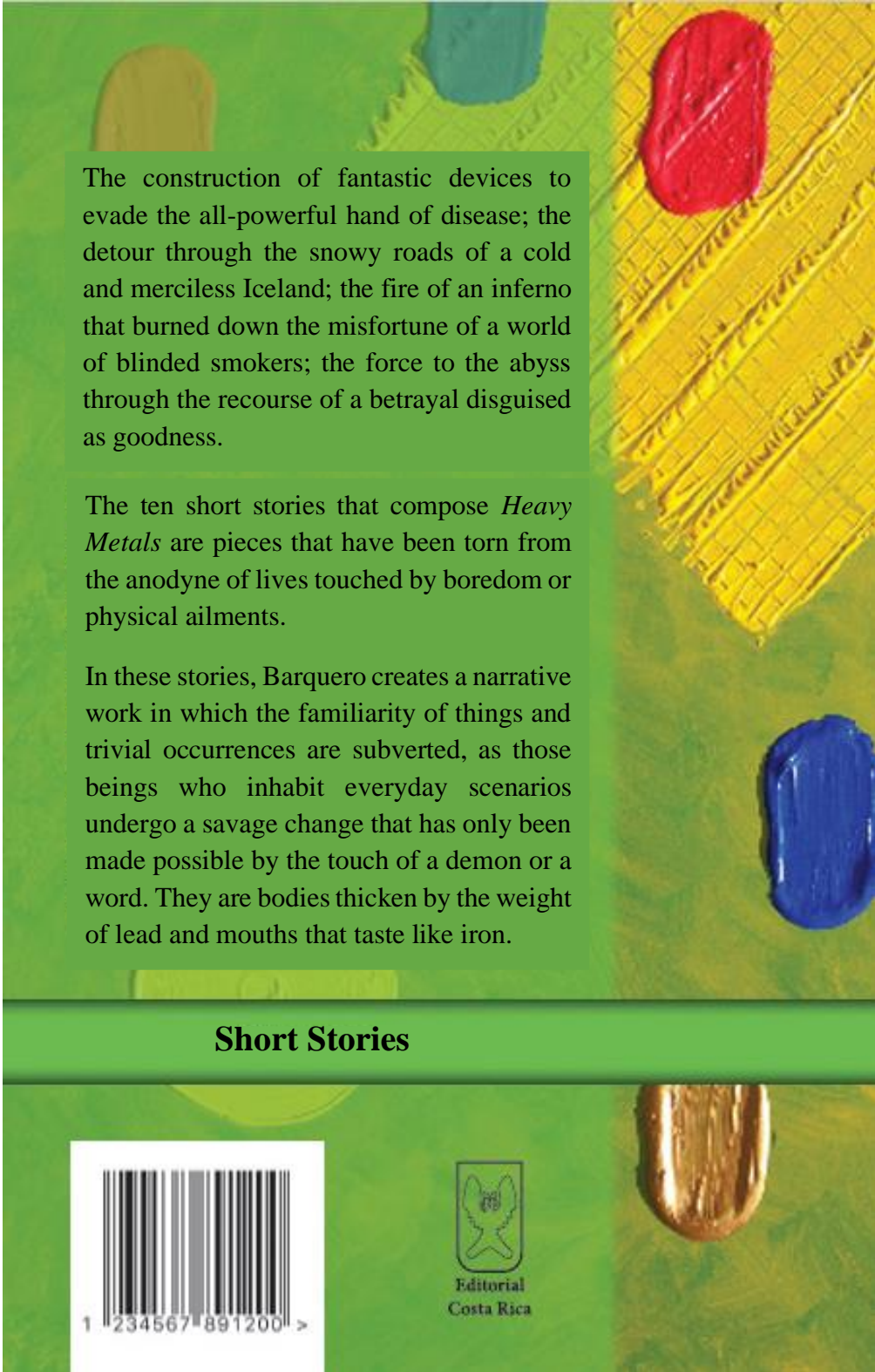
He walked southward retracing the route he had had to interrupt. It was the end of the desire, the quietism, the crazy vices, and the shattered libido. He touched his jacket pocket. The memory of Cristal's voice appeared like a specter in the cold early morning. He heard the screeching noise of two cats on some neighboring roof—the male's beaked phallus inflicting a stinging pain on the female.

It was an ascetic, a real one. He walked two hours to the apartment. He went up the stairs from the front door. He lay down. He was stiff and terrified. He put his hand in his pants' pocket sorting through lint and seams, which were misshapen masses of fabric and cavities he touched with his clumsy fingertips.

He moved his fingers slowly at first and then searched in a frenzy for a cigarette tip, which slithered in pursuit of a snake of tobacco, a filter like a death sponge, a foul-smelling, blind, muscular cavity, a heart, the shreds of flesh like flaps, and the fingers of Cristal, who smoked in some corner.

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The construction of fantastic devices to evade the all-powerful hand of disease; the detour through the snowy roads of a cold and merciless Iceland; the fire of an inferno that burned down the misfortune of a world of blinded smokers; the force to the abyss through the recourse of a betrayal disguised as goodness.

The ten short stories that compose *Heavy Metals* are pieces that have been torn from the anodyne of lives touched by boredom or physical ailments.

In these stories, Barquero creates a narrative work in which the familiarity of things and trivial occurrences are subverted, as those beings who inhabit everyday scenarios undergo a savage change that has only been made possible by the touch of a demon or a word. They are bodies thickened by the weight of lead and mouths that taste like iron.

Short Stories



Editorial
Costa Rica

Chapter V

Data Analysis

This section describes the research findings from translating the book *Metales Pesados* from Spanish into English. Moreover, it presents the results of the data collection instruments such as the textual analysis table, which was used to determine the particular features of the source text, the color-coding table, which indicates the various translation procedures that were applied throughout the translation process, and the translation glossary, which lists the most pertinent, challenging, and obscured terms.

5.1 Analysis and Interpretation of the Results

Three data collection instruments were used to answer the research question and the objectives of this study: the textual analysis table, the color-coding table, and the translation glossary. Accordingly, the textual analysis table made it possible to deeply analyze the singular characteristics of the target text to make decisions about the translation process. Next, the color-coding table helped to identify the translation procedures applied during the translation process, as well as their effects. Finally, the translation glossary ensured the consistency and quality of the translation by listing the most meaningful, complex, and obscured terms.

5.1.1 Text Analysis

The following is the textual analysis table, which presents the particular characteristics of the source text based on Newmark's proposed textual elements. Likewise, Newmark (1988) stated that textual analysis is used as a reference point to be considered while considering the translator's intuition (p. 21) and to analyze the text from a translator's point of view. In this way,

it helps to determine its intention and the form in which it is written to choose an accurate translation method and to recognize particular problems (p. 11).

Table 4

Text Analysis Table of the Book Metales Pesados

Text Analysis Element	<i>Metales Pesados</i>
Text Style	Narrative / Descriptive
Stylistic Scale of Formality	Informal
Stylistic Scale of Generality	Popular
Stylistic Scale of Emotional Tone	Warm
Text Function	Expressive
Type of Translation	Semantic / Communicative

Table 4 shows the text analysis of the book Metales Pesados by Guillermo Barquero—the researcher’s own creation.

5.1.2 Color Coding

The following is the color-coding table that was used for the subsequent thirty paragraphs, taken from the book *Metales Pesados*. This table is intended to represent through a multicolor schematic system the translation procedures that were implemented throughout the translation process. Thus, these paragraphs are shown in their source language, and then their translation in the target language along with the corresponding shades for each translation technique. In this way, this chromatic approach facilitates the recognition and evaluation of their effects.

Table 5

Color-Coding Table

Translation Procedure	Color scheme
Transposition	Magenta
Modulation	Purple
Omission	Blue
Amplification	Cyan
Explicitation	Brown
Literal Translation	Green
Compensation	Yellow
Equivalence	Orange
Adaptation	Red

*Table 5 shows the chromatic system that represents each of the translation procedures used in the following paragraphs taken from the book *Metales Pesados*—the researcher’s own creation.*

5.1.2.1 Color Coding: the book *Metales Pesados*

Paragraph 1

Su aspecto era igual que **el de** siempre, aunque un poco más pálido. Del salón, lo único importante era la inmaculada blancura, perfectamente medicinal. **Le** di la mano, y creí estar tocando un bloque de hielo. Bromeamos con el frío de **los** hospitales **y con** la deferencia o **la** amargura exagerada de **las** enfermeras, **con** sus pantalones blancos y la ropa interior **que** llevaban. Ese primer día **que lo** visité, hablamos poco de su enfermedad.

Por teléfono, esa misma noche, **me** enteré **de** que el día anterior **al** internamiento **se** había sentido débil, casi muerto. Palideció, fue hasta un laboratorio y pidió un análisis **de** sangre. Al cabo de dos horas –usualmente tardan un par de días en dar los resultados– **lo** llamó la encargada

del laboratorio, para decirle que había visto algo irregular en el frotis sanguíneo, bajo el microscopio.

His appearance was the same as usual but slightly paler. The only important thing about the room was the immaculate whiteness, perfectly medicinal. I shook his hand, and I thought I had touched a block of ice. We joked about the hospitals' coldness, the nurses' deference or excessive bitterness, their white pants, and the underwear they wore. That first day I visited him, we didn't talk much about his disease.

The same night, I was informed over the phone that the day before his admission, he had felt weak and almost dead. He paled, went into a laboratory, and asked for a blood test. Within two hours—they usually take a couple of days to deliver the results—the lab manager called him and told him she had seen something irregular in the blood smear under a microscope.

Paragraph 2

La leucemia es un monstruo de múltiples cabezas, que va minando los sistemas celulares del paciente. Bajan las poblaciones de glóbulos blancos, rojos y plaquetas. El paciente sufre de sintomatologías relacionadas con estas carencias. Hay anemia, infecciones oportunistas, sangrados excesivos. Imaginaba a Gabriel sangrando por la nariz, en su cama, mientras leía *La peste*. Me llamó esa segunda noche. Del otro lado del auricular, aparte de su voz, que parecía salir de una tumba, no se escuchaba más que el soplar del viento o un ruidito diminuto de la línea. Era tarde para estar llamando desde un hospital; lo habían dejado usar su teléfono celular. Hablamos de la leucemia, como dos extraños refiriéndose episodios en sesiones de alcohólicos anónimos.

Leukemia is a multi-headed monster that undermines the patient's cellular systems. White blood cell, red blood cell, and platelet counts are lowered. The patient suffers from symptoms related to these deficiencies. There is anemia, opportunistic infections, and excessive bleeding.

I imagined Gabriel bleeding from his nose in his bed while reading *The Plague*. He called me that second night. On the other side of the receiver, apart from his voice that seemed to come from a grave, nothing could be heard but the wind blowing or a tiny noise from the line. It was too late to be calling from a hospital. He had been allowed to use his cell phone. We talked about leukemia like two strangers referring to episodes in *Alcoholics Anonymous* meetings.

Paragraph 3

Aún no había iniciado la quimioterapia, no sabía por qué, pero decía que eso debía ser la prueba de fuego. Se sale de la quimio y te salvás, me dijo una noche. Cambiamos de tema varias veces, evitando las conversaciones incómodas en espiral, que volvían al tema de la enfermedad y el tratamiento, más mortífero que el propio mal. Me preguntó que cuándo iría. Habló de un artículo de la revista *El Arte de las Máquinas*, que leía después de comer y cuando pretendía descansar la vista del paisaje inalterable de la ventana. Necesitaba unas cuantas cosas para entretenerse: varias cuerdas delgadas, un trozo de metal aplanado, un imán.

He hadn't started chemotherapy, yet. He didn't know why, but he said that should be the acid test. "You finish chemo, and you're saved," he told me one night. We changed the subject several times avoiding uncomfortable, circular conversations that brought up the subject of the disease and the treatment, which was more deadly than the disease itself.

He asked me when I was coming. He talked about an article in the magazine *The Art of Machines*, which he read after eating and when he intended to rest his eyes from the unchanging

landscape outside the window. He needed few things to entertain himself—several thin wires, a flattened piece of metal, and a magnet.

Paragraph 4

Cuando nos pusimos de pie, lo busqué, para evitar perderlo en la aglomeración de cuerpos medio borrachos, charlas sin sentido y café servido en tacitas de porcelana. Caminamos juntos, después del abrazo de rigor. Le pregunté por la gente del Centro de Investigaciones. Me preguntó por el Instituto. Hablamos de fútbol, de revistas de nuestro gremio y de la muerte de nuestros padres, ocurridas en circunstancias y épocas muy similares. Me preguntó por mujeres, amigos de los “viejos tiempos”, viajes, lecciones en la universidad y librerías especializadas. Con el efecto del vino, aquello parecía una conversación acerca de carros último modelo, en medio de la selva amazónica. Reímos, no sé ni por qué.

When we stood up, I looked for him to avoid losing him in the mass of half-drunk bodies, meaningless conversations, and coffee served in little porcelain cups. We walked together after we hugged each other as usual. I asked him about the staff at the Research Center. He asked me about the Institute. We talked about soccer, trade magazines, and our parents’ deaths, which occurred in very similar circumstances and times. He asked me about women, friends from the “olden days,” trips, university lessons, and specialized bookstores.

Under the wine’s effect, it seemed like a conversation about late-model cars in the middle of the Amazon jungle. We laughed. I don’t even know why.

Paragraph 5

—¿Hace cuánto murió el doctor Morales? —preguntó Alberto. Le dije que no sabía. No que no sabía hacía cuánto había muerto, sino quién era el doctor Morales. Me habló de investigaciones, de viejos trabajos, de visitas y premios en Suecia, en el Karolinska. Claro que sabía de qué me estaba hablando, pero no quería recordar nada relacionado con el doctor Morales, el renombrado Sergio Morales.

—Sí, el doctor Morales. No me acordaba de él.

—¿No te acordabas? —preguntó Alberto, clavándome unos ojos como diminutas bolitas de fuego, brillantes de la borrachera que se nos había estancado. Le pedí al cantinero dos vasos de *whisky*: Sí, con un poco de agua, por favor, de lo mejor que tenga.

“How long ago did Dr. Morales die?” Alberto asked. I told him I didn’t know. It wasn’t that I didn’t know how long ago he had died, but who Dr. Morales was. He told me about research, old papers, visits, and awards at Karolinska in Sweden. Of course, I knew what he was talking about, but I wanted to remember nothing related to Dr. Morales, the renowned Sergio Morales.

“Yes, Dr. Morales. I didn’t remember him.”

“Didn’t you remember him? Alberto asked staring at me with his eyes that looked like tiny fireballs, dazzling with the inebriation that had taken hold of us. I asked the barman for two glasses of whiskey. Yes, the best you have with a little water, please.”

Paragraph 6

—Marcela está en París, haciendo no se qué cosas. Creo que investigando algo del ganado vacuno, no sé bien. Me imagino que te acordarás de Marcela.

—¿Marcela Acuña? Si es ella, sí.

—Cómo no **te** vas **a** acordar –ironizó Alberto, poniendo un énfasis raro en cada palabra. De pronto **me** sonó **como** si estuviera borracho, sentado en aquellas sillas largas **y** raídas, moviéndose nerviosamente, con un vaso cuya bebida **se le** derramaba por un lado de los labios, como **a** un niño.

—Alberto, **los** dos sabemos que fue **una cosa** inevitable.

—Pedazo de hij... –alcanzó a decir Alberto. Colgué. Sentí un temblor extraño. Recordé **a** Marcela, como hace tiempos que no hacía.

“Marcela is in Paris doing I don’t know what. I think she’s doing some research on cattle. I don’t really know. I imagine you remember Marcela.”

“Marcela Acuña? If that’s her, yes.”

“How couldn’t you remember her!” Alberto was ironic by putting a strange emphasis on every word. I suddenly thought he was drunk sitting on those long threadbare chairs as he fidged nervously with a glass whose drink spilled over the side of his lips, like a child.

“Alberto, we both know that was inevitable.”

“Son of a bit...” Alberto managed to say. I hung up. I felt a strange tremor. I remembered Marcela as I hadn’t done for a long time.

Paragraph 7

¿De qué viven en Islandia? Pues **de** lo más esperable en un territorio yerto rodeado de un mar que debe **de** ser como un gran infierno azul: de la pesca, principalmente. Es cierto **que** hay grandes industrias islandesas de fundición de hierro y aluminio, pero son los pescados **los que** mantienen en movimiento el fuelle económico de la isla. Debe **de** ser lo único vivo, aparte de las

personas que caminan los 365 días del año embutidas en sus ropas invernales, en su caso consustanciales a su naturaleza glacial.

Debo decirlo: todo esto lo aprendí a punta de malos polvos. Marcela y yo nunca fuimos amantes especialmente buenos. Sí, hay parejas de buenos amantes, y otras que, a pesar de poder amarse con locura o una profundidad inusitada, no saben hacer el amor.

What do they live on in Iceland? Well, they live mainly from fishing, which is the most expected thing in a barren territory surrounded by a sea that must be like a big blue hell. There are certainly big Icelandic iron and aluminum smelting industries, but fishing keeps the island's economic bellows in motion. It must be the only thing alive, apart from the people who walk 365 days a year in their tight winter clothes, which in their case are consubstantial to their glacial nature.

I have to say I learned all this from a lot of bad fucks. Marcela and I were never particularly good lovers. There are surely couples of good lovers, and others who, despite being able to love each other with madness or unusual depth, don't know how to make love.

Paragraph 8

Cuando era niño, coleccionaba de todo, además de estampillas y monedas: piedras de colores distintos, trozos de madera endurecidos por el tiempo, circuitos arrancados de viejos televisores que encontraba en el patio de la casa de mis abuelos. No quería recordar las colecciones. Pasé a las banderas del mundo. Intenté aprender de memoria todas y cada una. Muchos años atrás, había hecho avances importantes. Luego, en esa primera época con Marcela, la cosa se puso difícil, pues varios países se habían separado en más países, y habían aparecido banderas que no reconocía en lo absoluto, como la de Georgia, Kazajstán, Croacia. Todas se me

parecían. Como todo lo que no deja huella, no había grandes rasgos que las distinguiesen (la forma de la bandera de Nepal, el arbolito de la del Líbano, el escudo intrincado de Swazilandia, esos sí eran nemotecnias utilísimas).

When I was a child, I collected everything. Apart from stamps and coins, I gathered different colored stones, pieces of wood that had hardened over time, and circuits that had been torn out of old TV sets I found in the backyard of my grandparents' house. I didn't want to remember my collections.

I moved on to the world flags. I tried to learn every one by heart. I had made important progress many years ago. Then, things got difficult during that first period when I was with Marcela because several countries had separated into more nations, and there were flags I didn't recognize at all, such as Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Croatia. They all looked alike to me.

As everything that leaves no trace, there were no major features to distinguish them (the shape of the Nepalese flag, the little tree of Lebanon's, and the intricate coat of arms of Swaziland, which were very useful mnemotechnies).

Paragraph 9

En 1972, Bobby Fischer, genio del ajedrez, se enfrentó con Boris Spassky, campeón mundial ruso, que defendía su título ante un Fischer de 29 años. Fue la partida de ajedrez más importante y mediatizada de la historia. Fischer se cagó en los rusos, hizo múltiples desplantes, hizo gala de su naturaleza caprichosa. Fischer, en los últimos dos años de su vida, vivió exiliado en la misma ciudad en la que le ganó a Spassky: Reykiavik, capital de Islandia. En la foto de la

enciclopedia, aparecen los dos hombres, frente a frente; se nota el nerviosismo del ruso, las manos en la barbilla, el sentimiento de que estaba perdiendo el juego.

In 1972, a chess genius, Bobby Fischer, faced the Russian world champion Boris Spassky defending his title against Fischer, who was 29 years old. It was the most important and broadcasted chess game in history. Fischer fucked the Russians, rebuffed them multiple times, and showed off his capricious nature.

Fischer, in the last two years of his life, lived in exile in the same city where he beat Spassky—Reykjavik, Iceland's capital city. In the encyclopedia photo, the two men appear face to face. It is noticeable the Russian's nervousness, his hands on his chin, and the feeling of losing the game.

Paragraph 10

La cinta se detuvo. Ella no entendió cómo le había alcanzado el poco tiempo disponible para decir tantas cosas; se dio cuenta, casi de inmediato, de que no decía mucho, pero que entre las palabras dejaba huecos de aire que costaba no determinar, como pequeños siseos o sílabas dichas con las comisuras de los labios arqueadas hacia arriba, como un payasito feliz de un mal espectáculo de vodevil.

Fue hasta el teléfono, presionó el botón BORRAR y se imaginó que acuchillaba los labios de Arturo, que lo eliminaba como si estuviera pintado al óleo y aún no se secara, le diera brochazos y lo llenara de disolvente, hasta hacerlo desaparecer.

The cassette tape stopped. She didn't understand how he had managed the little time

available to say so many things. She realized, almost immediately, that he said little, but he left air gaps between the words that were difficult to ignore, like little hisses or syllables uttered with the corners of the lips arched upward, as a little cheerful clown in a bad vaudeville show.

She reached the phone, pushed the DELETE button, and imagined herself stabbing Arturo's lips and removing him as if he were painted in oil paints and hadn't dried, yet. She would apply him brushstrokes and fill him with solvent until he disappears.

Paragraph 11

De nuevo colocó el esparadrapo encima de la diminuta cirugía. Sonó el teléfono. No estaba para contestar aparatos ruidosos en el inicio de sus vacaciones. Cerró la puerta del baño, se desnudó y se duchó.

A las once de la noche, cuando había olvidado la llamada de dos horas antes, presionó el botón REPRODUCIR sin ganas. Supo que era Álvaro cuando iba de camino hacia la máquina contestadora.

¿Te acordás cuando me decías Alvarito? Alvarito, mi amor, besémonos como si fuésemos dos adolescentes. ¿Te acordás de esas palabras? ¿De aquel almuerzo que tuvimos debajo de aquel árbol cerca de la Escuela de Arquitectura, cuando preparaste espaguetis con espinacas? Esos detalles, Clarita, no se olvidan, enferman cuando se los recuerda, son manchas en la vida, pequeñas erupciones como lunares sobre el tiempo que nos va dejando.

Again, she placed the adhesive tape over her tiny surgery. The phone rang. She wasn't up to answering noisy appliances at the start of her vacation. She closed the bathroom door, undressed, and took a shower.

When she had forgotten the call she received two hours ago at eleven at night, she reluctantly pushed the PLAY button. She knew it was Álvaro when she was on her way to the answering machine.

“Remember when you used to call me Alvarito and tell me: ‘Alvarito, my love, let’s kiss each other as if we were two teenagers’? Remember those words? Remember that lunch we had under that tree near the School of Architecture when you made spaghetti with spinach? Those details can’t be forgotten, Clarita. They make you sick when they are remembered. They are patches in life and small rashes like moles upon the time that passes us by.

Paragraph 12

Clara, mi amor, te me has metido en el cuerpo como un cáncer. Quiero que todo vuelva a ser como antes, que los pequeñitos recuerdos no sean solo recuerdos sino vivencias. Clara, Clarita de mi corazón, has dejado una huella imborrable en este patético hombre en que me he transformado. Cuando te conocí, supe que sin ti la pasaría mal, que sería un cero a la izquierda en una vida destinada a la miseria...

Se cortó. La había hecho levantarse el pitido del aparato; no eran ni las cinco de la mañana. Presionó de nuevo el botón REPRODUCIR. Se fue despertando con cada nueva repetición. Primero le pareció un extraterrestre tratando de comunicarse.

“Clara, my love. You have gotten into my body like a cancer. I want everything to go back to the way it was before, and those little memories aren’t only reminiscences, but life lessons. Clara, Clarita of my heart, you have left an indelible mark on this pathetic man I have become. When I met you, I knew I would have a bad time without you and that I would be a nobody in a life doomed to misery...”

It was cut off. The device's beep had made her wake up. It wasn't even five in the morning. She pushed the PLAY button again. She gradually woke up with each new repetition. At first, she thought he was an alien trying to communicate.

Paragraph 13

El primer hombre espera la llegada del tren. Hace calor, y mientras aguarda forma un abanico con una hoja de papel periódico: noticias de dos días atrás. El primer hombre cree sentir la vibración en el andén, se pone de pie, se acomoda el sombrero y el saco. Falsa alarma. Se sienta de nuevo, consulta la hora. A pesar del calor, piensa que sería mala idea quitarse el saco marrón.

El segundo hombre camina hacia la estación. Lleva la boca tapada con un pañuelo blanco: el polvo es abundante y maligno, se mete por cualquier cavidad en la que encuentre albergue. El primer hombre mueve su cuerpo para darle campo al segundo hombre, en caso de que quiera sentarse a esperar también el tren.

The first man waits for the train to arrive. It's a hot day, and while he waits, he makes a fan out of a sheet of newsprint—from two days ago. The first man thinks he feels the vibration on the platform, stands up, and adjusts his hat and jacket. False alarm. He sits down again and looks at the time. Despite the heat, he thinks it wouldn't be a good idea to take off his brown jacket.

The second man walks toward the station. His mouth is covered with a white handkerchief. The dust is abundant and malignant. It gets into any cavity in which it finds shelter. The first man moves to make room for the second man, in case he wants to sit down and wait for the train, as well.

Paragraph 14

El primer hombre no sabe si esas palabras están dirigidas especialmente a él —en un alarde de poder, en un arranque de innecesario odio—, así que se concentra en olvidarlas. Yo prefiero el recorrido del tren B, dice de inmediato el primer hombre, como si la pregunta anterior (y, claro está, la subsiguiente respuesta) jamás se hubiera presentado en la realidad. Me imagino que va usted hacia Valle Calizo, señor, dice el primer hombre. No, voy a Humo. ¿Humo? Sí, Humo, reitera el segundo hombre, sin cambiar la modulación de la voz. El primer hombre no sabe qué cosa suena rara en las palabras del segundo hombre, pero siente un cosquilleo incómodo en la garganta, como si a la distancia el segundo hombre lo estuviera ahorcando.

The first man doesn't know if those words are directed especially at him—in a demonstration of power or in an outburst of unnecessary hatred—so he concentrates on forgetting them.

“I prefer the route of the B train,” the first man says immediately as if the previous question (and obviously, the subsequent answer) had never really been asked. “I imagine you’re going to Valle Calizo, sir,” the first man says. “No, I’m going to Humo.” “Humo?” “Yup, Humo,” the second man reiterates without changing his voice modulation. The first man doesn’t know what sounds strange in the second man’s words, but he feels an uncomfortable tickle in his throat as if the second man was hanging him from a distance.

Paragraph 15

Usted conoce las reglas, dice el primer hombre, poniéndose de pie. Además, agrega el primer hombre, me he quedado sin balas. ¿Cuál calibre maneja, amigo?, pregunta el segundo hombre. Treinta y dos, dice el primer hombre, limpiándose el sudor de la frente. Treinta y dos,

repite el segundo hombre, meditabundo; no es común tener un treinta y dos, sigue el segundo hombre, ¿la compró cerca? No, qué va, solo se consiguen en el Valle de los Búfalos, tren B, estación intermedia, explica el primer hombre, señalando las líneas paralelas que parecen extenderse hasta el infinito. Esa cachera es claramente de Colt, afirma meditabundo el segundo hombre, tocándose la orilla derecha de la barba, lo debió de haber conseguido en otro lado, prosiguió.

“You know the rules,” the first man says standing up. “I’ve run out of bullets,” he also adds. “What caliber do you handle, my friend?” the second man asks. “Thirty-two,” the first man says wiping the sweat from his forehead. “Thirty-two,” the second man repeats, thoughtfully. “It isn’t common to have a thirty-two,” the second man continues, “did you buy it nearby?” “No way. You can only get them in Valle de los Búfalos, B train, and midway station,” the first man explains pointing to the parallel lines that seem to extend to infinity.

“That holster is definitely Colt’s,” the second man, thoughtfully affirmed touching the right edge of his beard. “He must have gotten it somewhere else,” he continued.

Paragraph 16

El cuarto apestaba. Era el mismo hedor que bien conocía de los cuartos de hotel: mezcla de sudores de miles de cuerpos que han estado en el sitio, y de los motores de las pequeñas máquinas aspiradoras, que dejan pelusas invisibles. Las alfombras no ayudan para refrescar el ambiente; hay acumulaciones de polvo, detritos, insectos, heces de pequeños animales invisibles que, insensiblemente, se van acumulando con los años.

La escalera de caracol era lo que él hubiera podido llamar “hermosa”, o al menos “extraña” o, mejor que esos dos calificativos, “extrañamente hermosa”. Subió los tres niveles,

hasta toparse con el pomo mitad dorado y mitad herrumbroso **de** la puerta. La habitación no tenía número;

The room stunk. It was the same stench **he knew well from hotel rooms**—a mix of the sweat of **thousands of bodies** that have been there and the motors of the **small vacuum cleaners**, which leave **invisible lint**. Carpets **don't** refresh the ambiance. There are accumulations of dust, detritus, insects, and feces of **small invisible animals** that insensibly **pile up over** the years.

The **spiral staircase** was what he might have called “beautiful,” at least “strange,” or better than those two adjectives “strangely beautiful.” He **went up** the three **floors** until he **came upon** the **half-golden and half-rusty doorknob**.

The room **had no number**.

Paragraph 17

—No entiendo, señor —dijo Manuel, moviendo las manos hacia arriba, queriendo decir **que** podría entender, pero si el hombre **le** hablaba despacio. Repitió la palabra **dos veces más**, llevándose a los labios el dedo pulgar de la mano derecha, haciendo el signo inequívoco **que** quería decir “estoy bebiendo algo”. Manuel entendió **que** el hombre del hotel **le** estaba ofreciendo agua, a **lo** que aceptó, moviendo hacia arriba y hacia abajo la cabeza.

Después **de** traer un pichel lleno de agua y un pequeño vaso transparente, el hombre **se** puso a aspirar el cuarto. Manuel sacó el penúltimo cigarro del paquete y comenzó a fumar, olvidándose de la forma de revólver del encendedor.

“I don't understand, sir,” Manuel said moving **his hands upward** and trying to say he could understand, **only** if the man talked **to him** slowly. He repeated the word twice, bringing the

thumb of his right hand to his lips and making the unequivocal gesture to mean “I’m drinking something.” Manuel understood the man from the hotel was offering him water, to which he accepted bobbing his head up and down.

After bringing a jug that was filled with water and a small clear glass, the man set about vacuuming the room. Manuel took the penultimate cigarette out of the pack and began to smoke forgetting about the lighter in form of a revolver.

Paragraph 18

Pensó en las tres noches, contada esa, que le quedaban para abandonar la ciudad, el país, el continente. Sintió más hambre que nostalgia: no llevaba demasiado dinero, por lo menos no para darse grandes lujos. Había estado comiendo mal. Se metió la mano en el grueso e incómodo calzoncillo térmico, y alcanzó a tocar el pasaporte. Lo sacó; se extrañó de ver su foto y, casi al mismo tiempo, los dos billetes de 20 euros que le pertenecían aún, aparte de las monedas que le habían ido quedando de los buses, el metro y las esquinas de comidas baratas e insípidas. Pensó en los dos tipos, y en qué hubiera hecho si de verdad lo hubieran desnudado en la capa delgada de nieve y lo hubieran dejado sin la plata de emergencia—¡Plata! ¡Plata!, decían sus gritos furiosos en su francés rudimentario—, de la que pensaba aún guardar algo para la vuelta a su país.

He thought of the three nights, including that one, he had left to leave the city, the country, and the continent. He felt more hungry than nostalgic. He didn’t carry much money or at least not enough to afford great luxuries. He had been eating poorly. He put his hand in his thick, uncomfortable thermal underwear, and reached to touch his passport.

He took it out. He was surprised to see his photo and almost at the same time the two 20-euro bills that still belonged to him, apart from the coins he had kept from the buses, the metro, and the meals he bought from cheap and insipid food stands.

He thought about the two fellows, and what he would have done if they had really undressed him on the thin layer of snow and left him with no contingency money— “Dough! Dough!” he shouted angrily in his rudimentary French—, of which he thought he would still save some for his return to his country.

Paragraph 19

Llegaron al Instituto de Estudios Anglosajones. Era tarde. El salón principal del lugar era uno de los cinco posibles sitios para la presentación de libros en la ciudad. Antonio y Julián procuraron sentarse lo más lejos posible del frente, para no tener que saludar a Mario, que decía las palabras finales, con una gran sonrisa, ampliamente satisfecho de que Adolfo Rojas, uno de los poetas de la vieja escuela –maldito pedazo de verga, había dicho entre dientes Antonio, al entrar, porque los de su grupo despreciaban sin ambages a los viejos poetas de las figuras literarias recargadas–, hubiese aceptado presentar su poemario *Encrucijadas de un muerto*.

Gracias por estar acá, dijo Mario Sánchez, señalando al público, que estaba formado por varios de sus amigos, ciertos poetas menores, algunos miembros de su familia y, en el fondo, los poetas de Rectangular, los ciertamente distinguidos Antonio Luján y Julián Rodríguez.

They arrived at the Institute of Anglo-Saxon Studies. It was late. The main hall of the venue was one of the five possible sites for book presentations in the city.

Antonio and Julian tried to sit down as far from the front as possible to not have to greet Mario, who said the final words with a big smile and was amply satisfied that Adolfo Rojas, one

of the old school poets — “Damn piece of cock,” Antonio had mumbled as he entered because his group thoroughly despised the old poets who wrote with excessive literary figures—had agreed to present his book of poems *Crossroads of a Dead Man*.

“Thank you for being here,” Mario Sánchez said pointing to the audience that was made up of several of his friends, some minor poets, some of his family members, the poets of the Ediciones Rectangular group that were in the background, and the certainly distinguished Antonio Luján and Julian Rodríguez.

Paragraph 20

La novia de Mario Sánchez se llamaba Marta. Cuando Mario se la presentó a Antonio y Julián, lo hizo con su sonrisa inamovible de muñeco de cera, como enseñando un marlín gigante recién pescado. Antonio le dio un beso en la mejilla al conocerla; Julián le dio la mano, como a un amigo. Les pareció bonita. Era delgada, baja, de cabello largo, rojizo, muy blanca.

Brindaron de nuevo. Había dos botellas sin abrir en una repisa. Mario se había preparado para una celebración multitudinaria, que se había reducido a los seis que tomaban alrededor de la mesa de los tragos, sobre la que Mario había puesto aceitunas, frutas secas y quesos, como en la presentación. No se le borraba la sonrisa del rostro.

Mario Sánchez’s girlfriend’s name was Marta. When Mario introduced her to Antonio and Julian, he did so with his immovable smile of a wax sculpture as if he showed a freshly caught giant marlin. Antonio kissed her on the cheek when he met her. Julian shook her hand as if she were a friend. They thought she was pretty. She was thin, short, with long reddish hair, and very white.

They toasted again. There were two unopened bottles on a shelf. Mario had prepared for a multitudinous celebration, which had been reduced to the six of them drinking around the drink table, on which Mario had placed olives, dried fruits, and cheese as he did in the presentation. His smile never wiped off his face.

Paragraph 21

Antonio *se* limpió la frente. Sentía el sudor frío bajarle como hilos de mercurio, álgidos y venenosos. Vio a Mario dando su discurso y recitando versos *que* él nunca había escuchado. Quizá fuesen de Sylvia Plath, o de Rimbaud, todos *se le* parecían en esos momentos. Quizá fuese un poema *que* estaba improvisando Mario, hermoso y sangriento. Antonio *se* olvidó de los discos, *de* la música que no existía en la sala y del vómito. Neblinosamente recordó la presentación de *Encrucijadas de un muerto*, de Mario, y de *Instantes o fragmentos*, que él, Antonio Luján, había escrito para ganar un concurso en Barcelona, donde *se* había terminado publicando, pero que no llevaba muertes, ni taras insoportables ni episodios dolorosos que, a pesar de no conocer la historia *que* Julián había escuchado, adivinaba en la boca pegajosa de Mario.

Antonio cleaned his forehead. He felt the cold sweat trickling down like small, sharp, and poisonous threads of mercury. He saw Mario give his speech and recite verses he had never heard. Maybe they were by Sylvia Plath or by Rimbaud. They all sounded alike to him at that moment.

Maybe it was a poem Mario was improvising, beautiful and bloody. Antonio forgot about the CDs, the music that didn't exist in the living room, and the vomit.

He vaguely recalled the presentation of *Crossroads of a Dead Man* by Mario, and of *Instants* or *Fragments*, which he, Antonio Luján, had written to win a contest in Barcelona, where it had ended up being published, but which had nothing to do with death, unbearable defects or painful episodes that, despite not knowing the story Julian had heard, he sensed in Mario's sticky mouth.

Paragraph 22

Le dijo a su mamá que era una maldita perra desconsiderada, que era una viciosa del gran carajo; sin embargo, la quería, y muchísimo, entonces no había hablado en serio, o sí lo había hecho pero no se había preocupado por la dureza de sus palabras. A su madre no le importó en lo absoluto que su hijo mayor la insultara; todo lo que ella quería eran los putos cigarros. Y punto. Alguien mencionó, con evidente ánimo de echarle leña al fuego, que cómo era posible que vivieran en un pueblo así, de mierda, en un lugar tan alejado de todo lo imaginable, de los últimos pedazos de civilización, si es que así se le podía llamar al mercadito de la entrada de los caseríos menos desastrados, al lado de la carretera principal.

He told his mom she was a damn inconsiderate bitch and a fucking addict. However, he loved her very much. Therefore, he didn't mean it, or if he did, he didn't care about the harshness of his words. His mother didn't care her eldest son insulted her at all. All she wanted was the fucking cigarettes and that was all.

Someone mentioned, with the obvious intention of adding fuel to the fire, how was it possible for them to live in such a shitty town, in a place so far removed from everything imaginable and from the last shreds of civilization, if that is what one could call the little market at the entrance of the less unfortunate hamlet, which was next to the main road.

Paragraph 23

Los gritos de su mamá de pronto se disipan, como ratas huyendo. Sentado, se rasca las piernas, cargadas de pequeñas picaduras. No siente angustia, ni miedo, ni remordimiento. Los gritos vienen y van: malparido, ¿para qué putas lo traje al mundo? No sirve para nada, igual que su papá. Aunque si él estuviera, probablemente estaría calentando el carro en el garaje destartalado, dándole pequeños golpecitos al acelerador, para empujar la gasolina y hacer que se moviera el aceite, calentándolo en el frío de la noche de invierno.

Le sorprende no haber visto antes las rayas que aparecen sin estridencia, del otro lado de una cosa que es una montaña o un montículo de basuras, muy a lo lejos: rayos de alguna tormenta lejana.

His mother's screams suddenly dissipate like rats running away. While sitting, he scratches his legs, which are full of small itches. He doesn't feel anguish, fear, or remorse. The screams come and go— "What the fuck did I bring you into the world for, motherfucker? You're good for nothing. You're just like your dad."

Although, if he were alive, he would probably be warming up the car in the rundown garage tapping the gas pedal a little to push the gas and get the oil moving and warming it up in the winter night's cold.

He is surprised he hasn't seen the rays that appear dimly on the other side of a thing that looks like a mountain or a mound of garbage in the far distance—lightning bolts from some distant storm.

Paragraph 24

Horas sentado, siente un dolor en la columna. Se baja y busca a tientas las formas, en una oscuridad profunda de madrugada. Está medio dormido; lo despierta completamente el calor de la manija de la puerta. En el negro absoluto, la vaharada de carbón le entra como una plaga de moscas. Sale de la casa, moviendo los brazos entre una nube de humo y desperdicios secos. En la calle los perros son trazos de carbón, visibles a través de una luz artificial de luna nueva. Todas las casas son el mismo amasijo de cenizas, de pedazos que adivina negros. Todo está quemado, nadie existe en el pueblo. El silencio es interrumpido por el crepitar constante de todo lo que se consume por el fuego que ya no tiene qué quemar, que antes sonaba como el zumbido de la lluvia.

From sitting for hours, he feels pain in his spine. He went down stairs and gropes for the forms in the dawn's deep darkness. He is half-asleep. He is fully awakened by the door handle's warmth. In the pitch black, he gets charcoal puff like a plague of flies.

He leaves home moving his arms among a cloud of smoke and dry debris. In the street, dogs are traces of charcoal, which are visible through an artificial light of a new moon. All the houses are the same jumble of ashes and pieces he sees as black. Everything is burned and nobody exists in the village.

The silence is interrupted by the constant crackle of all that is consumed by the fire, which no longer has anything to burn down and used to sound like the pattering of rain.

Paragraph 25

En un día calmo, llegó intempestivamente. Apenas si se tomó el trabajo de tocar la puerta, en el arrebató de su locura que bien conocía. Entró sin saludar, diciéndome que la tenía lista, que recién la había terminado e impreso. Las tapas del manuscrito temblaban bajo sus dedos de

poseído. Con esto, la gloria, me dijo como si no fuera conmigo, hablándole a un ente abstracto que lo escuchaba sin moverse, sin reclamarle por su agitación y por la hora de la madrugada. Me puso el manuscrito en las manos, espetándome la seguridad de lo que me dijo sería su consagración. Salió sin despedirse, haciéndome el signo de los dedos que anunciaba una llamada telefónica, quién sabe cuándo.

On a calm day, he arrived at an inconvenient time. He barely managed to knock on the door in a fit of madness he knew well. He entered without saying hello and told me he had it ready, as he had just finished it and printed it. The manuscript covers trembled between his possessed fingers.

“With this, the glory,” he told me as if he wasn’t talking with me but to an abstract being that listened to him without moving and without claiming him for his agitation and the time of the early morning. He put the manuscript in my hands and reassured me that what he told me would be his recognition. He left without saying goodbye and made a sign with his fingers announcing a phone call, who knows when.

Paragraph 26

Esa iba a ser su quinta novela. Las cuatro restantes no eran malas, pero no salían de los lugares comunes de la denuncia social, el amor incomprendido al arte y el onirismo que todo lo resuelve y explica. Claro, esa era mi opinión de lector desordenado, que poco conocía de técnicas literarias, pero cuya opinión Gabriel siempre buscaba. En este caso particular, se trataba de algo que bien conocía: una historia de falsificación de arte. Conté los folios: 595, cargados de referencias históricas, enciclopédicas, artísticas; llegado al número 100, veía que intentaba algo nuevo, muchas veces muy bien resuelto. Aunque algo me decía que no sería entendida la obra en

la magnitud en **la** que Gabriel quería. Comenzando con el título: *Las manías duchampianas del disfraz*.

That was to be his fifth novel. The **other** four weren't bad, but they **were only about** the commonplaces of social **complaint**, the **misunderstood** love of art, and oneirism which solves and explains everything. **Of course**, that was my opinion as a **disordered reader**, who knew little of **literary techniques**, but whose opinion Gabriel always sought.

In this **particular case**, it **was about** something he knew well—a story of art forgery. I counted the folios—595, which were **filled** with **historical, encyclopedic, as well as** artistic references. When I reached the number 100, I saw he tried something new that **often worked out** well; even though, something told me the work **wouldn't** be understood at the magnitude in which Gabriel wanted it to be, starting with the title *The Duchampian **Obsessions** of Disguise*.

Paragraph 27

Se hablaba de Rose Sélavy, **de** Henri Rousseau, **de** la obsesión de un multimillonario que falsificaba continuamente cuadros de Klimt, luego de **la** afición de su esposa por Van Meegeren, quien inventara pinturas de Vermeer en **la** Europa posnazi. **En** la novela **se** intentaba llegar **a** la rebuscada conclusión, mediante las obsesiones febriles de los diez o doce protagonistas, **de** que **la** pintura (y **el** arte en general) estaba supeditada a los mandatos del dinero y **la** locura, y nunca del genio o la grandeza. En tres días leí el manuscrito completo, el que alternaba con un libro de Antoni Caralt, un ensayista español que hablaba de algo llamado “necesidad de autorreferencialidad”. No evoco **a** Caralt con fines enciclopedistas ni **de** borgianismos falsos, pero tengo que **hacerlo**, porque **le** hablé del tema a Gabriel el mismo día que me llamó para escuchar mi opinión de su intrincada novela.

It talked about Rose Sélavy, Henri Rousseau, and the obsession of a multimillionaire who continually forged paintings by Klimt after his wife's fondness for Van Meegeren, who made up paintings by Vermeer during post-Nazi Europe.

The novel attempted to reach the stilted conclusion through the feverish obsessions of the ten or twelve protagonists that painting (and art in general) was subject to the mandates of money and madness, and never of the genius or the greatness. In three days, I read the whole manuscript, which alternated with a book by Antoni Caralt, a Spanish essayist who talked about something called "the need for self-reference."

I don't evoke Caralt for encyclopedic purposes or fake Borgianisms, but I have to because I talked to Gabriel about the topic the same day, he called me to have my opinion on his intricate novel.

Paragraph 28

Le había gustado caminar mucho antes del trabajo en el hospital, antes de haber comprado varios carros último modelo, cambiados apenas envejecían el año de rigor. Mucho antes de los congresos y los viajes, de las terminales aéreas. Recordando que le gustaba caminar cuando era estudiante, incluso cuando había ingresado a la clínica en sus primeros tiempos como médico, no le pareció tan mal llegar a pie hasta el hotel y preguntarle a la muchacha pelirroja dónde estaba el salón 142B, el de las convenciones médicas.

La mujer no tuvo que buscarlo en la lista, pues sabía perfectamente que era el doctor Alvarado, el especialista en cardiología que tenía que dar la charla de las siete y media, y que por deferencia debía escuchar más o menos atentamente a los colegas del extranjero, que eran una cantidad considerable de quince.

He had enjoyed walking a lot before getting his job at the hospital and before buying several late-model cars, which were changed as soon as they were a year old. It was so long before congresses and air terminal travels.

He recalls he liked to walk when he was a student, even when he had joined the clinic in his early days as a doctor. He didn't think it was so bad to walk to the hotel and ask the red-haired girl where room 142B was located, the one used for medical conventions.

The woman didn't have to look for him on the list as she knew perfectly well that he was Dr. Alvarado, the cardiology specialist, who had to give the talk at seven thirty, and that out of deference he had to listen more or less attentively to the foreign colleagues, who were a considerable number of fifteen.

Paragraph 29

Salió a un pasillo que rodeaba a un patio central, que le recordaba la forma de un convento; fumó un cigarro y con este encendió un segundo, cada cual más fuerte en la garganta, más profundo. Cada uno le entraba como un sahumero tranquilizador.

Muy al fondo, unas voces hablaron algo sobre algún lugar al que ir, para conocer la capital, para ver cómo era la vida nocturna de este hermoso país tropical. Lo único en lo que pensó, mientras el humo se le metía en los pulmones, fue en que quería estar en la cama del apartamento, fumando y quizá con un vaso de vidrio, haciendo sonar los cubos de hielo mientras inhalaba y exhalaba el blanco fantasmal del cigarrillo.

He went out into a corridor that surrounded a central courtyard, which reminded him of the form of a convent. He smoked a cigarette and lit a second one with it, each one stronger and deeper in his throat. Each one went into him like calming incense.

In the background, some voices mentioned something about a place to go to see the capital, and to see what the nightlife was like in this beautiful tropical country.

As the smoke got into his lungs, all he could think about was that he wanted to be on the apartment bed smoking and maybe with a glass tumbler, rattling the ice cubes as he inhaled and exhaled the ghostly white part of the cigarette.

Paragraph 30

Se metió la mano en el bolsillo y escudriñó lentamente; aumentó la velocidad, sintiendo los pedazos de tela y pelusas en la yema de los dedos; sintió una tromba de sangre en el corazón, un pánico creciente; súbitamente se tranquilizó al recordar que el carro estaba en el taller, que no había perdido las llaves y tendría entonces que caminar.

Se despidió de aquellos cuyos nombres recordaba o que había visto en otros congresos de otros países. Tomó un pasillo y llegó imprevistamente a una salida lateral del hotel; un hombre elegante, un maniquí pálido, le abrió la puerta de hierro. Tardó casi diez segundos en ubicarse con respecto a la calle en la que estaba y a la ruta a seguir.

He put his hand in his pocket and scrutinized slowly. He increased his speed touching the pieces of cloth and lint on his fingertips. He felt a gush of blood in his heart and a rising panic. He suddenly calmed down when remembering his car was in the garage, he hadn't lost his keys, and he would then have to walk.

He said goodbye to those whose names he remembered or whom he had seen at other congresses in other countries. He went down a corridor and arrived unexpectedly at a side exit of the hotel. An elegant man, who was a pale mannequin, opened the iron door for him.

It took him almost ten seconds to locate himself with respect to the street he was on and the route to follow.

5.1.3 Translation Glossary

The following is the Spanish-to-English translation glossary, which includes the most challenging, complex, and obscured terms found in the source text. This ensures consistency and accuracy of the translated terms, avoiding ambiguities and giving uniformity to the target text.

Table 6

Translation Glossary

Source Term	Target Term	Grammatical Category	Definition
Amasijo	Jumble	Noun	An untidy and confused mixture of things, feelings, or ideas
Anodina	Anodyne	Adjective	Intended to avoid causing offence or disagreement, especially by not expressing strong feelings or opinions
Artificios	Artifices	Noun	A clever trick or something intended to deceive
Asceta	Ascetic	Noun	Someone who lives an ascetic life, often for religious reasons
Asedio	Siege	Noun	A situation in which the police surround a building where people are living or hiding, in order to make them come out
Aspereza	Roughness	Noun	The quality of having a surface that is not even or regular
Ávidos	Avid	Adjective	Very enthusiastic about something
Borgianismos	Borgianisms	Noun	Of or pertaining to the House of Borgia, a Valencian-Italian noble family who became prominent during the Renaissance

Cacha	Grip	Noun	A specific type of grip or handle that protrudes from underneath the mainframe of the gun
Cachera	Holster	Noun	A holder for carrying a handgun or other firearm, typically made of leather and worn on a belt or under the arm
Calaña	Kind	Noun	A group with similar characteristics, or a particular type
Chulo	Pimp	Noun	A man who controls prostitutes, especially by finding customers for them, and takes some of the money that they earn
Colgajos	Flaps	Noun	Something that is broad, limber, or flat and usually thin and that hangs loose or projects freely
Comatosa	Comatose	Adjective	Very tired or in a deep sleep because of extreme tiredness, hard work, or too much alcohol
Concupiscencia	Lust	Noun	A very strong sexual desire
Covacha	Storage room	Noun	A room for keeping things in while they are not being used
Craso	Crass	Adjective	Stupid and without considering how other people might feel
Deferencia	Deference	Noun	Behavior that shows that you respect somebody or something
Desavenencias	Disagreements	Noun	A situation in which people have different opinions, or an inability to agree
Desganado	Listless	Adjective	Tired and weak, and lacking energy or interest
Desgarbo	Slovenliness	Noun	The fact of being careless, untidy or dirty in appearance or habits
Desidia	Indolence	Noun	The state of showing no real interest or effort
Dicotomías	Dichotomies	Noun	A division or contrast between two groups or things that are completely opposite to and different from each other
Duchampianas	Duchampian	Adjective	Of or pertaining to Marcel Duchamp
Enclenque	Puny	Adjective	Small and weak, or not effective
Enhiestos	Erect	Adjective	In a straight vertical position, or standing up or out from a surface or body

Entreverado	Interspersed	Adjective	Having something in several places among something else
Escozor	Stinging	Noun	Characterized by a sharp tingling or burning sensation
Escupefuego	Firebreather	Noun	A performer who creates fireballs by breathing a fine mist of fuel over an open flame
Espeta	Blurts out	Verb	To say something suddenly and without thinking, usually because you are excited or nervous
Execrable	Execrable	Adjective	Very bad
Falo	Phallus	Noun	An image or a model of the penis, especially one representing the power of men to make women pregnant, or a penis
Farfullar	Mumble	Verb	To speak quietly or in an unclear way so that the words are difficult to understand
Fárrago	Farrago	Noun	A confused mixture
Filatelia	Philately	Noun	The collecting or study of stamps as a hobby
Frenesí	Frenzy	Noun	Excited, uncontrollable, and sometimes violent behavior or emotion
Fronda	Foliage	Noun	The leaves of a tree or plant; leaves and branches together
Frotis	Smear	Noun	A sample of material spread thinly on a microscope slide for examination, typically for medical diagnosis.
Fuelle	Bellows	Noun	A piece of equipment for blowing air into or through something.
Grupúsculos	Small groups	Noun	A group of 3 to 9 individuals
Hieden	Stink	Verb	To smell very unpleasant
Impávidas	Undaunted	Adjective	Still determined and enthusiastic, despite problems or no success
Impíos	Impious	Adjective	Showing no respect, especially for God or religion
Inasible	Indefinite	Adjective	Not exact, not clear, or without clear limits
Incólume	Unscathed	Adjective	Without injuries or damage being caused

Inusitada	Unusual	Adjective	Different from what is usual or expected
Jíbaros	Jivaros	Noun	A member of an indigenous people of the eastern slopes of the Andes in Ecuador and Peru
Jirones	Shreds	Noun	A very small, thin piece that has been torn from something
Letanía	Litany	Noun	A long Christian prayer in which the person leading the service speaks some parts and the other people at the service speak other parts
Macilento	Gaunt	Adjective	Very thin, especially because of sickness or hunger
Manierismo	Mannerism	Noun	A style in 16th century Italian art that did not show things in a natural way but made them look strange or out of their usual shape
Maremágnum	Welter	Noun	A large and especially badly organized number of things
Marlín	Marlin	Noun	A long fish with a pointed top jaw, often caught for sport
Melifluas	Mellifluous	Adjective	Having a pleasant and flowing sound
Metonimias	Metonymies	Noun	The act of referring to something using a word that describes one of its qualities or features
Monocordes	Monotonous	Adjective	Not changing and therefore boring
Mórbida	Morbid	Adjective	Relating to or caused by disease
Mustio	Gloomy	Adjective	Dark in a way that is unpleasant and makes it difficult to see
Nemotecnias	Mnemotechnies	Noun	The study and practice of improving one's memory
Nevo displásico	Dysplastic nevus	Noun	Also known as an atypical mole and is a nevus (mole) whose appearance is different from that of common moles
Nimias	Insignificant	Adjective	Small or not noticeable, and therefore not considered important
Numismática	Numismatics	Noun	The study or collecting of coins, paper money, and medals
Onirismo	Oneirism	Noun	A state of abnormal consciousness in which dream-like experiences and hallucinations happen while awake
Palpa	Feels	Verb	To touch something in order to discover something about it

Parca	Sparing	Adjective	Using very little of something
Pasmosa	Astonishing	Adjective	Extremely surprising
Poetastro	Poetaster	Noun	A derogatory term applied to bad or inferior poets
Pomo	Doorknob	Noun	A round handle that you turn to open a door
Proferir	Uttering	Verb	To say something or to make a sound with your voice
Prosaísmo	Prosaism	Noun	A manner, quality, expression, style, phrase or word that is prosaic
Proscrito	Outlaw	Noun	(Especially in the past) a person who has broken the law and who lives separately from the other parts of society because they want to escape legal punishment
Pusilánime	Faint-hearted	Adjective	Not being confident or brave enough; afraid of failing
Quemarropa	Point-blank	Adverb	fired with the gun touching or very close to the person or thing it is aimed at
Ráidos	Worn-out	Adjective	Something that is worn out can no longer be used because it is so old or because it has been damaged by continued use
Rebuscada	Stilted	Adjective	Not natural or relaxed; too formal
Reducto	Redoubt	Noun	A small, often hidden building in which soldiers can hide while they are fighting
Reticente	Reticent	Adjective	Unwilling to tell people about things
Reyertas	Squabbles	Noun	A disagreement, often about an unimportant matter
Rictus	Rictus	Noun	An expression in which someone shows their teeth in a smile, but looks strange or in pain rather than looking happy and relaxed
Risible	Laughable	Adjective	Silly and not deserving to be seriously considered
Sahumerio	Incense	Noun	A substance that is burned to produce a sweet smell
Soez	Rude	Adjective	Not polite; offensive or embarrassing

Soliloquio	Soliloquy	Noun	A speech in a play that the character speaks to himself or herself or to the people watching rather than to the other characters
Soporífera	Soporific	Adjective	Causing sleep or making a person want to sleep
Soterrada	Buried	Adjective	Placed or hidden underground
Súbito	Sudden	Adjective	Happening or done quickly or unexpectedly
Subterfugios	Subterfuges	Noun	A trick or a dishonest way of achieving something
Surcos	Furrows	Noun	A long line or hollow that is formed or cut into the surface of something
Teogonías	Theogonies	Noun	The genealogy of a group or system of gods
Tornasoladas	Iridescent	Adjective	Showing many bright colors that change with movement
Tremor	Tremor	Noun	A slight shaking movement in a person's body, especially because of nervousness or excitement
Tromba	Gush	Noun	Large amount of liquid or gas that flows quickly
Turgentes	Turgid	Adjective	Swollen or firm, usually because of being full of liquid
Usanza	Style	Noun	High quality in appearance, design, or behavior
Vaho	Whiff	Noun	A smell that you notice briefly
Vestigios	Vestiges	Noun	A small part left from something larger and more important, esp. one that is no longer used
Yerto	Barren	Adjective	Not good enough for plants to grow on it

Table 6 shows the Spanish-to-English translation glossary that includes the most relevant, complex, and obscured terms from the source text—the researcher's own creation.

Chapter VI

Conclusions and Recommendations

This section comprises the conclusions and recommendations obtained through the analysis and evaluation of the translation of the book *Metales Pesados* from Spanish into English. Likewise, the specific objectives are reviewed to discuss how they were achieved, the research question is answered, and the pertinent recommendations are included. Furthermore, these findings could be of great interest for future research and may serve as the basis of reference for other students who need to carry out a similar study.

6.1 Purpose of the Conclusion

The main purpose of the conclusions of this research is to present the results derived from the textual analysis and the translation process, so it is indispensable to provide sufficient information and evidence to demonstrate that the previously defined objectives have been successfully achieved. Thus, the results of the analysis of the translation procedures from Spanish to English applied to this literary work will be shown.

6.2 Conclusions

6.2.1 To translate the book *Metales Pesados* by Guillermo Barquero from Spanish into English for Editorial Costa Rica

The first step that was taken before starting the translation process was to read the book in general and then in depth in order to become familiar with certain features of literary texts, such as the author's background and writing style, genre, lexicon, idiomatic expressions, rhetorical figures, local cultural atmosphere, and context. Such characteristics demand a higher level of

translation difficulty, making it a more time-consuming process and involving more research. Then, since this is a literary text and according to what Newmark establishes for expressive texts, it was determined that this work would be rendered through the semantic translation approach with a touch of communicative translation approach, emphasizing the need to follow the forms and structure of the source text while trying to reproduce its effects. Based on this, the textual analysis elements were identified. The text is narrative-descriptive, the stylistic scale of formality is informal, the scale of generality is popular, and the emotional tone is warm. Furthermore, certain stylistic aspects had to be changed in the English translation, such as the paragraph division, which facilitates reading and prevents the readers from getting bored, and many subordinate sentences were separated by punctuation marks.

6.2.2 To apply various translation techniques to the book to achieve an accurate target text

The translation procedures applied to the translation of the book *Metales Pesados* were transposition, modulation, amplification, explicitation, literal translation, compensation, equivalence, and adaptation, which are listed in the color-coding table in Chapters III and IV. For this purpose, 30 paragraphs of 110 to 150 words each were taken from the book, and the different translation strategies were applied. The literal translation was abundant, especially because the intention was to maintain the forms and structure of the source text; however, equivalence, modulation, and adaptation were applied frequently since certain idiomatic expressions could not be translated literally, so they were adapted to the target culture in order to reproduce the same effects of the source text. On the other hand, transposition was also used repeatedly to make certain grammatical shifts related to adjectives, pronouns, nouns, and verb tenses in English. In addition, omission was used to suppress Spanish articles and relative pronouns, which are, in

most cases, superfluous in English. As a result, the importance of the translation procedures lies in the fact that they demonstrate the syntactic and morphological differences between the two languages and help to balance these linguistic nuances to maintain fidelity and convey the same message as the original text.

6.2.3 To evaluate the effect of the translation techniques applied to the book

After having applied the different translation techniques to the literary text using the color-coding table, it is possible to highlight the linguistic similarities and differences that can be found in each language, so it is unquestionable to determine that the use of literal translation is abundant, which complies with the principles established by Newmark. Thus, this literary text must follow the semantic translation approach and preserve the original text's semantics and syntax as faithfully as possible. Hence, it was not necessary to apply amplification and explicitation very often.

In addition, adaptation, modulation, and equivalence helped to give the translation the touch of the communicative translation approach. They helped to adapt idioms and phrases to the target culture. Likewise, transposition was required to achieve grammatical shifts in English, for example, adjectives, pronouns, verb tenses, and nouns. Then, omission was used to suppress articles and relative pronouns that are unneeded and redundant in English. Finally, it was possible to achieve a literary translation that expresses the same message as the source text and maintains its essence, sense, fidelity, cultural atmosphere, and stylistic resources.

6.2.4 To create a glossary with the most relevant terminology found in the book

Accordingly, a Spanish-to-English translation glossary was created, which includes the most significant, complex, and obscured terms found in the literary text and is intended for

readers of the book whose mother tongue or secondary language is English. In addition, the information included, such as source term, target term, grammar category, and definition, are pertinent to the target audience, so adding additional information would make the search process laborious. Moreover, this translation glossary not only provides a guide for readers to understand the more complex terms of the literary text but also helps to maintain consistency throughout the translation of the different stories, which ensures a uniform style and avoid ambiguity.

6.3 Restatement of the Research Question

What is the effect of the procedures and methods used to translate the book *Metales Pesados* by Guillermo Barquero from Spanish to English for Editorial Costa Rica? The answer to this question is founded on the principles and concepts discussed in Chapter II, along with the data collection instruments in Chapter III, which served as the basis for the textual analysis and the translation process. Besides, it is undeniable that the translation process had a higher level of difficulty since certain intrinsic factors must be taken into account when translating literary texts, so they demand more time, analysis, and research, such as literary figures, writing style, genre, and cultural atmosphere, which are not found in other types of translation.

Likewise, the textual analysis provided a more in-depth understanding of the work and the resources used by the author, such as the textual style, the stylistic scale of formality, stylistic scale of generality, stylistic scale of emotional tone, text function, and translation type, all of which were key elements that guided the translation process. In this way, the effects of applying the different translation procedures and methods to the literary text helped to understand the linguistic differences between the two languages and to achieve a translation that preserves the

essence, sense, and fidelity of the source text through the semantic translation approach with a touch of the communicative translation approach.

6.4 Recommendations

The following are some recommendations based on experience in translation that can be considered for future similar research. First, it is paramount to identify the field of translation for which the research is to be conducted since a wide variety of specialized fields can be found, such as legal, medical, technical, commercial, scientific, literary, etc. Therefore, depending on one's interest in a specific specialized field, one can begin to search for the documents to be translated.

Second, when dealing with literary translation, it is imperative to address several intrinsic features of literary texts that are required to produce a high-quality translation, such as the author's background and writing style, genre, rhetorical and stylistic figures, lexicon, idiomatic expressions, cultural atmosphere, and context.

Third, reading the literary text in a general and specific way before starting the translation process is also crucial, which not only helps to find out the elements mentioned above but also to comprehend the narrative, to know the rising and falling actions, to be familiar with the characters, their relationships, and their way of speaking, to identify the teaching and moral lesson, among other elements that will assist the translator during the translation process.

Fourth, when translating short stories like these, it is useful to take these tips into account:

- Keep in mind that the names of characters and places should be invariable.
- Idiomatic expressions have to be adapted to the target culture.

- Linguistic borrowings or adapted calques can be used sparingly to give a touch of “local color” in the target text.
- If the source text is made up of a single paragraph like some of the short stories in this book, it is advisable to separate it by paragraphs to give coherence to the target text and not bore the readers.
- Patience is required since literary translation involves more time, analysis, research, and re-reading.

Finally, literary translation entails a higher level of complexity than other fields of translation. However, it is an artistic and stylistic work that provides the translator with an opportunity for professional growth and new experiences.

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Annexes

Annex 1



Editorial
Costa Rica

DEPARTAMENTO DE PRODUCCIÓN EDITORIAL

San José, 27 de abril de 2022
ECR-PE-032-2022

Sr. Leslie Elizondo Mora

Director

Carrera de Inglés

Universidad Internacional de las Américas, C.R.

Estimado señor:

Por medio de la presente, le comunico que la Editorial Costa Rica ha otorgado la licencia de traducción académica al idioma inglés de la obra *Metales pesados*, de Guillermo Barquero, al estudiante José Pablo Corrales Paniagua, cédula 206520464.

El Departamento de Producción Editorial envía como documentos adjuntos a este oficio la licencia de uso de la obra y el libro completo en formato PDF. Asimismo, se pone a disposición del estudiante para cualquier consulta con respecto al texto o a su uso mientras realice su trabajo de graduación.

Sin otro particular, se despide cordialmente,

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Annex 2

PERMISO GRATUITO PARA TRADUCCIÓN AL IDIOMA INGLÉS
TÍTULO DE LA OBRA: METALES PESADOS
AUTOR: GUILLERMO BARQUERO UREÑA

Por medio de la presente, la **EDITORIAL COSTA RICA**, empresa pública estatal creada mediante Ley N.º 2366 de 10 de junio de 1959, con cédula jurídica N.º 3-007-051128 representada en este acto por la señora **MARÍA ISABEL BREN ES ALVARADO**, mayor, divorciada dos veces, máster en Administración de Empresas, vecina de Residencial Monserrat, casa número dieciocho H, en distrito Concepción, del cantón La Unión, en Cartago, con cédula de identidad número tres-doscientos cincuenta y cinco-setecientos ochenta y cinco (3-0255-0785), en calidad de Gerente de la Editorial, según consta en el Registro Público, Sección Mercantil, al Tomo quinientos sesenta y ocho, Asiento siete mil cuarenta y siete, Consecutivo uno empresa pública estatal creada mediante Ley N.º 2366 de 10 de junio de 1959, Cédula jurídica Tres- Cero cero siete-cero quinientos once-veintiocho, que para los efectos del presente permiso se denominará **LA EDITORIAL**, y **CONSIDERAN DO:**

1. Que la Editorial Costa Rica posee los derechos patrimoniales de la obra *Metales pesados*, del autor Guillermo Barquero Ureña.
2. Que la Editorial Costa Rica es la entidad autorizada para otorgar el permiso de traducción y publicación **con fines académicos** de la obra descrita según lo establecido en los incisos 1) y m) del artículo 4 de la Ley N.º 6683 Ley de Derechos de Autor y Derechos Conexos, y las expresiones derivadas de distribución al público y divulgación de conformidad con lo señalado en los incisos 4, 7, 8, 11, 32 y 38 del Artículo 3 del Reglamento a la Ley de Derechos de Autor y Derechos Conexos.
3. La solicitud gestionada ante Editorial Costa Rica, mediante correo



PERMISO GRATUITO PARA TRADUCCIÓN AL IDIOMA INGLÉS
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electrónico, suscrita por el estudiante José Pablo Corrales Paniagua, cédula 206520464, manifiesta el interés por traducir al idioma inglés la obra *Metales pesados*, de Guillermo Barquero, para un proyecto académico del curso Tesis de Graduación de la Universidad Internacional de las Américas (UIA).

4. Que "La Editorial tiene como fin principal el **fomento de la cultura del país** mediante la edición de obras literarias, artísticas y científicas de costarricenses", según disposición del artículo 2 de la Ley N.º 2366, y esta es una oportunidad de poseer un insumo para dar a conocer la literatura costarricense en otro idioma.
5. Que La Editorial tiene como **MISIÓN**: "Somos la Editorial del Estado **que fomenta la cultura** del país mediante la edición, **difusión y comercialización de obras** con contenido literario, artístico o científico que contribuyan de manera significativa a la educación y al disfrute de los lectores; bajo los principios éticos de excelencia, creatividad y confiabilidad" y su **VISIÓN** es la de "Constituirnos en un pilar para la creación literaria, de excelencia, para el desarrollo y **difusión de la cultura costarricense en los ámbitos nacional e internacional.**"
6. Que Editorial Costa Rica como titular de los derechos de explotación está de acuerdo en apoyar el proyecto desde un punto de vista educativo, cultural y de difusión.

PORTANTO:

SE OTORGA EL PERMISO GRATUITO para la traducción al idioma inglés,



PERMISO GRATUITO PARA TRADUCCIÓN AL IDIOMA INGLÉS
TÍTULO DE LA OBRA: METALES PESADOS
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en observancia de los usos honrados, con fines académicos y culturales, a la obra completa *Metales pesados*, del autor Guillermo Barquero Ureña, como proyecto para la Tesis de Graduación de la Licenciatura en inglés con énfasis en Traducción, de la Universidad Internacional de las Américas (UIA).

La presente licencia de traducción se otorga sujeta a la estricta observancia del cumplimiento de los siguientes requisitos:

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TÍTULO DE LA OBRA: METALES PESADOS
AUTOR: GUILLERMO BARQUERO UREÑA

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Se extiende la presente autorización, en San José el martes, 27 de abril de 2022.

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Annex 3

Departamento de Producción Editorial
ECR-PE-003-2023
Pág. 1 de 1

San José, 9 de febrero de 2023
ECR-PE-003-2023

Señor
Leslie Elizondo Mora
Director
Carrera de Inglés
Universidad Internacional de las Américas, C.R.

Asunto: Entrega de traducción del libro *Heavy Metals* por parte del estudiante
José Pablo Corrales Paniagua

Estimado señor:

Por medio de la presente, le comunico que el estudiante José Pablo Corrales Paniagua, cédula 206520464, entregó al Departamento de Producción Editorial de la Editorial Costa Rica la obra *Heavy Metals*, traducción al inglés de la obra *Metales pesados*, de Guillermo Barquero.

Sin otro particular, se despide cordialmente,

LAURA SOLANO RIVERA (FIRMA)
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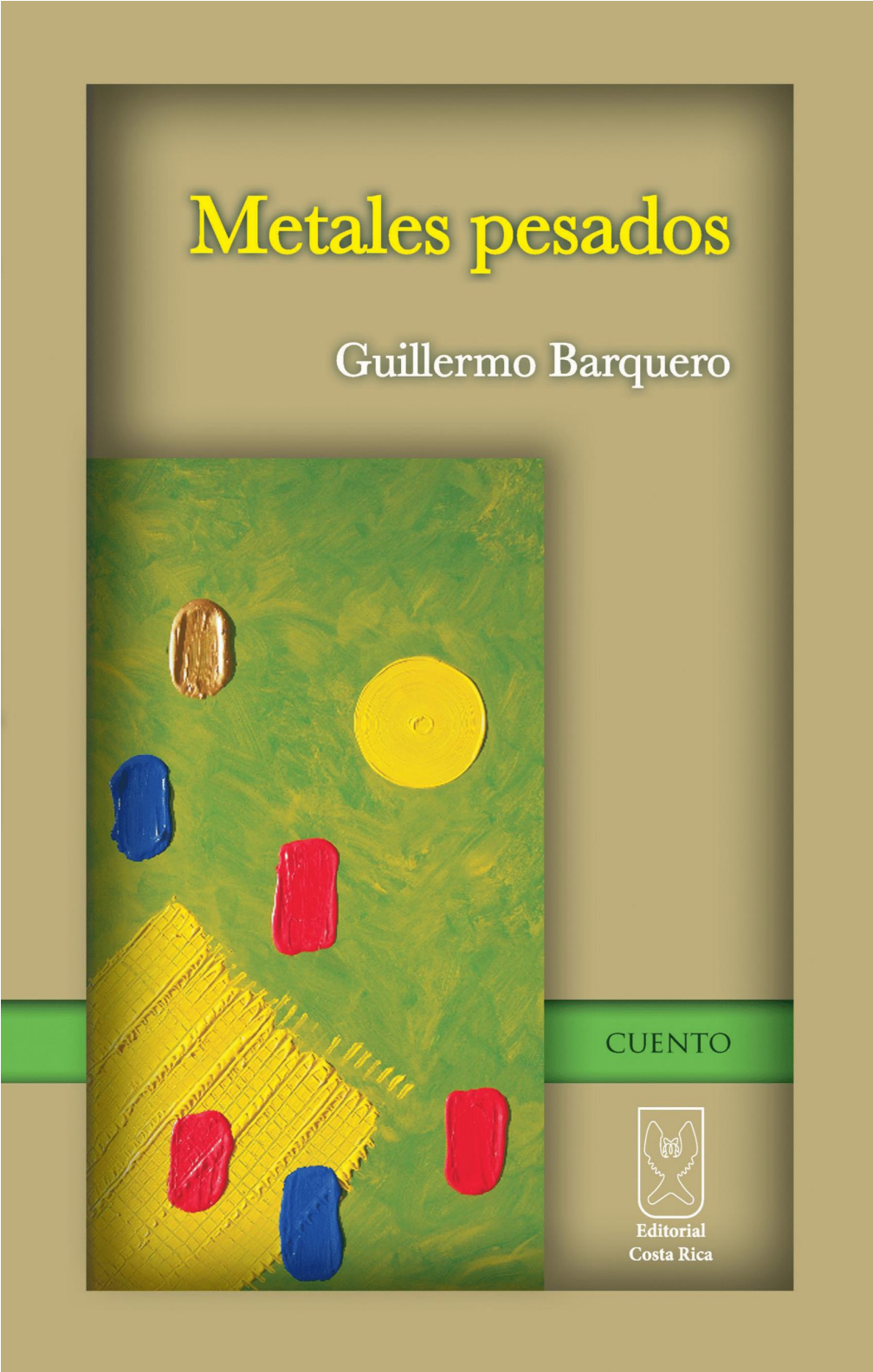
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Annex 4



Metales pesados

Guillermo Barquero

Metales pesados



Editorial
Costa Rica

IMPERIO DE ESCUPEFUEGOS

Para Christian Aguilar

Su aspecto era igual que el de siempre, aunque un poco más pálido. Del salón, lo único importante era la inmaculada blancura, perfectamente medicinal. Le di la mano, y creí estar tocando un bloque de hielo. Bromeamos con el frío de los hospitales y con la deferencia o la amargura exagerada de las enfermeras, con sus pantalones blancos y la ropa interior que llevaban. Ese primer día que lo visité, hablamos poco de su enfermedad.

Por teléfono, esa misma noche, me enteré de que el día anterior al internamiento se había sentido débil, casi muerto. Palideció, fue hasta un laboratorio y pidió un análisis de sangre. Al cabo de dos horas –usualmente tardan un par de días en dar los resultados– lo llamó la encargada del laboratorio, para decirle que había visto algo irregular en el frotis sanguíneo, bajo el microscopio. Ese algo raro no lo alarmó, así que esperó varias horas antes de ir por los resultados. Cuando llegó, ya le tenían una orden de internamiento de emergencia en el hospital. Creyó que se trataba de una broma o una exageración. Se internó y, según me contaba por teléfono, se había visto en el espejo de la habitación cuando lo habían cambiado de ropa, y sintió que tenía súbitamente 40 años más, y que estaba ajado, y que la piel se le había convertido en un pellejo de reptil. No hablamos de la enfermedad en sí, sino de su posible gravedad, de algo que ninguno de los dos llamó incertidumbre, pero que lo era realmente.

Al día siguiente, entré de nuevo en las blancas salas del hospital. Me extravié dos veces seguidas –pasillos intrincados, malas indicaciones espaciales, que se me hicieron más llevaderas por el café con leche de una máquina expendedora–, y finalmente llegué al salón donde estaba internado Gabriel. Oncología 2 de hombres. Algunos enfermos conversaban sin ánimo; otros, según esperaba en un salón de oncología, se entregaban a descansos pesados y pálidos, acordes con la gravedad del rótulo de la entrada.

Gabriel leía. *La peste*, de Camus. Leucemia, me dijo, sin mostrar sorpresa alguna. Mi rostro, espero, fue de impasibilidad total. Le pregunté qué seguía, si la quimioterapia, la radioterapia, o ninguna de las anteriores; conocía poco más que eso. Gabriel me dio varias explicaciones que ni él mismo entendía, mencionando los nombres de dos médicos que recién le habían presentado y dos alas del hospital, cuyos nombres no escuché, se reclinó hasta alcanzar la manija metálica y verde de la pequeña mesa de noche, guardó el libro –alcancé a ver que le habían llevado toda una pequeña biblioteca– y sacó una revista de portada brillante, que parecía recién comprada: *El Arte de las Máquinas*. Su papá, don Gabriel, se la había llevado, para que se entretuviera con algo más liviano que los libros, que no lo dejarían recuperarse en buena forma, según le había tratado de explicar.

Sí, leucemia. Cuando salí del salón, y los siguientes días, leí un par de artículos acerca de la leucemia, que no me permitieron definirla como quería. Se trata de una enfermedad de muchas caras, todas complejas y a la vez tan matizadas que no permiten enmarcarla, como se haría con las piedras en el riñón o la ceguera. En la ceguera, la persona no ve; si es parcial, ve un poco, pero no hay mucho más que decir; si es total, no ve absolutamente nada, se trate de las causas de las que se trate. La leucemia es un monstruo de múltiples cabezas, que va minando los sistemas celulares del paciente. Bajan las poblaciones de glóbulos blancos, rojos y plaquetas. El paciente sufre de sintomatologías relacionadas con estas carencias. Hay anemia, infecciones oportunistas, sangrados excesivos. Imaginaba a Gabriel sangrando por la nariz, en su cama, mientras leía *La peste*. Me llamó esa segunda noche. Del otro lado del auricular, aparte de su voz, que parecía salir de una

tumba, no se escuchaba más que el soplar del viento o un ruidito diminuto de la línea. Era tarde para estar llamando desde un hospital; lo habían dejado usar su teléfono celular. Hablamos de la leucemia, como dos extraños refiriéndose episodios en sesiones de alcohólicos anónimos. Le dije lo poco que yo sabía, tratando de explicarle lo que había captado de los artículos, que no había sido demasiado; él me dio sus opiniones, lo que había escuchado de boca de los médicos y lo que había leído en un folletito que le dieron cuando se internó. Quedamos en que ninguno de los dos sabía gran cosa. De lo que sí estábamos seguros, acordamos, era de la gravedad de su estado, aunque ninguno de los dos lo dijera abiertamente. Me dijo que le costaba dormirse: un niño de 12 años – ni se fijó en el nombre, solo en la fecha de nacimiento en la cabecera de la cama– gemía constantemente del dolor, decía que le iban a explotar los riñones, que se estaba muriendo; cuando cerraba los ojos, las lamentaciones en voz baja inundaban el silencio del salón de Oncología 2 de hombres.

No pude visitarlo por cinco días. Cuestiones de trabajo. Hablamos todas las noches por teléfono. Bromeábamos como en la época lejana de la escuela y el colegio. Yo olvidaba que Gabriel estaba del otro lado, con moribundos y gente muy enferma o sin esperanza. Él parecía olvidarlo, por descuido o por simple deliberación: aseguraba que su estado no era tan malo como el del resto. Bueno, algunos estaban mejor, pero la mayoría eran seres desahuciados y verdosos. Eso decía, una y otra vez. Leía casi todo el tiempo. Había terminado *La peste*; estaba con algo de Oé, que lo tenía fascinado. Aún no había iniciado la quimioterapia, no sabía por qué, pero decía que eso debía ser la prueba de fuego. Se sale de la quimio y te salvás, me dijo una noche. Cambiamos de tema varias veces, evitando las conversaciones incómodas en espiral, que volvían al tema de la enfermedad y el tratamiento, más mortífero que el propio mal. Me preguntó que cuándo iría. Habló de un artículo de la revista *El Arte de las Máquinas*, que leía después de comer y cuando pretendía descansar la vista del paisaje inalterable de la ventana. Necesitaba unas cuantas cosas para entretenerse: varias cuerdas delgadas, un trozo de metal aplanado, un imán. No pregunté nada; solo me dijo que le comprara esas cosas, que después hablaríamos del tema.

Cuando entré de nuevo en el salón, casi una semana después, me recibió el fantasma de Gabriel, idéntico al Gabriel del primer día de internamiento, pero con la mirada más honda, con los pómulos más azules, adaptado perfectamente a la atmósfera de alguien con leucemia en un salón de oncología. Nos abrazamos, algo que casi nunca hacíamos. Bromeamos, como era de esperarse. Las enfermeras pasaban de izquierda a derecha, en aquel pasillo con tres asientos; hablábamos de la ropa interior bajo los pantalones blancos. Él mencionó la quimioterapia; yo, la leucemia como mal crónico y extraterrestre–había leído un par de cosas más que terminaron de confundirme–. Le llevé las cosas que me había pedido, sin hacer preguntas. En el salón, me mostró de qué se trataba: un artículo acerca de la historia de las máquinas tragamonedas, desde los viejos modelos mecánicos, con manzanas en la pantalla, ruidosos y pesados, hasta los modernos equipos electrónicos, que imitaban los anteriores, torpe y robóticamente. Todo un número de *El Arte de las Máquinas*, dedicado a las tragamonedas. Gabriel no me explicó nada, simplemente guardó la revista y la bolsa que le llevé en una gaveta de sus estantes. Tenía el libro de Oé casi terminado; seguiría con *Alcools*, de Apollinaire. No le quedaba más remedio que atiborrarse de libros, me dijo, sin ironía. Tampoco estaba para reparar en géneros literarios.

Iría todos los días que pudiera. Algunos, según le conté, me sería imposible, habría asuntos importantes en el trabajo. Hablamos dos días después. Me llamó a las once y media de la noche. No era tarde, le dije dos veces; de todas formas, redactaba dos cartas en el computador, así que no me había despertado ni interrumpido. Me dijo que sudaba, que había comenzado el tratamiento, o una parte preliminar, para acondicionar el cuerpo. Me lo imaginé, sin vellos, con forma de gran

huevo calvo, amarillo y enfermo. Su voz no sonaba enferma, sin embargo. Hablamos de libros, del aburrimiento, de los gemidos del niño de 12 años. De las enfermeras. De la vida, puta e ingrata.

Pude ir hasta seis días después. Esperaba a un Gabriel arruinado, vomitando sangre –me logró convencer de que fuera, cuando le dije que no quería molestarlo–; encontré al Gabriel intacto, un poco más pálido, con todo el cabello. Se dio cuenta de mi reacción y explicó los periodos y retrasos del hospital. Además, no había llegado la parte violenta del tratamiento. Nos sentamos en la cama, en el salón de Oncología 2 de hombres; se había instalado el olor medicamentoso y sedante del resto del edificio. El niño de 12 años jugaba con un aparatito electrónico. Me miró cuando entré. Imaginé sus gemidos.

Esto era sencillo antes, me dijo Gabriel, tomando la revista entre las manos. Estaba arrugada, y parecía una edición de 30 años atrás. Le pregunté qué cosa era sencilla antes. Hacer fraudes con las máquinas tragamonedas, sacar toda la plata, hacerlas escupir y vomitar, respondió Gabriel. Abrió la gaveta de metal en el mueble, al lado de la cama. Me mostró un artefacto que parecía un saltamontes de hilo, amenazador y blanco, entreverado con la placa de metal y el imán. Para esto era lo que te pedí, dijo. Alcé los hombros. Explicó: con algo así, los antiguos estafadores sacaban todas las monedas de las máquinas. Se trata de un simple mecanismo de pequeñas poleas, levantadas por los hilos. Me enseñó los diagramas del artículo de la revista. Interesante, dije y pensé. Muy interesante. Ni siquiera tenían que bajar la palanca de la máquina, dijo, lo hacían a veces para disimular. ¿Y Apollinaire?, cambié bruscamente de tema. Leyó *Zone* y luego, más por curiosidad que por aburrimiento, lo cerró y siguió explorando el artículo de las máquinas tragamonedas.

Sacó una hoja rectangular, de un cuaderno de notas, con una lista de artículos que yo debía llevarle lo más pronto posible; sí, tenía que ver con las máquinas. No quedamos en fechas, solo en hablar cuando nos fuera posible.

Pasaron dos, tres días y nada. Imaginaba a Gabriel siendo sometido a la parte violenta de la quimioterapia, si es que había una etapa particularmente violenta dentro de esa atrocidad. Había leído más artículos médicos, y me iba pareciendo todo demasiado siniestro, y temía llamar a Gabriel y escuchar un cadáver hablando, escupiendo y lamentándose de su maldita suerte.

El teléfono sonó, y creí estar soñando. Nunca adiviné la hora, pero era una madrugada fría en pleno febrero. La voz de Gabriel estaba inalterada. Ni siquiera hablamos de lo tarde que era. Me contó que no podía dormir, ya no tanto por los gemidos del niño de 12 años, que había estado algo callado los últimos días, sino por sus propios gemidos internos. Sentía que los órganos le iban a estallar. Vomitaba varias veces al día, o tenía arcadas insoportables, vuelcos nauseabundos de un cuerpo que sentía como lleno de plomo. Me preguntó por los artículos de la lista. ¿Cuál lista?, le dije; estaba medio dormido. La de la última vez, dijo un Gabriel que no parecía el de los vómitos y las arcadas insoportables. Le dije que había comprado todo. Mentí a medias: no había podido conseguir una lámina de plástico antirreflejos que me había pedido. Nada del otro mundo. Colgué. Quedamos en vernos al día siguiente, en la tarde.

Gabriel estaba leyendo la revista, cuando entré en el salón. Me saludaron dos hombres, a quienes apenas recordaba. El niño de 12 años me miró; me pareció un perrito bajo la lluvia. Ahora sí me topé con otro Gabriel, arrugado, de 200 años, con la lengua de trapo, con los lentes puestos, mustio y sabio. Después de un abrazo difícil –le dolía el cuerpo y, particularmente, el costado derecho–, entramos en los detalles que yo adivinaba como menos escabrosos del tratamiento y del desarrollo de la enfermedad: debilidad extrema, sentirse como un pedazo de vidrio a punto de

estallar, manchas en el cuerpo, visión borrosa. Nos detuvimos en la conversación, pues Gabriel puso el dedo índice en la página de la revista. ¿Tenés todos los materiales?, preguntó suavemente, como si fuera un anciano. Los saqué de la bolsita de plástico. Repasó la compra, asintiendo, concentrado. Me dijo que era todo lo que necesitaba, en efecto. Cuando la tecnología de las máquinas tragamonedas avanzó, en vez del sistema mecánico, obsoleto y predecible, los dueños de los casinos, particularmente en el estado de Nevada (Las Vegas está allí), idearon el sistema de detección de las monedas depositadas por medio de una especie de rayo láser, delgado y muy preciso, imposible de engañar por cualquier estafador. Gabriel dijo que eso no era nada, que él sabía exactamente el mecanismo de vulneración de esa tecnología, de por sí pasada de moda. Con los materiales, lo tendría listo en un par de días. Le pregunté cómo probar la eficacia. Me dijo que eso no importaba, sino construir detalladamente el pequeño artefacto, difícil de detectar debajo de camisas de manga larga. El plástico antirreflejos haría todo el trabajo, así de simple, bloqueando apenas el paso del haz de luz, engañando a la máquina. Me pareció bastante razonable, aunque de nuevo le pregunté por la importancia práctica de todo ese asunto de los artefactos en forma de insectos electrónicos y máquinas tragamonedas de Las Vegas. Gabriel se quedó callado; miraba el paisaje gris detrás de la ventana: puros techos de zinc descascarados —era un salón que daba con un viejo residencial del centro—. Se me acabaron las malditas preguntas. Para Gabriel no existía la importancia práctica de los artilugios; eran fantasmas con los que paliar el miedo y el asco, en sus ensoñaciones anestésicas de medianoche. Cuando salga, voy a saber más de todo esto que cualquiera; nos vamos al Hotel Palma, al casino, saqueo todas las máquinas y te quedás con la mitad de la plata, dijo Gabriel, sonriendo. Hablaba en serio, por supuesto. Solo necesito ir conociendo cómo trabajaban los viejos modelos, para llegar a estas, dijo, señalando con el índice pálido y largo la hoja brillante. Cuando tenga todo claro, nos largamos, dejamos la banca vacía, tomamos guaro toda la noche y nos echamos unos puritos. A mi pesar, me gustó la idea. Le pregunté si no tenía otra lista de materiales que necesitara. Nos abrazamos al despedirnos; de nuevo sintió dolor.

Apenas por segunda vez desde el internamiento, lo llamé. No era tarde, pero no pensaba que fuera a contestarme. Después de saludar, no me imaginaba que fuera a hablarme de inmediato de las máquinas tragamonedas más modernas, provistas de toda suerte de mecanismos electrónicos, mecánicos, informáticos. Eran auténticas computadoras, casi invulnerables. Amplió la lista de materiales que me había dado la última vez. Me habló de la médula ósea, que creaba las células y las escupía en la sangre, defectuosas y con formas aberrantes. Hizo una comparación entre su cuerpo y una máquina tragamonedas, carcajeándose. No recuerdo sus exactas palabras, pero me pareció gracioso a la vez que inquietante. Su voz era baja y comatosa, cuando se tranquilizaba. Lo imaginaba demasiado viejo y adolorido como para estar vivo. Conquistaremos las malditas Escupefuego, dijo Gabriel; así las llaman en Las Vegas, las es-cu-pe-fue-go, las más modernas. Imaginate lo que vamos a hacer con las de acá, que son porquerías de segunda mano. Nos despedimos. Me vi saqueando, con Gabriel cubriéndome la espalda, todos los casinos del país, comprando todos los tragos, atragantándome con todas las comidas.

Volví a los días. Entré al salón y no lo encontré. Salí al jardín donde reposaban los enfermos, afuera del salón de Oncología 2 de hombres y el de Cardiología. Algunos fumaban, lo cual no era extraño ni chocante, sino risible. Una enfermera me había dicho que tendría que esperar a Gabriel. De todos modos, pensé, no le agradaría la visita: no había podido conseguirle todas las cosas de la lista, algunas ni existían, creo, otras no se conseguían por separado, solo dentro de equipos más grandes. Pasó el mediodía y la media tarde. Llamé por teléfono a Gabriel. El sonido de espera se

repitió, hasta no dar tono. Lo intenté de nuevo. Tres, cuatro veces. En su casa, nadie contestaba. Me fui del hospital. Regresé. No me podría recibir, estaba grave, según me dijo la enfermera. ¿Grave? Sí, grave, alcanzó a decirme. Abandoné de nuevo el hospital. Llamé a su teléfono celular en la noche y en la madrugada. También al del salón de Oncología 2 de hombres, que nadie contestó. Grave. La única palabra que la enfermera repitió, como una letanía malévol.

Tardé 15 minutos menos de lo habitual en llegar al hospital. Sudaba. Entré directamente al salón, sin preguntar por Gabriel. Me saludaron los mismos dos hombres de siempre. El niño de 12 años jugaba con su aparatito portátil; me saludó, con el rostro reposado. La cama de Gabriel estaba arreglada, perfecta y vacía. Ninguno de los enfermos sabía nada. Abrí las gavetas: los libros seguían allí. *El Arte de las Máquinas* seguía allí. No, señor, creo que se puso mal, me dijo un tipo al que nunca había visto. Le agradecí la información. Llegué hasta la máquina expendedora de café al final del pasillo. Solo aceptaba monedas. Abrí el maletín que llevaba. Nada. Revisé los bolsillos de la chaqueta; de entre las llaves, logré apartar seis monedas doradas, todas iguales. Las miré con detenimiento. alguna de ellas alimentaría a aquellas tragamonedas sucias, manoseadas, en su imperio de pantallitas multicolor. alguna de esas las haría escupir fuego, unas llamitas que golpearían la bandeja de metal, estruendosas, dándole la vida a alguien, después de bajar la palanca. Y no harían falta artilugios en forma de bichos mecánicos con cuerdas y plásticos antirreflejos, y no haría falta Gabriel para ello, y todo seguiría tal y como estaba.

FÁBULA DE PEQUEÑAS TENTACIONES

Me acaba de decir Margarita, mi asistente, en un tono neutro e impersonal, que Alberto se ahorcó. Como yo estaba ocupado en una prueba de laboratorio, y no podía ni siquiera quitarme los guantes, apenas si alcancé a farfullar sorpresas y a preguntar desordenadamente toda clase de pormenores, que Margarita no sabía o no le interesaban.

La última vez que nos vimos fue en un almuerzo, de esos de enormes mesas redondas, bullicio molesto y comidas más o menos gustosas. Fue después de un congreso de colegas de varios institutos, cuando hubo terminado la parte soporífera de las últimas disertaciones, el día de cierre. Nos saludamos efusivamente, porque no nos habíamos visto, aunque cada uno supiera que el otro andaba por aquellos lados, con sus respectivos grupos de investigadores, olvidándose de los años del doctorado.

Comimos en la misma mesa, aunque no en puestos contiguos; sin embargo, no podía dejar de pensar en lo que alguna vez Alberto había dicho: comer en una misma mesa puede originar amistades para toda la vida, sobre todo después de conversaciones de sobremesa, relajadas y llenas del sopor que deja como un lastre la comida. Aún recuerdo a algunos de los que estaban ese día en el almuerzo. A algunos, no sé cómo, los recuerdo, aunque solo hayamos compartido un par de palabras. A otros, los he visto en el transcurso de los meses, en eventos relacionados con el Instituto, y nos hemos llegado a llevar bien. A Andrea, la famosa doctora Ramírez, la llegué a conocer íntimamente: estuvimos casados un par de años.

Aquel día, recuerdo particularmente que nos ofrecieron más tipos de postres de los que cualquiera podría comer, toda una gama de platos dulces, de nombres raros, de aspecto aún menos determinable. Bebimos vino, comimos un plato que tenía arroz como base. Fue uno de esos cierres que uno llama “buenos”. Después de pasar trabajando en un instituto más de diez años, y de haber gastado muchísimo tiempo completando los trabajos necesarios para los doctorados y posdoctorados, por lo menos eso se merece uno. De vez en cuando, un almuerzo decente.

Cuando nos pusimos de pie, lo busqué, para evitar perderlo en la aglomeración de cuerpos medio borrachos, charlas sin sentido y café servido en tacitas de porcelana. Caminamos juntos, después del abrazo de rigor. Le pregunté por la gente del Centro de Investigaciones. Me preguntó por el Instituto. Hablamos de fútbol, de revistas de nuestro gremio y de la muerte de nuestros padres, ocurridas en circunstancias y épocas muy similares. Me preguntó por mujeres, amigos de los “viejos tiempos”, viajes, lecciones en la universidad y librerías especializadas. Con el efecto del vino, aquello parecía una conversación acerca de carros último modelo, en medio de la selva amazónica. Reímos, no sé ni por qué. Al final, cuando los grupos con los que ambos habíamos asistido se estaban yendo, cada uno a sus cosas y trabajos, nos despedimos efusivamente. Me dispuse a buscar mi carro.

* * *

Llegué al parqueo. Recordaba a medias las exposiciones, los trabajos de investigación, los debates y, como si hubiera sucedido antes, el almuerzo, que más que un almuerzo, fue una comida para tres o cuatro días.

Abrí la puerta del carro. Alguien dijo mi nombre. Era Alberto. Lo llamé Albert, como la gente que más confianza le tenía. O, pensándolo bien, creo que solo yo le decía Albert, haciendo

un énfasis exagerado en *bert*, como si fuera catalán. Todavía sentía (sentíamos, estoy seguro) el cosquilleo del vino tinto, de mejor calidad que el promedio.

Tenía razón Alberto, probablemente pasaría un buen tiempo antes de que nos viéramos de nuevo, y teníamos que celebrar esa especie de reencuentro fortuito de alguna forma. Sin los grupos de trabajo; sin mujeres (ninguno de los dos tenía pareja, de todos modos); sin los rigores, a veces absurdos, de la academia.

Alberto me dijo que conocía bien la cantina. Yo había pasado por el frente, muchas veces, cuando debía entregar las documentaciones de mis alumnos, los que hacían sus tesis de maestría en el Instituto. Era un lugar con una calle de cemento, casi nueva, de mejor aspecto que las del centro de la ciudad. Pero eso era lo único bueno; las casas, las gentes, los perros callejeros, los postes del alumbrado público (cuando funcionaban), estaban llenos de una nostalgia de pobreza, que a Alberto parecía gustarle. Yo tuve mis reservas, hasta que entramos al lugar. Paredes muy altas, de madera, olor a orines hasta en la barra, afiches de mujeres desnudas, viejos calendarios raídos. No es que me hubiera gustado, pero era una imitación casi exacta de los bares a los que íbamos muchos años atrás, en los primeros tiempos nuestros en la universidad.

Quise pedir vino pero, al ver el estado mohoso de los estantes, las telarañas, las manchas de antigüedad de los muebles, me encontré con una cerveza oscura entre las manos. Tenía tiempo de no tomar cerveza; el sabor, desde el primer trago, fue abriendo surcos profundos en mi cabeza.

—Lo peor no fue que estuviéramos en ese estado, sino que el maldito lugar lo cerraran dijo Alberto, estallando en una carcajada que casi había olvidado. Le dijo un par de cosas al hombre detrás de la barra, en un argot ininteligible. Siguió recordando las viejas borracheras, con historias que me iba mostrando, como si nunca las hubiera vivido.

Creo que después de las dos cervezas, de una marca que no conocía, oscuras y dulzonas, seguimos con sendas jarras enormes, que el cantinero sirvió de un sifón herrumbrado y viejo. Me daba lo mismo estar tomando vino, cerveza, ron o agua. Nos sentíamos cada vez más lejos del presente, viviendo en aquel pasado atestado de personas, lugares y comportamientos aberrantes. Se me ocurrió preguntar por Sofía, una de nuestras compañeras, para hacer conversación.

—Sí, ¿cómo no me voy a acordar? Qué par de tetas —espetó Alberto, gangoso y lúgubre, como si estuviera invocando a un muerto.

—Se casó dos veces. Tres hijos. ¿Te acordás de Rodrigo?

—Rodrigo, Rodrigo... No, la verdad no.

—Rodrigo, el que repitió con nosotros el curso de manejo de laborato...

—Sí, sí, Rodrigo Sánchez —interrumpió Alberto, mostrando sus dientes amarillentos como perlitas falsas de collar. Era el efecto de la luz, pobre, que hacía que todos se convirtieran en seres macilentos y desgraciados.

—Pues él fue el primero de sus esposos. Dicen que una completa desgracia de matrimonio. Y el segundo, casi tan malo como Rodrigo.

—Desgracias que se buscan —dijo Alberto, metiéndose de pronto en una especie de ensoñación de cerveza, pastosa y enlentecida.

El lugar se llenaba de una bulla de voces que jugaban naipes, una rocola destartada como salida de otra época y de otro mundo. El hombre detrás de la barra nos ofrecía cervezas. Nosotros aceptábamos en silencio. Llegamos al punto de estar tan borrachos que parecíamos no estarlo, y alguno de los dos decía cosas, a las que el otro respondía con una calma pasmosa, como si se tratara de una conversación trivial a la salida de la iglesia.

Repasamos las vidas de unas treinta personas, las cosas que cada una de ellas había logrado, las relaciones amorosas entre compañeros de la facultad, los trabajos publicados, las vicisitudes de

las vidas de investigador, que solían terminar en encuentros en la barra de una cantina de mala muerte.

—¿Hace cuánto murió el doctor Morales? —preguntó Alberto. Le dije que no sabía. No que no sabía hacía cuánto había muerto, sino quién era el doctor Morales. Me habló de investigaciones, de viejos trabajos, de visitas y premios en Suecia, en el Karolinska. Claro que sabía de qué me estaba hablando, pero no quería recordar nada relacionado con el doctor Morales, el renombrado Sergio Morales.

—Sí, el doctor Morales. No me acordaba de él.

—¿No te acordabas? —preguntó Alberto, clavándome unos ojos como diminutas bolitas de fuego, brillantes de la borrachera que se nos había estancado. Le pedí al cantinero dos vasos de *whisky*: Sí, con un poco de agua, por favor, de lo mejor que tenga. Una advertencia sin sentido en un lugar como ese, lleno de bebidas añejas, importaciones dudosas y mezclas entre licores finos (las botellas) y contrabandeados (los contenidos).

—Murió años después de aquello —dijo Alberto, como queriéndome decir otra cosa. En el espejo detrás de la barra, interrumpido por las botellas y la mugre, aparecíamos más flacos y ojerosos.

Años después de aquello. Pensé en ese “aquello” que Alberto pronunció como fingiendo descuido, con una voz muy gutural, acorde con la atmósfera mortuoria. Permanecimos en silencio varios minutos, dando pequeños tragos al *whisky*, que sabía a diablos, enfrascados cada uno en sus pensamientos, que seguramente eran distintos pero convergentes.

—Sí, me cagó todo, disfruté de su sueldo de presidente, y luego se murió, solo, podrido por el cáncer.

—Albert, él no tiene la culpa de lo tuyo —dije, poniendo a prueba la memoria de Alberto, su carácter apacible, a pesar de las invectivas que solía lanzar contra los miembros de la facultad y contra muchos de los directores de los centros más importantes del país.

El segundo o tercer vaso de *whisky* —o ron, o vodka, no recuerdo, todo me sabía igual— se consumía. Comenzaba a sentir un peso insoportable detrás de los ojos.

—Sí, él no tiene la culpa. Bueno, no solo él tiene la culpa. Vos también, hijueputa. Ustedes dos se pusieron de acuerdo para publicar el mugroso trabajo sin mi permiso.

—Albert...

—No me digás ni mierda, infeliz. Morales y vos se aprovecharon de que yo no tuviera opción en ese momento. Claro, cuando salió aquella serie de artículos, ustedes dos eran los “grandes expertos” —gritó Alberto, entrecomillando las palabras con un gesto grotesco de perro rabioso. Los ojos ya no solamente le brillaban, sino que se le habían desplazado al resto de la cara, como una gran mirada de un dios demente.

Yo sabía de lo que estaba hablando y, a pesar de los años transcurridos, fui comprobando que no había olvidado ni el más mínimo detalle de aquellas investigaciones robadas. No me gustan esas palabras juntas, pero, sí, son investigaciones robadas. El doctor Morales lo sabía, yo lo sabía. Alberto lo fue sabiendo paulatinamente, como un cáncer, que al inicio parece algo inofensivo, y termina por explotar de un momento al otro.

—No, Albert, mirá, Morales y yo...

—¡Dejate de pendejadas! Morales y vos nada, malparido.

—Albert, decime de qué estás hablando —dije estúpidamente. No había salvación posible. Solo me quedaba seguir mintiendo, inventando subterfugios, salvándome de algo que no sabía qué era, pero que intuía como fatal.

Le dije que estábamos muy borrachos, que no había por qué volver a asuntos tan imprecisos. Me mandó al carajo unas diez veces. Insistí en que no era un buen momento para hablar de esas cosas, le di mi número de teléfono, mis datos, hasta le puse la fecha a un nuevo encuentro. No lograba desviar la atención. Alberto lucía unas facciones siniestras, confusas. Me pareció que en cualquier momento podía sacar un arma y volarme el cráneo en pedazos.

Me di cuenta de que estaba muy borracho cuando, buscando el carro en un lugar que no recordaba, vomité cerca del jardín de una casa de madera, vieja y totalmente arruinada. Me sentí mejor. Me había despedido –creo– de Alberto, precipitadamente, buscando una salida definitiva. No lo volví a ver.

Hace un par de años, Margarita me dijo que me llamaba el doctor Barquero, del Centro de Investigaciones en Enfermedades de Origen Americano, el venido a menos CIFOA. Tardé en decirle que me pasara la llamada. Inventé mil excusas para no contestar, en una fracción de segundo, pero pensé en salir del problema de una vez por todas, lo más pronto posible.

—Qué sorpresa, Albert –dije, con el horrible tono con que se le habla a un enfermo mental o a alguien que uno no recuerda y finge haber reconocido.

Nos preguntamos toda la serie de cosas de siempre, una por una, en el mismo orden. El trabajo suyo era mediocre, según me dijo; yo lo disuadí de esa idea absurda, diciéndole que era un colega respetado, y de verdad creía cada palabra dicha. Me continuó contando cosas que no venían al caso: la muerte de varios familiares, los problemas del presupuesto de centros en los que no tenía ninguna injerencia. Yo temía que regresara a la conversación de aquella noche, que había sido cortada de un tajo, sin resolución. Se concentró, más bien, en referencias a mujeres que ambos conocíamos. No recuerdo si aquella vez, en la cantina, hablamos de todas ellas, aunque lo creo bastante difícil.

—Marcela está en París, haciendo no se qué cosas. Creo que investigando algo del ganado vacuno, no sé bien. Me imagino que te acordarás de Marcela.

—¿Marcela Acuña? Si es ella, sí.

—Cómo no te vas a acordar –ironizó Alberto, poniendo un énfasis raro en cada palabra. De pronto me sonó como si estuviera borracho, sentado en aquellas sillas largas y raídas, moviéndose nerviosamente, con un vaso cuya bebida se le derramaba por un lado de los labios, como a un niño.

—Alberto, los dos sabemos que fue una cosa inevitable.

—Pedazo de hij... –alcanzó a decir Alberto.

Colgué. Sentí un temblor extraño. Recordé a Marcela, como hace tiempos que no hacía. El hecho de que, casi el día de la boda de ella con Alberto, nos hubiéramos acostado, no quería decir nada, por lo menos a mi parecer. Explicárselo a Alberto hubiera requerido de palabras de sonido falso, explicaciones inútiles y nuevas historias, para encubrir mentiras (mentiras para Alberto; verdades para mí). Marcela no era feliz, eso estaba claro; yo solo fui el instrumento final que terminó de convencerla de que su matrimonio iba a ser un error craso.

Comencé a recibir llamadas de colegas, casi todos los días, a un ritmo que se me figuró como anormal. Margarita me consultaba siempre; algunas veces podía contestar, cuando no estaba en reuniones. Cuando contestaba, colgaban. Era él, por supuesto, haciéndose pasar por colegas, que llevaban a veces apellidos estrambóticos: doctor Rimbagout, doctor Morelli-Canda, doctor Riberillo y algunos más por el estilo.

Cualquier llamada, en cualquiera de los aposentos por los que pasaba, en el Instituto, me sonaba como una amenaza de Alberto. Procuraba no contestar nunca, aunque, viendo bien las cosas, era difícil que Alberto llamase a un teléfono distinto al que contestaba Margarita.

Por desgracia, la costumbre me fue amortiguando el miedo. Hace dos meses, contesté una llamada, sin pensarlo, para dejar de lado la lectura de un par de artículos francamente incomprensibles.

—Esteban Rodríguez, el abogado, tu amigo, ¿te acordás, malnacido? —dijo la voz. Colgó, dejándome con el bip impersonal en la línea. Era Alberto, sin duda. No necesitó decirme más. Esteban Rodríguez, como sabía, le había quitado su casa y la mayoría de sus propiedades, dejándolo a merced de los directores de los centros de investigación y de lo que quisieran pagarle. Yo no había querido hacerlo, pero tuve que buscar a Esteban, para consultarle un par de cosas relacionadas con los trámites legales del Instituto, y de paso hablarle del asunto de Alberto, que medio conocía; las leyes son las leyes y, sobre todo en cuestiones de propiedades, no se puede tener flexibilidad, ni puede uno guardar consideraciones especiales con los compañeros de estudios, colegas. Si Alberto sabía que no podía pagar aquel préstamo, ni realmente tenía la propiedad de Linda Vista a su entera disposición, no se hubiera comprometido con los bancos. Esteban comprendió que lo hice de buena fe.

—Sí, se ahorcó —me acaba de confirmar Margarita, sin mostrar sorpresa.
Sus razones para matarse habrá tenido.

ÚLTIMA ERA GLACIAL

Islandia es un país extraño. Parece, en las lejanísimas fotos de satélite, una gran verruga blanca, una infección en medio de un mar inhabitable. Su densidad de población es bajísima; no hay ni trescientas mil personas en la gran isla a la que hay que llamar país. La tasa de alfabetismo es impresionantemente alta: casi del 99.9%. Algo impensable. Pero, como pasa con todos los lugares invadidos por el hartazgo, tiene que haber asesinos que disparan a quemarropa y dejan el cúmulo rojo de la sangre de las víctimas sobre la nieve. Imagino los enormes bloques de hielo, los niños caminando hacia la escuela y luego al colegio y más adelante a la universidad, viendo lo agreste de un paisaje de ríos congelados, una gran meseta central, millones de montañas blancas y totalmente muertas. Es un sitio inquietante, no hay duda.

¿De qué viven en Islandia? Pues de lo más esperable en un territorio yerto rodeado de un mar que debe de ser como un gran infierno azul: de la pesca, principalmente. Es cierto que hay grandes industrias islandesas de fundición de hierro y aluminio, pero son los pescados los que mantienen en movimiento el fuelle económico de la isla. Debe de ser lo único vivo, aparte de las personas que caminan los 365 días del año embutidas en sus ropas invernales, en su caso consustanciales a su naturaleza glacial.

Debo decirlo: todo esto lo aprendí a punta de malos polvos. Marcela y yo nunca fuimos amantes especialmente buenos. Sí, hay parejas de buenos amantes, y otras que, a pesar de poder amarse con locura o una profundidad inusitada, no saben hacer el amor. Nosotros pertenecemos a este segundo grupo, el de los amantes pobres, que se incomodan porque sus huesos chocan, sus músculos son incompatibles, y sus tendones se acalambran porque el cuerpo del otro, a pesar de ser flaco y espigado, pesa toneladas. Nunca aprendimos a coger.

Con los años, las cosas no han hecho más que empeorar, aunque a ninguno de los dos le guste la palabra. “Empeorar” es totalmente peyorativo, indica un deterioro general del estado de cosas. Algo que estuvo bien, ahora está *peor*. Es decir, convencionalmente, no sirve, sus mecanismos no funcionan, o hay algo que impide la marcha normal de eso deteriorado. El caso con Marcela y yo no es así de drástico: nos queremos, nos damos besos apasionados, nos mordemos los labios. A mí me encanta su cuerpo blanco, sus senos firmes y pequeños, medio torcidos hacia abajo, como todos los senos naturales, que cuelgan levemente. Me encanta su abdomen que, a pesar de no estar marcado como el de las personas que hacen ejercicios, es plano y tiene en su centro un hermoso ombligo profundo, en el que meto a veces la lengua. Marcela tiene un cabello rizado, negrísimo. Su piel, en contraste, parece la de un fantasma, o semeja la nieve, la desolación incluso.

Cuando nos propusimos vivir juntos, no pensamos en los inconvenientes del mal sexo. Nos acostábamos, al principio, todas las noches, o las tardes cuando podíamos llegar temprano del trabajo —ella es enfermera; yo, analista de aguas residuales en un laboratorio químico—. Algunas noches, lo hacíamos dos veces. Muchas de ellas no eran malas, aunque tampoco diría que fuesen espectaculares. Un par de polvos comunes y corrientes. Lo que más me gustaba de ellos eran los besos de antes y después de terminar, y la parte en que le soltaba el enganche del sostén, en su espalda. Me había convertido en un experto en soltar esa amarra, con una sola mano, en menos de un segundo, con apenas un leve chasquido de los dedos y el metal. Me gustaba la parte antes de que le bajara el calzón en que tocaba, debajo de la tela humedecida, su vulva rosada, afeitada en los lados, como si fuera una niña. Eso era lo mejor, el proemio húmedo. La penetración, el movimiento, podían llegar a ser terriblemente aburridos, a veces dolorosos, para qué negarlo.

Evitamos siempre hablar francamente del tema, aludirlo de forma directa. No era vergonzoso, pero tampoco valía la pena pasarse hablando de lo malos que eran aquellos primeros polvos, de lo malos que siempre habían sido, y de la poca perspectiva de mejora que se adivinaba.

A eso de las once de la noche, en aquella primera época de convivencia con Marcela, después de pasar por la pena de los coitos sin mucho sentido, nos sentábamos en la cama, a veces sudorosos, a veces secos, como cubiertos con costras o escamas de pescado bajo el sol. Fumábamos, nos besábamos la frente como si tuviéramos quince años, nos dábamos besos pequeños en los labios. La boca de Marcela es bellísima; sus dientes parecen falsos, están perfectamente alineados y son muy blancos. Sus labios son algo gruesos aunque no desmesuradamente. Besarnos después de todo aquel trámite penoso era casi tan bueno como soltarle el brasier por la espalda o bajarle su ropa interior de encaje. Después de la hora (más o menos) que invertíamos en pasar sobre la cama, secándonos el sudor de forma natural, fumando y hablando de todo menos del sexo, la dejaba dormirse, poco a poco, hasta que, desnuda, buscara la cobija y el edredón que habían quedado debajo de nosotros, arrugados e irreconocibles.

Me costaba dormir. Salía al comedor del apartamento. El lugar era pequeño, pero en medio de ese comedor, en una mesa redonda (una de las pocas cosas nuevas que compramos, al mudarnos), leía de todo lo que podía encontrar en la biblioteca que había formado desde que vivía con mis papás, mucho antes de conocer a Marcela y siquiera pensar en mudarme con ella. Leyendo, fumaba lentamente. A veces, cuando sentía un escozor en la punta del pene, un ligero dolor como de ampolla reventada, me detenía y cerraba los ojos. Sacaba una cerveza del refrigerador, escuchaba la noche y seguía leyendo. Pasaba de un tema a otro. Filatelia, numismática. Esa época me pasó pronto. Cuando era niño, coleccionaba de todo, además de estampillas y monedas: piedras de colores distintos, trozos de madera endurecidos por el tiempo, circuitos arrancados de viejos televisores que encontraba en el patio de la casa de mis abuelos. No quería recordar las colecciones. Pasé a las banderas del mundo. Intenté aprender de memoria todas y cada una. Muchos años atrás, había hecho avances importantes. Luego, en esa primera época con Marcela, la cosa se puso difícil, pues varios países se habían separado en más países, y habían aparecido banderas que no reconocía en lo absoluto, como la de Georgia, Kazajstán, Croacia. Todas se me parecían. Como todo lo que no deja huella, no había grandes rasgos que las distinguiesen (la forma de la bandera de Nepal, el arbolito de la del Líbano, el escudo intrincado de Swazilandia, esos sí eran nemotecnias utilísimas).

Casi a la una de la mañana, a veces medio borracho, llegaba de nuevo hasta donde estaba Marcela. Le daba un beso en la frente. Pensaba en el sexo que habíamos tenido horas atrás. Cuando era posible, me masturbaba. Me salían demonios por la uretra. Pensaba en Marcela, a quien tenía al lado, y en una serie de mujeres que alguna vez había visto, o en partes del cuerpo apenas recordadas de películas. Ellas debían de ser polvos monumentales, diosas del sexo que lubricaban como grandes aparatos de una fábrica de carros, o como volcanes de lubricante vaginal. Cuando abría los ojos, jadeante, tocaba con la mano que no había usado el cabello de Marcela, rizado y negro. Me limpiaba y procuraba dormirme. Mentalmente, cuando desaparecía el sueño, repasaba los datos leídos en los libros y las enciclopedias.

Evitábamos hablar del tema del sexo, del dolor de la penetración, del uso de lubricantes para auxiliar lo que costaba tanto. A veces, en las mañanas, cuando tomábamos café, pensaba en la abertura vaginal de Marcela, y me imaginaba una horrenda planta carnívora astillando la carne de mi verga, que se resistía al ataque, a pesar de estar sangrando y revolcándose en su desgracia de estar muriendo. Nos dábamos besos en los labios. Yo le tocaba los senos. Cuando salía de la ducha, le acariciaba la vulva. Ella me tocaba. Nos íbamos a trabajar, como si nunca nos hubiésemos acostado en la vida, calientes y parecidos a adolescentes torpes.

A pesar de saber perfectamente que tendríamos un sexo sin gracia, no podíamos detenernos, noche tras noche. Con los meses, el acto duraba más tiempo, pues debíamos detenernos una y otra vez. Comencé a usar preservativo, para evitar que se lastimara el pene. Enrojecido, embutido en aquella cosa que parecía un instrumento quirúrgico, salía y entraba con dificultad en el cuerpo de Marcela, que prefería no gemir y me detenía con una mano encima de las caderas huesudas, como para que no empujara demasiado adentro la verga semierecta. La mayoría de las veces, después de practicarle sexo oral, cuando iniciaba la penetración, sentía la resequedad de las paredes calientes y punzantes. Los movimientos eran torpes, los de ambos, parecían los tanteos de un púber o las imaginaciones infértiles de un niño que intuye que hay que moverse, pero que no sabe qué es el movimiento, para qué sirve.

Meses después, le dije a Marcela que usara uno de sus trajes de enfermera. No éramos muy aficionados al porno, pero sabíamos que había mujeres que hacían de enfermeras, demonios con látigo, maestras y alumnas de colegio, con sus faldas a rayas. Lo que teníamos a mano eran los trajes blancos de Marcela, cuya delgada tela dejaba ver la ropa interior, diminuta y estimulante. El cambio pareció funcionar. La primera vez, no solo los prolegómenos fueron buenos. Pudimos terminar el acto casi sin dolor. La segunda fue igual que la primera. Tardamos menos tiempo, pero no estuvo mal. A partir de la tercera, todos los meses de torpeza, dolor e imposibilidad volvieron. De nuevo puros malos actos sexuales, que los trajes de enfermera –Marcela había conseguido un imposible atuendo, que constaba de una camisa semitransparente y una minifalda que le llegaba a la mitad de las nalgas, en una tienda de artículos para adultos– no podían arreglar. El sexo volvió a ser seco y casi diría que nefasto.

A pesar del dolor, los sangrados, los enrojecimientos, la resequedad, los grititos y pequeños lamentos que no eran precisamente de placer, lo hacíamos todas las noches. Estábamos enamorados. Había pasado ya un año desde que nos habíamos ido a vivir juntos. Yo intentaba masturbarme más veces, durar poco en el acto, no hacer muchas preguntas, dar muchos besos, tocar los senos de Marcela continuamente. Me seguía pareciendo hermosa. No por malos polvos de todos los días había perdido su belleza.

Un día, en que sabía que Marcela llegaría tarde al apartamento, por cosas urgentes en la clínica, pasé por una cerveza al centro, en uno de esos bares de gringos, adornados con banderines de equipos de básquetbol y múltiples televisores de pantalla plana, todos con diferentes programas. Era un jueves por la tarde. El lugar estaba desolado. En el televisor que me quedaba al frente, tenían puesto un canal de noticias. La periodista anunció lo que vendría después de la “pausa comercial” (frase ceremoniosa de televisora internacional), en la siguiente sección del noticiero de variedades: imágenes impresionantes desde satélites, de diversos puntos de la Tierra. Minutos después, aparecía un tipo hablando al lado de una pantalla enorme, en la que iban desfilando fotos de lugares que costaba reconocer: Oceanía, América Central, Europa del Este, el estrecho de Bering, el sur de África; al final, antes de la imagen satelital del planeta completo (se veía la división del día y la noche entre América y Europa), apareció la gran verruga blanca: Islandia. Esta es la remota Islandia, dijo el tipo, que parecía ser un experto de la NASA o de alguna agencia espacial europea. Me pareció estar viendo una mano plegada, momificada por el hielo que la habría cubierto por miles de años, sin pausa. De verdad era remota, como había dicho el tipo. Ya llevaba dos cervezas, y pensé que eran cosas de borracho. Pensaba en Islandia, con esa imagen de una masa deforme y blanca sobre fondo negro, como una franja transplantada a la fuerza en el planeta. Claro, en ese momento no sabía nada sobre el país. Solo la verruga blanquísima e incómoda, y ya.

Esa noche, salí con Marcela. Tomamos varias cervezas. Como casi nunca nos emborrachamos juntos, comenzamos a meternos en una conversación sin sentido en el bar, entre

saliva, olor a cigarro seco y vuelto a humedecer –bromeamos con que las bocas son malos ceniceros, que hieden como si tuvieran basura–; prometimos coger como monos o como conejos cuando llegásemos a la casa. Imaginé el primer chorrito de semen saliendo de mi uretra, ese primer rastro incoloro de los animales que presienten el sexo o el apareamiento. Marcela sonrió, me dijo que estaba mojada también. Te la voy a meter hasta por los ojos, le dije. Sonreía embrutecida. Estábamos idiotizados. Cuando se me estaba acabando la quinta cerveza, le pregunté si conocía Islandia. No, jamás he ido. Nos reímos. Yo sé, pero en libros, en la tele. No sé, creo que es un país que es una isla, grandísimo. ¿En qué continente está?, le pregunté. No es de América. Debe de ser de Asia, respondió. Puede ser, tenés razón, le dije.

El alcohol no se comportó como el auxilio, dulce y poderoso, que suele ser; tampoco como la desgracia en que a veces se convierte; menos en el sometimiento a algo que cabe en una botella de 355 mililitros y que parece tener litros y litros de un alivio que termina en un orinal y en la boca con el insoportable sabor del vómito. Tenía años de no vomitar por una borrachera. Esos vómitos son providenciales.

En la cama, nos besamos como las primeras veces de nuestra convivencia juntos. Emitíamos pequeños gemidos. Nos tocábamos como adolescentes. Aún estábamos borrachos. El preámbulo fue una mancha de voluptuosidad, lubricación y un deseo grande como el puño de un ciego. Nos prometimos introducir todas las partes de uno en las del otro. Estábamos para un sexo mojado y eficiente. En la penetración, sentía las paredes de la vagina de Marcela encerrarme el miembro, morderlo. Se había secado. No nos detuvimos, y más bien nos golpeamos como perros o como actores porno. Cuando tuve el orgasmo, vi en la oscuridad el espectro negro y doloroso en mi pene. A la luz de la lámpara de la mesa de noche, apareció el olor a hierro, el sangrado profuso, la imagen que parecía la de un asesinato a sangre fría. Me dolía el miembro. Marcela se tocaba un punto debajo del ombligo, sin mover su expresión de muñeca de trapo. Limpió un resto de sangre. Su blancura me pareció impresionante. Semejaba un gran bloque de hielo antártico, frío e inhóspito, con una interrupción roja encendida. Pensé en Islandia. Ahí comenzó todo.

En 1972, Bobby Fischer, genio del ajedrez, se enfrentó con Boris Spassky, campeón mundial ruso, que defendía su título ante un Fischer de 29 años. Fue la partida de ajedrez más importante y mediatizada de la historia. Fischer se cagó en los rusos, hizo múltiples desplantes, hizo gala de su naturaleza caprichosa. Fischer, en los últimos dos años de su vida, vivió exiliado en la misma ciudad en la que le ganó a Spassky: Reykiavik, capital de Islandia. En la foto de la enciclopedia, aparecen los dos hombres, frente a frente; se nota el nerviosismo del ruso, las manos en la barbilla, el sentimiento de que estaba perdiendo el juego. Afuera, el frío era insoportable, el cielo negro era insoportable. La humillación de Spassky fue insoportable.

Algo de magnético debía de tener Islandia. O mucho de repulsivo. Su nombre en inglés lo dice todo: Iceland, literalmente, “tierra de hielo”, un reducto casi deshabitado, una verruga en la que los pocos habitantes por metro cuadrado no piensan más que en la sangre helada, en la estasis. El islandés es una lengua que proviene del noruego antiguo, o que es su gemela, más bien; de hecho, cualquier persona islandesa, por un efecto de conservación extrema del idioma a través de los siglos, podría leer textos de islandés antiguo sin grandes problemas. Parece un fenómeno de cuerpos muertos debajo del hielo, de una actitud estática *in extremis*. Las invasiones danesas y estadounidenses no pudieron cambiar en lo absoluto la forma del islandés, a pesar de haberlo deseado. Sus lenguas se congelaron en el mar blanco y desolado del gran cañón glacial que todo lo enmudece. El hueco que por dentro es negro e inhóspito, y que por fuera muerde, arranca y escama la piel. Ahí nada puede florecer.

La cuarta noche de lecturas intensas sobre Islandia, sentí la mano de Marcela en el hombro. Me pidió que habláramos. Le pregunté si conocía a Björk, la cantante, si sabía su nacionalidad. No lo sabía. Islandesa, le dije, es raro, pero es islandesa. Se me quedó viendo, sin decir palabra. Parecía un gran vaso de leche, una mancha láctea que hubiera aparecido dentro de una bata semitransparente, sin brasier. De nuevo, me dijo que teníamos que hablar. Hay problemas, vos lo sabés. ¿De qué tipo de problemas estamos hablando? Arturo, vos sabés, lo que pasa todas las noches. Hablamos de la sangre, del dolor insoportable, del paisaje desolado sobre las sábanas, el mancharse con la suciedad de otro cuerpo que no nos corresponde ni nos pertenece ni nos estimula.

Yo sabía lo que pasaba, aunque las causas ni siquiera ahora las conozco. Llamé perra seca y puta arrastrada a Marcela, las noches siguientes. Nunca la había insultado. Comenzamos a gritarnos continuamente. Lo irracional del odio invadió el apartamento, que se fue llenando de un velo blanquecino, solidificado con los días como la nieve. Cuando me di cuenta, ya ella no estaba acá.

Fue siendo todo como penetrar en una calleja blanca y gélida, en Skagafjörður, un pueblo en los confines del universo islandés, caminar debajo de la nieve, sentir el impacto de bala de algún maleante que se escapa de la vida perfecta de Islandia, de su irrealidad de mancha arrugada sobre el planeta. Allí, a pesar del alto nivel de vida, debe de haber asesinatos. Gente que mata a otra gente por codicia o aburrimiento o locura, que descuartiza, balea y deja un rastro rojo sobre la nieve, que alguien deberá limpiar, para restablecer el orden de lo que no cambia, de lo que no tiene más remedio que permanecer inmutable. Y, si nadie lo limpia, le dejará el trabajo a la nieve, que todo lo cubre.

MANCHAS

Clara, soy yo, Arturo. No me puedo sentir peor. Me duele todo el cuerpo; no sé si tengo algún mal incurable, algo meramente físico, pero sé que es de dolor del alma de lo que me estoy muriendo. Clara, solo, en este cuartucho de mierda, solo pienso en aquellos días que tuvimos y disfrutamos y hoy se nos van convirtiendo solo en recuerdo. El recuerdo es un suplicio oscuro. Te debe de parecer grotesco todo este discurso, a vos, que me conocés como la palma de tu mano. Clara, Clarita, estoy más solo que...

La cinta se detuvo. Ella no entendió cómo le había alcanzado el poco tiempo disponible para decir tantas cosas; se dio cuenta, casi de inmediato, de que no decía mucho, pero que entre las palabras dejaba huecos de aire que costaba no determinar, como pequeños siseos o sílabas dichas con las comisuras de los labios arqueadas hacia arriba, como un payasito feliz de un mal espectáculo de vodevil.

Fue hasta el teléfono, presionó el botón BORRAR y se imaginó que acuchillaba los labios de Arturo, que lo eliminaba como si estuviera pintado al óleo y aún no se secara, le diera brochazos y lo llenara de disolvente, hasta hacerlo desaparecer. Puso de nuevo la cinta a correr, y lo que apareció fue el silencio.

Llegó hasta el espejo que estaba en el baño, contiguo a su habitación. La cerámica era blanca y la luz era fluorescente. En ese paisaje immaculado, el cuadrito de cuatro por cuatro centímetros parecía una mancha natural de la cara; más de cerca, pudo ver los contornos del esparadrapo, pegado como un lunar albino a la piel. Le sorprendió haber salido cuatro horas antes de la casa, nerviosa y torpe (chocó el talón contra la pata de una mesa, le dio al taxista una dirección equivocada, no puso el casete al revés solo porque la máquina contestadora no se lo permitió), haber sido inyectada hasta sentirse con un cuerpo extraterrestre que la dejó lista para el corte del bisturí con el que el amable doctor Morales le había sacado aquel tumorcito en forma de pera miniatura (menos de medio centímetro de diámetro), haber atravesado las calles por las que la gente enloquecía después del día de trabajo (que ella había tomado libre, por cualquier contratiempo con la cirugía) y estar de nuevo en su apartamento, viendo a lo que había quedado reducida aquella protuberancia negra. Ahora solo quedaba esperar el resultado de la biopsia.

Al día siguiente recibió un par de besos, todos en la otra mejilla, la que no tenía pegado el pedacito de cinta blanco y que antes había tenido aquella cosa negra encima, aquel levantamiento que Luis, el guarda, le había dicho que podía ser peligroso, en una de esas conversaciones que comienzan en un cómo está frío y raquítico, y terminan en posibles enfermedades que invadirán el cuerpo y lo corromperán y lo harán parecerse a un monigote del cáncer o la tuberculosis. Después de esa alarma de Luis, había decidido revisarse lo que había llamado siempre, desde que lo había visto aparecer, tierno y redondo, “lunar”, y que horas antes de la operación parecía gritar su verdadero nombre atroz: “verruga”, “tumor”, “espolón”. Las tres posibilidades no dejaron de aterrarla.

En la tarde, y viendo que las cosas en el banco no eran tan catastróficas como había pensado que se convertirían, insulsamente, con su ausencia de la jornada anterior, pidió vacaciones. Seis largos días para descansar y recuperarse de la operación que tampoco necesitaba demasiados cuidados. Llegó a su casa en la noche, más tarde de lo que hubiera querido. Pero estoy de vacaciones, qué importa, se dijo. Presionó el botón REPRODUCIR. La voz lastimera se tardó en aparecer:

Clara, mi amorcito, no sabés lo que es salir a la calle y sentir que los edificios se le vienen a uno encima, que la gente te mira como si fueras un pedazo de verga, manchado, sucio, inservible. Acá, en estas paredes descascaradas, soy un proscrito de la Edad Media, un leproso que no puede tener contacto con otros seres porque les pasa sus infecciones, toda su mugre, los llena de enfermedad. Estoy vedado para el contacto con los otros, y todo porque no te tengo, Clarita, Clarita de mi amor, mi vida, mi...

El tiempo se le venció en medio de una frase. Ella pensó que podía administrarlo mejor, escribir lo que diría, practicarlo, cronometrar las palabras y tratar de embutirlas en lo que la cinta le permitía. Retrocedió el casete y escuchó de nuevo lo dicho por Arturo. La voz de él no sonaba a enfermedad, sino a fingimiento de enfermedad. El deseo de provocar lástima, claramente. Ella lo sabía y también estaba completamente segura de que él mismo buscaba con deliberación ese tonito de perro bajo la lluvia. Le parecía tierno, aunque un poco exagerado.

Le comenzó a picar debajo del esparadrapo. El doctor Morales le había dicho que cuando eso pasara, retirase el cuadrado blanco, para dejar que el aire hiciera su trabajo de limpieza. Siguió las instrucciones al pie de la letra. Era una niña bien portada. Pensó que eso tendría su recompensa, aunque no sabía de qué forma o bajo cuál apariencia. En el espejo del baño, que todo lo amplificaba, la piel aplanada parecía un injerto más que una mutilación.

El resultado de la biopsia tardaría semana y media en salir, a lo sumo, según las previsiones impávidas del doctor. Le picaba insoportablemente, pero prefirió soportar antes de rascarse y dañar la piel, algo más rosada que la del resto de la cara.

Cuando las palabras de Carmen, su compañera de sección, se unieron a las del guarda del edificio, enfatizando en una posible peligrosidad del levantamiento de su piel, buscó información en Internet, bajo las palabras clave “lunar”, “verruga”, “mancha”, “piel”, haciendo combinaciones que la referían a millones de resultados, cuya consulta se le había aparecido como una tarea, además de estúpida, infértil. Había tenido que escoger al azar las búsquedas de las páginas con nombres más serios. Le fue difícil discriminar cuáles le servirían. Cada persona tiene al menos diez lunares, que se desarrollan en la niñez y la adolescencia, leyó. Le pareció una cantidad modesta; sin constatarlo en ese momento (estaba en la oficina), pudo contar hasta quince puntitos cafesucos, distribuidos en partes de su cuerpo que bien recordaba. En las nalgas tenía un par de lunares, en una distribución asimétrica; también cerca del codo derecho, y en la nuca. A un par de centímetros debajo del ombligo, un lunarcito más claro que el resto parecía una gota de agua barrosa que se hubiera secado a medias. Y así contó hasta llegar a la formación sin contornos claros en el lado derecho de su cara, cerca del nacimiento de la nuca.

En una de las innumerables búsquedas en los minutos de descanso, había leído que en algunas culturas los lunares son marcas de belleza; en otras, de fealdad. El artículo no decía en cuáles pasaba cada una de las cosas. Había ido al baño, al final del pasillo donde comenzaban los cubículos donde pasaba ocho horas al día recibiendo y entregando billetes, cheques, comprobantes. Por primera vez, se había atrevido a escribir, junto a las palabras anteriores de sus búsquedas, el término “cáncer”. Le aparecieron casi dos millones de resultados, cuando lo combinó con la palabra “piel”. Al añadir “lunar”, apenas aparecían unos 50 000 resultados. Eso la había aliviado, pues quería decir que no eran demasiados lunares los que terminaban en cánceres de piel.

De nuevo colocó el esparadrapo encima de la diminuta cirugía. Sonó el teléfono. No estaba para contestar aparatos ruidosos en el inicio de sus vacaciones. Cerró la puerta del baño, se desnudó y se duchó.

A las once de la noche, cuando había olvidado la llamada de dos horas antes, presionó el botón REPRODUCIR sin ganas. Supo que era Álvaro cuando iba de camino hacia la máquina contestadora.

¿Te acordás cuando me decías Alvarito? Alvarito, mi amor, besémonos como si fuésemos dos adolescentes. ¿Te acordás de esas palabras? ¿De aquel almuerzo que tuvimos debajo de aquel árbol cerca de la Escuela de Arquitectura, cuando preparaste espaguetis con espinacas? Esos detalles, Clarita, no se olvidan, enferman cuando se los recuerda, son manchas en la vida, pequeñas erupciones como lunares sobre el tiempo que nos va dejando. Clarita... Clarita...

Las dos últimas pausas le habían quitado valiosos segundos. No quiso devolver la cinta. Todo eso de los lunares y las manchas no le parecía adecuado en esos momentos. Si fuera ella, pensó, evocaría momentos más determinantes, o quizá más calientes. Cuando pensó en la palabra “caliente”, imaginó cuántos resultados le aparecerían en Internet. Quizá millones, billones. Los hombres, cuando tratan de ser tiernos, suelen convertirse en seres patéticos, pensó. Solo son sinceros cuando hablan de sexo y de esperma y eyaculación y todo eso. Pensó en que no sería nada malo que hablara de algo que realmente lo apasionara, de las sábanas con el olor de los dos sudores juntos, del olor aceitoso; de cosas así, no tan melifluas como el almuerzo ese bajo la fronda de un árbol.

Al tercer día de sus vacaciones, se hartó soberanamente de levantarse cada cinco minutos de la cama, ir a la cocina por un vaso de agua; tomar el teléfono; comenzar a marcar el número del doctor Morales y detenerse a medio camino; abrir un libro que llevaba por la mitad, avanzar apenas un párrafo; mirar la televisión o más bien cambiar los canales para tener una sensación de movimiento y acción que sabía que era ilusoria; llegar al espejo del baño y verse el parchecito blanco, que cada vez usaba menos horas al día, como se lo había indicado el doctor. Si él no la había llamado, era que no estaba todavía el resultado. O que no tenía el valor para decirle a alguien que se iba a morir en cuestión de dos meses. Esta última posibilidad, antes de darle risa y parecerle estúpida, la aterró.

¿Cuántos resultados bajo el término “cáncer”? Millones, sin medias tintas. Era una palabra que había escuchado tanto últimamente, muchas veces soterrada bajo eufemismos baratos como “malignidad”, “avance de una displasia”, “crecimiento anormal”. Si combinaba todas estas palabras, se vería ahogada por una corriente indetenible de búsquedas sin fruto. Llamó a tres números que encontró en la sección comercial del directorio telefónico. El tercero le pareció una buena opción. Estar en un hotel de montaña en sus vacaciones, cuando no había nada mejor que esperar la llamada del doctor Morales, le pareció una idea brillante. Como vivía sola, era aún más fácil salir de la ciudad, sin tener que pedirle permiso a nadie.

Dejó la máquina contestadora lista para recibir algún mensaje de Álvaro; realmente no deseaba hablar con él, solo escuchar su voz en la imperfección de la cinta, que con el tiempo iba oscureciendo las voces e iba volviendo los pequeños mensajes en documentos antiguos, fosilizados.

En el hotel, mientras caminaba detrás de la mujer de cabello desordenado y ojos azules, con la que había hablado días atrás para hacer la reservación, pensó que justamente era eso lo que necesitaba: una laguna central, cortada por una especie de puente a la usanza japonesa; muchos árboles de pino que llenaban de un verde apagado toda la extensión de tierra montañosa que llegaba a verse desde el pasillo por el que caminaban; la humedad de las alturas, no muy pesada ni muy

fría. Sintió el viento pegarle en la cicatriz, sobre la cual ya no usaba ni esparadrapo ni ningún otro artilugio protector.

Le dio risa el llavero en forma de llave gigante que le entregó la mujer. Le dio las gracias, cerró la puerta, desempacó, se acostó y logró dormirse dentro de la placidez de la cabaña, construida al parecer recientemente. El olor de la madera era muy fuerte, agradable. Pensó en el olor de los billetes, que, por el contrario, era profundo y sucio. Cuando se despertó, buscó medio sonámbulo un espejo en el baño, construido casi junto a la cama. La cabaña era diminuta y confortable, algo fría pero acogedora. El único espejo era más pequeño que el que Clara cargaba en su maleta. Era redondo, estaba pegado a la pared, encima del lavabo. Colocada a la distancia correcta, apenas podía ver el reflejo del parche de piel en el espejo, sin ninguna otra parte de su cara o su cuerpo que interrumpiera la visión de esa piel que se tornaba más rosada cada día, más levantada. La cicatrización le parecía la normal, aunque no sabía por qué; solo miraba la mancha dentro del círculo redondo del espejo.

Salió del baño. En la cama, hizo un esfuerzo enorme por intentar no sacar las hojas informativas que una vez había tomado del consultorio del doctor Morales, que hablaban del melanoma. Esa palabra no solo era maligna en el cuerpo, sino que sonaba amenazante, peor que “peste” o “lepra”. “El ABCD del cáncer de piel o melanoma”, se llamaba el artículo del panfleto. Había, debajo de la explicación de cada una de las letras, imágenes que se parecían a lo que el doctor le había arrancado de raíz, dejándole la manchita rosada de piel sin sensibilidad. Es ridículo y estúpido estar en un hotel de montaña y estar leyendo documentos de lo que vine a olvidar, pensó. Asimetría. Borde. Color. Diámetro. El ABCD le pareció sencillo de entender; ella había visto cada una de esas características anormales cuando ni siquiera había pensado en consultar al doctor Morales, meses atrás.

Antes de llegar a su casa, había aprendido que “nevo” era un sinónimo de lunar, un horrible sinónimo. Sonaba como a nombre de alguna parte remota del universo. Y “nevo displásico” no solo era atroz, sino que le pareció francamente asqueroso, inhumano. Sin embargo, “melanoma” seguía siendo la palabra cúspide, el término al que ninguna piel quería llegar. Los nevos corrientes y los displásicos, las verrugas, las erupciones, las manchas de cualesquiera formas, todo culminaba en la horripilancia del melanoma. Todo eso lo aprendió en la cabaña, en las horas que se le fueron haciendo eternas, hasta que decidió, después de sumergirse en las lecturas desordenadas del panfleto y las hojas sueltas (había empacado una serie de artículos de Internet, de los que no entendió más que las amenazas de una muerte rápida, el factor de protección solar de la crema que usaba por las noches y los cambios de color que sufren las manchas del cuerpo de una mujer, a la par de los cambios hormonales), que era hora de largarse y volver al departamento, sentarse y esperar, ir de cuando en cuando hasta el espejo del baño y medir los cambios en su cicatriz, su mancha rosada.

Sacó sus cosas del carro con desesperación. Dejó un desorden en una esquina de la sala. Cuando llegó a la contestadora, apenas si tuvo aliento para presionar el botón REPRODUCIR. Escuchó una serie de mensajes cortos, todos dichos con una voz igual. Primero pensó en una broma de mal gusto, sencilla e infantil. Luego, en una de esas equivocaciones que no hacen nada más que consumir segundos valiosos de cinta. Al final, supo que era imposible negar que se trataba de una serie de mensajes profesionales del doctor Morales, en los que la invitaba, con el mismo tono afable e indiferente, a llamarlo; tenía noticias importantes, dijo. Nadie con ese tono y esas palabras podía estar llamando para decirle buenas noticias, pensó ella. Dejó que la reproducción de la cinta siguiera: cinco mensajes idénticos, monocordes. Si Álvaro supiera administrar su tiempo al hablar,

podría hacer como el doctor, desperdigar pequeñas pistas misteriosas que no lo delataran por completo, podría evitar el ridículo y la verborrea innecesaria.

Marcó el número del consultorio del doctor Morales. La secretaria la recordaba, le preguntó por la cicatriz, por el estado general de salud. El doctor Morales no estaba. ¿Usted no sabe nada sobre el resultado de la biopsia?, preguntó. Señorita, no, no sé nada, respondió la secretaria, sin perder un ápice de su voz chillona y siempre esperanzadora. ¿Está segura?, preguntó ella y, casi al mismo tiempo, se arrepintió, por sonar arrogante y desesperada. La secretaria (que también era la enfermera del doctor Morales) sonrió o pareció sonreír en la línea, y repitió que no, que no sabía nada, pero que sabía que el doctor Morales tenía resultados recientes de varias pruebas; ahí podía estar la de ella. Quedó en llamar más tarde o al día siguiente.

Ella tenía 32 años. En uno de los artículos decía que el ciclo de vida de los lunares era de hasta 50 años. A los 82, todas las pequeñas manchas que se desarrollaban en su piel, pequeñas y nimias, serían verrugas enormes, marcas de vejez. Si, en cambio, la biopsia le decía que tenía cáncer, no sobreviviría a las manchas de la edad, inevitables y muchas veces atroces. Fue al baño; bajo la luz intensa y blanca, vio la cicatriz, que había cambiado de forma y color. Hubiera deseado tener el espejito de la cabaña, redondo y pequeño, para solo ver esa porción rosada de piel insensible.

Le costó dormirse esa noche. En la marejada de un insomnio que no se iba, a veces turbulento y otras nuboso y negro, imaginó al doctor Morales abriendo, con una ceremonia espeluznante e innecesaria, el sobre que contenía su condena. Mostrando evidentes signos de incomodidad, se tocaba la gabacha y levantaba el hombro izquierdo, como si le fuera a dar una mala noticia que lo hiciera estallar y fragmentarse como una bomba de tiempo. Soñó o pensó o alcanzó a imaginar las millones de entradas que la palabra “miedo” tendría en Internet. Posiblemente más resultados que cualquier otro vocablo en español. Más que “amor” u “odio”; más que “enfermedad”, casi con entera seguridad.

Clara, mi amor, te me has metido en el cuerpo como un cáncer. Quiero que todo vuelva a ser como antes, que los pequeñitos recuerdos no sean solo recuerdos sino vivencias. Clara, Clarita de mi corazón, has dejado una huella imborrable en este patético hombre en que me he transformado. Cuando te conocí, supe que sin ti la pasaría mal, que sería un cero a la izquierda en una vida destinada a la miseria...

Se cortó. La había hecho levantarse el pitido del aparato; no eran ni las cinco de la mañana. Presionó de nuevo el botón REPRODUCIR. Se fue despertando con cada nueva repetición. Primero le pareció un extraterrestre tratando de comunicarse. Después pensó que se trataba de su padre –muerto muchos años atrás– resucitado. Cuando logró despertar por completo, le pareció solo un ser patético que hablaba. Qué sabía ese tal Álvaro de cáncer. Qué sabía ese imbécil que la llamaba Clara de manchas que invaden el cuerpo. A Mariela le dejó de gustar ese jueguito de flirteos ridículos, de anonimato. Abrió la máquina y sacó el casete; comenzó a retirar la cinta de este. El ovillo negro crecía malignamente a sus pies.

TOMAR EL TREN A

El primer hombre espera la llegada del tren. Hace calor, y mientras aguarda forma un abanico con una hoja de papel periódico: noticias de dos días atrás. El primer hombre cree sentir la vibración en el andén, se pone de pie, se acomoda el sombrero y el saco. Falsa alarma. Se sienta de nuevo, consulta la hora. A pesar del calor, piensa que sería mala idea quitarse el saco marrón.

El segundo hombre camina hacia la estación. Lleva la boca tapada con un pañuelo blanco: el polvo es abundante y maligno, se mete por cualquier cavidad en la que encuentre albergue. El primer hombre mueve su cuerpo para darle campo al segundo hombre, en caso de que quiera sentarse a esperar también el tren. El segundo hombre está más lejos de lo que parece, o eso cree el primer hombre, que de nuevo se mueve hacia su derecha, para despejar los asientos del andén. Las sillas son ordinarias y viejas, pero son las únicas instaladas en la estación.

El segundo hombre llega hasta la estación. Suda y se rasca la barba. Las botas alguna vez llevaron espuelas, pero el hecho de que ahora estén desnudas no las hace menos pesadas. El primer hombre saluda con dos palabras secas. Obtiene por respuesta los dedos del segundo hombre que toman el ala del sombrero, en señal de parca deferencia. Prefiere quedarse de pie que sentarse junto al primer hombre. Intercambian apenas tres palabras dichas entre los dos. El primer hombre regresa a su posición de antes de divisar al segundo hombre. El segundo hombre es más alto que el primero, o el espejismo del sol y la posición relativa de ambos lo hace verse voluminoso.

El primer hombre desabrocha un botón de metal plateado, saca una cantimplora y le ofrece agua al segundo hombre. Este dice que no pero sin abrir la boca. Está delante del primer hombre, de pie, y sólo mueve la cabeza y levanta dos dedos de una mano. Al primer hombre le parece que el segundo hombre no ha sido bien educado, o que es un retrasado mental, o que no conoce las más elementales reglas de la sociedad. Abre la cantimplora. El agua no es agua sino una bebida alcohólica que sabe a diablos: está caliente y el proceso con que se fabricó no es de fiar, piensa el primer hombre. No le diría al segundo hombre que no se trata de agua, porque podría aceptar; es mejor no insistir en estos casos.

El segundo hombre abre una maletita rectangular y saca algo que parece un cuaderno de anotaciones. Nadie en ese lugar anota nada. El primer hombre encuentra una dificultad suprema en la determinación de lo que el segundo hombre sacó de su maletita de cuero: la luz es enceguecedora. Piensa en qué demonios podría anotar el segundo hombre en ese grupo de hojas unidas por algo que debe de ser una tripa seca de animal. El segundo hombre pasa las páginas –eso sí lo determina el primer hombre algo más claramente–, mueve la cabeza en señal de asentimiento y guarda de nuevo lo que antes sacó. El primer hombre se lleva la cantimplora a los labios, haciendo acopio de fuerzas enormes para no vomitar. El primer hombre lleva más de catorce horas de no comer; lo último que pudo saborear fue la carne mórbida de un enorme conejo de monte. El segundo hombre lleva dos días sin comer, pero esto no lo sabe el primer hombre, y el segundo hombre apenas lo resiente en alguna parte del abdomen.

El primer hombre, luego de pensar descuidadamente en los pros y los contras, le pregunta al segundo hombre si va a optar por el recorrido del tren A o por el del tren B. El segundo hombre no sabe o no entiende la pregunta, y voltea la cabeza a medias, para dar una respuesta que más bien suena a un gruñido irrespetuoso. Sí, ¿prefiere usted el recorrido del tren A o el del tren B, mi estimado amigo?, pregunta el primer hombre, poniendo un énfasis exagerado en sus palabras amables. No es cuestión de preferencia, amigo, sino de necesidad. Tiene razón, dice el primer hombre, sonriendo. Al primer hombre le duele el estómago, y está seguro de que se trata del efecto

de lo que contenía la cantimplora. Bastante calor, ¿no?, dice el primer hombre, considerando que ha franqueado una barrera o que ha abierto las puertas para un buen diálogo entre hombres. Sin embargo, el segundo hombre no abre la boca. El segundo hombre no se mueve, ni parece estar vivo, ni parece querer desplazar ninguna parte de su cuerpo. Si no lo hubiera visto caminar hacia él, en el espejismo caliente de la gran planicie, el primer hombre habría pensado que se trataba de un fantasma. O de un espantapájaros. O de una armadura medieval (esta última posibilidad la descarta de inmediato, no sin un disgusto que no atina a explicarse). El primer hombre se acomoda la faja de cuero, revisa sin mirarlos el estado de varios botones y remaches, toca la cachera de su pistola y se limpia el sudor de la frente. El segundo hombre, según puede apenas distinguir el primero, también lleva su revólver de reglamento. Es un Colt, aunque lo satisfaría que fuera un LeMat, en el caso de que el segundo hombre aceptara enseñárselo, si él se atreviera a llegar hasta ese punto de una conversación por lo demás entrometida y sin propósito. El primer hombre está harto del silencio del segundo hombre. Le pregunta si le parece que el recorrido del tren A es aburrido y previsible, a lo que el segundo hombre responde que no sabe cómo calificar algo diseñado por un ingeniero ferroviario. El primer hombre trabajó como ingeniero ferroviario durante quince años, mucho tiempo atrás –ya no diseña rutas de trenes, ahora solo se monta en los vagones y viaja apaciblemente–; le parece que las palabras del segundo hombre son malintencionadas. ¿A qué se refiere con que no sabe calificar algo diseñado por un ingeniero ferroviario, mi estimado amigo?, pregunta el primer hombre, abandonando el asiento de madera del andén. El segundo hombre le muestra su perfil al primer hombre, abriendo la boca y articulando unas palabras que el primer hombre no atina a escuchar. Disculpe, no alcancé a oír, mi estimado, dice el primer hombre. El segundo hombre de nuevo le muestra su espalda, que contrasta con el brillo sin misericordia del sol. No repite sus palabras. El primer hombre llega a pensar que imaginó las palabras del segundo hombre, que toca ahora su cinturón de cuero y palpa las cachas de su revólver. El primer hombre puede casi oler la amenaza física y la violencia; apoyado principalmente en su pierna derecha, siente unas ganas densas de vomitar; se sienta de nuevo, destapa la cantimplora y bebe (piensa que así neutralizará la náusea, paradójicamente). Oiga, querido amigo, ¿usted conoce a algún ingeniero ferroviario?, espeta de improviso el primer hombre, a lo que el segundo hombre responde con un “sí” que parece haber salido de alguna parte de su cabeza que no está conectada con su boca. He matado a varios, continúa el segundo hombre, sin desplazarse ni mover ninguna de sus cuatro extremidades innecesariamente. El primer hombre no sabe si esas palabras están dirigidas especialmente a él –en un alarde de poder, en un arranque de innecesario odio–, así que se concentra en olvidarlas. Yo prefiero el recorrido del tren B, dice de inmediato el primer hombre, como si la pregunta anterior (y, claro está, la subsiguiente respuesta) jamás se hubiera presentado en la realidad. Me imagino que va usted hacia Valle Calizo, señor, dice el primer hombre. No, voy a Humo. ¿Humo? Sí, Humo, reitera el segundo hombre, sin cambiar la modulación de la voz. El primer hombre no sabe qué cosa suena rara en las palabras del segundo hombre, pero siente un cosquilleo incómodo en la garganta, como si a la distancia el segundo hombre lo estuviera ahorcando. Humo no está en el recorrido del tren A ni en el del tren B. He esperado acá unas quinientas veces, y he tomado el tren que va para Humo *acá*, dice el segundo hombre, sin perder la compostura, señalando no el andén ni la dirección de las líneas ferroviarias sino el suelo, como si el tren emergiera del punto en que él se hallaba. No puede ser, acá no pasa el tren para Humo, dice el primer hombre, abanicándose con la mano derecha. Debe de ser que hay un tren D o un tren H; o tal vez haya un tren Z o uno Y, se burla el segundo hombre, llevándose la zona del talón derecho hacia la espalda, para examinar sus botas sin verlas. El primer hombre entiende el sarcasmo. Oiga, forastero, es usted un facineroso, dice el primer hombre. ¿Quiere decir que soy un

maleante?, pregunta el segundo hombre, volteándose por completo, por vez primera desde que le ha dado la espalda al primer hombre. Este se da cuenta de que el segundo hombre lleva una barba mal recortada, y que de sus labios pende un cigarro. Se pregunta por la marca del tabaco y por el fabricante del chaleco que el segundo hombre luce con un desgarbo asombroso. No dije maleante, sino lo que escuchó, señor, dice el primer hombre. Facineroso es lo mismo que maleante, por si no lo sabía, replica el segundo hombre. No, facineroso no pretende calificar a nadie, es solo una forma de decir “descuidado”. Maleante tampoco pretende calificar a nadie, hombre, pero todos sabemos lo que quiere decir, dice el segundo hombre. El primer hombre se extraña de no haber visto o intuido antes la barba del segundo hombre, pelirroja y fea. Entonces, ¿quiere decir que soy un maleante?, recomienza el segundo hombre, ahora poniendo sus iris azul marino encima del rostro sin barba del primer hombre. No quise decir eso, usted lo sabe; usted fue el que comenzó a hablar mal de los ingenieros ferroviarios, cuando sabe que más de dos tercios de la población se ha dedicado a esa profesión en alguna parte de su vida, dice el primer hombre, y se siente estúpido al decirlo. El segundo hombre se acomoda el cinturón de cuero, toca el revólver y mueve la cabeza hacia atrás, desafiadamente. Esto lo podemos arreglar, dice el segundo hombre, sacando el revólver con lentitud. El primer hombre sabe que el otro no puede disparar, pues está prohibido matar a alguien por disputas de palabra, si no es en un duelo en que participe un juez imparcial. Las leyes del condado son claras y recientes, según evoca el primer hombre. Usted conoce las reglas, dice el primer hombre, poniéndose de pie. Además, agrega el primer hombre, me he quedado sin balas. ¿Cuál calibre maneja, amigo?, pregunta el segundo hombre. Treinta y dos, dice el primer hombre, limpiándose el sudor de la frente. Treinta y dos, repití el segundo hombre, meditabundo; no es común tener un treinta y dos, sigue el segundo hombre, ¿la compró cerca? No, qué va, solo se consiguen en el Valle de los Búfalos, tren B, estación intermedia, explica el primer hombre, señalando las líneas paralelas que parecen extenderse hasta el infinito. Esa cachera es claramente de Colt, afirma meditabundo el segundo hombre, tocándose la orilla derecha de la barba, lo debió de haber conseguido en otro lado, prosiguió. Ya le dije, amigo, lo compré en el Valle de los Búfalos; además no es Colt, es Webley, mire, le dice el primer hombre al segundo hombre, acercándole el revólver sin balas para que pueda verlo y constatar que no miente. El segundo hombre se hace una visera con la mano derecha, para aplacar el obnubilador tono de la luz del sol, escupe restos del tabaco que le han quedado adheridos a la barba y frunce el ceño, en señal de algo que el primer hombre no alcanza a entender plenamente. Le prestaría de las mías, pero no entran en el tambor de su revólver, dice el segundo hombre, mostrando un asomo de compasión o desesperanza. Así es, dice el primer hombre, buscando por todos los medios una solución al problema, que no involucre armas ni sangre ni hombres caminando en dirección opuesta para volverse y darle justificación a la fama de salvajes que tienen los habitantes del oeste. Pues este desaguisado habrá que dirimirlo de alguna forma, dice el segundo hombre, poniendo sus dos puños cerrados en las caderas, en franca señal de territorialidad amenazada. Yo no encuentro cuál, ¿y usted?, replica el primer hombre; además, agrega, no usaría la palabra desaguisado para describir esta situación. ¿Por qué no?, pregunta el segundo hombre, levantando la barbilla, pareciendo aumentar de tamaño como mecanismo de defensa atávico o como muestra de llana y simple matonería. Desaguisado no es la palabra, eso es lo que sé, dice el primer hombre, no sin un tremor leve en la voz. ¿Es usted lingüista?, pregunta el segundo hombre. No, no lo soy, pero sé que esa no es la palabra correcta. ¿Y cuál es, según usted, genio de la lengua, la palabra adecuada?, pregunta el segundo hombre, levantando las invisibles comisuras de los labios. La estructura de esa voz carrasposa no le gusta al primer hombre. Si anduviera dos pistolas, encantado le daría una. No serviría de nada, de todos modos. ¿No serviría de nada? No, señor mío, no tenemos juez, dice

resignado el primer hombre. Se da cuenta en el acto que antes el segundo hombre no lo estaba escuchando. No se necesitan jueces. Sí se necesitan, está en la nueva Ley de Duelos, ¿no lo sabía, buen hombre?, pregunta sin sorna el primer hombre. Me gustaría saber quién publicó esa ley. Se imprimió en la casa de Orwell, en el recorrido C, tercera estación al norte, replica el primer hombre sin mostrar señal alguna de evocación forzada, como si él mismo hubiera diseñado el maremágnun de recorridos de los trenes, que ya llega hasta la ruta H –mucho más al oeste, en un sitio menos polvoriento que el que alberga al primer hombre y al segundo hombre–. El segundo hombre: Orwell ya no tiene casa de impresión. El primer hombre: Sí, claro que tiene, él mismo se encargó de publicar la ley. Ya no hay ley, ¿no lo sabía?, pregunta con auténtico interés el segundo hombre, acomodándose el chaleco de cuero en la parte del pecho, que se le ha doblado extrañamente hacia la derecha. Lo dice en sentido figurado..., sospecha el primer hombre. No. ¿Entonces? Lo digo porque es la verdad: no hay ley, dice el segundo hombre mientras se introduce dramáticamente en la sombra del andén. ¿Conoce al impresor Hamilton? Sí. Ahora es de su taller de donde sale lo que se hace y lo que no se hace en este lugar, dice sin reparos el segundo hombre. Hamilton, Hamilton... paladea, musitando, el primer hombre. El segundo hombre saca la Colt, revisa el tambor como si el primer hombre no lo estuviera mirando absorto, apunta y le dice que el tren A sí va para Humo, que sí se permiten los duelos sin jueces imparciales, que un tren es todos los trenes y todos los trenes pueden ser saqueados por dos tipos que apenas si se conocen.

LA SUCIA VIDA DE LOS HOTELES

A la bailarina del Hotel de L'Aveyron

El cuarto apestaba. Era el mismo hedor que bien conocía de los cuartos de hotel: mezcla de sudores de miles de cuerpos que han estado en el sitio, y de los motores de las pequeñas máquinas aspiradoras, que dejan pelusas invisibles. Las alfombras no ayudan para refrescar el ambiente; hay acumulaciones de polvo, detritos, insectos, heces de pequeños animales invisibles que, insensiblemente, se van acumulando con los años.

La escalera de caracol era lo que él hubiera podido llamar “hermosa”, o al menos “extraña” o, mejor que esos dos calificativos, “extrañamente hermosa”. Subió los tres niveles, hasta toparse con el pomo mitad dorado y mitad herrumbroso de la puerta. La habitación no tenía número; como él no tenía mucho dinero, no le pareció raro que el tipo del recibidor –un hombre perfectamente amable, el profesional de los pequeños hoteles de las grandes ciudades, educado, sonriente y comprensivo con los que no entendían bien el idioma– le hubiese entregado la llave que simplemente decía “Ellie”. El cuarto, como era uno de los últimos del pasillo, no podría confundirse con el resto, perfectamente numerados. El cuarto Ellie, señor, le había dicho el tipo, con su francés neutro y practicado con los chinos y los turcos que no hablaban ni dos palabras de la lengua. Él, Manuel, entendía algo más de dos palabras, y sonrió cuando recibió la llave, metida en un aro frío y enorme, ridículo.

Entró, recibió el vaho desagradable de los millones de sudores –cansancio, amor, reyertas, golpes nocturnos de pesadillas olvidadas–, abrió la ventana, y sintió en los dedos el impacto del frío de afuera. Nunca había visto la nieve y, mientras observaba las hojuelas alargadas y como etéreas bajar del cielo, en la ventana del tercer piso, se dio cuenta de que tampoco había sentido jamás un frío similar. A pesar de la chaqueta, los guantes negros, la bufanda ridícula y la ropa interior térmica que había comprado antes de salir de su país. Tocó la parrilla de la calefacción, pintada con el mismo color crema del resto del cuarto; se notaba que tenía años sin funcionar, y que solo había permanecido en el cuarto para dar la impresión de calor y de normalidad, dentro de lo esperable en un hotel de una estrella. Había estado en dos hoteles de una estrella, pero en todos servía perfectamente la calefacción; aquí, solamente estaba la parrilla color crema, muda y ornamental.

Por puro instinto, sacó el paquete de cigarros de la bolsa izquierda de la chaqueta. Le quedaban aún tres, todos medio arrugados, quizá estropeados en su viaje desde las diez cuerdas que había tenido que atravesar, desde el cuarto del hotel anterior, de la misma categoría que este –solo que algunos euros más caro–. El encendedor en forma de pequeño revólver le hizo algo de gracia, a pesar de haberlo estado viendo por horas de horas la noche anterior, de haber estudiado cada uno de sus detalles (el gatillo, la cache, el pequeño tambor que no giraba); ahora, en el cuarto “Ellie”, miraba de nuevo el aparatito plateado que, verticalmente, emitía su llamita fusiforme, como un revólver de verdad hubiera soltado sus balas de plomo. Le dio risa cuando encendió el cigarro y el rostro se le llenó de humo y tuvo que lagrimear, con los ojos ligeramente irritados.

Tomó la lata entre las manos. En el momento de entrar, fue lo segundo en lo que había reparado, después del olor acre. Le parecía que recién la habían sacado de un refrigerador; eso era lo bueno de los hoteles baratos, que se podía uno encontrar una lata de cerveza que alguien hubiera

dejado, como una suerte de obsequio del huésped anterior, o como el descuidado regalo de recibimiento de los dueños del hotel. Dudó si devolverla o no, pero se encontró con los dedos llenos de espuma, al levantar el pestillo metálico que, en medio del silencio, sonó como la detonación de una pequeña e inofensiva granada de mano. Bebió, sorprendido de que no le diera asco que solamente la lata estuviera fría, y que el contenido, amargo y fragante, estuviera a una temperatura que recordaba a las cervezas con las que se ha estado más de media hora en una mesa, cuando comienzan a calentarse y a saber a otra cosa.

Abrieron la puerta.

—Agua, agua —entró diciendo una boca que era parte de un hombre que llevaba una aspiradora en la mano. Manuel no entendió lo que quería decir el hombre, un negro pequeño que olía como la alfombra del cuarto, o que había acumulado todos los olores de todas las alfombras de todas las habitaciones que había aspirado con su aparato gris de rueditas de hule, durante ese día o en todos los años, si es que eran años, que llevaba de trabajar en el hotel.

—No entiendo, señor —dijo Manuel, moviendo las manos hacia arriba, queriendo decir que podría entender, pero si el hombre le hablaba despacio. Repitió la palabra dos veces más, llevándose a los labios el dedo pulgar de la mano derecha, haciendo el signo inequívoco que quería decir “estoy bebiendo algo”. Manuel entendió que el hombre del hotel le estaba ofreciendo agua, a lo que aceptó, moviendo hacia arriba y hacia abajo la cabeza.

Después de traer un pichel lleno de agua y un pequeño vaso transparente, el hombre se puso a aspirar el cuarto. Manuel sacó el penúltimo cigarro del paquete y comenzó a fumar, olvidándose de la forma de revólver del encendedor. El ruido constante y molesto de la aspiradora lo hizo olvidarse por algunos segundos del frío que no cesaba. Se excusó con el hombre y salió del cuarto.

En la escalera de caracol, oyó alejarse el sonido de la aspiradora, y el olor del hombre y la alfombra y la imagen de la parrilla muerta de la calefacción se le fueron borrando poco a poco. Las imágenes de los hoteles se borran, se tienen que borrar, pensó sin insistencia, como si lo estuviera leyendo más que pensándolo; lo que se ve y se huele en los hoteles, el aroma de los millones de sudores, los ruidos de las duchas y los lavabos, y los gritos apagados de las parejas, tienen que morir como las fotografías quemadas de unas vacaciones desagradables e insípidas, pensó antes de llegar a la puerta principal.

El suelo estaba lleno de hojuelas. Una gran alfombra blanca, resbalosa y sucia por algunas pisadas o por el color natural de la acera subyacente, reflejaba la última claridad del día, o de las tardes claras a las que aún no se acostumbraba. A esa hora, pensó, en su país ya estaría oscuro o por lo menos la luz no tendría la consistencia que no es del día ni de la noche, sino que sería esa gelatina de imprecisión que el sol crea antes de ocultarse. Tiró la colilla en el suelo, sin preocuparse de aplastarla para apagarla. Le dio risa el efecto de la nieve: no necesitaba refrigerador ni ceniceros; la nieve era un ser omnipotente que no permitiría ni incendios ni podredumbres.

Un hombre pasó frente a él, saludando con algo que no fue ni un gesto ni una palabra, sino una actitud del cuerpo entero, que se encogió ligeramente antes de sortear el obstáculo que era Manuel, parado como un idiota a la puerta del hotel L’Horloge. Manuel caminó hacia la esquina, que estaba a escasos veinte metros, poniendo despacio el pie en el suelo antes de cada paso. La acera parecía repeler el cuerpo suyo, como una gota de aceite encima de la piel de un muerto. Así sin fuerza las irregularidades de los edificios antiguos que se erguían como momias al lado de la acera. En la esquina, se sostuvo de una pequeña baranda de metal, seguramente puesta allí para que las personas mayores pudieran sostenerse antes de cruzar a la esquina del frente. Las hojuelas de nieve habían dejado de caer, pero el frío le pareció el mismo, constante e inmisericorde. Se imaginó

desnudo en medio de la calle, muriendo con la temperatura, que seguramente era de pocos grados bajo cero. El sabor de la cerveza, que había dejado por la mitad —el hombre de la aspiradora se habría bebido el resto del contenido, pensó—, le subió desde la boca entreabierta hasta la nariz, coagulado por el frío que se le pegaba en el sitio donde iba el bigote, la pequeña parcela de piel sobre el labio de arriba.

Dos tipos salieron de alguna de las esquinas que llegaban hasta el punto en que se encontraba Manuel, quien observaba el cambio de la capa delgada de nieve sobre el cemento y los carros parqueados a la vera de la calle. La voz de uno de ellos pareció un grito. Gesticulaba en exceso, como súbitamente enloquecido por la nieve o el frío o sus propios gritos. Manuel sintió el brazo del otro, un tipo gordo y más alto que él, la piel de su mano a través de un guante de cuero negro. Los dos hablaban un francés básico y torpe aunque, por más absurda que pareciera la situación, Manuel entendió que decían ser de la Policía Francesa. Somos de la Policía Francesa, somos de la Policía Francesa, repetía el tipo que gritaba, clavando en Manuel sus ojos azules, desorbitados e inhumanos. Movía los dedos de la mano derecha de una forma que significaba “dinero”; le ordenaba a Manuel que sacara la plata, frenéticamente.

—No entiendo —dijo sin embargo Manuel, en un francés más correcto que el de los policías, a todas luces impostores e idiotas, además.

—Somos de la Policía Francesa —decía el tipo de los ojos azules, a la vez que el otro no le quitaba la mano enguantada del antebrazo derecho, que Manuel se había visto obligado a sacar del bolsillo de la chaqueta. Pensó en el cigarro que le quedaba y en que no quería que ningún contacto se lo arrugara.

El tipo de los ojos azules siguió haciendo el signo de “dinero” con el pulgar y el índice, produciendo un pequeño chasquido que era como una cuarta voz en la tarde de la nieve a medio derretir. Manuel sacó la billetera. El tipo que lo sostenía lo soltó y sacó los dos billetes que llevaba Manuel; arqueó las cejas, como queriendo decir “¿esto es todo, imbécil?”, a lo que Manuel respondió con un levantamiento de los hombros, significando que le valía una mierda lo que el hombre pensara de la cantidad de plata que llevaba. En ese momento pensó en el pasaporte y los dos billetes de 20 euros que llevaba dentro de este, todo metido en el ridículo calzoncillo térmico. No ando más, no ando más, repitió varias veces Manuel, en un español tembloroso y alejado del que hubiera usado en cualquier otra circunstancia. Hijos de perra, dijo en voz muy alta, porque sabía que no le entenderían, y comenzó a caminar. El hombre de los ojos azules le gritó algo incomprensible, tanto como habían sido casi todas las palabras que Manuel había escuchado o había dicho en esos minutos. Sintió el sudor debajo de la chaqueta y las dos camisas, a pesar del frío de afuera. Le pareció que, al igual que las alfombras y los millones de sudores de los cuartos de hotel, el olor de la nieve era inmemorial, acumulativo: cemento mojado, cuerpos en constante agitación, agua que se va estancando antes de que el hielo por completo desaparezca y sea tragado por las innumerables alcantarillas de las ciudades.

Sin tener tiempo de sostenerse, agitado por el asedio de los dos hombres que comenzaron a seguirlo, gritando en una lengua que ya no era ni francés ni español ni árabe, ni ningún dialecto del mundo, cayó en el suelo frío. Sintió que golpeaba la osamenta congelada de un mastodonte. Los dos hombres lo sostuvieron y lo ayudaron a incorporarse, sin dejar de mover los labios y proferir palabras incomprensibles. Los tres comenzaron a caminar juntos; la escasa gente que había salido ese 2 de enero no mostraba el más mínimo interés por ese variopinto bloque de seres desgraciados. Manuel pensó en el cigarro y su suerte, en el probable interior del paquete que llevaba en el bolsillo de la chaqueta.

Se soltó bruscamente del agarronazo de los hombres cuando llegaron a la puerta del hotel L'Horloge, pensando con fugacidad en una película de cine negro.

La mezcla del calor del sudor de la espalda, el hielo que lo había mojado, la especie de calefacción defectuosa de la entrada del hotel y el recuerdo del hielo sobre el cemento, hizo que los gritos y las interjecciones de los hombres se le diluyeran de inmediato de los oídos. En el recibidor, el hombre amable y de sonrisa neutra y profesional –¿un francés criado en el extranjero?, pensó muy fugazmente– se le quedó mirando, luego de levantar la vista de un periódico arrugado y largo.

—¿Le pasa algo? –preguntó en francés el hombre. Manuel, a pesar de no entender cada una de las palabras, comprendió la pregunta del tipo, que sonreía como si tuviera un mecanismo de movimiento perpetuo en la boca. Los hombres de los hoteles siempre sonríen, se dijo Manuel, pensando en el frío del hielo derretido sobre su chaqueta y parte de su pantalón, pensando en los dos tipos, cuyas voces se habían ya perdido. Intentó decir que estaba bien, solamente esgrimiendo un gesto simple, como de niño o de alienado. El hombre dijo algo y siguió leyendo el periódico, sin perder la sonrisa.

La escalera de caracol tenía impregnado el mismo olor del resto del hotel, del resto de rellanos que había percibido desde su llegada a la ciudad. Su padre le había dicho que en París no asaltaban de la forma en que ellos estaban acostumbrados, que no había puñales ni armas ni forcejeos absurdos ni golpes. Los ladrones parisinos eran refinados estafadores. Manuel era una cuasi víctima de una estafa estúpida y, mientras subía los escalones y hasta que se encontró frente a la puerta que simplemente rezaba, en un rotulito hecho a mano, “Ellie”, se tocaba varias partes, para constatar que el cuerpo y la vida y el pasaporte y el cigarro eran reales. Las llaves también las llevaba, y abrió la puerta con una especie de temblor molesto e insistente, de esos que solo suelen pegarse al cuerpo cuando se está a miles de kilómetros de casa, en una situación absurda además.

Dentro del cuarto, lo asaltó el olor estancado de los miles de sudores de todos los que antes habían estado allí, como él, acostados en la cama, meditando, haciendo el amor, masturbándose, pensando en el suicidio o la pasión, orando o leyendo. La luz que venía de afuera, amortiguada por una especie de cortina o pieza rojiza de tela, extendida sobre la ventana de vidrios sucios, había mudado en cuestión de minutos. Estaba en esa hora imprecisa que podía ser la de la primera noche o la del primer día. Se sorprendió al ver la lata de cerveza en la mesita, tal y como él la había dejado antes de salir. El resto del cuarto estaba casi exactamente igual: el tipo de la aspiradora apenas si había acomodado los ganchos en un clóset sin puertas, y apenas si se había tomado el trabajo de cambiar de posición la maleta desparramada de Manuel.

Llegó hasta la ventana: las hojuelas ya no caían. Según había leído en un anuncio de letras anaranjadas sobre fondo negro, en una de las calles por las que había caminado, no era común que nevara en París, y mucho menos un 2 de enero. Pensó que también podía ser la última vez que vería la nieve, y eso no lo angustió ni lo entristeció. La maldita nieve derretida y solidificada de nuevo sobre la ropa le estaba llenando la piel de pequeñas puntas afiladas, un frío sin forma, extenso y jamás sentido. De hecho, el olor de la nieve, casi totalmente desaparecida de la acera y la calle, ascendía hasta la ventana por la que Manuel apenas si se asomaba; el hielo convertido en agua y luego en vapor o en suciedad vaporosa olía a tantas cosas repugnantes o sin nombre, que aborreció de pronto las fotografías que recordaba de los países alpinos, o de los niños jugando sobre la nieve, haciendo sus horrendos muñequitos en Canadá o Estados Unidos.

Pensó en las tres noches, contada esa, que le quedaban para abandonar la ciudad, el país, el continente. Sintió más hambre que nostalgia: no llevaba demasiado dinero, por lo menos no para darse grandes lujos. Había estado comiendo mal. Se metió la mano en el grueso e incómodo

calzoncillo térmico, y alcanzó a tocar el pasaporte. Lo sacó; se extrañó de ver su foto y, casi al mismo tiempo, los dos billetes de 20 euros que le pertenecían aún, aparte de las monedas que le habían ido quedando de los buses, el metro y las esquinas de comidas baratas e insípidas. Pensó en los dos tipos, y en qué hubiera hecho si de verdad lo hubieran desnudado en la capa delgada de nieve y lo hubieran dejado sin la plata de emergencia –¡Plata! ¡Plata!, decían sus gritos furiosos en su francés rudimentario–, de la que pensaba aún guardar algo para la vuelta a su país.

Cuando sintió que el sudor de la espalda se le secaba, se asomó por la ventana. La luz era irreal. Hacía menos frío. Escuchó agua correr en algún sitio, y pensó que quizá se tratara de una de esas duchas compartidas de los pasillos de los hoteles baratos. Intentó sumar la cantidad de cuerpos que se habrían metido en esas duchas, desde la fundación del hotel –no sabía la fecha exacta de su construcción y apertura como hotel, pero seguramente andaría por los doscientos años, tal vez más–, la cantidad de suciedades que se habrían mezclado en el desagüe, y en el recorrido de este por los alcantarillados, en los inviernos gélidos y los veranos insoportablemente calientes. Se quitó la bufanda. Se volteó hacia la parrilla de calefacción, cuyo nombre real desconocía. No supo cómo, pero recordó cuando el hombre de la recepción le había dicho que no funcionaba, pero que le podía dar cobijas adicionales y bajarle la tarifa. No sentía frío, pero pensó en la madrugada y en la primera mañana, eternas en el invierno de la ciudad gris, cuando la temperatura bajaba, y los olores de las alfombras y los empapelados se estancaban, en las horas en las que se encendía un cigarro y el olor del humo permanecía como una mano gaseosa que tratara de asfixiar a un niño.

Miró a derecha e izquierda, abajo, en la calle. Una mujer caminó de un lado al otro de su campo de visión, lenta, haciendo un ruido cuando pisaba el hielo sucio, que ahora era mejor llamar agua o suciedad mojada o mugre. En el extremo izquierdo de su campo de visión, adosados a una de las fachadas, distinguió a los dos hombres. Sintió un chorro de sangre salirle del corazón hacia el resto del cuerpo. Instintivamente, se tocó los bolsillos de la chaqueta. En un momento, antes de poder introducir la cabeza y cerrar la ventana rectangular y pequeña, se dio cuenta de que ellos lo habían encontrado desde afuera. El sonido del agua corriendo, a lo lejos, cesó. Sin proponérselo, halló el paquete de cigarrillos. Con sorpresa, constató que el último, blanco por completo y arrugado, no estaba más estropeado que antes. Lo colocó sobre la mesita, junto a la cerveza. Dio un trago a la lata; era tan asqueroso el nuevo sabor que había adquirido, como el aroma del cuarto, concentrado por el día en mero trámite de desaparición. La cerveza sabía a almohada, a babas, a sudor, a alfombras ensangrentadas.

El pasaporte –no los billetes, estos los llevó consigo, plegados en el puño derecho–, el encendedor en forma de pequeño revólver, la faja, las monedas, los tiquetes del metro y el mapa arrugado e irreconocible de la ciudad parecían los objetos de un libro de criminología, acomodados para una de esas fotos inquietantes, en las que se distorsionan o se tapan con una banda negra, posteriormente, los ojos del cadáver. Cerró la puerta del cuarto, atravesó el frío amortiguado del pasillo y llegó a la ducha. Se limpió un cuerpo que no olía a nada, o que había perdido su olor en el invierno en el que nunca había estado, o que apestaba pero que había sido purificado por la nieve. El agua, calentada por algún mecanismo eléctrico, implantado como un cáncer en las entrañas del hotel antiguo (según el parecer borroso de Manuel, concentrado en no pensar en nada), le arrancaba del cuerpo el olor de la pelusa y los ácaros, el frío de la piel, la sensación de la estafa y el asco del viaje de turista sin mucho dinero. Sacó la cabeza de la ducha, por el mismo instinto de conservación de antes, que le iba creciendo con cada minuto del día que terminaba. Los dos billetes, plegados y casi irreconocibles, estaban encima de la toalla, junto al desodorante, todo puesto sobre el inodoro blanco y algo descascarado. Se terminó de duchar, sintiendo que solo le quedaban dos noches: esta ya estaba muerta, ya se había extinto, y los hechos recientes serían borrados durante la noche, la

negra noche del invierno de París, que no era el que siempre había imaginado. No era romántica ni literaria, ni seductora ni lírica. Era fría, maloliente, sospechosa y ordinaria, como una puta de la peor calaña, o como una infección purulenta.

Lo primero que notó al entrar en “Ellie” fue el cambio total de la luz, ahora sí perteneciente a una noche auténtica. Botó la lata de cerveza en un basurero pequeño de plástico; el sonido del interior, del líquido enfriado y oloroso por el ambiente, le produjo un malestar que no era hambre ni sed, sino un deseo de quemar la noche, o de beber directamente de una botella de algún vino tinto barato, de esos que la gente tomaba el 31 de diciembre, casi tres días atrás. Llegó a la ventana. Recordó el golpe de su cuerpo contra el cemento cubierto por la piel escamosa de nieve, en el momento en que vio a los dos hombres, ahora justo enfrente del hotel L’Horloge, que discutían en voz baja y que, apenas Manuel se asomó por la ventana, lo miraron como se mira la luna llena, en silencio y sin buscar explicaciones. Él metió la cabeza deprisa, de nuevo por el instinto. Pensó en llamar a la policía, y se dio cuenta de que eso sería imposible. Apenas si podría dar un par de indicaciones imprecisas a quien contestara su llamada. No sabía el número al que llamar, no sabía cómo usar el teléfono para llamadas locales de emergencia –apenas había utilizado los teléfonos públicos para llamar a su casa, con las tarjetas que indicaban su uso mediante ilustraciones sencillas–, no sabía cómo se decía “corbata” en francés, ni “chaqueta afelpada”, ni “ojos maliciosamente azules”, ni “un tipo un poco más alto que yo, pero mucho más grueso”.

Salió del cuarto “Ellie”, con la intención de bajar todas las gradas hasta llegar al recibidor, para alertar sobre los dos hombres al tipo de la sonrisa inmutable. En el pasillo, ya la oscuridad era profunda. Manuel se tocó el pecho, quieto, disuadiéndose de bajar. Estaba nervioso. Quiso una cerveza, pero una muy fría, en una botella, a ocho mil kilómetros de allí, en el bar que estaba a un par de kilómetros de su casa, en San José.

Ingresó de nuevo al cuarto. Se asomó por la ventana. Los dos hombres observaban sin parpadear –la distancia era grande, pero a él le parecía que no respiraban, que no parpadeaban, que no vivían–, hasta que uno de ellos, el bajo de ojos azules, comenzó a gritar y a proferir interjecciones ininteligibles. Levantaba las manos y las movía como aspas, dando patadas al suelo, clavándole la mirada y dándole a entender a Manuel que quería que bajara, porque tenían cuentas pendientes. Manuel miraba a los tipos sin hablar. Pensaba en la sustancia de las pesadillas, en el olor de la noche, que ya no era el de la nieve derretida, sino el del cemento subyacente que rezumaba los siglos de historia y los días de basuras pequeñas y aparentemente inocuas. Se volteó hacia la mesa. Tomó el encendedor en forma de pequeño revólver y comenzó a jugar con él, sonriendo como cretinizado por la suciedad de la noche. La habitación, a pesar de no estar calentada por la parrilla, descompuesta y ornamental, no estaba demasiado fría. Apuntó con el revólver hacia el tipo de los ojos azules, luego dirigió el arma de juguete hacia el hombre gordo y un poco más alto que él. Levantó uno de los dedos de la mano derecha, diciéndoles con el gesto que se fueran al carajo. Los dos hombres hablaron entre sí. La calle se llenó de sus bajas voces que, en la ventana del tercer piso, desde la cual los observaba Manuel, se convirtieron en zumbidos que soltaban un vaho blanquecino, como palabras de demonios que se concretan en la noche.

El hombre gordo y más alto que Manuel, minutos después, habló despacio en dirección a la ventana del hotel, moviendo excesivamente la boca y gesticulando. Las manos denotaban súplica y el resto del cuerpo alguna derrota inasible. Manuel, con la cabeza afuera de la ventana, observaba los gestos, los movimientos, y no entendía ninguna de las palabras. Parecía que el hombre lloraba; el temblor de la voz era evidente. Eso no era francés, o era un francés deformado en alguna colonia, o era una lengua lejana a cualquier lengua romance. El hombre no se detenía en lo que parecía ser un discurso escrito y aprendido décadas atrás o un soliloquio teatral de alguna obra menor. El tipo

de ojos azules miraba alternativamente a su compañero y a Manuel, como un muñeco desgano. Manuel pensó en los estafadores de París, en la vida de la ciudad que abandonaría en un par de noches, en el olor de los hoteles, en la suciedad de todo lo tocado por los demás.

Alcanzó el paquete de cigarros y, usando la punta del revólver pequeño y plateado, logró encender el cilindro blanco y arrugado. De nuevo lagrimeó por el humo que le dio en los ojos. Soltaba las bocanadas hacia su derecha. El hombre seguía con su discurso y sus gestos suplicantes, soltando su propio humo-vaho con cada palabra, abajo, en la acera de enfrente. Todos soltamos el mismo humo –pensó Manuel–, damos los mismos pasos, tocamos las mismas cosas, sudamos los mismos sudores. Él mismo suplicaría, adosado a la pared de alguna de las fachadas de su ciudad, a miles de kilómetros de allí, en un país más pobre que este pero igualmente lleno de estafas y ruegos y manos mendicantes, o vería a otros más suplicar, si le iba bien.

Cerró la ventana. Aún con el rumor de la voz, lejano e ininteligible, se resolvió a dormir. Se llevó los dedos que sostuvieron el cigarro a la nariz; el olor del tabaco quemado era desagradable. El soliloquio del hombre gordo y alto parecía mezclarse con el sudor de la alfombra, el aroma de la sábana, la respiración añeja de la madera. Sintió frío en la madrugada.

METALES PESADOS

La vida es una mierda, pensó Mario Sánchez al despertarse y ver la luz que entraba a su derecha, con un artificial dramatismo que hacía que todo fuese aun peor.

El día anterior, Antonio Luján estaba sentado, incómodamente plegado en una silla que estaba a punto de desparramarse, en la habitación de su amigo Julián Rodríguez, lugar al que siempre iban los sábados por la tarde. Antonio había logrado publicar en Barcelona dieciocho meses atrás, y eso ciertamente era una cosa grande, de esas que trascienden los grupúsculos de poesía y los malos talleres, que brotan tan pronto como prenden fuego. Su amigo Julián había logrado contagiarse de algo del estado de gracia de Antonio, y ambos, a pesar de la fama a nivel latinoamericano de este, habían permanecido fieles a Ediciones Rectangular, que se preciaba de publicar a los poetas que marcaban el rumbo a seguir en la lírica del país. La lírica de lo no lírico, la poesía de las calles y las tazas de café que humean, el asesinato de metáforas, símiles y todas esas payasadas de la poesía muerta: esa era, en resumen, la consigna de Ediciones Rectangular.

Antonio le preguntó a Julián de dónde había sacado esa botella; estaba deliciosa, aunque le supiera cada vez menos a algo reconocible, mientras avanzaba la tarde y los dos se emborrachaban poco a poco, aturdidos por el ron que se acababa. Antonio golpeó la silla con el puño torpe, como pidiéndole explicaciones a un ente invisible que no se las daría. Julián estaba inclinado en dirección a la mesa llena de libros, intentando emborracharse menos que su amigo, para mantener una compostura fuera de lugar. Habían estado trabajando en el número 3 de la revista *Crucigrama*, en la que juntaban los trabajos de los poetas activos, del grupo de Rectangular o de los que no les llevaban la contraria. Los recortes, las fotos y colaboraciones estaban desperdigados junto a las pilas de libros, formando un conjunto sobre el que Antonio, de tanto en tanto, pensaba que iba a vomitar.

Perra revista, dijo Julián, tomando la foto que usarían en la portada: una pila de discos de acetato fuera de sus fundas, junto a un moderno equipo de sonido, como símbolo de la incongruencia en el arte. Hasta ahí llegaban en alegorías, para la poesía no dejaban nada. Los dos rieron, faltaban todavía dos semanas para la salida de ese número 3, y el trabajo estaba bastante adelantado. Antonio se llevó el vaso de ron a la boca; estaba vacío. Buscó con torpeza la botella. Estaba vacía. Dio un par de putazos o le pareció que Julián daba un par de putazos. El ron lo había comprado Julián, pero en ese momento ninguno de los dos estaba para mierdas de quién había comprado qué. No había más ron en toda la casa, ni más guaro, ni vino, ni cerveza. Los últimos vestigios de poesía se les fueron de la cabeza. Más ron, por la gran mierda, más ron, gritó Julián, sabiendo, entre la malla de metal alcoholizado en que estaban atrapados, que ir a algún lado y conseguir una botella de ron no estaba dentro de sus posibilidades, que era una de esas vanas esperanzas de los que se saben derrotados.

Mierda, necesitamos más, mucho más, dijo Antonio, llevándose a los labios en embudo uno de sus pulgares, señalando que necesitaban beber más. Julián estuvo de acuerdo, aunque su mayor preocupación era no desplomarse; la mesa se movía y el mundo se movía y una agitación demencial se movía en el ambiente de las cinco y media de la tarde.

Julián, dijo Antonio, ¿te acordás de Mario Sánchez? Julián se acordó y maldijo sin poder mover bien la lengua. Hoy presenta un poemario, dijo Antonio, y precisó en los ojos brillantes y temblorosos de Julián. Vamos, acordate que nos llegó la invitación el otro día. ¿Que vayamos a la presentación?, preguntó Julián, con un tono que no era de contrariedad cuando había pretendido

serlo. Pero si es una mierda de poeta, continuó, no es un poeta, es una mierda que hace libros con versos y los publica en cualquier imprenta de esquina, como una puta. Yo sé que es una mierda, respondió Antonio, pero siempre lleva buen vino a las presentaciones. *Cabernet sauvignon* del Pays d'Oc, dijo Julián, sin poder contener una risa explosiva y sonora. Oporto, dulce y putamente bueno. Vinos de Francia, finos. Poemas de mierda, todos malos, metafóricos y asquerosos, como perras ahuecadas por el plomo. Se rieron de las palabras pegajosas. Habrá que ir a esa porquería, dijo Antonio.

Llegaron al Instituto de Estudios Anglosajones. Era tarde. El salón principal del lugar era uno de los cinco posibles sitios para la presentación de libros en la ciudad. Antonio y Julián procuraron sentarse lo más lejos posible del frente, para no tener que saludar a Mario, que decía las palabras finales, con una gran sonrisa, ampliamente satisfecho de que Adolfo Rojas, uno de los poetas de la vieja escuela –maldito pedazo de verga, había dicho entre dientes Antonio, al entrar, porque los de su grupo despreciaban sin ambages a los viejos poetas de las figuras literarias recargadas–, hubiese aceptado presentar su poemario *Encrucijadas de un muerto*.

Gracias por estar acá, dijo Mario Sánchez, señalando al público, que estaba formado por varios de sus amigos, ciertos poetas menores, algunos miembros de su familia y, en el fondo, los poetas de Rectangular, los ciertamente distinguidos Antonio Luján y Julián Rodríguez. Ya había leído tres poemas largos y escabrosos y, después del sentido agradecimiento a los asistentes, leyó cinco versos adicionales que hablaban de la muerte, los espantapájaros, los ojos de los que resucitan y lo escabroso de ver un cadáver directo a las cuencas vacías. Nadie pareció entender una palabra, pero todos aplaudieron. Llovía, y los aplausos hacían eco de la lluvia, que chocaba contra el cinc.

Pasen por este lado, les tengo un humilde agasajo, dijo Mario, señalando a su derecha, hacia un salón pequeño que parecía ser un apéndice del sitio de la presentación. También se estarán vendiendo los libros, por si alguno de una vez quiere tenerlo. Nadie pareció querer tenerlo, todos se desplazaron hacia la mesa rectangular que contenía una gran bandeja de metal, redonda y enorme, llena de aceitunas, trozos cúbicos de queso, pedazos irregulares de jamón, frutas secas, todo puesto en círculos concéntricos y multicolores. En otra mesa, un tanto más pequeña, las botellas de vino recién descorchadas, las copas grandes y el tipo que comenzaba a servir con su postura profesional y una expresión sin sonrisa. El olor del vino invadió casi de inmediato el sitio. Las uvas muertas y aplastadas. Antonio y Julián, después de darle la mano a Mario Sánchez, por mero compromiso profesional de colegas, fueron directamente a la mesa del vino tinto. Mario se sentía orgulloso de la asistencia de los dos poetas de Rectangular, a pesar de no comulgar con sus métodos y de no pertenecer a la misma escuela. Claro, esa noche no estaba para esas dicotomías y reyertas de los distintos aparatos poéticos. La noche de una presentación es una noche blanca, neutra, en la que todos son amigos.

Te dije que este hijueputa tenía buenos vinos. Yo sabía, respondió Julián. El tipo que servía los miraba como se mira a dos perros rabiosos a punto de extinguirse. Brindaron unas cinco veces, cada vez más borrachos y chocando las copas cada vez más fuertemente. Mario Sánchez se desplazaba entre las pocas personas, saludando con su sonrisa inamovible y agradeciendo la asistencia. Mario llegó hasta donde estaban Antonio y Julián. Gracias por venir, de verdad se lo agradezco a los dos, dijo sonriente Mario, tomando una copa y levantándola, en señal de triunfo, como una presea olímpica. Mae, todo un placer, respondió Julián, volteando hacia donde Antonio, cuya sonrisa era idéntica a la de Mario, inamovible y horrenda, enrojecida y absurda. Se dieron la mano y se abrazaron como viejos amigos.

Después de firmar tres ejemplares de *Encrucijadas de un muerto*, Mario Sánchez pidió silencio y comunicó que había una fiesta en su casa. Hay que celebrar, un libro es algo que lleva mucho trabajo, yo invito a los tragos, dijo, algo borracho aunque completamente consciente de sus palabras. Había seis personas en total, aparte de Mario Sánchez. Una se fue a los pocos minutos, sin despedirse. El presentador se había marchado hacía más de media hora, excusándose en el cansancio y en trabajos por realizar al día siguiente. Antonio y Julián se sostenían en las orillas de la mesa de los vinos, pidiéndole al tipo que les sirviera más. Quedaba menos de media botella. Solo dos hombres –poetas o aprendices de poetas, o amigos de Mario Sánchez– aceptaron la invitación de Mario a la fiesta en su casa. Antonio y Julián aceptaron, movidos por algo que estaba más cercano a la borrachera que a la compasión. Antonio recordó, torpemente y en ráfagas, la noche en que presentó su primer libro de poemas, antes de lograr publicar en Barcelona. Había poca gente. No tenía vino, solo café y refrescos. No se había sentido exactamente triste, pero ahora creía que sí y no quería que Mario, a pesar de sus desavenencias, se sintiera como esa imagen inventada de sí mismo. Julián simplemente asintió a la hora de las invitaciones. Mario Sánchez los abrazó al mismo tiempo, sin perder la mueca de su sonrisa guasónica.

Este hijueputa está lleno de guaro, en la casa debe de tener litros y litros de aquel ron que te terminaste. Yo no me terminé nada. Rieron con torpeza. Delante de ellos, caminaban Mario y sus dos acompañantes, amigos o aspirantes a poetas; hablaban de la presentación y las palabras elogiosas del presentador y del ambiente y de la lluvia, que ya había cesado. La casa de Mario estaba a pocas cuerdas del Instituto de Estudios Anglosajones. La noche estaba fría. Antonio fumaba y sentía que el humo era el vaho de sus pulmones. Pensaba en un par de poemas que podía escribir, hasta que la sonrisa inamovible de Mario Sánchez lo invitó a pasar a su casa, interrumpiéndolo. Julián ya caminaba por el pasillo, sosteniéndose de unas columnas blancas y descascaradas que se le iban de las manos como frutos podridos. La noche olía a podredumbre, a vino fermentado en las bocas.

Mario Sánchez entraba a las habitaciones de su casa, salía a los pocos segundos, caminaba de un lugar a otro como un insecto sonriente y amable, aturdido por la luz amarilla de una lámpara que encendió al entrar. Sus amigos conversaban en voz baja. Antonio y Julián esperaban que sacara las botellas de vino tinto o de ron o de lo que fuera. Mario, gracias por invitarnos, dijo Antonio, levantando una copa imaginaria. Brindemos, sí señor, secundó Mario, deteniéndose de pronto. Le brillaban los ojos, con algo que era alegría u orgullo. Abrió un estante de madera negra y sacó dos botellas largas, cuyo contenido brilló a contraluz. Llenó los cinco vasos. Por los amigos que me acompañan hoy, en este día tan especial, salud. Chocaron vasos, alguien dijo “mierda, esto es una belleza”. Julián encendió un cigarro. Sonó el teléfono.

Mientras Mario hablaba, Antonio y Julián se presentaron con los dos tipos con los que habían llegado hasta allí. Somos amigos de toda la vida, dijo uno de ellos. ¿Son poetas? No somos poetas, leemos algunas cosas que nos presta Mario, pero no estamos en el ambiente. Mejor por ustedes, dijo Julián, sonriendo sin felicidad. Antonio les ofreció cigarros.

Es mi novia, viene de camino; no pudo ir a la presentación, dijo Mario al colgar. Antonio y Julián brindaron por la novia de Mario, a quien no conocían. Todos brindaron de nuevo. Alfonso pensó en que se tomaría todo lo que quedaba de la botella, y la otra y luego saquearía el mueble negro, hasta atiborrarse con todo lo que hubiese en aquella casa de mierda, en la que vivía aquel poeta de mierda.

La novia de Mario Sánchez se llamaba Marta. Cuando Mario se la presentó a Antonio y Julián, lo hizo con su sonrisa inamovible de muñeco de cera, como enseñando un marlín gigante recién pescado. Antonio le dio un beso en la mejilla al conocerla; Julián le dio la mano, como a un amigo. Les pareció bonita. Era delgada, baja, de cabello largo, rojizo, muy blanca.

Brindaron de nuevo. Había dos botellas sin abrir en una repisa. Mario se había preparado para una celebración multitudinaria, que se había reducido a los seis que tomaban alrededor de la mesa de los tragos, sobre la que Mario había puesto aceitunas, frutas secas y quesos, como en la presentación. No se le borraba la sonrisa del rostro. Contaba chistes a las sombras que adivinaba detrás de la luz tenue de la lámpara de mesa. Malos chistes. A veces se escuchaba alguna risa o unos tos de humo de cigarro. Alguien preguntó por la música. ¡Música, música!, gritó Julián, esto parece un velorio. En aquel mueble, dijo Mario, señalando tres enormes columnas de discos compactos, casi de la altura de un niño de diez u once años.

Antonio llegó hasta los discos. Repasaba los lomos de las cajas y no encontraba nada que le gustase. Emmanuel. Camilo Sesto. Nino Bravo. La Sonora Santanera. Aquí no hay nada bueno, dijo, todo esto es una mierda. Mario se puso de pie; se sentía borracho. ¿A ustedes qué les gusta, muchachos?, preguntó. No sé, no estas porquerías. No son porquerías, son clásicos. Mierda, déjate de pingas, pendejo, yo quiero metal, metal, algo pesado, no musiquita romántica de viejo. Metal pesado, insistió Julián, con el rostro desencajado. Acá no hay música de esa, dijo Mario, sin perder la sonrisa. Alternaba entre mirar a Marta, a Antonio y a Julián. A sus dos amigos no alcanzaba a verlos, metidos como estaban detrás de una cortina de sombras. Quiero metal pesado, secundó Antonio, tomando a Mario por los hombros. Tranquilo, tranquilo, acató a decir Mario, con sus ojos brillantes de animal temeroso. Podemos poner la radio, tal vez haya algo bueno. En la radio no hay metal, no hay nada de Sepultura, nada de Carcass, nada de Terrorizer. Julián y Mario recordaban todos esos nombres de la adolescencia, y rieron con caras retorcidas de borrachos, recordando las patadas y los tímpanos arruinados de aquellos años. Mario encontró un disco con éxitos de los ochenta. Comenzó con Dire Straits. Es decente, por lo menos, dijo Antonio.

Siguieron terminándose las botellas de ron, escuchando la música que dejaba de ser música y se convertía en una sucesión ininterrumpida de notas que no podía ser encadenada por los oídos de Antonio o Julián. Los dos amigos de Mario estaban ya borrachos, y fumaban marihuana y enrolaban cigarrillos de tabaco y se atiborraban de humo y reían como estúpidos. Mario había caído en un sillón de la sala.

De pronto, Julián se encontró bailando con Marta, la novia de Mario Sánchez. El volumen de la música era estridente. A Antonio, tembloroso y empalidecido, le pareció distinguir a John Coltrane dentro de las notas que se movían en la habitación tétrica, por debajo de *Careless whisper*, de Wham! Mario estaba desparramado, con los ojos cerrados, imitando la postura de un desgraciado anónimo en un cuadro de Lucian Freud. El vaso de ron se le había caído de las manos, después del vigésimo o vigésimo primer brindis; los añicos de vidrio se veían como bichos esmaltados encima de la alfombra verde oscuro de la sala.

¿Vos también sos poeta?, preguntó Julián, tratando de poner sus ojos encima de los de Marta. Le tocó un brazo, torpemente, como si llevara una pezuña por mano. Soy poeta, he aprendido mucho de Mario. ¿Aprender? Lo que escribe tu novio es una mierda, de eso no vas a aprender nada. No creo que sea cierto, es bueno. No es bueno, es una porquería; todo lleno de metáforas y alusiones a otras cosas, cargado de esas figuras literarias que no valen un cinco. Eso es la poesía, Julián. Eso no es la poesía, eso son palabras muertas, artificios de imbéciles que se dicen poetas; ahora lo que se escribe no es eso, ya no se usan los símiles ni las metonimias, todo

eso es pura verga; ahora se escribe como se acuchilla a un perro, ahora se mete el metal pesado de un puñal en la carne sin tantas puerilidades. Hizo la mímica de que se estaba clavando un puñal en el costado. Mario escribe por otros motivos, vos no lo conocés. No me interesan sus motivos, sino la mierda que ponga sobre el papel, dijo Julián, golpeando la palma de una mano con dos dedos de la otra, como escribiendo con sangre encima de un papiro. Mario escribe para no volverse loco, aseguró Marta. Todos escribimos para no volvernos locos, respondió Julián, sonriendo como si tuviera aceite de cocina hirviendo encima de los labios, con los ojos nublados. No me entendés, su mamá se despedazó en un carro, su papá se pegó un tiro después de eso, él escribe sobre todas esas cosas, vos no sabés lo que es eso. Julián intentó entender el significado de cada palabra y de decir algo inteligente, o que al menos conciliara su desprecio por Mario con su historia desgraciada; algo bonito, humano. Se volteó hacia la imagen de Mario en la penumbra, desparramado en el sillón, sin conciencia. Trató de imaginar a los padres de Mario, que seguramente habían llevado durante toda su vida esa misma sonrisa inamovible, de labios torcidos hacia arriba como un rictus, como imágenes inocuas de guasones más contentos de lo normal.

La música cesó. Los dos amigos de Mario habían desaparecido, pero sus risas y sus expresiones rabiosas se escuchaban afuera de la casa, en el jardín. Estaban fumando y bajándose una botella completa de ron. Todo olía a hospital o a campo de batalla; el guaro se sentía en cada palabra y cada movimiento.

Antonio buscaba entre los discos compactos alguno que sirviera de algo. En su languidez todo le sonaba a silencio y aturdimiento. Pensó en Leonard Cohen y en la tristeza de alguna de sus letras, luego en Deicide y Cannibal Corpse y todo el *death metal* que recordaba de su adolescencia. El metal pesado era lo que necesitaban para despertar al mundo, para que Mario Sánchez reviviera en su sillón y saliera de su muerte de execrable poeta ebrio. El recuerdo de los acordes de las guitarras distorsionadas le produjo unas arcadas insoportables. Vio a Julián agarrándole el culo a Marta, la novia de Mario Sánchez, el poetaastro. A Julián se le movían los ojos en las cuencas, parecían moluscos. Le dio un beso en la boca a Marta, metiéndole una lengua pesada y plomiza. Ella no quitó su boca. La saliva de los dos olía a alcohol de fricciones, a prosaísmo. Julián le puso una mano encima de una nalga. La carne era suave, o por lo menos estaba suavizada por la sensación anestésica.

¿Qué es esta mierda?, dijo la voz de Antonio, y las manos de esa voz tomaron la columna izquierda de discos compactos, casi de la mitad del tamaño de Antonio, y la lanzaron por el suelo. El estruendo del plástico roto despertó a Mario Sánchez, que fijó su mirada perdida y cadavérica en el posible origen del ruido. Qué pasa, qué pasa, gritó con una voz que le salía no de la garganta sino de las costillas, una fractura de sonido pegajoso. Qué pasa, querido público, dijo, soñando que estaba en la presentación de un poemario que no era el suyo.

Antonio pateaba las cajas de los discos y aplastaba las ruedas tornasoladas que se habían desperdigado en el suelo, casi en penumbra. Julián le tocó un seno a Marta, se separó de ella y alcanzó a Antonio. Esto es la poesía, dijo Antonio, las patadas, el metal, señores. Los discos eran duros, costaba quebrarlos. Mario intentó salir del sopor; había recuperado, con su escasa conciencia, la sonrisa imperecedera. Se imaginó que estaba en un paisaje en el fondo del mar, lento y salino. Ustedes no saben lo que es el fin de un imperio, dijo, levantando un dedo que temblaba, en señal de muerte a los impíos.

Julián intentó abrazar a Antonio, pero al encontrar la resistencia de una anguila eléctrica, volvió donde Marta. La tomó de un brazo y la llevó a una habitación –que encontró después de entrar en un baño, un cuarto con máquinas de hacer ejercicios, uno con varias camas desarmadas que parecían cuerpos apilados y un jardín interno que olía a rosas mojadas y a herrumbre.

En la sala, Mario Sánchez continuaba con su discurso enlentecido por la desidia extrema, en el que hablaba a los muertos, a su madre destrozada, y le pedía a su padre que no, que no, que no metiera la cabeza en el recorrido de la bala de plomo, que no permitiera que él quedara prácticamente solo en el mundo asqueroso que hay que reconstruir con el arte de los versos. Con el arte de los versos... alcanzó a decir y no soportó más: vomitó encima del piso de la sala, un vómito sonoro, una cascada de asco, cuyo extremo se mezcló con los trozos de discos arruinados y los gritos de Antonio, que había botado también la otra columna, la de Los Bukis, Los Tigres del Norte, Salvatore Adamo. Los amigos de Mario habían desaparecido, o se habían transformado en fantasmas o en piedras. Sus rastros no subsistían, ni sus gritos, solo su olor a alcohol y a marihuana.

Antonio se limpió la frente. Sentía el sudor frío bajarle como hilos de mercurio, álgidos y venenosos. Vio a Mario dando su discurso y recitando versos que él nunca había escuchado. Quizá fuesen de Sylvia Plath, o de Rimbaud, todos se le parecían en esos momentos. Quizá fuese un poema que estaba improvisando Mario, hermoso y sangriento. Antonio se olvidó de los discos, de la música que no existía en la sala y del vómito. Neblinosamente recordó la presentación de *Encrucijadas de un muerto*, de Mario, y de *Instantes o fragmentos*, que él, Antonio Luján, había escrito para ganar un concurso en Barcelona, donde se había terminado publicando, pero que no llevaba muertes, ni taras insoportables ni episodios dolorosos que, a pesar de no conocer la historia que Julián había escuchado, adivinaba en la boca pegajosa de Mario. El suyo era un libro sin alma. Se sentó en el suelo, cerca de la puerta de la casa e intentó llorar. Lo logró a medias.

Mario Sánchez se detuvo y cayó dormido de nuevo, con la sonrisa impresa levemente en el infierno de su cara. Se despertó solo y asqueado, pensando que la vida era una mierda. Y sentía la lengua como de plomo, y la boca le sabía a hierro.

VICISITUDES DEL VICIO

*...puesto que para tener una visión negra del mundo
hay que haber creído antes en él y en sus posibilidades.*

ERNESTO SABATO

Le dijo a su mamá que era una maldita perra desconsiderada, que era una viciosa del gran carajo; sin embargo, la quería, y muchísimo, entonces no había hablado en serio, o sí lo había hecho pero no se había preocupado por la dureza de sus palabras. A su madre no le importó en lo absoluto que su hijo mayor la insultara; todo lo que ella quería eran los putos cigarros. Y punto.

Alguien mencionó, con evidente ánimo de echarle leña al fuego, que cómo era posible que vivieran en un pueblo así, de mierda, en un lugar tan alejado de todo lo imaginable, de los últimos pedazos de civilización, si es que así se le podía llamar al mercadito de la entrada de los caseríos menos desastrosos, al lado de la carretera principal. Ese mercado –enlatados, pan, huevos, cigarros y una que otra cosa más– estaba a más de veinte kilómetros de la casa suya, y su hijo era el único que sabía manejar, que podía llegar hasta el “centro” de noche, porque las calles eran intransitables de barro y agua empozada.

Ahora, yace acostado, en la oscuridad. Como la insultó de la forma más directa y soez, no quiere ni puede salir de la habitación. Si fumara, tomaría todo el paquete que le quedase y lo encendería al mismo tiempo, para quemar la casa y todas las casas de los alrededores, todas iguales, las mismas cajas de madera.

Los gritos de su madre traspasan la débil hoja de la puerta: maldiciones; hijueputa quién te habrá parido; saque ese maldito carro y me compra los cigarros, si quiere gasolina le doy plata; suspiros entrecortados por el deseo todopoderoso. Se oyen golpes lejanos, ceremonias de destrucción, truenos, las palabras de su mamá a través de la puerta cerrada del cuarto. Se quita los tres anillos puestos en su dedo medio, juguetea con ellos, pasándoselos de una mano a otra, con dedos de yemas torpes. Afuera del cuarto, la voz de su madre se confunde con el grito entrecortado de una lluvia necia y pequeña.

Le dice de nuevo que tome el puto carro y salga por los cigarros, que si no lo va a matar, que él sabe que nadie más que él maneja y que es su obligación hacer todas las compras de la casa, a lo que él responde con una risita cretina que se le pega sin querer en los huesos afilados de la cara invisible. Otra vez le da vueltas a los anillos; se pone de pie y tropieza con la mesita de noche, que produce el sonido de siempre: las patas medio despedazadas, medio herrumbradas en el lugar en que se pegan a la madera de la mesa, raída y ahuecada por el tiempo de humedades. No tiene ánimo de responder; solamente mueve la cabeza, buscándose en la penumbra imperfecta. Llega hasta la ventana y la abre. El tiempo de afuera es una mezcla de neblina y agua sin ninguna forma ni base, pegada a las casas desde un cielo avasallador. Se toca la cara, la barba, la aspereza de las facciones. Se toca el pecho descubierto, las piernas de vellos muy crespos y suaves. Si supiera fumar, posiblemente se sentaría en el alféizar de la ventana vieja y encendería el cigarro largo y profundo como una babosa fosforescente en la oscuridad. Daría un par de jalonazos, muy hondos, silenciosos, llenos de un rescoldo rojo que le iluminaría la cara. Apagaría el resto de colilla en el borde humedecido que da a la calle.

Escucha cinco golpes exactamente separados en el tiempo, como campanadas secas: tres violentos toques de nudillos flacos y dos contactos secos con la madera de la puerta contra la mitad

de la palma de una mano. Su madre grita, le dice que es su obligación ir, que si no lo va a matar en la noche o que va a buscar alguien que lo haga, que él sabe que todos los lugares están lejos y solo en carro se puede llegar, malnacido imbécil. Él no responde; voltea y adivina (el sonido es inconfundible) el pomo metálico de la puerta que se mueve como un animal en la oscuridad, percute contra el hueco que alguna vez alguien le hizo a la puerta, cuando era solo una pieza alargada, sin pintar y sin agujeros de polillas. Sabe que la fuerza de su madre no es suficiente para derribar la puerta, que no sabe meter cuchillos en los bordes que están al lado derecho de las cerraduras de la casa. Piensa en la noche, en la tranquilidad de afuera, mientras se le acostumbran los ojos a la penumbra espesa. Como no quiere insultar de nuevo a su mamá, innecesariamente maltratarla, no abre la boca sino para respirar hondo, se traga lentamente el aire que se refrescó desde antes de que cayera la noche. Maldito, me las va a pagar, acuérdesese que estamos solo su hermana, usted y yo. Es mentira: la hermana no estaba, había salido por el resto de la noche con Manuel, su prometido, así que solamente son ellos dos en la casa húmeda y olorosa a viejo.

Se imagina en una noche similar, de un invierno muy húmedo y pesado igual de negro y gelatinoso, tomando el cigarrillo entre los dedos de su mano derecha, dejándolo colgar como una lengua de muerto en la esquina derecha de la boca, en la comisura quemada de tantos cigarros y tantas noches iguales, aburridas y mojadas. Si fumara, probablemente se encontraría sentado así, en el mismo marco de la ventana, con el mismo craqueo de la madera que cede lenta ante el peso de su cuerpo flaco y alto. Moriría lentamente, con el otro peso, el del humo en los pulmones, llenándolo de la certidumbre de que de algo hay que morir.

Los gritos de su mamá de pronto se disipan, como ratas huyendo. Sentado, se rasca las piernas, cargadas de pequeñas picaduras. No siente angustia, ni miedo, ni remordimiento. Los gritos vienen y van: malparido, ¿para qué putas lo traje al mundo? No sirve para nada, igual que su papá. Aunque si él estuviera, probablemente estaría calentando el carro en el garaje destartado, dándole pequeños golpecitos al acelerador, para empujar la gasolina y hacer que se moviera el aceite, calentándolo en el frío de la noche de invierno.

Le sorprende no haber visto antes las rayas que aparecen sin estridencia, del otro lado de una cosa que es una montaña o un montículo de basuras, muy a lo lejos: rayos de alguna tormenta lejana. La luz le trae a la mente los rescoldos de los cigarros que ha visto, los de su madre y los de su padre muerto. Piensa en la delicia de un cigarro que nunca ha probado.

Afuera, los ruidos reaparecen de pronto, las gotitas de agua que chocan contra las latas de zinc de los techos, los truenos que pueden ser rayos lejanos o ladridos de perros que comen parsimoniosamente basuras, los gritos de algunos seres que se extinguen en la penumbra indeterminada de las casas, perdidas en el fondo del pueblo.

Si tuviera un cigarro encendido, inhalaría y exhalaría el humo blanco, absorbería las partículas de una muerte gris, arrugaría el cuerpo en una forma caprichosa ahí, en el marco de la ventana, metido en la madera como un bicho en las fibras de una carne rancia. Haría lo que hacía su abuelo materno: soltaría las cenizas poco a poco, muy poco a poco, dejando que se embutiesen como salchichas frágiles en la punta del cigarrillo, para después tirarlas en el suelo y aplastarlas, ceremoniosamente. Un olor a caucho comienza a subir desde alguna parte: las sensaciones previas al sueño.

Su madre se calló minutos atrás, pero los improprios lanzados a ella le resuenan en la cabeza vacía, y los insultos de malnacido, inútil, hijueputa, feto, que vinieron de su boca vieja y vahosa, aún son presencias en la oscuridad incólume. Se quemaría por dentro, soltaría un nuevo embutido de cenizas, esta vez en el piso de madera antigua y olorosa a escorpiones. El olor artificial de un caucho imaginario lo reconforta. La posición de su cuerpo le permite apreciar la humedad de

una lluvia que parece crepitar a lo lejos, como llamas. Se fumaría todo un paquete, y le metería a su mamá veinte cigarros al mismo tiempo, para que se deleitara y cesara en su esfuerzo inútil de insultos y palabras vacías.

La lluvia se acerca, o su solo sonido a lo lejos, en llamaradas de agua que se forman del otro lado de lo que parece ser una montaña, o los pedazos de basuras del pueblo. La llamó puta desagradecida, y ahora no sabe por qué, o lo entiende demasiado bien y se arrepiente. No quiere salir del cuarto ni quitar el seguro enclenque de la puerta. El pomo ya no se mueve. El lugar está en paz.

Horas sentado, siente un dolor en la columna. Se baja y busca a tientas las formas, en una oscuridad profunda de madrugada. Está medio dormido; lo despierta completamente el calor de la manija de la puerta. En el negro absoluto, la vaharada de carbón le entra como una plaga de moscas. Sale de la casa, moviendo los brazos entre una nube de humo y desperdicios secos. En la calle los perros son trazos de carbón, visibles a través de una luz artificial de luna nueva. Todas las casas son el mismo amasijo de cenizas, de pedazos que adivina negros. Todo está quemado, nadie existe en el pueblo. El silencio es interrumpido por el crepitar constante de todo lo que se consume por el fuego que ya no tiene qué quemar, que antes sonaba como el zumbido de la lluvia. Si hubiera existido el infierno, este habría sido su aspecto al acabarse.

Maja algo que parece un cuerpo carbonizado; lo toca con el pie, para cerciorarse de que no se mueve: su madre con los dedos doblados como si fumara, mucho más tranquila.

TRÁMITES BANCARIOS

En un día calmo, llegó intempestivamente. Apenas si se tomó el trabajo de tocar la puerta, en el arrebato de su locura que bien conocía. Entró sin saludar, diciéndome que la tenía lista, que recién la había terminado e impreso. Las tapas del manuscrito temblaban bajo sus dedos de poseído. Con esto, la gloria, me dijo como si no fuera conmigo, hablándole a un ente abstracto que lo escuchaba sin moverse, sin reclamarle por su agitación y por la hora de la madrugada. Me puso el manuscrito en las manos, espetándome la seguridad de lo que me dijo sería su consagración. Salió sin despedirse, haciéndome el signo de los dedos que anunciaba una llamada telefónica, quién sabe cuándo.

Esa iba a ser su quinta novela. Las cuatro restantes no eran malas, pero no salían de los lugares comunes de la denuncia social, el amor incomprendido al arte y el onirismo que todo lo resuelve y explica. Claro, esa era mi opinión de lector desordenado, que poco conocía de técnicas literarias, pero cuya opinión Gabriel siempre buscaba. En este caso particular, se trataba de algo que bien conocía: una historia de falsificación de arte. Conté los folios: 595, cargados de referencias históricas, enciclopédicas, artísticas; llegado al número 100, veía que intentaba algo nuevo, muchas veces muy bien resuelto. Aunque algo me decía que no sería entendida la obra en la magnitud en la que Gabriel quería. Comenzando con el título: *Las manías duchampianas del disfraz*. Se hablaba de Rose Sélavy, de Henri Rousseau, de la obsesión de un multimillonario que falsificaba continuamente cuadros de Klimt, luego de la afición de su esposa por Van Meegeren, quien inventara pinturas de Vermeer en la Europa posnazi. En la novela se intentaba llegar a la rebuscada conclusión, mediante las obsesiones febriles de los diez o doce protagonistas, de que la pintura (y el arte en general) estaba supeditada a los mandatos del dinero y la locura, y nunca del genio o la grandeza. En tres días leí el manuscrito completo, el que alternaba con un libro de Antoni Caralt, un ensayista español que hablaba de algo llamado “necesidad de autorreferencialidad”. No evoco a Caralt con fines enciclopedistas ni de borgianismos falsos, pero tengo que hacerlo, porque le hablé del tema a Gabriel el mismo día que me llamó para escuchar mi opinión de su intrincada novela.

Contesté el teléfono sin prisa, sabiendo de antemano que era él y que estaba desesperado. Me dijo aló y hola y apenas un cómo estás de cortesía, que no me tomó por sorpresa. Un silencio largo e incómodo precedió a mis palabras, que sonaron absurdas y gangosas. Le dije que estaba bien, que había conseguido algo nuevo, que había evolucionado, que se publicaría en cualquier momento, pero... ¿Cómo, hay peros de por medio? Un nuevo silencio. Acomodé las palabras exactas en la lengua y la cabeza. Mencioné, con un pusilánime tono neutro, el concepto de Caralt, diciéndole a Gabriel que la novela estaba muy bien, pero que nadie iba a entenderla, o a lo sumo unos cuantos iniciados o *connaisseurs* de historia del arte, específicamente de pintura, iniciando en el siglo XVI y terminando en *happenings* contemporáneos, instalaciones y obras oscuras y fácilmente prescindibles. Bueno, ¿y ese tal Antoni Caralt, qué tiene que ver con todo eso?; un nuevo silencio creció como un mal sueño; la cuestión es que para él una obra solo tiene valor si se basta a sí misma; no entiendo; es fácil, Gabriel: un libro solo tiene valor si no hace referencia a elementos externos para ser entendido y apreciado, o sea, que tiene que ser un microcosmos que encierre todas sus explicaciones, referencias y escalas de valores; creo que entiendo... para comprenderlo no hay necesidad de buscar nombres en periódicos ni la historia de movimientos artísticos en la enciclopedia; exactamente, Gabriel. Sentí algo como un odio concentrado en su silencio, en el lado invisible del teléfono. Asintió –supongo–, argumentó parcamente y me dijo que

eso era solo un mal juicio crítico de Caralt; él también ha escrito novelas; sí, pero no me convencen sus argumentos. Vituperó, maldijo y renegó de la utilidad de la literatura, hasta que se oyó el sonido parejo de la línea telefónica, triste en aquella tarde.

Pasada una semana, tuve que llamarlo, no sé si por remordimiento de conciencia o por mera curiosidad. Me dijo, sin dejarme hablar, que tenía listo el nuevo manuscrito, que me lo llevaría dos días después, que tenía resuelto el problema de la autorreferencialidad. Me extrañó que tomara tan en serio mi comentario. Otro ruido se irguió sin vida a través del aparato, hasta que mostré un súbito interés que quizá solo era lástima. O bien impotencia, una sensación dolorosa y pesada. Colgamos sin despedirnos, como siempre.

En la fecha acordada, el golpe en la puerta fue desesperado, más temprano que la otra vez, él con la barba más larga, ya de días, con los ojos desorbitados, rojos y lejanos. Traía tres manuscritos –en el momento que atravesó el umbral creí que eran proyectos para algo nuevo, inesperado– que, combinados, formaban la modificación de la primera obra. Pregunté por el número de folios, anticipándome con una sonrisa fingida a alguna desgracia esperable: 5625 folios, me dijo con una voz de orgullo, mirándome por primera vez fijamente a los ojos, como un verdadero loco. Ni siquiera le pregunté si debía leer todo aquel fárrago intransportable, porque era casi mi obligación. De nuevo no se despidió, pero antes de salir me dijo someramente en qué consistían los cambios del primer manuscrito y los nuevos capítulos, de los que según él no se podía prescindir.

Sólo al día siguiente comencé a ser testigo de lo que se podía inferir como una burla de Gabriel, pero que no lo era: la historia tenía los rasgos esenciales del primer manuscrito, pero todos los nombres, movimientos artísticos, lugares y escuelas estaban cambiados; al leerlos comprobaba que todos, uno a uno, habían sido inventados por Gabriel. El nuevo título trataba de englobar las más de cinco mil páginas, sin equívocos posibles: *Las manías de un ficticio ladrón de arte*. Intenté leer la obra de pies a cabeza, pero resultaba imposible. Escogía páginas salteadas, comprobando, mediante cotejaciones difíciles, trabajosas, que un apellido como Klee (del primer manuscrito) había sido cambiado por Kellener; manierismo por umbrismo; Duchamp por Deschaines. Me di cuenta de que la historia era la misma, porque la novela comenzaba con una prehistoria que servía de explicación a las manías del protagonista y terminaba con un glosario de términos creados en el libro, árboles genealógicos, teogonías innecesarias que pretendían explicar las creencias de los personajes, sus comportamientos más nimios, y muchos detalles más, imposibles de recordar. Su microcosmos, su universo que se bastaba a sí mismo era ahora inabarcable.

Seis meses después, revisé la lista de títulos impresos por la editorial en que publicaba Gabriel. Por supuesto que el libro no aparecía. Ojeé reseñas durante semanas, suplementos culturales y resultados de premios literarios por meses, hasta que me olvidé de la novela y de Gabriel. Nada por ningún lado. Sin embargo, esperé su llamada en la que me pediría mi opinión: nunca llegó.

Pasado un año o trece meses, me pareció verlo desde la calle, mientras caminaba yo a lo largo de un bulevar cerca de mi casa; meses atrás, habían construido un gran edificio hecho de vidrios en lugar de las paredes habituales, que permitía ver a la gente detrás de las ventanillas de adentro: un banco moderno. Crucé la calle y me di cuenta de que era él, atendiendo seriamente a las personas en la fila. Lo pensé brevemente y entré. Hubiera querido que no me sorprendiese su aspecto de hombre correcto y de horarios fijos, pero lo hizo. Me vio y me hizo una señal para que entrara. Un saludo más bien efusivo, sin ninguna admonición o simplemente un perfecto disimulo de su odio. Hicimos el teatro de una conversación anodina –familia, trabajo, dinero, mascotas–, hasta que me atreví a preguntarle qué había pasado con la literatura; nada nuevo, me dedico a esto

y quizá después a trabajar en un supermercado o en un taller. Evité a toda costa preguntarle por la novela y su suerte, aunque no tuve que hacerlo, porque me dijo que podía quemar aquel manuscrito si quería, que para él la literatura no tenía ninguna función, que lo enorme de la vida se le hacía inabarcable hasta en diez mil páginas; hizo referencia a las frases célebres de un par de diarios de pintores del siglo XX y parafraseó a no se qué escritor del siglo XIV. Al final, me entregó diligentemente los billetes que le pedí.

HISTORIA SACRA

Para Umanzor, desde un episodio de Schopenhauer

Le había gustado caminar mucho antes del trabajo en el hospital, antes de haber comprado varios carros último modelo, cambiados apenas envejecían el año de rigor. Mucho antes de los congresos y los viajes, de las terminales aéreas. Recordando que le gustaba caminar cuando era estudiante, incluso cuando había ingresado a la clínica en sus primeros tiempos como médico, no le pareció tan mal llegar a pie hasta el hotel y preguntarle a la muchacha pelirroja dónde estaba el salón 142B, el de las convenciones médicas.

La mujer no tuvo que buscarlo en la lista, pues sabía perfectamente que era el doctor Alvarado, el especialista en cardiología que tenía que dar la charla de las siete y media, y que por deferencia debía escuchar más o menos atentamente a los colegas del extranjero, que eran una cantidad considerable de quince.

Le señaló con el dedo de uña esmaltada, turquesa y larga, el rectángulo que al parecer no estaba nada lejos, y le dio un par de indicaciones acerca de la mejor entrada al salón esquinero (evitar la bulla de una puerta en mal estado; acceder más fácilmente al espacio sin sillas que conducía hasta el estrado).

Nunca se llegó a acostumbrar a que la gente lo esperara, pero sentía un gusto nada oculto por ser el objeto de una atención elogiosa, el centro de preguntas y respuestas que iban y venían entre sonidos de lapiceros sobre hojas en blanco, comentarios reducidos a tremolinas anónimas y botones de grabadoras de voz. Habló sobre los caminos nuevos para eliminar la obstrucción de las arterias coronarias, exponiendo el resultado de sus métodos quirúrgicos y medicamentosos, que resultaron toda una revelación prometedora.

Lo felicitaron y felicitó, en el transcurso de la noche, que se volvía fría, negra, desplazándose poco a poco fuera de los salones de conferencias. Tomó algo de café y algunos cocteles. Se sintió bien por breves momentos; algunos otros lo invadía un sueño aplastante o una sensación de invisibilidad pasmosa: el cansancio de llegar a las once y media de la noche, con tan poco sueño los días previos.

Salió a un pasillo que rodeaba a un patio central, que le recordaba la forma de un convento; fumó un cigarro y con este encendió un segundo, cada cual más fuerte en la garganta, más profundo. Cada uno le entraba como un sahumero tranquilizador.

Muy al fondo, unas voces hablaron algo sobre algún lugar al que ir, para conocer la capital, para ver cómo era la vida nocturna de este hermoso país tropical. Lo único en lo que pensó, mientras el humo se le metía en los pulmones, fue en que quería estar en la cama del apartamento, fumando y quizá con un vaso de vidrio, haciendo sonar los cubos de hielo mientras inhalaba y exhalaba el blanco fantasmal del cigarrillo.

Se metió la mano en el bolsillo y escudriñó lentamente; aumentó la velocidad, sintiendo los pedazos de tela y pelusas en la yema de los dedos; sintió una tromba de sangre en el corazón, un pánico creciente; súbitamente se tranquilizó al recordar que el carro estaba en el taller, que no había perdido las llaves y tendría entonces que caminar.

Se despidió de aquellos cuyos nombres recordaba o que había visto en otros congresos de otros países. Tomó un pasillo y llegó imprevistamente a una salida lateral del hotel; un hombre elegante, un maniquí pálido, le abrió la puerta de hierro. Tardó casi diez segundos en ubicarse con respecto a la calle en la que estaba y a la ruta a seguir. Comprobó que solo le quedaba un cigarrillo

en el paquete negro y amarillo: el que fumaría en la pequeña cama del centro de su cuarto, medio borracho y feliz, durmiéndose y escuchando su corazón en el silencio.

Caminó hacia el sur, tratando de crear un recorrido diagonal, torciendo la ruta para poco a poco llegar hasta la estación de buses, que era una de las cosas que nunca morían en el centro de la ciudad; habría hombres tirados en las esquinas, mujeres esperando con sus niños y sus cuerpos tristes, viejos sentados frente a la gran pantalla del televisor central (encendido las 24 horas), protegido por una malla electrosoldada, grisácea en las penumbras, por lo menos hasta donde recordaba.

Se detuvo de pronto, viendo los zapatos celestes, el cuerpo que casi se le mete en el suyo, la cercanía, el hombre que hablaba con ella, las risas pequeñas, sonoras en la calle desierta, en una parte negra y curva. Se tocó de nuevo el interior de una bolsa, y esta vez halló, con la torpeza de la yema de los dedos, la billetera delgada, con las tarjetas de crédito y los billetes, con los papeles, un anillo suelto y pedazos de otras pelusas. Se disculpó, y los zapatos celestes se movieron al mismo tiempo que el cuerpo pequeño, delgado y vestido vulgarmente. La fugacidad del pensamiento simplemente lo obligó a voltearse hacia el hombre y después hacia la mujer, cuyos ojos refulgían con el brillo del cansancio y del viento sucio de la medianoche. Los dos lo saludaron, y ella apoyó la mano en su antebrazo, disculpándose de nuevo, mostrándole completo el verde de los ojos. El falso verde de los ojos se movió al mismo tiempo que su boca pintada más allá del límite visible de los labios. Las bocas de la mujer y del hombre brillaban más que los ojos de ambos, y de inmediato ella dejó ver los dientes, al hablar y hacerle una invitación, con nuevos toqueteos en el antebrazo y el hombro.

Pensó fugazmente en el cigarro y la cama en medio del apartamento, y se negó sin convencimiento, dando dos pasos pequeños, tambaleantes; se sentía algo borracho, o simplemente estaba cansado, o se trataba de las palabras y los gestos de la mujer, los pechos a través de la blusa blanca y celeste, los ojos brillantes, la mano del hombre en la manija de la puerta del taxi, los toques en la pierna derecha, casi en la entrepierna, los billetes en la mesa de noche, porque aquí se paga por adelantado.

El cuarto dejaba ver un cuadro verde en el centro, casi donde la almohada había sido puesta, con esmero, rectangular y perfecta en la parte superior de la cama, como un cuerpo de niño. Más bien era un rectángulo verde, como una coagulación de luz que venía desde arriba, desde un tragaluz puesto en el techo, que absorbía claridad durante el día, y que en la noche soltaba la gelatina necesaria para ver entre las sombras, porque a Cristal no le gustaba que encendieran la pequeña lámpara de la mesa de noche.

Alguien los había conducido hasta la covacha, y ese mismo alguien había recibido el dinero con manos grasientas, a través de un pequeño hueco practicado en una de las paredes, húmedas y malolientes. Había ropa desperdigada encima de una mesa redonda, muchas prendas que le parecieron de pronto pedazos de carne. Se rió, inevitablemente, y Cristal le preguntó si alguna vez había ido con una puta a un hotelucho del centro de la capital. Respondió algo sin palabras, quitándose la ropa lentamente, como si estuviera en su apartamento, alistándose para acostarse en medio de la estancia clara, retirándose las medias, el traje entero, la corbata, casi sintiendo el sabor del *whisky*, de los cocteles fermentados encima de su lengua. Se quitó un anillo negro que usaba desde que su abuelo materno había muerto, casi doce años atrás. Se desnudó completamente mientras sonreía, mientras Cristal acomodaba la cama, retiraba un edredón grueso y torpemente creaba pequeñas e innecesarias luces de candela en cada esquina del cuarto. Él le preguntó si era cierto que las “mujeres de la calle” (así lo dijo, casi entre dientes) no besaban a los hombres, aunque fueran clientes habituales; Cristal le respondió con la suavidad de los labios cuyo color rosado

había desaparecido en alguna esquina de la sábana arrancada de los bordes del colchón de la cama. Se acariciaron sin la pasión que él había esperado de camino, en el momento en que pagaba el viaje del taxista, una suerte de protector o de chulo.

El brillo verde no le dejaba ver el detalle de los rasgos de ella, aunque sabía muy bien, en el reciente recuerdo de la calle mustia, que el rostro era bello aunque algo macilento. Se imaginaba los ojos brillantes como los de una vaca en la oscuridad, los brazos de muñeco de plástico, los pechos turgentes y nutricios, los pies embutidos en los zapatos de un tacón ridículo. Sintió un impulso de deseo súbito, al recordar el cuerpo de ella mientras lo iba tocando, mientras la iba desnudando en la pretensión de un romanticismo imposible. La mezcla del verde que venía del tragaluz y del amarillo de las velas creaba la atmósfera de una morgue, especialmente dentro de su cabeza, que con toda seguridad llevaba una impresión distinta de la de Cristal, que ya casi estaba desnuda—apenas llevaba trozos de ropa en algunas partes del cuerpo—, que tomó el teléfono y pidió que les llevaran dos vasos de *whisky* con agua y un poco de hielo, que Alfonso —su nombre evidentemente falso— pagaría cuando salieran.

Le tocó por algunos minutos las piernas, los senos, el rostro, y simplemente imaginaba el sexo de Cristal —su nombre evidentemente falso— dibujado con sus vellos mínimos en la entrepierna morena y delgada, cráter avezado en medio de la carne de la mujer pequeña, que apenas si se revolcaba, emitiendo pequeños gritos, con las piernas cerradas como un alicate oxidado, resistiéndose mitad borracha y mitad ausente.

Él tocaba ciego, perpendicular al cuerpo de Cristal, en un ángulo que le permitía verla de medio lado, llevarse sus pechos a la boca, tocarle la espalda con un deseo que se iba haciendo concreto, brillante.

Entre besos pequeños, su voz apenas salía formada por la atmósfera verde, blanca y amarilla.

—¿Cada cuánto venís por estos lados?

—Nunca.

—¿Soy la primera?

—Caminaba hace muchos años cerca de la estación. Ahora no puedo, siempre ando en carro. Hoy tuve que volver a caminar.

—Ando de suerte, entonces.

La calló con mordiscos ávidos en el labio inferior; los cuerpos estaban en ángulo de noventa grados el uno del otro. La concupiscencia se había transformado en el preámbulo en el que simplemente se imaginaba en la calle, después de terminar el acto, el negocio con Cristal.

—Sí, una vez vine con mi mejor amigo de la universidad. Las mujeres nos dijeron que ustedes no besan.

—Antes no besaban. Antes eran putas castigadas por la religión, como j́baros con la boca cosida para que no se les saliera el alma como un vómito.

No supo, con las piernas en sus dedos inquietos, si las palabras las había oído o imaginado. Podía tratarse de un chiste.

Puso los dedos fuera del cuerpo de Cristal, tanteando en la oscuridad la lengua de ella con la punta de la suya, la lámpara con sus dedos torpes, hasta que encontró un botón plano y gastado. Lo presionó. Encontró una resistencia torpe en Cristal, que se plegó como un insecto en una orilla de la cama. La mezcla de tonos —el verde del tragaluz, el amarillo mustio de las candelas, el filamento artificial del bombillo de la lamparita— convirtieron la covacha en un juego de sombras: pedazos del rostro de Cristal; cuerpo plegado en dos, como una silla doblada en la arena; cortinas

orladas con arrugas y pedazos arrancados, pintadas con flores insulsas; dedos que se partían súbitamente; pedazos de cuerpos metidos en un negro anguloso.

Quería ver la entrepierna de ella con detalle. Movi6 el cuerpo reticente de Cristal, bañada en claroscuros fastuosos. La sávana, amarilla (su color natural o la atm6sfera) la cubrió desde el ombligo hasta los pies. El deseo se le había transformado en algo amplio, inasible, en una erección de todo el cuerpo. Recordó cuánto le había pagado a Cristal, y buscó sus pies debajo de la sávana, intentando concentrarse en la forma de los dedos, enhiestos, que se movían como caracoles. Le quitaba la sávana, entre jadeando y preguntando cosas sin sentido. Lentamente. El cuarto estaba frío. El olor de Cristal subía a su nariz. Le abrió las piernas por el instinto de los perros. Hablaba con lentitud, entre sueños. Se detuvo en el mar de sombras.

En silencio completo, escuchaba su corazón palparle, o tenía la sensación de un gran corazón que le llenaba todo el t6rax y el abdomen, las piernas, las sienes y los pulmones, fundamental y ciego, abundante y cargado de una sangre que se detenía. Intentó tocar, pero los dedos eran de metal en ese momento. Cristal mantenía la cabeza desviada, hundida en una de las angulosas penumbras.

El olor era una fetidez deformada por la oscuridad y por las cremas que se habían ido disipando en el transcurso de la noche; le cambi6 el cuerpo de posición, llevándola hasta un borde de la cama que daba a la luz fluorescente de la lámpara. Se prosternó en silencio, con las palabras muertas. Cristal se tapaba el rostro. El deseo en él se deshizo o cambi6 de forma, partido en miles de añicos. Parecía que rezaba. Le abrió las piernas todo lo que pudo; la fetidez saltó hacia su rostro, en un último impulso llevado por el frío de la covacha. Cristal intentó por un momento apartar la entrepierna del rostro herido de él. La fetidez se hizo constante y verde. La erección desapareció lentamente, movida por algo entre el asco y una desidia insoportable. Cristal se sigui6 ocultando, disculpándose entre dientes, con la voz muerta en la garganta. Él forceje6, tratando de determinar la forma exacta de la carne entre las piernas de Cristal. Coloc6 un dedo, gimi6 como un animal: los jirones malolientes se le fueron encima en una nueva tromba de podredumbre. Se apart6, metiéndose en las sombras que crecieron como dedos extendidos al apagar la lámpara y al extinguirse la luz de una de las velas.

Se arrodill6 al lado del cuerpo de Cristal, sintiendo que el suyo se le hacía de agua. Vio que los ojos verdes de ella no lloraban ni se movían, que parecían los de una muñeca de porcelana, o dos cerezas brillantes, o dos piedras color turquesa, mojadas y yertas. La tom6 de las manos, resolviéndose a dejar de respirar, a extinguir la latencia de un deseo omnipotente. Vio a Cristal como un animal aplastado por un carro, a la orilla de una calle desierta.

—Es una mierda. Todo esto es una mierda —le dijo a un espectro.

—A nadie le importa el resto del cuerpo. En el fondo no se preocupan más que por esto señal6 su monte de Venus, de donde salía el olor que se hizo parte de la fetidez apagada del cuartucho.

Él se resolvió a no desear, de nuevo, a pesar suyo. Se prostern6 ante Cristal, cerr6 los ojos.

—Es una mierda —dijo, mirando varios sitios que convergían en la vulva de Cristal.

—Es solo un maldito hueco. A todos les gusta. Ya me pagaste. Terminemos.

Los ojos cerrados le pesaban. Aún retenía la imagen de los jirones deformes, de la vulva hecha de colgantes tasajos malolientes, un antro de podredumbre dentro del cuerpo de Cristal, diminuto en las sombras. Se oblig6 a no desear, a olvidar que había caminado en la noche, que su carro estaba en el taller, a que la gente le había aplaudido ese mismo día; se oblig6 a no desear, a morir mientras cerraba los ojos y sentía la fuerza de los párpados hacérsele de fuego.

El renunciamiento a todo deseo.

Se puso la ropa lentamente, tanteando la billetera vacía, descuidadamente, sin pensar en absoluto en el dinero que Cristal había guardado en un bolso redondo y turquesa. Sudaba un agua fría y lenta, que le inundó la frente. Ella apagó el resto de la velas temblequeantes; de nuevo se llenó la covacha de las algas verdosas de una noche sucia.

Le pagó al dueño del hotel con los billetes que a él le habían pagado en el hospital, dos días atrás.

Salieron.

En la calle era imposible hablar. En la vuelta de una esquina oscura, que presagiaba el blanco lejano de la estación de buses, la mano de Cristal lo soltó. La dejó atrás como a un árbol. Se metió en el juego claroscuro de los cables que colgaban entre los postes del alumbrado, muchos de ellos inservibles. La muerte del deseo. Pensó en los ascetas, en el inicio de las vidas ejemplares de los santos. Supo que ya no deseaba nada, que ya no podría desear nunca, que tendría que meterse en un nuevo e intrincado camino de deseos muertos o mutilados.


Caminó hacia el sur, describiendo de nuevo el recorrido que había tenido que interrumpir. El fin del deseo, el quietismo, los vicios idos, la libido destrozada. Se tocó la bolsa de la chaqueta. El recuerdo de la voz de Cristal se le aparecía espectral en la madrugada fría. Escuchó el ruido chirriante de dos gatos en algún techo vecino: el falo lleno de picos del macho infligiendo un dolor punzante en la hembra.

Un asceta, un verdadero asceta. Caminó dos horas hasta el apartamento; subió las escaleras desde la puerta principal; se acostó, tieso y aterido. Se metió la mano en el bolsillo del pantalón, sorteando pelusas y costuras, masas deformadas de tela y cavidades que adivinaba con las yemas torpes. Movié los dedos, primero lentamente, después con un frenesí que buscaba una punta de cigarro, que se deslizaba en procura de una serpiente de tabaco, un filtro como esponja de muerte, una cavidad maloliente y ciega, musculosa, un corazón, los jirones de carne como colgajos, los dedos de Cristal que en alguna esquina fumaba.

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La construcción de aparatos fantásticos para evadir la mano todopoderosa de la enfermedad; la evasión por los caminos nevados de una Islandia tan fría como inmisericorde; el fuego de un infierno que ha carbonizado la desdicha de un mundo de fumadores enneguecidos; el empuje al abismo mediante el recurso de una traición vestida de bondad.

Las diez historias que componen *Metales pesados* son retazos que han sido arrancados de lo anodino de vidas tocadas por el tedio o los males físicos... Con estos relatos, Barquero continúa una obra narrativa en la que se subvierte la normalidad de las cosas y los acontecimientos nimios, en la que los seres que habitan escenarios cotidianos sufren un cambio salvaje que solo ha sido posible por el toque de un demonio o una palabra. Cuerpos que se adensan con el peso del plomo, bocas que saben a hierro.

CUENTO



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Editorial
Costa Rica