

**Short Fiction from
Catalonia: New and
Improved**

Readings by two
cutting-edge Catalan
writers

Empar Moliner

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The Great Wall

Empar Moliner

I can't get Joan Dilla out of my head. He's my professor of theater criticism. I like everything about him. The fact that he's a writer, his blue-collar accent, the bored tone of voice he uses in class, the drinks he orders in the cafeteria, his big old-fashioned eyeglass frames, or the fact that he has a paunch—the paunch is what drives me most wild.

As soon as I have put a name and a shape to my feelings, I start dropping in on him during office hours wearing long dresses, with my hair tied back in a style more and more in keeping with the fashion of *The Three Sisters*. The despair with which Dilla corrects my spelling errors fills me with desire. If I weren't so feminine and womanly, I would say that I get an erection every time he touches his red marker to one of my mistakes. One evening when I finally dare to show him the stories I've written—his opinion will determine whether I toss them into the sea or not—, Dilla strokes my cheek. He says he's just called for a cab and he can give me a lift into Barcelona. We'll talk about them on the way. But during the ride he doesn't open his mouth, and all he says when we part is,

“See you tomorrow, Tam?”

The fact that he called me “Tam” instead of “Tamara” seems so adorable to me that I get all misty-eyed. When I open the door I see by the reflection in the glass that the taxi is still there. Dilla is so considerate that he's asked the driver to wait, so I won't be raped. I go upstairs and stick my neck under the faucet to bring my temperature down. There's no getting around it: I adore him. Now I can see that I wasn't really in love with the other two writers I'd picked up at school. (They were just about sex.)

The next day I go to class dressed like Irina, the youngest sister, in that scene where she feels like a sailboat under a blue sky. But Dilla acts as if he hadn't taken me home or said “See you tomorrow, Tam?” In fact, I would even say he's acting a bit cold.

After a week of indifference, though, he proposes we go to a bar to discuss the stories because now he's read them. We arrange to meet Saturday evening, which I take to be a good sign. If he didn't want to go to bed with me or if he hadn't liked the stories, we wouldn't be meeting outside of class. So

that weekend, instead of going back home like my other three roommates, I stay in Barcelona. Besides, ever since I fell in love with Dilla (and now that we have a date, I feel inflamed with love), I've been faithful to him. I will never again darken the door of the bars in the Gothic Quarter where the Erasmus scholarship students looking to hook up hang out. On Friday I'm in bed by ten. I devour Dilla's book, *From Barcino to Barcelona, An Approach to the Roman City* (with itineraries of under three hours). I hug my pillow (symbolizing Dilla) and kiss it passionately. I take off his glasses and I put one of my nipples in his mouth. Then the other. He's worried about his paunch, oblivious to the fact that all I want is to hug it close. I slip farther down and playfully alternate sweet kisses with raunchy sucking. I make a turtle mouth, stretching my lips over my teeth so as not to hurt him, and apply suction. Then I bite gently on it. I take hold of it as if it were a microphone and quickly rub it back and forth against my lips, which I leave completely slack. I lick it in circles and take it into my mouth whole, right down to the glottis. It makes me tear up, but Dilla likes to hear me say, "Look, you've made me cry." I move my hand up and down, *andante*, soon reaching a lively *prestissimo*. Not letting go (never let go is a rule I have never broken since my first time), I stick my head out from under the sheet to catch some air (the temperature gets high down there; men never seem to realize this). "Dilla, does it bother you that I'm left-handed?" I ask innocently. For some reason, that brings things to a head. But instead of swallowing the issue, I keep it in my mouth. Then, when Dilla comes to his senses, I tell him to look. I expel it down the length of his trunk and swallow it right up again.

Then he asks me to forgive him for having come so fast, because as it appears he has never before been so excited. Since I don't want him to feel frustrated, I arouse him again. I lie face down and propose to the pillow that is Dilla that he take me from behind. He can't believe it but I don't have to say it twice: he starts filling me with saliva as he grips me by the head. As I cry out (in pain and pleasure, as it appears), I muse for a moment that if the word got out at school about our relationship, he wouldn't go to prison. At worst he would be

sanctioned. After all we've done I've gone all limp so I put my bra back on (I sleep with my bra on because I want these pretty breasts of mine to stay firm until I'm old). But before dropping off to sleep, I still plan everything I have to buy. If anything is to happen it will have to be here, in my house, because he lives with his wife and daughter. He's mentioned his wife four times, three in a noncommittal voice and once with praise, but in a condescending way. He always speaks well of his daughter. (And if everything goes as it should, I'm certain that we'll be great friends. She's my age.)

The next day, I go to the Chinese discount store to buy two ice trays and a set of six tall glasses. At the liquor store, I buy the brand of Irish whiskey that Dilla drinks. When I get home I throw two fingers into the toilet so it won't be obvious the bottle is new. And I fill the ice trays, feverishly clean my bedroom, make the bed with the new sheets and pillowcase my mother gave me for Christmas, place the condoms they handed out on campus for World AIDS Day within reach (because this seems less calculated than if they had come from the drugstore), exfoliate my skin and wash with vaginal soap (even if it kills the flora. So? As if it exterminated it.). We've agreed to meet in front of the police station on Via Laietana. That was my choice, as if by chance, though it's not. Most of the teachers at school tell us how they were tortured there under Franco. True or not, telling the tale gets them all softhearted. Not only that, there are Roman ruins in the neighborhood and I am well aware—from the little experience I've had with intellectuals like him—that there is no city in the world where you can get a man into bed as fast as in Barcelona when you show an interest in the Roman ruins. This time I wear a white lace dress that I bought at the Encants flea market, suitable for the garden scene.

I park my motorcycle and he waves at me with my manuscript. (Butterflies in my stomach.) He kisses me on either cheek and asks:

"How are you?"

I get red as a beet. I'm embarrassed to talk with him as if nothing had happened, after all I did to him (the pillow that was him) the night before.

"Fine."

“How about a drink? Future or the Galicians?”

Oh my God. Now what do I say? I nod, as if I were just responding to the first half of the question. The two places he’s suggested say a lot about the kind of man he is. Future is a modern bar with gray flooring where people order wine by the glass—not the bottle. The Galicians’ is a bar-restaurant that lately has become fashionable with the artsy crowd because they have card games and chess boards there. What should I say? Future or the Galicians’? Maybe I should try to appear downscale and say the Galicians’. But if we go there my clothes and my hair will come out smelling like fried food. On the other hand, if I say Future, I’ll seem more trendy than I actually am and I will leave myself open to Dilla’s making fun of me and calling me a preppy who gets money from daddy to pay for her studies. Not only that, it would seem he should be the one to pay for the drinks, but what if he doesn’t? Will I have enough for the check if we go to Future?

“It’s up to you. You decide!” And you will always be the one to decide, for all eternity.

“Let’s go to the Galicians’, then.”

Shit. I’m going to have to shower for sure when we get home. And with my electric water heater the water takes at least a half hour to come out even lukewarm. I’ll have to change my underwear and bra, but I only have one cotton set, and I’m wearing it. When I went to the Erasmus bars I would put silk lace underwear on to seem older. Going to the Galicians’ throws everything out of whack. I should have had got up the nerve to choose Future.

“There’s been a rise in crime,” he says.

“The City doesn’t give a damn,” I answer, in a show of quick thinking. I figure he prefers the governing party, but from a critical stance. If he says that crime’s gone up, it must be because he doesn’t agree with the mayor’s immigration policy, right?

“Do you vote?” he asks, surprisingly.

In comparison with this, the question about Future vs. the Galicians’ was simple. What should I say? If he doesn’t vote and I say I do, I will look like a sheep who supports the establishment. If I say I don’t, though, and he is one of those fanatics of the democratic process who always do, I’ll look bad, even if I allege anti-system reasons for not voting. He will accuse me of being

apathetic and of needing to have everything served to me on a platter. A thing like this can postpone the possibilities of *bed sine die*, as he says in class. Of course I could say I vote and if it turns out he doesn’t, I can say I cast a blank ballot. I take the plunge:

“Yes, I do.”

“I don’t. But I know I should, of course.” He says it with a tinge of guilt, so I modify my strategy.

“Well, I suppose I think that if I don’t vote, then I can’t complain about the system.”

I see his face. Bingo. Seven and a half. Next screen. The bed looms closer. I’ll undress him, kiss him all over, press my ear to his hairy belly to hear his gastric juices, and I will have and give him orgasms that will make him shed tears of desperation and nostalgia when he goes off each night to sleep with his wife. When he undresses me, he will see that I’m a nymph, like the ones we study in class, a fairy, Wendla of the wood. And maybe he’ll even tell me I have talent as a writer and help me get my stories published. He’ll take me on a trip to New York and take me to dine at expensive restaurants. We’ll go for drinks in hotel bars and have trysts in furnished rooms rented by the hour. He’ll introduce me to his writer friends and they will die of envy.

“You’re right.”

I smile, affecting modesty, and so as not to have to go into whom I vote for, I distract him with a complaint about the dirty streets.

“Look at all this garbage. You know, it’s just…”

“This must be the seediest historic city center in all of Europe.”

Not again! Every phrase he utters is a mine set to explode. Do I know the list of seedy European city centers? Not Paris. Does London have one? Not Madrid, either. Cáceres doesn’t count, they’re on the list of the United Nations Patrimonies of Humanity.

“It’s true,” I say at last. And I rub his arm, as if by chance. “Not even Naples looks like this.”

He snaps his fingers a few times in agreement. Then he asks,

“You aren’t hungry yet, are you?”

This time I can guess the answer by the tone of his voice.

“No,” I lie. “I hadn’t even thought about it.” But I am hungry. Everyone’s hungry at ten p.m. Maybe Dilla, in the habit of writing in the evening, never has dinner and just drinks whiskey.

We walk along. He’s limping a bit because he twisted his ankle playing soccer. He’s the kind of guy who plays soccer with the guys in the neighborhood, friends with jobs as mailmen or mechanics. As we walk he points things out to me: a square that was bombed during the Civil War or a balcony that still displays the distinctive insignia of a guild. I feel the same kind of tickling in my eyes as when I drink sparkling water. I love him. I want to spend the rest of my life as his muse and never eat dinner again.

“If you like, I’ll show you the Roman wall,” he says. And I cry yes, delighted, yes! We limp toward Via Laietana. On the way we spot unique façades and patrician tombs. I could have eaten him up with kisses right then and there. I could just melt. This time, if I get pregnant, I won’t have an abortion.

“Look!” And he points to a narrow rising street that comes to a dead end at a wall full of graffiti. I try not to react. I show a neutral kind of interest. At this point I’m not sure what the heck he’s trying to show me.

“This is a section of the wall,” he explains. And, suddenly, he starts acting really happy. He cries out because he’s spotted a friend. A friend who is also reveling in the wall, in a way that doesn’t happen anywhere else in the world. They call each other names, in jest, and their blue-collar accent gets really strong.

“Son of a bitch!”

“Motherfucker!”

“Asshole!”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

The last sentence is Dilla, and he pronounces it “Whut da fuck are yoo doin’ here?”

Asshole is walking arm in arm with a girl I know by sight because she studied in my department (I seem to remember her name was Penelope Picó and she was an airhead). But I don’t think I’ve ever had him as a teacher. I would have remembered, because he’s not all bad, and because he also has a limp, as if it were some kind of generational thing. Penelope compliments me by way of saying hello. She’s wearing stockings with red, dark

brown, light brown, dark brown and green stripes, buckled shoes, and a black felt hat. She’s dressed the way she must think a “cute little witch” dresses. That must be what they tell her she looks like, a cute little witch. We kiss each other on the cheek and say “what a coincidence” while the two men step aside to chat. You can tell the one is asking the other who I am, and whether he’s screwed me yet. (Nothing could be more of a turn-on.) Bit by bit, I’m remembering more things about this Penelope: she dropped out in junior year because she was anorexic and kept missing class.

“Wow,” she exclaims as she twists her hair into a braid. “We had given up on introducing Joan to girls.”

And then and there, even though we hardly know each other, she takes me by the arm (she’s the kind who thinks physical contact is really important) and gives me the rundown on her wretched love story with Asshole. She did her internship in the sports section of the newspaper where he works. At first she just admired him, but soon her admiration turned into something deeper. She had to deal with everyone’s disapproval—the newspaper was full of machistas and conservatives—for being in a relationship with a writer (he’s a writer) who’s married and has had a knee operation (the reason for his limp).

“I need a man I can learn from,” she declares with vehemence. “I want to suck it all in, be a sponge, I want him to give me his all.”

And she repeats this, that she wants to suck it in. And she also repeats that she’s a child, and she knows it, just a child, but people her age do nothing for her, because she’s immature, she’s a child, etc. People her age are so far from the literary scene... I can tell that all she wants in life is to find a friend in the same situation (and as attractive as she is) to be there for her, give her advice, and lend her clothes. She already loves me. She’s already accepted me. She’s already interrupting the two men to say with a phony and exaggerated confidence, “Joan, we really like this girl. And you know very well what a little witch I am and how I’m never wrong.”

Asshole nods with a mangy smile:

“Yes, we really do like you, you know?” But he doesn’t tell me his name. No one thinks of introducing us.

When Dilla announces that we were thinking of having dinner at the Galicians', they invite themselves right off the bat. And when he tells them we were working up an appetite by exploring the wall, Asshole's panda eyes light up. As a matter of fact, he—as Dilla knows—has written a book about daily life between the first and fifth centuries A.D., and if there's one thing he loves, it's the wall. As all four of us limp along, he adds with a heroic air:

"We're homeless today, you know? Thanks for taking us in..."

Penelope takes my arm again and quickly gives me a new rundown. The story is that his wife already knows he has a lover (her, Penelope), because Asshole is very sincere and doesn't hide it from her (he would be incapable of such a thing). His marriage has long been a sham. But his wife—Penelope calls her the Walkyrie—not only makes his life impossible but, on the advice of her lawyer, is waiting for him to walk out and leave her so as to keep everything, on the grounds of desertion. As a result, he can hardly go out to buy a book of matches, except on Saturday, when he pretends to be on the graveyard shift and spends the night with her in a hotel. It's the only day they have together. I'm bored to tears with this, while Dilla and the friend walk on ahead, happy as clams. They stop at every corner and every so often they turn back:

"We're just crazy about these old stones. You don't mind, do you...?" one of them says.

"Please don't leave us. We know we're a pain," says the other.

I smile, but, in truth, I'm starting to panic. One thing is to go for a walk with Dilla (as the first step toward going to bed with him and as the first step before he tells me that my stories are masterpieces) and another is to go for a walk with Dilla and the other two.

"Wow," says Asshole in amazement. "They've become total friends."

"Ooooh, scary. Now they're going to start criticizing us," says the other, just as tickled. "Now they're going to say: 'Look at these two old men with two trophy women on their arms and they're ignoring them.' Right?"

"Hey, hey, hey, wait up there! What do you think we were up to?" says Penelope as she braids her hair again. (She has a real thing about playing with her hair.)

Everyone but me laughs. I wouldn't put it past them to spend the whole night drinking warm cognac and reciting poems. We stop at a square that has recently been restored and admire the dividing walls left standing when the buildings were torn down.

"It's fascinating to see a building showing its innards... the different tiles in the bathrooms and the wallpapers in the living rooms..." Dilla says with feeling.

"It's like seeing a piece of daily life, as if they were brazenly revealing it..." Asshole finishes the thought. "The tiles, the beams, the outline of the stairway..."

"The trace of a painting on the wall..."

"A calendar..."

"A faucet..."

When they're done drooling, Asshole goes over to Penelope—who is doing her best rendition of a sensitive girl stirred to emotion—and hugs her. He gives her a noisy kiss and, in empathy, Dilla does the same with me. I cling to him and, for a moment, the rest of the world fades away. When we tear ourselves apart, Asshole and his asshole girl are watching us like idiots.

Then both men start hinting at how they've been aroused. They don't try to hide it. They want it to be known.

"At our age...!" one of them is stirred to say.

"We're lucky guys," the other admits. As if I were Dilla's official girlfriend and, from that moment on, the only thing left to decide were the day and time in which the four of us will be taking off for Paris.

We continue walking, now coupled off. We go down a narrow street and see the Roman ruins beneath the civic center.

"Watch out!" Penelope says to Asshole every so often.

"What?", he says, offended.

"You were about to step in shit."

"I saw it...!" he grunts, as if not seeing a dog turd made him seem less sensitive or attuned to the reality of this Barcelona he

so loves. From time to time they almost get ticked off over things like this.

My feet are swelling big time. (The three sisters wear high-heeled boots but for the entire length of the play they don't budge from the house of Prókhorov, and the longest trip they take is behind the screen to change their clothes.) I calculate that there are no less than one or two kilometers of wall left, and the passion to get Dilla into bed starts to wane a bit. All I want is to have a hamburger with mustard and take off my shoes. In contrast, the two men, despite their limping, are fresh as a daisy. They act as if they can't help but talk about the Roman walls. One thing is clear: Hollywood had done them a bad turn, the worst, by producing a movie for the masses about the sinking of the Titanic. The sinking of the Titanic, when it was still a topic for insiders, must practically have moved them to tears.

"Look at that! It's amazing, a-maz-ing..." says Dilla, pointing to a balcony. Not a moment later he turns to me, pleased with himself.

"Forgive me. You must think I'm not only crazy but rude."

"And we are, we are. We're very rude," the other stresses. "Penelope and I hadn't seen each other for five days, and this is our only night."

That was to be expected. They had their own special night. And I'll bet a nipple that they also had their own bar, their own song, their own day, their own lucky number, their own color, their own poem, their own city and their own little getaway hotel. They must be the kind who celebrate the anniversary of their first fuck, their tenth, their twentieth, and the day their first box of condoms ran out. And a week from now they're going to want to celebrate the fact that they met us a week ago.

A Pakistani vendor tries to sell us roses, and stupid Penelope, instead of saying no without looking, like everyone else does, goes and smiles at him. Once she's shown how sweet and openminded she is, we can't get rid of the guy. He keeps after us until Asshole softens up and decides to buy one rose for Penelope and another for me, 'cause I'm so special. Dilla insists on paying and takes out his wallet, but he has to scrape around for a while to find the money. He ends up asking if I don't have an extra euro on me. Sheesh.

When we get to the Galicians', the kitchen's been closed for a half an hour.

"The same thing will happen at Future," Penelope predicts. And she says that she happens not to have had lunch that day. She's not anorexic any more but I sense she's one of those girls who skip meals and then are hungry in between. And when that happens, they always want a tapa and a glass of champagne, but they always order it in the wrong bars, where they don't sell champagne by the glass. The four of us stand there frozen, wondering what to do. We can't go to Asshole's house, or to Dilla's house, because the wives are there. Penelope's house is out: she lives with her parents (and they've always been very open-minded, very, but they wouldn't understand this), so Dilla proposes that we go to mine. Asshole thinks this is a fabulous idea, and tries to convince me:

"P and I will grab a taxi and buy some dinner at the gas station."

"I'm not sure I'm going to be capable of riding on one of those infernal apparatuses you call motorcycles," Dilla warns him, pleased as punch.

"Wow! Extra! Extra! Read all about it: 'Joan Dilla's First Ride on a Motorcycle!'" laughs Penelope.

I don't find it the least bit funny. I can't stand carrying a man (who's about to go to bed with me) as cargo. If I liked carrying guys as cargo, I'd still be going to the Erasmus bars. I wouldn't be an (unpublished) writer. I wouldn't be dressing up as Irina, I'd be buying my clothes at System Action or Urban Outfitters. And as if that weren't enough, this also means we're not going to be able to discuss my stories.

"Joan, you have to do it! You can't leave this young lady unprotected!" scolds the other.

I'm not the slightest bit in the mood to have to make sandwiches for four, or to open Vanessa's bedroom so that the Assholes can have their night together. Nor do I feel like group showering and breakfasting tomorrow, just before Asshole goes running home pretending the night shift is over. But there's no stopping it: the three of them are limping off toward Via Laietana. Walking behind, I can hear them making plans. Now the Assholes will go to the Seven Eleven and buy wine, whiskey,

champagne, baguettes, cold cuts, the whole deal, for a spur-of-the-moment supper. That's how they put it: spur-of-the-moment, and you can tell they think the whole idea of a spur-of-the-moment supper is just the cat's meow. And if, as luck would have it, there weren't enough chairs in my house and they had to sit on the floor or on the bed, they'd be even more delighted. For them, all this is much more fun than sex. Picture the Assholes on their way to the Seven Eleven preparing to make the purchases for a spur-of-the-moment supper and you will see them on the verge of paroxysm. She even gets out a pad and pencil to take down everyone's orders:

"*S'il vous plaît*, who wants tonic, and what brand?" she shrieks. But he's already flagged a cab.

"Take down my address," I tell her.

"Don't get lost along the way!" cries Dilla, being naughty.

Alone again, we limp slowly up Via Laietana toward the police station, where my motorcycle is parked. If Dilla were a real man, he would take me to a hotel now. He'd start groping me right here, he'd take me violently by the nape of the neck and tell me not to worry about his friends, that they'd understand. He would also tell me that my stories were masterpieces and must be published immediately and that both of us would gain from it. But all he does is pinch my cheek and exclaim through puckered lips, "Oh, the things I'm going to do to you!" as we walk at a mule's pace.

It's taken us so long to wend our way to the motorcycle that I reckon the Assholes must already have had time to buy out the store. As I search in my bag for the keys I look with resignation at scads of open bars and restaurants. I untie the extra helmet and give it to him so he can put in on, but it doesn't quite fit. Now I see it. He has a big head.

"Good, now I can rub right up against you..." he whispers when he's somehow managed to stuff his head inside the helmet. He says it as if it were the kinkiest phrase of the year.

I start the motor, kick the kickstand, and tip the bike to one side so he can get on. Poor bastard, his joints must be rusty, because he can't seem to get his leg high enough. That's all I needed to lose the last bit of desire I had to get him naked.

I gun the motor and now he does indeed grab on to me, in

fear! He's a baby. I head up Via Laietana and stop at the light. Unprepared, he bumps my helmet with his. He's not used to riding a motorcycle and the short stop throws him on top of me. He's taking up more than half the seat. Every time I accelerate he unintentionally bumps my helmet again. Every time he does it, I hate him more. I count the bumps: one, two, three, four... If he does it one more time, I'll hate him with a barbarous, inhuman, irremediable hatred. He does it again. I would make him get off then and there if not for my stories and because he'd fail me. I purposely throw on the brakes and he bumps me again. I can't help thinking that the Assholes must already be at my house, sitting on my doorstep, surrounded by plastic bags full of stuff, laughing, of course, hugging to keep warm, eating potato chips and drinking coke to make time until the fun starts.

Translation by Mary Ann Newman.

A Slight Temperature (fragment)

Jordi Puntí

1

A man called Leif and his wife got separated four months ago. No children or pets were involved. He kept the apartment since, technically, it was Irina who had left him. Four months of aimless existence have been enough to tinge everything around him, his whole life, with utter desolation. He pretends that he doesn't notice, but in the light of day, the furniture looks blurry beneath an opaque coating of white dust. Every object in the kitchen—the ladle, calendar, blender, and refrigerator, appears to be outlined with an insensible misery. It wouldn't surprise him if that night, or maybe the next, the florescent bulb on the ceiling started to flicker. Some mornings, when he wakes up, he can almost smell the aroma of fresh coffee and toast that she used to make for him before heading off to work. In his confusion, it takes Leif a full minute to realize that it's a waking dream, just remains of the past, clinging like fragments of sleep. "It's as though my left hand had been cut off and I could still feel it," he would say, "as if my wedding ring was tickling me." He had never once taken the wedding ring off. Since his hands tended to be sweaty, they often itched when he played tennis. Between sets, Leif rubbed the band constantly with the nervous tick of a professional athlete. The wedding ring: he ripped it off unthinkingly the morning after she left for good, but he kept it close by, in the bedside table, wrapped up in a handkerchief embroidered with her initials, I. B.

Since that day when she had slammed the apartment door for the last time, taking away only a small suitcase, ludicrously overstuffed, and an equally crammed carry-on, he hadn't seen or heard from her. At first, when he asked their mutual friends about Irina—in scenes involving phone calls at odd hours, bizarre late-night encounters and inconsolable tears—, they couldn't give him a straight answer. But out of the corner of his eye, he could see that they were exchanging significant looks. Were these glances of compassion or complicity? Leif would mull it over later, on the lonely journey home. He found the answer in the blood-shot eyes of an inordinately hostile taxi driver caught in a rear-view mirror, or while wandering the streets of his neighborhood, chewing on the bamboo stalk

the tiny umbrella that, minutes before, had garnished a daiquiri as fake and flavorless as he was.

During the last four months he has lived in a state of continual resentment, punctuated by moments of prosaic cruelty (like opening his apartment door and being immediately struck by the pungent stench of matrimony) and periods of numbness (that feeling he gets at work when he loses himself completely in the whirlwind of numbers, bank transfers and phone conversations with neutral voices). Aggravating the very core of this despair is the sheer awkwardness of the situation. After all, she was the one who had cheated on him; not the other way around. He just hadn't taken it very well. It was true, the sequence of events felt unreal. The whole setup, with its calculated passions, couldn't have been more dramatic. It was like something out of a novel; or the product of some twisted, perverse mind. And—now that you mention it—it might be worthwhile someday to hear Leif's side of the story, from start to finish, just to see what he says.

[...]

3

It is Monday afternoon and Leif is in the lavatory at work. The refreshing scent of strawberry soap invades his nostrils as he washes his hands. He looks up, opening his eyes wide (pupils fully dilated) and steals a quick glance at his reflection in the ample mirror. It's true; he no longer looks uptight. Today, a co-worker let him know how sorry he had been for Leif all these months. The co-worker is also separated. It's true, Leif doesn't look uptight anymore. He doesn't drag his feet when he walks or obsess about his ex-wife while watching late night television, stretched out on their worn-out sofa (the one he just ordered from Ikea hasn't been delivered yet). The scar is beginning to close and the scab has hardened.

All these improvements were discussed during last Friday's session with the psychiatrist. Leif hadn't realized it, but even his manner of speech has changed. Now he apparently inserts "I mean" between sentences with some frequency. The psychiatrist assures him that this is a good sign, because it represents the

need to express himself and communicate with others. "The best tennis players, I mean, the ones I like best, are always Swiss", he says, gazing into the mirror. And it also seems that he repeats "without a doubt" fairly often, another sure sign of renewed self-esteem. These are probably the kinds of things that the psychiatrist jots down during Leif's sessions. "Without a doubt, the Swiss are the best tennis players, without a doubt". He barely recognizes the calm and assured tone of his own voice, as it echoes against the bathroom tiles. He rinses his hands in the lukewarm water. Then, before returning to his office cubicle, Leif checks his reflection one more time and gives himself a wink.

As Leif makes his way back to his desk, whistling merrily through the hallways, he realizes that it is almost time to quit for the day. He checks his agenda, making a note of everything he will have to do tomorrow. The words flow energetically from his pen, in jubilant capital letters (a fact that perhaps the psychiatrist should be aware of). Today he has a squash game with that separated co-worker and will get back late. He calls home before leaving to see if they're any messages on his answering machine. There are two. After the initial recording (which he changed a few weeks ago, deleting forever the adorable sing-song of his ex), Leif punches in the password and is surprised to hear his own voice yet again. Although it slipped his mind, it turns out that he had called himself from work that morning. "Leif, don't forget to bring Lisa the García Márquez novel tomorrow." Lisa is another co-worker, married, who Leif has lately begun to regard in a different light. Today, he told her during the coffee break how he had just finished *Love in a Time of Cholera* and had enjoyed it immensely. A glint of admiration shining in her eyes, she asked if she could borrow it. He smiles as he envisions an evening spent perusing the book to relocate some of the more moving passages, underlining them for her to come across, unexpectedly, while reading.

The second message, from the neighborhood video-club, is frankly a bit disorienting. A young and careless female voice (she could have been munching on an apple) garbles his last name, hopes that he has a nice day and reminds him that the movie he took out last Friday should have been returned this morning.

They've made a mistake, Leif thinks, there must be some kind of error, because he didn't rent anything on Monday. He hasn't rented a single video in months. Then, repeating out loud to no one in particular, "They've made a mistake, there must be some kind of error." Since he has a few minutes to spare, Leif looks up the video-club's number in his electronic agenda and calls. A girl's voice picks up, but it doesn't sound like the same one who called that morning. This new young lady is a lot more serious. He starts to explain how he heard the message and that there must be some sort of misunderstanding because he didn't rent any movies. But she cuts him off by requesting his last name. Leif listens to her key the letters into the computer. He can just about make out snippets of dialogue from some romantic comedy that must be spooling on some television screen in the background. Leif hears the faint rasp of two bodies slipping around on silk sheets coupled with the phony panting of Hollywood sex. There is a pause and, just when he expects the dialogue to begin again, the same girl from before confirms that he has a movie out, which should have been returned on Friday. "I have it in the computer" she insists, and there isn't any way that Leif can argue with that. He doesn't know what to say, how to protest. So, to buy some time, he asks instead what the title of the movie is. "It's an adult film," the girl replies, "a porno".

An hour and a half later, as he takes a shower after the squash game while his co-worker tries to convince him to have a beer in a singles bar, Leif is still thinking about how the girl said "porno" and feels a layer of humiliation washing over his whole body, as if it were one of the active ingredients in his hypoallergenic shower gel.

Translation by Cheryl Leah Morgan.

Dog Licking its Wounds (fragment)

Jordi Puntí

I can't stand those stories where everything happens according to some preordained, overly rehearsed plan. One event leads to another in a simple, even pleasing order, like the swaying of those vines that Tarzan would come across in the jungle. The creepers would just emerge out of nowhere from the untamed depths, letting him get from place to place without ever touching the ground. I can't stand the feeling that every move has been measured and prearranged, like in those novels where the characters seemed to be led by remote control and every paragraph is calibrated to lead them inexorably towards their fate. It's as if a train was left sitting on the same track forever, all for lack of funds to remove it. The well-worn and beloved armchair that has witnessed four generations of bankers live and die; the girl who, without being able to help it (hah, hah, hah!), just happens to relive all the crucial moments of her life—romance and betrayal, births and deaths—aboard some ship that crosses the Atlantic relentlessly. The sentimental film buff that falls for a young lady who looks just like Kim Novak, has a friend with a heart-of-gold like James Stewart and is killed accidentally by a small time crook with the face of Peter Lorre. I find those kinds of cheap tricks embarrassing. That's why, no matter how much I might like to, ever since I was that feverish kid trembling with fear in a carnival trailer on Sunday afternoon eighteen years ago, to this day I can't just casually open the door of a trailer parked in a campground as if it were nothing.

I can't do it because it would seem that, all the while, my life were in complete stagnation, nothing more than a fairly long list of trailers, all variations of one another from the first to the last. That meant that the college dorm room where I spent six semesters of my life would have had the same cramped quarters of a trailer. And that Saturday, seventeen years ago, I would have slept with the Red Cross volunteer who, just like me, spent one out of every three weekends in a trailer on the outskirts of the city, waiting around to collect the drunk teenagers that wrapped their car around the first sharp bend in the road to cross their path. Or maybe it would have turned out that one summer, after smoking hashish and chugging a carton of wine with some friends; I would have been tempted to join

the circus, embarking on a nomadic and desolate existence. Dragging toothless lions through all sorts of factory towns; a faded uniform and a trailer replete with fake comfort, tacky upholstery on the sofas and those stickers you find on oranges stuck to the windows. Or if not, I would have become a forest warden complete with a shaggy beard and a plaid shirt. A modern mystic of a hermit, living alone on a snowy mountain top, spending the long winter nights huddled in the trailer with the heat cranked up. Barefoot and listening to an echoing radio station, I would reminisce about the last city girl who I'd manage to dazzle for a whole three months (a real record), thanks to my smooth skin and a gaze as clear blue as a mountain lake in summer.

No, my life had followed a much more ordinary, more mundane route. I met my wife at a disco, it was that simple, one Saturday night while out with the guys, trying to pick up girls. In less than two months, we were married (we knew what we wanted). Both of us worked and made a pretty good living. On the weekends we went out with couples just like us; dinner in semi-expensive restaurants, the occasional musical, local marathons on Sunday mornings (followed by quaint county lunches in equally quaint country villages), that sort of thing. The first four years of our marriage, we always went abroad somewhere for vacation: fifteen days on the white sands of a tropical beach; resorts with an all-you-can-eat buffet; exotic bars with bamboo chairs, a caged parrot and Harry Belafonte tunes playing in the background. "It helps us relax", we would tell our co-workers when September rolled around; doing absolutely nothing, sleeping, soaking up the sun, swimming, reading a book... But as time went on, like everybody else, we became more practical. The summer came when some new friends, a couple our age who Irina, my wife, had met at the gym, invited us to spend our vacation at a campground on the coast. The four of us stuffed into a tent that the couple insistently referred to as an apache with such ingenuous enthusiasm that I couldn't help feeling ashamed for them. It turned out to be a minor disaster. Within five hours of our arrival, after unfolding the tent like an accordion and setting up the tables and chairs, we couldn't think of a single thing to say to each other. The week seemed to

go on forever. Every evening- every evening- we ate ice cream cones and strolled past craft stands that the hippies had strewn along the beach. We brought a camera, but when we got home we realized that we had only taken seven or eight photos. We didn't bother to get the role developed until five or six months later, after a weekend skiing with our normal crowd. Those pictures of us four on the beach, in bathing suits and flashing artificial smiles at the camera, seemed so dated, so horribly out-of-place, that, with feigned carelessness, we ripped them up and tossed them into the garbage.

Although the destruction of those photos implied a cruel disavowal, in the end we must have gotten something out of that tedious week at the campground. We ended up buying a trailer and, the couple from the gym long gone, the following summer, and the next, and the next; we devoted our month-long vacation to the social simulacrum of the campground. A life of T-shirts, dusty access roads, communal toilets and bocci ball. And now, yes, at this very moment, far from everybody and everything, I think that this is as good a time as any to finally open the trailer door.

I opened the trailer door, and, just like every other day after lunch, I went inside to take my afternoon nap. We had left both windows open to let a little air in, but that August the heat was so dense and sticky that, as soon as you got inside, it felt like being hit by a dollop of condensed milk. Covered in sweat, I peeled off my T-shirt and splayed out on the unmade bed. As I sunk into oblivion, I could still hear my wife pattering around outside. Then, amplified by that clear and uncanny resonance found in dreams, came the voice of the neighbor's daughter. She had come to return a magazine that Irina had lent her that morning on the beach. We had been living like astronauts inside the trailer for four weeks and it was as if, lacking gravity, we had lost all conception of time. When you're on vacation at a campground, the days all begin and end in the same familiar pattern, each twin to the next. Often, the most trivial details are the ones that stand out in the memory after time has passed: a tune someone whistled by the communal sinks while washing

the dishes, or the blend of odors that wafted through the campground in the evenings, as it were a bazaar; or just the erotic curves of a bright bathing suit that had been left out to dry in the sun. Every drip seemed to distill the wanton essence of the female body that had been wearing it only minutes before.

Soon after, still half asleep, I thought I heard Irina come into the trailer, put on her bright bathing suit (Ah!) and go out again. It must have been about four thirty, because that was when she went, every afternoon, to a water-aerobics class at the pool. She had signed up for it the day after we got to the campground, tickled by the novelty of it all. In the beginning, she probably dipped into the water with an ironic giggle—I'm sure of it, it's as though I'm seeing her right now. Whenever Irina got back from class, hair wet and a beach wrap cinching her waist, she relished going over every detail about her immersion in the waters of kitsch. She described the deep concentration of some of the old women as they took part in the rejuvenating exercise, barely moving from their assigned places, with their bathing suits bursting at the seams and their white legs purpled by ridges of varicose veins. She told me about how when the Scandinavian ladies did push-ups, their livid red backs would be stretched to the point of rupture, like broken blood vessels beneath the skin.

Her mockery waned as the days went by however, eventually disappearing altogether. It was as if Irina had let herself go, had gotten caught up in the current, as if she too had melded with all that mediocrity. As if she was actually having a good time. One afternoon, after my nap, I snuck a peek at the class and found, to my horror, that she was just another willing participant in the extravaganza. There she was, in the water, right in the front row, perfecting her already perfect figure to the rhythm of that strident and monotonous music. One, two, three, four, and again... she aped the movements of the two instructors standing at the poolside. There was a female instructor whose movements were always off a beat and an Adonis with a perfect sense of timing that couldn't take his eyes off Irina as he clapped his hands and smiled at her with a set of blinding white teeth.

Oh no, I didn't suspect anything simply because I didn't think it was possible, not by a long shot. I've never been one to declare a war over fidelity, that's for sure. If my words sound reproachful, or tinged with a hysterical hint of jealousy, it is because I'm writing now and not then. It is because the words are already dead and I'm filling them with pain for the same reasons that you would stuff a desiccated animal; out of remembrance and the need to put it on exhibition.

[...]

Translation by Cheryl Leah Morgan.

La gran muralla

Empar Moliner

No em trec del cap el professor de crítica teatral, Joan Dilla. D'ell m'agrada tot. Que sigui escriptor, el seu accent xava, el to de veu avorrit que gasta quan fa les classes, les begudes que demana a la cantina, les ullerotes passades de moda, o que tingui panxa —això, sobretot, em torna boja.

De seguida que dono nom i definició als meus sentiments, li començo a fer visites quan toca tutoria, amb vestits llargs i recollits de cabell cada cop més adequats als gustos de Les tres germanes. La desesperació amb què en Dilla em corregeix els errors ortogràfics m'omple de desig. Si no em sentís tan femenina i tan dona com em sento, diria que tinc una erecció cada cop que posa el retolador vermell al damunt d'una falta de les meves.

Un vespre que finalment m'atreveixo a donar-li els contes que he escrit —de la seva opinió depèn que els foti a mar o no—, en Dilla em fa una festa a la galta. Em diu que acaba de demanar un taxi i que no li fa res baixar-me a Barcelona. En parlem pel camí.

Però durant el trajecte no obre la boca i només quan ens acomiadem fa:

—¿Fins demà, Tam?

Que m'hagi anomenat «Tam» en lloc de «Tamara», em sembla tan amorós que els ulls se m'humitegen. obro el portal i veig, reflectit al vidre, que el taxi encara no se'n va. En Dilla és tan atent que té por que em violin i ha ordenat al conductor que s'esperí. Pujo a casa i poso el clatell sota l'aixeta per mirar de fer-me passar els fogots. No hi ha solució: l'adoro. Ara comprenc que no estava realment enamorada dels altres dos escriptors que m'he lligat durant la carrera. (Només era sexe.)

L'endemà vaig a classe vestida igual que Irina, la germana jove, en aquella escena en què se sent com un vaixell de vela sota un cel blau. Però en Dilla es comporta com si no m'hagués acompanyat a casa i no m'hagués dit: «¿Fins demà, Tam?» Al contrari: diria que està una mica fred.

Però després d'una setmana d'indiferència, em proposa d'anar a un bar a comentar els contes, perquè ja se'ls ha llegit. Quedem dissabte al vespre, cosa que interpreto com un bon senyal: si ell no se'm volgués endur al llit o si els contes no li haguessin agradat, no quedariem fora de l'horari de classes.

Així que el cap de setmana, en lloc d'anar al poble com els meus altres tres companys de pis, em quedo a Barcelona. A més a més, des que estic enamorada d'en Dilla (i ara que he quedat amb ell em noto inflamada d'amor), li sóc fidel. No penso tornar a posar els peus als bars del casc antic on hi ha estudiants erasmus amb fama de fàcils. Divendres, a les deu ja sóc al llit. Devero el llibre d'en Dilla: *De Barcino a Barcelona, una aproximació a la ciutat romana (amb itineraris de menys de tres hores)*. M'abraço al coixí (que simbolitza en Dilla) i li faig petons apassionats. Li trec les ulleres i li fico un mugró a la boca. Després l'altre. Ell està preocupat perquè té panxa, sense saber que jo només vull abraçar-m'hi. Baixo cap avall i, fent-me la juganera, alterno els petons dolços amb succions de les més porques. Faig boca de tortuga: em protegeixo les dents amb els llavis, per no fer-li mal, i l'hi xumo. Després, l'hi queixalo amb suavitat. L'hi agafo com si fos un micròfon i me la passo, molt de pressa, amunt i avall, pels llavis, que deixo completament morts. L'hi llepo en cercles i me la fico tota sencera a la boca, fins a la campaneta. Em salten les llàgrimes, però a en Dilla li agrada molt que li digui: «Mira: m'has fet plorar.» Sacsejo la mà amunt i avall, a un ritme andante que aviat es converteix en un prestíssimo d'allò més viu. Sense deixar-l'hi anar (això mai, és una norma que em vaig autoimposar des del meu primer cop), trec el cap de sota el llençol i aprofito per agafar aire (la temperatura, allà dins, és alta; els homes mai no ho tenen en compte). «¿Et molesta, Dilla, que sigui esquerrana?», li pregunto amb innocència. Això, per alguna raó, precipita els fets. Però no m'empasso el resultat, el conservo a la boca. Així, quan en Dilla torna en si, li puc dir que miri. L'escupo al llarg del tronc i el torno a engolir de seguida.

Aleshores, em demana perdó per haver anat tan ràpid, perquè figura que s'ha excitat com mai. Com que no vull que es frustri, torno a provocar-lo. Em poso de bocaterrosa i li proposo —al coixí que és en Dilla— que m'ho faci per darrere. Ell no s'ho pot creure, però no l'hi haig de repetir dos cops: em comença a omplir de saliva i m'engrapa pels cabells. Mentre xisclo (de dolor i de plaer, figura), rumio un instant que, si la nostra relació s'arribés a saber a la facultat, ell no aniria a la presó. Com a molt, l'expedientarien.

Després de tot el que hem fet, em ve la nyonya, o sigui que em torno a posar els sostenidors (dormo amb sostenidors, perquè vull que aquests pits tan bonics que tinc se'm mantinguin fermes fins que sigui vella). Però abans d'adormir-me, encara planifico tot el que haig de comprar, tenint en compte que, si fem res, segur que serà aquí, a casa, perquè ell viu amb la dona i la filla. De la dona n'ha parlat quatre vegades: tres en to neutre, i l'altra en to elogiós però condescendent. De la filla sempre en parla bé. (I estic segura que, si tot va com ha d'anar, serem grans amigues. Té la meva edat.)

L'endemà, vaig als xinesos a comprar dues glaçoneres i un joc de sis gots llargs. Al celler, em quedo la marca de whisky irlandès que beu en Dilla. Quan torno a ser al pis, en llenço un dit al vàter perquè no es noti que enceto l'ampolla. I: ompló les glaçoneres, netejo l'habitació febrilment, estreno uns llençols i una coixinera que ma mare em va regalar per Nadal, deixo a mà els condons que van repartir al campus el Dia Mundial de la Sida (perquè semblen menys preparats que si fossin de la farmàcia), em faig una exfoliació i em rento amb sabó vaginal (encara que destrueixi la flora. ¿I què? Com si l'extermina).

Hem dit de trobar-nos al davant de la comissaria de la Via Laietana. El lloc l'he triat jo, com si fos per atzar, però no ho és. La majoria de professors de la facultat expliquen que van ser torturats en aquesta comissaria durant el franquisme. Sigui veritat o sigui mentida, explicar-ho els posa tendres. A més a més, al barri hi ha ruïnes romanes, i jo ja sé —per la mica d'experiència que tinc amb aquesta mena d'intel·lectuals— que a cap ciutat del món te'n vas tan de pressa al llit amb un home com a Barcelona, si t'interesses per les ruïnes romanes. Aquest cop porto un vestit blanc de puntes que en vaig comprar als Encants, adequat per l'escena al jardí.

Aparco la moto i ell em saluda agitant el manuscrit. (Pessigolles a la panxa.) Em fa dos petons i pregunta:

—¿Com estàs?

Em poso vermella com un tomàquet. M'avergonyeix parlar amb ell, com si res, després d'haver-li fet tot el que li he fet (al coixí que era ell) la nit passada.

—Bé.

—¿Vols que anem a fer una copa? ¿Al Future o al gallec?

Déu meu. I ara, ¿què dic? Faig que sí, com si respongués només a la primera part de la pregunta. Ha anomenat dos llocs que diuen molt de l'home que és. El Future és un bar modern de terra grisós on la gent es pren copes —no ampolles— de vi. El gallec és un bar de menú que des de no fa gaire s'ha posat de moda entre els artistes perquè hi ha jocs de cartes i d'escacs. ¿Què dic? ¿El Future o el gallec? Potser haig de semblar senzilla i dir el gallec. Però si anem al gallec, la roba i els cabells m'agafaran pudor de sofregit. En canvi, si dic el Future, semblaré més moderna del que sóc en realitat i m'exposo que en Dilla es burli dels meus orígens de nena de casa bona que rep diners del papà per pagar-se la carrera. A més, se suposa que a les copes m'hi convidarà ell, però, ¿i si no ho fa? ¿Ja tindrè prou cèntims, si anem al Future?

—Tria tu, tria tu! —Triarà ell, sempre, tota l'eternitat.

—Doncs anem al gallec.

Merda. Per força m'hauré de dutxar quan arribem a casa. I l'escalfador que tenim és elèctric; l'aigua triga mitja hora a sortir una mica tèbia. M'hauré de canviar les calces i els sostenidors, però, de cotó, només en tinc un conjunt; el que porto. Quan anava als bars d'erasmus em posava roba interior de blonda per no semblar massa criatura. Anant al gallec, tot s'ha esgarriat. M'hauria hagut d'atrevir a escollir el Future.

—Ha augmentat la delinqüència —diu ell.

—L'Ajuntament és que passa de tot —contesto, demostrant la meva agilitat mental. Em fa l'efecte que ell simpatitza amb el partit que governa, però que és del sector crític. Si diu que ha augmentat la delinqüència, deu ser perquè no està d'acord amb la política d'immigració de l'alcalde, ¿oi?

—¿Tu votes? —em demana per sorpresa.

En comparació, que fàcil em sembla la pregunta del Future i el gallec. ¿Què faig? Si ell no vota i jo dic que sí, semblaré una estudiant que va en ramat i forma part del sistema. M'acusarà de no ser rebel i de seguir les normes. Si, en canvi, dic que no i ell és d'aquests fanàtics de la democràcia que sempre voten, quedaré malament, encara que li doni raons àcrates per no votar. M'acusarà de no comprometre'm i que se m'ha de donar tot mastegat. Per una cosa així les possibilitats de llit es poden ajornar sine die, com diu a classe. Esclar que podria con-

testar-li que voto i, si resulta que ell no vota, afegir que voto en blanc. M'arrisco:

—Sí, sí que hi vaig.

—Jo, no. Però hi hauria d'anar, ja ho sé. —Ho diu amb una mica de sentiment de culpa, de manera que modifico l'estratègia.

—Bueno. Suposo que penso que, si no voto, doncs crec que no puc queixar-me del sistema, després.

Li veig la cara. Bingo. Set i mig. Següent pantalla. El llit torna a ser a prop. El despullaré, li faré petons pertot arreu, posaré l'orella a la seva panxa peluda per sentir-li els sucus gàstrics, i tindrè i li faré tenir orgasmes que aconseguiran que vessi llàgrimes de desesperació i nostàlgia quan, cada nit, se'n vagi a dormir amb la seva dona. Quan em despulli, veurà que sóc una nimfa com les que estudiem a classe, una fada, Wendla enmig del bosc. I potser fins i tot em dirà que tinc talent per ser escriptora i procurarà que em publiquin els contes. Em portarà de viatge a Nova York i em convidarà a sopar a llocs cars. Anirem als bars dels hotels i als meublés. Em presentarà als seus amics escriptors perquè es morin d'enveja.

—Tens raó.

Somric fent-me la modesta i, per no haver de dir a qui voto, el despisto queixant-me de la brutícia:

—Mira, mira quantes escombraries. Si és que...

—Aquest deu ser el casc antic més degradat d'Europa.

Torna-hi! Cada frase d'ell és una mina a punt d'explotar. ¿Em sé la llista de cascos antics degradats d'Europa? El de París, no; el de Londres, ¿existeix?; el de Madrid, menys; el de Càceres no compta, que és patrimoni històric.

—És veritat —responc finalment. I li frego el braç com qui no vol la cosa.— Ni el de Nàpols.

Ell fa petar els dits unes quantes vegades per donar-me la raó. Després em pregunta:

—Però, ¿tens gana, ja? —Aquest cop endevino la resposta, pel to.

—No —menteixo—. Ni me'n recordava. —Però en tinc. Tothom en té a les deu de la nit. Potser en Dilla, acostumat a escriure als vespres, no sopa mai i només beu whisky.

Passagem. Ell va una mica coix perquè es va torçar el tur-

mell jugant a futbol. És d'aquest estil d'home que juga a futbol amb amics del barri: amics que fan de carter o de mecànic. Pel camí m'ensenya tot de coses: una plaça que va ser bombardejada durant la Guerra Civil o un balcó on es conserva la rajola distintiva d'un gremi. Em noto la mateixa coïssor als ulls que quan bec aigua amb gas. L'estimo. Vull passar-me la vida sent la seva musa i no sopant mai més.

—Si et ve de gust, t'ensenyo la muralla romana —em diu. I, entusiasmada, crido que sí, que sí! Coixegem cap a la Via Laietana. De camí veiem façanes singulars i tombes de patricis. Me'l menjaria a petons allà mateix. Em noto a punt de neu. Aquest cop, si em quedo embarassada, no penso avortar.

—Mira! —I assenyala un carreró costerut que mor en una mena de mur ple de grafitis.

Procuo no comprometre'm. Mostro una cara interessada però neutra. De moment no sé què coi m'està ensenyant.

—Això és un fragment de la muralla —m'explica. I, de sobte, es posa a fer alegrois. Crida perquè ha vist un amic. Un amic que, com no passa enlloc més del món, també s'està delectant amb la muralla. S'insulten a crits, de broma, i amb l'accent xava més exagerat que mai:

—Mamonàs!

—Dat pel sac!

—Cabró!

—Però, ¿què collons fots aquí?

L'última frase, que la pronuncia ell, sona així: «Paró, ¿ca cuiions fots an aquí?»

En Dat va de bracat amb una noia que conec de vista perquè estudiava a la meua facultat (em sembla recordar que es diu Penèlope Picó i que és burra). No em sona, en canvi, que ell m'hagi fet de profe. Me'n recordaria, perquè no està malament del tot, i perquè també va coix, com si fos una qüestió generacional. La Penèlope em saluda amb tot de compliments. Porta mitges de ratlles vermelles, marró fosc, marró clar, marró fosc i verdes, sabates de sivella i un barret de feltre negre. Va vestida segons la idea que ella mateixa deu tenir del que és «una brui-xeta». Segur que li diuen que ho sembla, una brui-xeta. Ens fem petons i diem «quina casualitat» mentre els dos homes s'aparten per enraonar. Es nota que l'un li pregunta a l'altre qui

sóc, i si ja se m'ha tirat. (No hi ha res que em posi més calenta.) De mica en mica, recordo coses de la tal Penèlope: que va deixar penjat el tercer perquè era anorèxica i faltava sempre a classe.

—Que fort —exclama mentre es fa una trena—. Nosaltres ja havíem renunciat a presentar-li dones, al Joan.

De seguida, tot i que gairebé no ens coneixem, se m'agafa de bracat (és d'aquestes que troben important tot això del contacte físic) i em resumeix la seva trista història d'amor amb en Dat pel sac. La noia va fer les pràctiques al suplement d'esports del diari on ell treballa. Primer només sentia admiració per ell, però aviat l'admiració es va transformar en un altre sentiment més profund. Va haver de patir la incomprensió de tothom—el diari és *tan* masculista i conservador—pel fet de tenir relacions amb aquell escriptor (és escriptor) casat i operat del menisc (raó per la qual va coix).

—Jo necessito aprendre d'un home —recalca tota veement—. Vull xuclar, vull ser una esponja, vull que m'ho donin tot.

I ho repeteix, que ella vol xuclar. I també repeteix que és una *baby*, que ja ho sap, que és només una *baby*, però la gent de la seva edat no li *aporta* res, perquè és immadura, és infantil i és etcètera. Els de la seva edat són persones *tan* allunyades del mundillo literari...

Jo ja veig que l'únic que desitja en aquesta vida és ensopegar amb una amiga que es trobi en el mateix cas (i que estigui bona com ella) per donar-li tot el seu suport, aconsellar-la i deixar-li roba. Ja m'estima. Ja m'accepta. Ja comença a interrompre els dos homes per dir amb una confiança exagerada i falsa: «Joan, ens agrada molt aquesta senyoreta. I ja saps que jo sóc molt bruixa i no m'equivoco mai.»

En Dat fa que sí amb un somriure pellerengós:

—Ens caus molt bé, ¿saps? —Però no em diu quin és el seu nom. Ningú no hi pensa, a presentar-nos.

Quan en Dilla els anuncia que anàvem a sopar al gallec, s'hi afegeixen immediatament. I quan explica que, per fer gana, estàvem recorrent la muralla, els ulls de panda d'en Dat s'il·luminen. Justament ell —ja ho sap en Dilla— ha escrit un llibre sobre la vida quotidiana entre els segles I i V després de

Crist, i si una cosa adora és la muralla. Mentre ja coixegem tots quatre, afegeix amb un rictus heroic:

—És que avui no tenim casa. Gràcies per adoptar-nos...

La Penèlope se'm torna a agafar de bracet i s'apressa a fer-me un altre resum. Figura que la dona d'ell ja sap que té una amant (ella, la Penèlope), perquè en Dat és molt sincer i no l'hi amaga (n'és del tot incapaç). El seu matrimoni fa molt temps que és una farsa. Però la dona —la Penèlope l'anomena «la valquíria»— no tan sols li fa la vida impossible, sinó que, seguint els consells de l'advocada, espera que ell faci un «abandonament de llar» per quedar-s'ho tot. En conseqüència, l'home no pot sortir de casa ni per anar a comprar mistos, excepte els dissabtes, que fa veure que li toca horari nocturn i passa la nit amb la noia en un hotel. És l'únic dia que es veuen. Me l'escolto avorrida, mentre en Dilla i l'altre caminen davant nostre, feliços com mai. S'aturen a cada cantonada i, de tant en tant, es giren:

—Estem penjats per les pedres. ¿Ens perdoneu...? —diu l'un.

—No ens abandoneu, sisplau... Ja sabem que som *molt* pesats —diu l'altre.

Somric, però, sincerament, em començo a espantar. Una cosa és anar a passeig amb en Dilla (com a pas previ abans que anem al llit i com a pas previ abans que em digui que els meus contes són una obra mestra) i l'altra és anar a passeig amb en Dilla i aquell parell.

—Flipó —s'admira en Dat—. S'han fet superamigues.

—Quina por. Ara ens criticaran —respon l'altre, igual de feliç—. Ara diran: «Aquests dos vells tenen al davant dues dones de bandera i no els fan cas.» ¿Oi que sí?

—Ei, ei, ei, un moment! ¿Què us penseu que estàvem fent? —pregunta la Penèlope mentre es torna a fer una trena. (Té un cert deliri per tocar-se els cabells.)

Tothom riu, excepte jo. Són capaços de voler passar la nit bevent conyac calent i recitant poemes. Ens aturem en una plaça recuperada de fa molt poc i admirem les parets mitgeres que queden dretes dels pisos que han enderrocat.

—Veure un edifici que t'ensenya les tripes... les diferents rajoles dels vàters i els papers pintats dels menjadors, em fascina —s'emociona en Dilla.

—És com veure un trosset de vida quotidiana, com si ens l'ensenyessin impúdicament... —completa en Dat—. Les rajoles, les bigues, la marca de les escales...

—El senyal d'un quadre a la paret...

—Un calendari...

—Una aixeta...

Quan acaben de bavejar, en Dat s'acosta a la Penèlope —que mostra la seva millor cara de noia commoguda i sensible— i l'abraça. Li fa un petó sorollós, i, per empatia, en Dilla fa el mateix amb mi. M'hi arrapo, i per un moment perdo el món de vista. Quan ens desenganxem, en Dat i la Dada ens miren amb cara de tòtils.

Tots dos homes comencen a donar a entendre, aleshores, com s'han excitat. No se n'amaguen. Els agrada que se sàpiga.

—A les nostres velleses...! —s'emociona l'un.

—Tenim molta sort —reconeix l'altre. Com si jo ja fos la nòvia oficial d'en Dilla i, a partir d'aquell moment, només ens haguéssim de posar d'acord en el dia i l'hora que fem l'escapada a París, tots quatre.

Continuem el passeig, però aparellats. Baixem per un carreró i veiem les ruïnes romanes que hi ha a sota del centre cívic.

—Vigila! —li adverteix la Penèlope al seu Dat, de tant en tant.

—¿Què? —fa ell, susceptible.

—Anaves a trepitjar un cagarro.

—Ja el veia...! —es queixa, com si no veure una tifa de gos el convertís en algú menys sensible i menys coneixedor de la realitat d'aquesta Barcelona que tant estima. De vegades, per coses com aquesta, es mig piquen.

Em noto els peus inflats com una mala cosa. (Les tres germanes fan servir botines de taló, però en tota l'obra no es mouen de calcs Prókhov, i el viatge més llarg que fan és al darrere del paravent, per canviar-se de roba.) Calculo que encara deu quedar, ben bé, un quilòmetre o dos de muralla, i l'ànsia per anar-me'n al llit amb en Dilla em passa una mica. Només tinc ganes de menjar una hamburguesa amb mostassa, i de descalçar-me. En canvi, els dos homes, malgrat la coixesa, estan frescos com una rosa. Actuen com si no poguessin evitar

enraonar entre ells de les ruïnes romanes. Ho veig: Hollywood els va fer una mala passada, i de les grosses, produint una pel·lícula per al gran públic sobre l'enfonsament del Titànic. L'enfonsament del Titànic, quan encara era minoritari, els devia emocionar d'allò més.

—Que fort. És brutal, bru-tal... —exclama en Dilla mentre assenyala un balcó. I al cap de no res, es dirigeix a mi, complagut:

—Perdona. Et deus pensar que sóc un boig i, a sobre, mal educat.

—Som. Som. Som uns mal educats —remarca l'altre—. La Penèlope i jo feia cinc dies que no ens vèiem i aquesta és la *nos-tra* nit.

Era d'esperar. Tenen la *seva* nit. I m'hi jugo un murgó que també deuen tenir el seu bar, la seva cançó, el seu dia, el seu número de la sort, el seu color, el seu poema, la seva ciutat i el seu hotelet. Són d'aquests que deuen celebrar l'aniversari de la seva primera cardada, la seva cardada número deu, la número vint i el dia que se'ls va acabar la primera caps de preservatiu. I d'aquí a una setmana, també voldran celebrar que fa una setmana que ens han conegut a *nosaltres*.

Un paki ens ofereix roses, i la burra de la Penèlope, en lloc de dir que no sense mirar-se'l, com tothom, va i li somriu. Quan acaba de fer-se l'oberta i l'encantadora no ens podem treure l'home de sobre. Ens va al darrere fins que en Dat s'estova i decideix comprar una rosa per la Penèlope i una altra per mi, que sóc tan especial. En Dilla insisteix a pagar i treu la cartera, però ha de rebuscar molta estona per trobar els cèntims. M'acaba demanant si no em sobra pas un euro. Mau.

Quan arribem al gallec, fa mitja hora que han tancat la cuina.

—Al Future ens passarà igual —vaticina la Penèlope. I explica que, justament, no ha dinat. Ja no és anorèxica, però endevino que, com a seqüela, ara és d'aquestes que se salten els àpats i tenen gana a deshora. I que, quan passa això, sempre volen una tapa i una copa de xampany, però sempre entren a demanar-ho als bars equivocats, on el xampany no es ven per copes. Ens quedem tots quatre palplantats pensant què fer. No podem anar a cal Dat, ni a cal Dilla, que hi ha les dones. La de la Penèlope es descarta: viu amb els pares (i sempre han sigut

molt oberts, molt, però no ho entendrien), de manera que en Dilla proposa d'anar a la meva. En Dat ho troba una idea d'allò més emocionant, i mira de convence'm:

—Ara, la Pe i jo agafem un taxi i anem a comprar sopar a la benzinera.

—Però, no sé si seré capaç d'anar en un d'aquests aparells infernals anomenats moto —li adverteix, cofoi, en Dilla.

—Ei! Titular, titular: «Joan Dilla puja per primer cop en una moto» —fa broma la Penèlope.

No em fa ni gota de gràcia. No suportó dur un home (que ha d'anar al llit amb mi) de paquet. Si m'agradés dur homes de paquet, no hauria deixat d'anar als bars d'erasmus. No seria escriptora (inèdita). No em vestiria com Irina, em compraria la roba al System Action. A més a més, això significa que no podrem parlar dels meus contes.

—Joan, t'hi has d'atrevir! No pots deixar sola aquesta senyoreta! —el renya l'altre.

Tampoc no em ve gens de gust haver de preparar entrepans per quatre, ni obrir l'habitació de la Vanessa perquè en Dat i la Dada hi passin la *seva* nit. Ni vull dutxar-me i esmorzar en comunitat, l'endemà, just abans que en Dat corri cap a casa fingint que ja ha acabat el torn. Però no hi ha res a fer: tots tres coixegen en direcció a la Via Laietana. Jo els vaig al darrere i els sento fer plans. Ara els Dats aniran al Seven Eleven i compraran vi, whisky, xampany, baguettes, embotit i de tot, per fer un sopar *improvisat*. Ho diuen així: *improvisat*, i es nota que els fa una il·lusió boja, això de fer un sopar *improvisat*. I si tinguessin la sort que a casa meva no hi hagués prou cadires i ens toqués seure a terra o al llit, els veuria disfrutar de valent. Això, per ells, és molt més divertit que el sexe. Encareu un Dat i una Dada rumb al Seven Eleven disposats a comprar un sopar improvisat, i veureu que arriben al paroxisme. Ella fins i tot treu un llapis i un bloc per anotar les peticions de tothom:

—*Please*, ¿qui vol tòniques i de quina marca? —xiscla. Però ell ja ha aturat un taxi.

—Apunta't la meva adreça —li dic.

—No us perdeu pel camí! —fa en Dilla, maliciós.

Un cop ens quedem sols, coixegem, parsimoniosos, Via Laietana amunt fins a la comissaria, on hi ha aparcada la moto.

Ara, si en Dilla fos un home, em duria a un hotel. Aquí mateix em grapejaria, m'agafaria del coll amb violència i em diria que no pateixi pels seus amics, que ja ho entendran. També em diria que els meus contes són una obra mestra i que s'han de publicar immediatament, cosa que faria que tots dos hi sortís-sim guanyant. Però només em pessiga la galta i exclama fent morrets: «iAi... Que te la fotrél!», mentre caminem a pas de burra.

Amb l'estona que triguem a fer la travessa fins a la moto, calculo que els Dats ja deuen haver comprat de tot. Busco les claus a la bossa mentre miro, amb recança, tot de bars i restaurants oberts. Deslligo el casc suplementari i l'hi dono perquè se'l posi, però resulta que no li acaba de cabre. Ara ho veig: té el cap gros.

—Que bé, ara et podré arrambar... —em xiuxiueja després d'haver-se'l encabint amb penes i treballs. Ho diu com si fos la frase més perversa de l'any.

Engego, plego el cavallet i inclino la moto cap a un cantó perquè hi pugui pujar. Pobre home, té les articulacions rovellades perquè no hi ha manera que alci prou la cama. Veure-ho em fa passar les poques ganes que em quedaven de despullar-lo.

Dono gas i ell se m'arrapa, però de por. És un nena. Enfilo per la Via Laietana i m'aturo al semàfor. Ell, desprevingut, em dóna un cop de casc, al casc. No està acostumat a anar amb moto i se'm llança al damunt, per la inèrcia. Ocupa més de la meitat del meu seient. Cada vegada que accelero, sense voler, em dóna un cop. A cada cop que rebo, li agafó més tírria. Els compto: un, dos, tres, quatre... Si me'n dóna un altre, l'odiare d'una manera bàrbara, inhumana, sense remei. Me'l dóna. El deixaria allà si no fos pels contes i perquè em suspendrà. Freno expressament, i això fa que me'n doni un altre. No puc deixar de pensar que en Dat i la Dada ja deuen ser al meu portal, asseguts al marxapeu, envoltats de bosses de plàstic plenes de coses, rient, segur, abraçats pel fred, menjant patates fregides i bevent coca-cola per entretenir-se mentre no arriba la diversió.

Unes dècimes (fragment)

Jordi Puntí

1

Hi ha un home que es diu Leif i fa quatre mesos que ell i la seva dona es van separar. No hi havia fills, ni animals, i ell es va quedar el pis de casats ja que tècnicament era ella, la Irina, qui se n'anava. Amb aquests cent vint dies de viure a la deriva n'hi ha hagut prou perquè al seu voltant, a la seva vida, tot hagi agafat un aspecte més desolat. Ell fa veure que no se n'adona, però els mobles, tocats pel sol, es desdibuixen en la claror opaca de la pols, i a la cuina els objectes —el cullerot, el calendari, el minipímer, la nevera— es perfilen amb una involuntària tristesa. No seria gens estrany que aquesta nit, o demà a la nit, el fluorescent del sostre comencés a fer pampallugues. Alguns matins, quan es desperta, de la cuina n'hi arriba l'olor del cafè acabat de fer i les torrades que ella li deixava a punt abans d'anar a treballar. Desorientat, triga ben bé un minut a adonar-se que és una pura il·lusió matinal, les escorrialles d'un temps que es resisteix a ser engolit. «És com si m'haguessin tallat la mà esquerra i encara me la notés», es diu llavors, «és com si l'anell de casat em fes pessigolles». L'anell de casat: no se l'havia tret mai. Com que sua de les mans, quan jugava a tennis sovint li feia picor i, entre punt i punt, se'l tocava tota l'estona igual que un tic de tennista professional. L'anell de casat: se'l va treure l'endemà que ella marxés definitivament, com un reflex instintiu, però va guardar-lo a prop seu, al calaix de la tauleta de nit, embolicat amb un mocador que té brodades les inicials d'ella, I.B.

Des del dia que ella va tancar per últim cop la porta de l'apartament (enduent-se només una maleta petita i un bossa de viatge ridículament atapeïdes) no l'ha tornada a veure ni sap on para. A la primeria, quan demanava alguna informació als amics comuns que tenien ell i la seva dona —una escenografia de trucades a deshora, estranyes trobades nocturnes i llàgrimes inconsolables—, tampoc no li sabien donar una resposta convincent, però de cua d'ull notava que entre ells sempre hi havia mirades. ¿Eren mirades de compassió o de complicitat? Hi pensava després, quan tornava cap a casa tot sol, i descobria la resposta en els ulls injectats de sang, al retrovisor, d'un taxista terriblement hostil, o mentre caminava pels carrers del seu

barri, rosegant el bastó d'una ombrel·la que feia uns minuts havia guarnit un daiquiri tan irreal i dessaborit com ell mateix.

Al llarg d'aquests quatre mesos ha viscut instal·lat en una frustració continuada, amb moments de crueltat quotidiana (com quan obre la porta del pis i a l'instant se sent embafat per l'olor de matrimoni) i moments anestesiats (aquella sensació que té quan és a la feina, com si es diluís en la voràgine de números, operacions bancàries, trucades de veus neutres —i ja no fos ell—). Al centre d'aquesta desesperació, atiant-la, hi ha l'estranyesa dels fets, perquè al cap i a la fi va ser ella qui el va enganyar, i no a l'inrevés, ell només va reaccionar de mala manera. Oh sí, semblava increïble: la seqüència dels esdeveniments, la posada en escena de tot plegat i el càlcul de les passions no podien ser més literaris, més dramàtics, com si haguessin estat programats per una ment entremaliada i fins i tot perversa —i, pensant-hi bé, un dia el mateix Leif ens ho hauria d'explicar tot fil per randa, a veure què en surt.

[...]

3

És dilluns a la tarda i en Leif és al lavabo de l'oficina on treballa. Mentre es renta les mans i sent l'olor refrescant del sabó de maduixa que li entra pel nas, alça la vista, obre els ulls ben oberts (les pupil·les se li dilaten) i dóna un cop d'ull al mirall ample que el reflecteix: sí, és veritat, ja no fa cara de restret. Avui l'hi ha dit un company de feina que tots aquests mesos s'ha solidaritzat amb ell perquè també està separat. És veritat que ja no fa cara de restret, que ja no arrossega els peus quan camina, que ja no pensa en la seva ex-dona quan mira la tele a la nit, estirat al sofà vell (els d'Ikea no li han portat el nou encara). La cicatriu es va tancant, la crosta s'endureix.

Divendres va visitar un altre cop el psiquiatre i van parlar d'aquestes millores. Ell no se n'havia adonat, però resulta que també està canviant la manera de parlar. Es veu que ara diu molt sovint «és a dir» entre frase i frase. El psiquiatre li diu que això és bo perquè significa que té ganes d'explicar-se, de comunicar-se amb els altres. «Els millors tennistes, és a dir, els que m'agraden més, són els suïssos», diu de cara al mirall. I es veu

que també diu molts cops «sens dubte», un altre senyal de la seguretat renovada: això, pensa, és el que el psiquiatre deu apuntar tota l'estona quan ell parla. «Sens dubte, els suïssos són els millors tennistes, sens dubte». La veu se li fa estranya, ressonant allà al lavabo, perquè té un deix de confiança i de serenitat que encara li costa de creure's. S'esclareix les mans sota l'aigua tèbia, se les eixuga amb una tovallola de paper i tot seguit, abans de tornar al cubicle que li fa de despatx, es mira de nou al mirall i es pica l'ullet a si mateix.

Quan torna a la seva taula, taral·lejant alegrement pels passadissos, s'adona que gairebé ja és hora de plegar. Repassa l'agenda i apunta les coses que farà l'endemà. Escriu les paraules amb un traç enèrgic, eufòric, i totes les lletres són majúscules (cosa que potser hauria de saber el psiquiatre). Com que avui té partit d'esquaix amb el company de feina separat i tornarà tard, abans de marxar truca a casa seva per escoltar si hi ha algun missatge al contestador —i n'hi ha dos—. Després del missatge d'entrada (que va canviar fa un parell de setmanes, esborrant per sempre més la cantarella divertida de la seva ex), pitja el codi secret i se sorprèn de sentir una altra vegada la seva pròpia veu. Ja ho havia oblidat, però és que aquest matí s'ha trucat des de la feina i s'ha deixat un missatge a si mateix. «Leif, recorda que demà al matí has de portar el llibre d'en Garcia Márquez per la Lisa». La Lisa és una companya de feina, casada, que últimament s'ha començat a mirar amb uns altres ulls. Avui, mentre esmorzaven junts, ell li deia que havia acabat de llegir *El amor en los tiempos del cólera*, que li havia agradat moltíssim, i ella, amb una espurna d'admiració als ulls, li ha demanat si li podia deixar. Somriu i pensa que aquesta nit hauria de buscar alguna d'aquelles frases que li van fer venir pell de gallina i subratllar-la perquè ella se la trobi, inesperadament, quan llegeixi el llibre.

El segon missatge que hi ha és del videoclub i el deixa una mica desorientat. Una veu de noia jove i despreocupada (com si mengés una poma) pronuncia el seu cognom, li diu bon dia i li recorda que aquest matí hauria d'haver tornat la pel·lícula que va llogar divendres passat. S'han equivocat, es diu en Leif, hi deu haver un error, perquè ell no va llogar cap pel·lícula el divendres, fa mesos que no lloga cap vídeo, i des-

prés ho torna a dir en veu alta: «S'han equivocat, hi deu haver un error». Com que encara li queden cinc minuts, busca el número del videoclub a l'agenda electrònica i hi truca. La veu que li respon també és de noia, però no sembla la mateixa que li ha trucat al matí, aquesta parla amb un to de veu més seriós. Ell comença a explicar-li que ha escoltat el missatge i hi deu haver un problema, perquè ell no va llogar cap pel·lícula, però ella el talla i li demana el seu cognom. En Leif li diu, i pot sentir com el tecleja a l'ordinador. De fons, esmorteïdes, li arriben les veus d'una pel·lícula romàntica que deuen tenir posada als televisors de la botiga. Pot sentir el fregament suau de dos cosos lliscant sota uns llençols de seda, el panteix fingit del sexe a Hollywood; hi ha una pausa i, quan espera que algú parli, és la noia d'abans que li confirma que té una pel·lícula per tornar des de divendres. «Em surt a l'ordinador», fa ella, i és com si no hi hagués rèplica possible. Ell no sap què dir, com queixar-se, i llavors, per guanyar temps, demana el títol de la pel·lícula. «És una pel·lícula per adults», li diu la noia, «pornogràfica».

Al cap d'una hora i mitja, mentre es dutxa després del partit d'esquaix i el company de la feina l'intenta convèncer perquè s'apunti a una cervesa en un bar de separats, en Leif encara pensa en la manera com la noia ha dit «pornogràfica», i pot notar la vergonya que se li escampa per tot el cos, com si fos un dels components químics del sabó dermatoprotector.

[...]

El gos que es llepa les ferides (fragment)

Jordi Puntí

Jo no suportó aquelles històries en què els fets transcorren sempre segons un ordre previst i assajat, quan els esdeveniments s'encadenen amb un compàs senzill i fins i tot bonic, com el moviment de les lianes que Tarzan trobava a la selva, d'un arbre a l'altre, i que, sortides de la foscor salvatge, del no-res, li permetien viatjar sense baixar dels arbres ni tocar mai a terra. No suportó aquesta sensació que tots els moviments han estat calibrats i pactats prèviament, o aquelles novel·les en què els personatges semblen teledirigits i només s'explica allò que canalitzarà estrictament el seu futur—com si el tren, un cop a la via, no pogués descarrilar per falta de pressupost—. La butaca vella i estimada que ha vist néixer i morir quatre generacions d'una família de banquers; la noia que, sense poder-ho evitar (ha, ha, ha!), viu per atzar tots els moments crucials de la seva vida—amors i desenganys, morts i naixements— dalt d'un vaixell casual que sempre creua l'Atlàntic; el cinèfil sentimental que s'enamora d'una noia clavada a Kim Novak, té un amic bondadós com James Stewart i mor accidentalment a mans d'un lladregot que s'assembla a Peter Lorre. Aquesta mena de trucs em mortifiquen; per això, tot i que en tinc moltes ganes, després del nen enfebrat que tremolava de por en aquella rulot de fira, un diumenge a la tarda de fa divuit anys, ara no puc obrir la porta d'una rulot instal·lada en un càmping i quedar-me tan tranquil.

No puc perquè faria l'efecte que, mentrestant, la meua existència ha estat una pura estagnació del temps, reduïda a una llista més o menys llarga de rulots, variacions de la primera i de l'última, i llavors l'habitació de la residència universitària on vaig viure durant sis cursos tindria les dimensions estretes d'una rulot, i aquell dissabte dels setze anys m'hauria allitat per primer cop amb una voluntària de la Creu Roja que, com jo, passava un cap de setmana de cada tres en una rulot als afores de la ciutat, esperant l'hora de recollir els adolescents borratxos que plegaven el cotxe en el primer revolt massa tancat que els escapia. O llavors potser resultaria que un estiu, després de fumar marihuana i beure vi d'un tetrabric amb els amics, hauria acariciat la possibilitat d'apuntar-me a un curs de circ i posar així la primera pedra a una vida nòmada i trista, arrossegant per tota mena de ciutats industrials uns lleons sense

dents, un uniforme descolorit i una rulot falsament confortable, amb una tapisseria passada de moda als sofàs i adhesius d'aquells de les taronges enganxats a les finestres. O, si no, m'hauria convertit en un guardabosc de barba serrada i camisa de quadres: un anacoreta modern i místic que viuria sol al capdamunt d'una muntanya nevada i passaria les nits d'hivern dins una rulot amb la calefacció a tot drap, descalç, escoltant una emissora de ràdio que faria eco i recordant l'última mossa de ciutat que s'havia deixat enlluernar, durant tres mesos (tot un rècord), per la meua pell estel·losa i una mirada blava i transparent com un estany al pic de l'estiu.

No, la meua vida ha anat per camins menys extraordinaris, menys fabulosos. Vaig conèixer la meua dona en una discoteca, així de senzill, una nit de dissabte que havia sortit amb dos amics a lligar, i ens vam casar al cap de deu mesos (ho teníem molt clar). Tots dos treballàvem i ens guanyàvem més o menys bé la vida. Els caps de setmana sortíem amb altres parelles com nosaltres: sopars en restaurants una mica cars, alguna obra de teatre musical, curses populars el diumenge al matí (seguides de dinars rústics en pobles igualment rústics), aquesta mena de coses. Els quatre primers anys de casats fèiem un viatge per vacances: quinze dies en platges tropicals de sorres blanques; complexos hotelers amb bufet lliure; bars exòtics amb les cadires de bambú, un lloro engabiats i les cançons de Harry Belafonte. Ens va bé per descansar, dèiem a la gent de la feina quan tornàvem el setembre: no fer res, dormir, prendre el sol, banyar-se, llegir un llibre... Com sempre passa, amb el temps ens vam tornar més pràctics: va arribar un estiu que uns amics nous, una parella de la nostra edat que la Irina, la meua dona, havia conegut al gimnàs, ens van convidar a passar les vacances en un càmping de la costa, entaforats tots quatre dins una tenda de campanya que anomenaven «apatxe» amb una ampullositat que em feia sentir vergonya aliena. Va ser un petit desastre: cinc hores després d'arribar, desplegar la tenda com un acordió i instal·lar la taula i les cadires, ja no sabíem què dir-nos. La setmana se'ns va fer llarguíssima. Cada dia al vespre —cada dia!—, després de sopar, menjàvem un gelat i passejàvem per les parades dels *hippies* de la platja. Portàvem una màquina fotogràfica, però al tornar a casa ens vam adonar que només

haviem gastat set o vuit fotos del carret. No les vam revelar fins cinc o sis mesos més tard, després d'un cap de setmana a la neu amb els amics de sempre, i aquelles imatges de nosaltres quatre a la platja, en banyador i somrient a càmera de manera postissa, ens van semblar llavors tan antiquades, tan horrorosament dislocades, que amb un gest fingit de despreocupació les vam estripar i les vam llençar a les escombraries.

Tot i el rebuig cruel que significava l'acte de destruir aquelles fotos, al cap i a la fi alguna cosa en devia quedar de la setmana tediosa al càmping, perquè vam comprar-nos una rulot i l'estiu següent, i l'altre, i l'altre, ja sense la parella del gimnàs, vam tornar a entregar el nostre mes de vacances al simulacre social dels càmpings, a la vida de la samarreta i els carrers de pols i els lavabos comunitaris i la petanca —i ara sí, en aquest precís instant, lluny de tot i tothom, em sembla que ja és una bona ocasió per obrir finalment la porta de la rulot.

Vaig obrir la porta de la rulot i, com cada dia després de dinar, vaig entrar-hi per fer la migdiada. Teníem les dues finestres obertes perquè passés una mica d'aire, però la calor que feia aquell agost era tan espessa i enganxosa que allà dins et queia al damunt com un glop de llet condensada. Suat, vaig treure'm la samarreta i vaig estirar-me de través al llit desfet. Mentre em venia la passió de son i m'anava adormint, encara vaig poder sentir la meua dona que feinejava a fora i, poc després, amplificada per aquell ressò tan nítid i irreal dels somnis, la veu de la nena dels veïns: venia a tornar una revista que la Irina els havia deixat aquell matí a la platja. Feia gairebé quatre setmanes que practicàvem la vida d'astronauta de l'interior d'una rulot i era com si, ingràvids, haguéssim perdut la noció del temps: al càmping, quan estàs de vacances, els dies neixen i moren tots amb la mateixa marca familiar, bessons l'un de l'altre, i sovint són els detalls més trivials els que al cap del temps fan un pas endavant i donen relleu al record: una cançó que algú xiulava a les piques de rentar, mentre esbandia els plats i coberts, o la barreja d'olors que al vespre s'escampava pels carrers del càmping, com en un basar, o sinó la forma eròtica d'un banyador de colors penjat perquè s'eixugués al sol, el

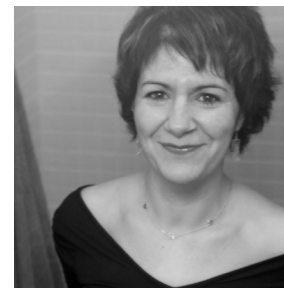
degoteig del qual semblava destil·lar tota l'essència lúbrica del cos femení que l'havia portat feia deu minuts.

Una estona després, encara endormiscat, em va semblar sentir que la Irina entrava a la rulot, es posava el seu banyador de colors (ai!) i tornava a sortir. Devien ser quarts de cinc, perquè en aquella hora, cada tarda, anava al curs d'aeròbic aquàtic que feien a la piscina. S'hi havia afegit l'endemà que arribéssim al càmping, entusiasmada amb la novetat, i els primers dies es devia ficar a l'aigua amb una mitja rialla irònica —n'estic segur, és com si la veies—, perquè quan tornava de la classe, amb els cabells mullats i el pareo sobre el banyador definint-li la cintura, es delia per explicar-me els detalls d'aquella immersió en el mal gust. Em parlava de la concentració amb què algunes dones velles practicaven aquella gimnàstica rejuvenidora, gairebé sense moure's de lloc, amb els banyadors botits i les cames blanques treballades per cordilleres de varius; em parlava de les esquenes morades de les nòrdiques, tan tibades que quan feien flexions semblava que haguessin d'esclatar, com un sangtraït.

Amb els dies, tanmateix, aquest acarnissament va anar disminuint i a la fi va desaparèixer, com si la Irina s'hagués deixat anar i, enduta pel corrent, també s'hagués dissolt en aquella mediocritat: com si realment li agradés. Una tarda, després de la migdiada, m'hi vaig acostar d'amagat d'ella i vaig poder comprovar amb un punt d'horror que estava plenament integrada en l'espectacle. Dins l'aigua, a primera fila, perfeccionava el seu cos perfecte al ritme d'aquella música estrident i monòtona, un i dos i tres i quatre, i tornem-hi, seguint els moviments que li marcaven els dos monitors des de fora de la piscina, una noia imprecisa i un adonis ultraprecís que, quan picava de mans, la mirava tota l'estona i li somreia amb unes dents massa blanques.

Oh no, jo no vaig sospitar res de res perquè no ho creia possible, de cap manera. Jo no he instigat mai les guerres de la fidelitat, això segur, i si les meves paraules sonen com un retret, o tenen el matís histèric de la gelosia, és perquè les escric ara i no aleshores, és perquè ja són mortes i les farceixo amb el dolor igual que es farceix un animal dissecat: per recordar-lo i per exhibirlo.

[...]



Empar Moliner (Barcelona, 1966), once an actress, is currently a very popular journalist who contributes to *El País*, Catalunya Ràdio and even late-night television talk shows. Her journalistic chronicles, written with the same corrosive style of her short stories, have been recently collected in an anthology, which has also been a success with both critics and readers. *I Love You when I'm Tippy* has been awarded the Lletra d'Or, one of the most acclaimed honours of Catalan literature.

Selected Works

L'ensenyador de pisos que odiava els mims (Destino, 2001)

['The Real Estate Agent Who Hated Mimes'].

Feli esthéticienne (Destino, 2001) ['Feli, esthéticienne'].

T'estimo si he begut (Quaderns Crema, 2004) ['I Love You when I'm Tippy'].

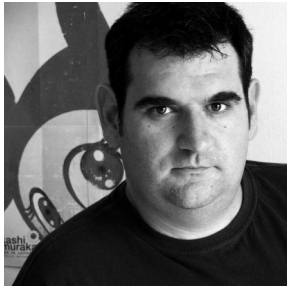
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['Wanted: Gentleman For Friendship and Maybe More'].

Latest Works in Translation

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Spanish. *Te quiero si he bebido*. Barcelona: El Acantilado, 2004.



Jordi Puntí (Manlleu, 1967) has translated into Catalan works by Paul Auster, Amélie Nothomb and Daniel Pennac, among others. He is currently the editor of the literary supplement *Quadern*, published by the newspaper *El País*. Jordi Puntí has received public and critical acclaim and is considered one of the most promising new voices of contemporary Catalan literature. *Armadillo Skin* has been awarded the prize Crítica 'Serra d'Or'. The cinema director Ventura Pons has recently filmed an adaptation of his stories, in a movie named *Animals ferits*.

Selected Works

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Spanish. *Piel de armadillo*. Barcelona: Salamandra, 2001.

Spanish. *Animales tristes*. Barcelona: Salamandra, 2004.

Animals tristos: rights sold to French, German and Italian.

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