Marginalized Experiences Expose the Problems of Nuance-Deprived Perspectives in the Short Stories of Lourdes Ortiz

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ABSTRACT

MARGINALIZED EXPERIENCES EXPOSE THE PROBLEMS OF NUANCE-DEPRIVED PERSPECTIVES IN THE SHORT STORIES OF LOURDES ORTIZ

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Northern Illinois University, 2021
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The short stories of Spanish author Lourdes Ortíz present the experiences of marginalized individuals upon whom outside observers have imposed a narrative. In these three stories, the only way for the character to escape this oppressive imposition of a narrative is through a sacrifice of the self, either literally with suicide, as in “Fatima of the Shipwrecked” and “Marcelinda’s Skin,” or metaphorically with the loss of sanity and identity in “Sleeping Venus.” These three stories call upon readers to reflect upon their own tendency to impose a narrative onto an “other,” and condemn the necessity of a sacrifice to escape this othering. They also present two ends of a spectrum of responses to observing a marginalized individual: a total lack of nuance versus one that is overly open to it. Finally, my work of translating these stories into English at this time in history exposes the problems with two troubling societal trends that are on the rise—tribalism and the death of nuance—and concludes with a call to action for American readers.
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RESUMEN

Los cuentos de la autora española Lourdes Ortíz presentan las experiencias de los individuos marginados a quienes los observadores de afuera han impuesto una narrativa. En los tres cuentos, la única manera para el personaje de escapar esta imposición opresiva es a través de un sacrificio del sí mismo, o literalmente con suicidio, como en “Fátima de los naufragios” y en “La piel de Marcelinda,” o metafóricamente con la pérdida de cordura e identidad en “Venus Dormida.” Estos tres cuentos llaman a los lectores a reflexionarse sobre su propia tendencia de imponer una narrativa en un otro, y condenan la necesidad de un sacrificio para escapar de esta alteridad. También presentan dos límites de un espectro de respuestas de observar un individuo marginado: una falta total de matiz versus una que es demasiado abierto a ella. Finalmente, mi trabajo de traducir estos cuentos al inglés es esta época de la historia expone los problemas con dos tendencias problemáticas que crecen actualmente—el tribalismo y la desaparición de los matices—y concluye con una llama a la acción para los lectores americanos.
MARGINALIZED EXPERIENCES EXPOSE THE PROBLEMS OF NUANCE-DEPRIVED

PERSPECTIVES IN THE SHORT STORIES OF LOURDES ORTIZ

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF WORLD LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

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Stephen Vilaseca, Ph.D.
For Dan
“You’re it.”
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INTRODUCTION

_Fatima of the Shipwrecked: Stories of Land and Sea_ (1998), a collection of six short stories by Spanish author Lourdes Ortíz, offers accounts of the experiences of marginalized characters in various aspects of Spanish society. In “Fátima of the Shipwrecked,” we see a Moorish African survivor of a shipwreck whose husband and son drowned in an attempt to reach the Spanish coast; in “Marcelinda’s Skin,” a thirteen-year-old Caribbean girl ostensibly tricked into prostitution in Spain; and in “Sleeping Venus,” an art professor whose sanity slowly slips away as revealed through his perceived displacement in time and space. Theorists including Maryanne Leone, Jessica Folkart, Maria DiFrancesco, and Mayela Vallejos Ramirez have discussed how the first two stories highlight problems of immigration in Spain, some of which are rooted in colonial practices and indeed which echo those practices to this day. “Fátima” and “Marcelinda” also pose questions with which a reader must grapple, particularly how observers of the plight of a marginalized person tend to write their own narratives onto others, obliterating the nuance of their individual struggles in order to “understand” by putting the locus of the issue upon themselves. However, previous analyses of these two stories have left out a third one by Ortíz, “Sleeping Venus,” which is the collection’s last story and which serves as a counterpoint to the previous two. This valuable and intriguing story offers yet another angle on the role of the marginalized voice in this collection of stories by Ortíz. It introduces the reader to Arellano, a character who will not be pigeon-holed into a category, and who ultimately makes a sacrifice much like Fátima and Marcelinda do. With the analysis of this third story, I raise the questions: At what cost do we gain control of our own stories? Can we bring about a change to abolish the harmful effects of tribalism and the ignorance of nuance in order to avoid the necessity of
sacrifices such as those made by Fátima, Marcelinda, and Arellano in order to escape the oppressive imposition of a narrative onto the “other”? By including this third story, I argue that the stories taken together, as Ortiz meant them to be in this collection, can be relevant for modern-day American readers. Although Ortiz wrote the stories for a Spanish audience in the 1990s, now that I have translated them into English for the first time, an American audience can grapple with these same questions of how to approach a perspective of a marginalized individual. The logic functioning within Ortiz’s texts suggests that one cannot be on either end of the spectrum when reacting to the marginalized “other”; that is, one cannot be the townspeople who never truly get to know Fátima, or the pimp who tries to justify Marcelinda having a “better life” than in her own country; and on the other end, one cannot be like Arellano, who is so overly open to nuance and interpretation that he loses his sanity, identity, and his ability to perceive others’ distinct identities. With the incorporation of “Sleeping Venus” as a counterpoint, the logic of the stories suggests that change must come carefully, not radically like Arellano. It must not be ignored and believed to be benevolence or sympathy, like the townspeople or the pimps in “Fátima” and “Marcelinda”: it has to be balanced.

My work of translating all three short stories into English for the first time will expand their readership to an American audience. Readers in the United States will gain a valuable perspective of how tribalism and the decay of nuance over time has affected the marginalized individuals within Spanish society, and how we might change that outcome in the United States. First, I will convey the most recent demographic and immigration data in Spain, as well as compare it to similar data during the time in which the stories were written; that is, the 1990s. Next, I will explain my methodology of analysis which includes a feminist, postcolonial, and Derridean framework, and provide a counterpoint to previous research on the first two stories by
synthesizing others’ arguments and adding to them with my analysis of “Sleeping Venus.” Next, I discuss my call to action for American readers to wrestle with the problems posed by the narratives, and how they reflect current troubling trends in our society. Finally, I will conclude with the pitfalls and problems of the translation process, how they reflect translation theories, and how, in an echo of Ortiz’s stories, my identity mixed with the author’s as I translated her narratives.

The demographics of Spain show an increase in the immigrant population every year that data has been collected since 1990 (Macrotrends 2021). In 1990, 2.1% of the population was considered immigrant, and every year, the percentage gradually increased until reaching 12.6% in 2015 (Macrotrends 2021). Data from the 1990s shows that Moroccans historically made up the greatest percentage of immigrants to Spain, due not only to their proximity to Spain, but also to the fact that a visa was not required for them to enter Spain prior to 1985 (Empez Vidal, Núria). In 1985, a much more restrictive law was passed, La Ley de Extranjería, causing many immigrants to pursue the methods of immigration that Fátima and her family sought in Ortiz’s story; that is, a small boat called a *patera* (Empez Vidal, Núria). Stories of shipwrecked survivors from these dangerous crossings from Africa to Spain were prevalent during the time that Ortíz composed her literature, and likely influenced her work. At the time of composition, the tragic fate of many immigrants to Spain was something that Ortiz wanted to call to the attention of her readers. However, by looking at the data, it appears that even more migrants are currently crossing the border to Spain. Clearly, despite having been written thirty years ago, the narratives are still relevant. Additionally, my work of translating the stories into English brings another perspective on the immigration issue to American readers. Per the Migration Policy Institute:
More than 44.9 million immigrants lived in the United States in 2019, the historical numeric high since census records have been kept. Immigrants’ share of the overall U.S. population has increased significantly from the record low of 4.7 percent in 1970.

For American readers, the stories of Ortíz can offer a new and nuanced perspective of the immigration issue as it is indeed not only restricted to the author’s country of origin.

The main characters in “Fátima of the Shipwrecked” and “Marcelinda’s Skin” are African and Caribbean immigrants to Spain. Previous analyses of these two stories have highlighted the phenomenon of an observer’s tendency to write their own narratives upon the plight of marginalized individuals, particularly immigrants. It is important to note that in both stories, the immigrant is the focal point of the story, but neither Fátima nor Marcelinda narrates or is given the opportunity to present her perspective; the stories are entirely told from the perspective of a legal Spanish citizen, which places the reader in the same position as the narrators. At first it may seem that this is a disadvantage, because the immigrants’ stories are not being told in their own words; however, it urges the reader to grapple with the question of perception and how they may also be guilty of centering the plight of another onto their own experiences rather than attempting to gain a real and nuanced understanding of the other’s struggle. Leone explains that “..the locals impose their culture on the immigrant characters” (450). However, the townspeople do not demonstrate any nuance in their treatment of Fátima; rather, they believe that they are behaving in a benevolent way. As the locals of Almería begin to assign mythological qualities to Fatima, a distance is created between the immigrant woman and them, rather than the respect or the admiration they believe they demonstrate, especially when attributing “superhuman” abilities to her (Leone). When one Almerian sees Fátima cradling the body of an older African boy, he immediately runs to the others claiming that she was cradling
her deceased son, who had been magically returned from the sea. The townspeople even debate among themselves whether this could be true or not, when it is (or should be) obvious to the reader that after four years it is impossible. Ortíz describes this scene as “Michelangelesque” in her narrative, but despite the comparison to one of the pinnacle images of Western Catholicism, Leone argues that this comparison actually “domesticates her Muslim otherness” (456). Ultimately, Leone argues that with the story of Fátima, Ortíz prompts the reader to analyze their own ability or even tendency to observe an immigrant’s plight from their own perspective, rather than a nuanced one that aims to truly understand the “other.”

Folkart offers a similar analysis of the townspeople’s’ attitudes towards Fatima, and also brings to light one of the pitfalls of perception that many who observe an “other” fall into, which is a lack of nuance. She explains: “In rendering her as a larger-than-life projection of their own loss and grief, they dehumanize her and ignore what she lacks as an immigrant at the most basic level of day-to-day living” (339). Vallejos Ramirez clarifies this lack of a nuanced perception of Fátima by the townspeople as well:

Les intriga pero nunca realmente tratan de aceptar el verdadero drama humano que está viviendo esta mujer … Sacan conclusiones de estereotipos que tienen sobre los moros, pero en la realidad no quieren llegar a conocer. (154, 151)

DiFrancesco makes the same observation by including the townspeoples’ names for Fatima, such as Macarena and Moreneta. That is, she does not possess her own identity, but rather is identified by a comparison to an iconic figure (DiFrancesco). The observations made by Leone, Folkart, DiFrancesco, and Vallejos Ramirez all illustrate valid points with which I wholeheartedly agree: the observers of Fatima’s situation lack a nuanced perspective, and essentially obliterate her
individuality in order to “understand” her situation, but they never arrive at a true understanding. A perspective rich in nuance surely would have had a more positive effect on Fatima.

In the story, “Marcelinda’s Skin,” preceding studies have also centered upon the control that is exerted upon immigrants, both literally (as the prostitutes are constantly monitored and are coerced to remain in the profession) and figuratively through control of the narrative. Leone essentially uses a postcolonial framework in her remarks as she explains that the changing of the women’s names to more Spanish-sounding ones reflects a colonialist practice of imposing an identity on the women, similar to slave-trade practices from the colonial era. DiFrancesco seems to disagree with this conclusion on the Chano/Marcelinda relationship, and explains that the naming of Marcelinda is more complex than just the Spaniard imposing himself on her. She approached Chano to identify herself to him. Neither one speaks the other’s language, so some negotiation of meaning has to take place between them, rendering their relationship more complicated than simply “colonizer and colonized” (DiFrancesco). Although they differ in their resulting argument, both Leone and DiFrancesco use a postcolonial framework to analyze the power dynamic between the African immigrant women and the male Spanish citizens. Folkart also examines the power dynamic of the characters, but from the narrative perspective. In her analysis, Folkart expands upon the fact that with her sacrifice (suicide), Marcelinda finally takes control of her narrative: “[Marcelinda’s skin is] where the male Spanish narrator inscribes what for him is the horror story of dark-skinned female resistance to European, colonial, phallocentric power” (351). Fátima also essentially commits suicide when she walks into the sea after the cathartic experience of cradling the washed-up African immigrant. It seems that the only way for the characters to escape the oppression of an imposed identity by their Spanish observers is through suicide. In both stories’ endings, the narrative “dwell[s] on its [the suicide’s] impact on
the Spanish spectator” (Folkart 351). Ortíz uses the word “Michelangelesque” as Fatima cradles the African boy and as Marcelinda cradles the body of Chano. Indeed, the culminination of the narration in “Marcelinda’s Skin” centers on the narrator’s visual perception of it: “You should have seen it!” (Ortíz, translation my own). By dwelling on the “impact on the Spanish spectator,” the reader is also included, as they have read the events from the perspective of the Spanish citizens (351). This highlights the problem that Ortíz exposes: the observers possess control of the narrative, and only by suicide are Fátima and Marcelinda “freed.” DiFrancesco develops the idea that what Fátima and Marcelinda do with their suicides is actually an act of resistance and power, especially with Marcelinda’s choice to stab herself in the abdomen, an area which is usually associated with the origin of life: “Her abject blood rebelliously flows, defining her as a warrior among the migrant women who attempt to find refuge on Spain’s shores” (211). DiFrancesco also seems to support the stance that only when a sacrifice of the self is made, the characters take control of their own narratives. She succinctly states: “The immigrant’s body becomes a site of resistance and subversion, a locus wherein oppression and injustice may not only be observed or explored, but also vigorously fought” (212).

While I acknowledge the colonization-type effect of the Spanish gaze upon the immigrant plight, how this perspective of not truly understanding the nuance of an individual’s condition creates a situation in which suicide is the only way to gain control of the narrative, I argue that a third story by Ortíz offers an important counterpoint that has been previously left out of the discussion. In “Sleeping Venus,” art professor Pablo Arellano presents his analysis of paintings of female nudes by various artists ranging from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, including Urbino, Goya, Manet, and Ingres. However, he eludes an analysis of Sleeping Venus by Giorgione (and later completed by Titian; Figure 1). When a bold student asks why it was left
out of his presentation, the reader begins to understand the core of Arellano’s psychological struggle; he is concerned that others will perceive him as a voyeur or a pervert of some kind because of his strong attachment and reaction to this painting of Venus in particular. The painting in question features a reclining female nude, resting on decadent fabrics, but in the middle of a landscape. Her hand rests between her legs, which some argue is a sexually suggestive position. As he reflects in his home upon his experiences with this painting, he becomes displaced in both time and space and finds himself observing the painting in a museum in Dresden during the bombings that occurred in 1945. Here, he encounters a girl named Gertrude, who tells Arellano about her parents as they shelter from the bombs in the museum’s basement. The two make love in the shelter, and soon after, Arellano’s experience of displacement ends and he finds himself back in his home. At the story’s end, it seems that Arellano has lost his grip on reality as he compares himself to various historical figures and other characters within the story.
When the student launches the triggering question at Arellano, “Why did you forget, or seem to forget, the Venus of Dresden?”, the narrator describes his anxiety (126¹). Although it is a long selection, I find it necessary to include this description, as it explains the core of Arellano’s despair at being perceived and categorized as a certain type of man:

It was in that instant that finally the professor’s fondness for the nude in the painting was going to take on its true meaning, the moment when the discrepancy would embarrassingly appear between who he portrayed himself to be and what was probably skirting underneath such elegant words: a voyeur himself also, transferring the lyric into movements that were perhaps unspeakable. The direct question demanded direct answers. What dark and essentially trivial movements hid behind so many published monographs, hid behind dwelling on the female nude in paintings, talking about textures, order, balance, qualities? In any case, it

¹ All translations into English are my own; however, the pagination reflects the original Spanish publication by Ortíz.
was an obsession, a diverted gaze that probably coated itself in concepts and technicalities in order to cover up the perverse pleasure of a horny man or of an adolescent who hides in the bathroom to savor wrinkled and sticky pages from obscene books. Something childish and picaresque made the room uncomfortable. (126)

The reader also begins to see a pattern in Arellano’s thinking and way of perceiving the women he encounters. He constantly confuses and conflates them. When “the girl” asks the question, Arellano notes with detail her hair: “golden, almost-red hair, Titianesque and spiky. Or maybe like Dante Gabriel Rosetti. Elizabeth Sidall’s hair, thought Arellano and closed his eyes” (126). When the question-asker is not satisfied with Arellano’s answer, “Elizabeth, or whatever her name was, didn’t give up” (127). It appears that Arellano sees a resemblance between this student and the wife of famous painter Dante Gabriel Rosetti, so much so that he even calls her Elizabeth, before correcting himself with “or whatever her name was” (127). The tendency that begins to become apparent with this incident is Arellano’s penchant for conflating women, both familiar (like his students) and famous, and his inability to easily distinguish them from one another. This habit is clearest when Arellano experiences a displacement in both time and space, after sipping whiskey and reflecting in his home upon both the red-headed girl who jarred him so much with her question, and his experience of viewing the Venus of Dresden in person. The description of his viewing begins with phrases that localize the events in the 90s:

He was in Dresden again in front of the painting like on that cold morning in November 1992 … He had meticulously prepared his trip as soon as the German unification occurred, they opened the borders, and one could finally skip the rolls of visas, paperwork, permits. (130, 131)

However, Arellano is suddenly accosted by the sound of bombs, and he finds himself experiencing the bombings that occurred in Dresden in 1945, and encounters a girl who is fleeing
to shelter in the basement of the museum. The narrator immediately begins using comparative language to describe the girl:

He looked at her: so small, so fragile, and so similar to the Venus that he had just been contemplating, as if she had broken away from the painting. And she had dressed herself in a strange way, the garments of a vagabond, layers and layers of shabby clothing to slip into a nightmare, his, or as if he, Arellano, had entered into the girl’s dream, a fitful sleep, made of bombs and frightful gestures. (134)

Before learning her name, Arellano refers to her as “clothed Venus” (135), but even after learning her name is Gertrude, she is described with: “The face of the Venus incarnate in that girl with red hair, almost gray, and her trembling hand” (137). With the inclusion of “red hair” there is also a connection to the student in Arellano’s class, who reminds him of Elizabeth Siddall (141). Indeed, later on, the phrase “The red hair of the impertinent girl with her long legs melts into the golden-gray hair of the girl” is used to compare the student and Gertrude (141). Clearly, Arellano conflates the women he encounters and sees so many similarities between them that their identities run together. At various points in their conversation, Arellano remarks on the “improvised cushions” on which she is laying, contrasting them with the luxurious satin and silk portrayed in the painting by Giorgione (135). During their conversation, Gertrude explains that her father was a lover of Robert Schumann’s music. One wonders if the “real reality” in which Arellano is experiencing this vision or out-of-body experience (that is, in his home, sipping whiskey in an armchair) is influencing what he is perceiving there. He had put Fantasie, op. 17 on his stereo before the displacement in time and space occurred, and the bombs are described as falling “with almost musical intervals” (140). Through their discussion of Schumann’s life, Arellano finds yet another female figure with which to conflate Gertrude: Clara², Schumann’s

² Clara Wieck: Wife of Robert Schumann, one of the most notable pianists of the 19th century.
Arellano remarks that he is “[i]n search of his Clara,” then refers to her as “Clara-Gertrude, about to turn eighteen” in the next sentence (145). Finally, when making love to Gertrude in the shelter, she says to Arellano, “if I don’t please you that much, think, while we’re making love, of that round and Italian Venus. I, as you can see, am very thin” (147). Towards the end of the episode, Gertrude asks Arellano, “‘I see you with my body and I know what you are like. Can you also see me?’ Yes. I can see you. Of course I can see you: sleeping Venus” (148). Arellano describes the scene in which he can “see” or imagine Gertrude at that moment; however, it is not the sleeping Venus of Giorgione that he describes. Rather, it is the Sleeping Venus by the surrealist Belgian painter Paul Delvaux (1944, The Tate Museum, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/delvaux-sleeping-venus-t00134). This painting also features a reclining Venus, but there is a definite air of calamity and mortality about the surrounding images: nude women crying out in distress, an elegantly dressed woman in a red dress and hat seemingly having a conversation with a skeleton, a dark sky over ancient ruins. For Arellano, this painting may bring his fear of his own mortality to the forefront of his mind, or perhaps the wailing women represent his own distress at being perceived as a voyeur or a misogynist.

At first view, the reader may indeed believe Arellano displays misogynistic behavior. That is, he is so unconcerned with who the women he encounters truly are that their identities blend together for him. He calls them by each other’s names in his thoughts, he compares them to famous women whom he has seen but never met, and seems to constantly compare them to Venus, who embodies the ideal female figure that male artists have tried to capture through their male gaze for centuries. However, upon closer inspection, Arellano does this conflation of identity within himself as well; that is, his identity appears to be just as fluid as the women’s. For example, before his displacement occurs, Arellano rests in an armchair in his home and the
narrator describes him as “leaning against the back of the chair, he, too, a Venus on cushions, leaving his left hand to rest forgotten on his inner thigh,” recalling the suggestive position of Venus’s hand in the Giorgione painting (130). He then remarks, “Maybe I dreamed it. Segismundo tormented by nightmares, prisoner of an obsession, chained. The king dreams he is a king and lives…” (130). Here, Arellano identifies with a character from the golden-age Spanish play La vida es sueño, or Life is a Dream. Segismundo is an imprisoned prince, and the play deals with the questions of dreams versus reality and what one can actually control about one’s fate. Additionally, when Arellano introduces himself to Gertrude during his vision of the bombings in Dresden, he says, “‘Pablo, I’m …’ And he/I extended my hand” (136). Arellano’s identity is so unsure and blurred at this point that he is not sure if he is viewing the events (he) or is experiencing them himself (I).

After exiting the museum, Arellano narrates, “I followed Gertrude, gelida manina that did not stop trembling” (139). The inclusion of this Italian phrase reflects another allusion that shows Arellano channeling yet another literary figure, this time to the opera La bohème, in which Rodolfo, a poet, comments on the heroine Mimi’s cold hands. After calling her Clara/Gertrude, Arellano thinks,

you, Pablo Arellano, outside of time, feeling the warmth of her cheeks, ready to fight for her, make her your own, with the stubborn pigheadedness of Robert, confronting the girl’s father, that renowned and successful piano teacher, the very venerable Mr. Wieck, who was not resigned to give up his beloved and beautiful daughter. (145)

Arellano imagines himself as Robert Schumann, and what he must have felt when courting Clara. It is important to note that Schumann composed some shorter pieces of music for piano, called Florestan and Eusebius. These pieces represent two sides of his personality, and Arellano feels as though he also contains these two sides of himself as he reflects:
You’re crazy, Arellano, like a goat. As crazy as Schumann himself with that strange splitting of personality. You’re going to end up like him in a madhouse: strange carnaval-esque visions, ‘Eusebius’ and ‘Florestan,’ half Eusebius with a head full of birds and dreams, half Florestan, that intrepid man of action who would never come into being. In search of his Clara. (145)

Arellano also compares himself to another tragic figure in literary history: Euripides. When explaining his avoidance of the Venus of Dresden at the beginning of the story (to the red-headed girl who poses the difficult question), Arellano tells her that “the mystery must never be revealed if one doesn’t want to end up like Euripides, devoured by the dogs” (128). Euripides is famous for his writing of tragedies, most of which include characters whose “tragic fates stem almost entirely from their own flawed natures and uncontrolled passions” (Taplin, Oliver, and Kitto, 2020). This is an apt comparison to Arellano.

It appears that Arellano experiences this particular displacement in time and space (the bombing of Dresden in 1945, meeting Gertrude) frequently, as he makes remarks such as “Every time the vision returns, he is afraid. A man can go crazy. The limits of reality blur,” and “And now will come the shudder. And the fainting afterwards. Another dimension” (132, 149). In one of these reflections, the narrator explains, “He knows that he cannot stop it, that he will not be able to do anything except arrive at that ending. To sleep, perchance to dream. Shit” (141). With this comment, Arellano compares himself to the tragic figure of Hamlet. Infamously introspective, Hamlet represents a figure who repeatedly fails to act, and suffers because of it.

Finally, at the end of the story, the confluence of all the people and characters comes in an illogical stream from Arellano. Although it is a long quote, it is necessary to include in its entirety to emphasize the great number of others with whom Arellano identifies:

And now will come the shudder. And the fainting afterwards. Another dimension. Do you think it is a pornographic painting? Would you include the painting by Delvaux, *Sleeping Venus* as a finale? Occupied Belgium, 1944. And the painter
While he conflates himself with various figures, both historical and fictional, it is important to note that there is a shift in narration that occurs at a particular moment in the story for Arellano. The story is narrated by a third-person narrator who appears to be omniscient, as observations are made about the lecture hall, the attendees, and Arellano’s behavior, both usual and unexpected. However, while in his out-of-body experience in Dresden, once Arellano decides to make a connection with Gertrude, the narration shifts: “‘Pablo, I’m …’ And he/I extended my hand” (136). It seems Arellano knows that this is unhealthy or paranormal in a sense, as he wonders: “Where the fuck have I arrived? Where am I? Maybe I should look for a clinic, someone who can bring me to my senses,” but immediately afterward, Gertrude and her desire to flee with him overpower any inclination he had at seeking help: “And she, Gertrude or whoever she was, followed at my side” (137, italics my own). It is at this point in the story that the narration shifts to the first person, to Arellano’s perspective. It only shifts back briefly in the middle of the Dresden bombing experience to say “Arellano gets up and connects the disc again” (145). Throughout the rest of the story, however, the narration is carried out in first person by Arellano himself, along with brief flashes of clarity as he talks to himself, such as “You’re crazy, Arellano … You’re going to end up … in a madhouse” (145). Later, as he conflates himself with the two
sides of Schumann’s personality with the comments “half Eusebius with a head full of birds and dreams, half Florestan, that intrepid man of action who would never come into being,” it is apparent that Arellano has resigned himself to the sacrifice of his sanity (145). The “man of action who would never come into being” is a version of Arellano who will never seek help for his psychological afflictions, who will always surrender himself to this experience of displacement (145). In surrendering to this psychological experience, Arellano effectively sacrifices his sanity. At the point at which Arellano sacrifices his sanity and identity, he literally takes control of the narrative, as evidenced by the switch from third- to first-person narration.

Much like Fátima and Marcelinda, a sacrifice of the self must be made in order to take control of the direction of the narrative. With these sacrifices, the extreme cost of taking control of one’s own narrative in an environment in which others impose their perspectives and perceptions upon others, especially the marginalized, is evident.

While the stories of Fátima and Marcelinda present to the reader a harmful phenomenon in which members of a majority (i.e. legal citizens, Eurocentric populations) pigeon-hole a person, particularly a dark-skinned female immigrant, into a stereotype and never try to understand the nuance of her experience, the story of Arellano in “Sleeping Venus” presents a pendulum shift in the opposite direction: being so open to nuance and fluidity of identity that sanity and personal identity is lost. Indeed, Arellano’s student at the beginning of “Sleeping Venus” tries to classify him into a certain group with her question. In provoking him to say that the painting of the Venus is pornographic, she attempts to get him to admit that yes, he is a voyeur, a misogynistic, typical male who has an inappropriate attraction to the female form in the painting. However, Arellano refuses to succumb to this provocation. He would rather be so open to interpretation that he is willing to lose his own identity and sanity to follow that ideal. In
this manner, Arellano also displays a sacrifice, much like Fátima and Marcelinda, in order to escape the oppressive force of others trying to classify him into a certain “type” or identity.

Lynda Nead’s commentary on Jacques Derrida’s “discourse of the frame” sheds some light on Arellano’s openness to nuance, particularly in the setting of the female form. In her book *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*, Nead explains:

> In a radical dismantling of Kantian aesthetics, Derrida problematizes the philosophical concept of the disinterested aesthetic experience by focusing our attention not on the object of contemplation but on its boundary. The frame is the site of meaning, where vital distinctions between inside and outside, between proper and improper concerns, are made. If the aesthetic experience is one that transcends individual inclination and takes on a universal relevance, then without the frame there can be no unified art object and no coherent viewing subject. (6)

Therefore, Arellano’s refusal to perceive women within one “frame,” as it were, actually sets free the female form, rather than trying to contain it. Again, according to Nead: “The female nude can almost be seen as a metaphor for these processes of separation and ordering, for the formation of self and the spaces of the other” (7). Arellano continually refuses to focus on the “boundary” of the women he encounters; he is completely open to the nuance and detail of each of them. He also does not resort to the classification of women into two stereotypical tropes: either virgin or prostitute (like Fátima and Marcelinda, respectively). However, Arellano’s openness to nuance and fluidity of identity (both the women’s and his own) goes too far; or as a famous quote summarizes: “Do not be so open-minded that your brains fall out” (Kotschnig).

Whereas observant characters in the stories of Fátima and Marcelinda are not open to understanding the nuance of the women’s identities, Arellano is overly open to it. I argue that the character of Arellano demonstrates to the reader the other end of a pendulum, and indeed this end does not hold the answer for approaching others’ stories with nuance either.
The stories of Fátima, Marcelinda, and Arellano expose an ugly truth about human psychology, particularly in terms of two troubling trends in current American society: tribalism, and the gradual death of nuance. In recent years, the word “tribalism” has been used by such prominent publications as The New Yorker and The Atlantic, as well as various other news sources to describe this cultural phenomenon. The term was originally used by George Orwell, who described it thusly:

the habit of identifying oneself with a single nation or other unit, placing it beyond good and evil and recognising no other duty than that of advancing its interests. . . . The abiding purpose of every nationalist is to secure more power and more prestige, not for himself but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.” (Packer, 2018).

The danger of tribalism lies in the extreme devotion that members demonstrate for their tribe, and the tendency to place “it beyond good and evil” (Orwell). Recently, observations about tribalism in American society have included:

When we think of tribalism, we tend to focus on the primal pull of race, religion, or ethnicity. But partisan political loyalties can become tribal too. When they do, they can be as destructive as any other allegiance. (Packer 2018)

The characters who observe the plight of Fatima, Marcelinda, and Arellano display similar behavior and act as a bloc; that is, no member of the observant groups in any story breaks from the group’s behavior. The tribe to which these characters belong demands that no one divert from the unwritten and agreed-upon rule that the “other” (Fatima, Marcelinda, Arellano) cannot be understood and cannot be incorporated into the tribe. I argue that a parallel can be drawn to the current state of American society. The United States is currently in a precarious position, as evidenced by recent events that have pitted groups against one another; for example,
conservatives versus liberals, police versus Black Lives Matter protestors, those who embrace and accept science versus those who deny it.

In a disturbing trend, Americans have begun assigning value to other human beings based on their beliefs, and indeed, the tribe to which they belong, rather than assuming their value just because they too are human. “In these conditions, democracy devolves into a zero-sum competition, one in which parties succeed by stoking voters’ fears and appealing to their ugliest us-versus-them instincts” (Chua, Rubenfeld 2018). In an article from 2018, George Packer observes:

Tribes demand loyalty, and in return they confer the security of belonging. They’re badges of identity, not of thought. In a way, they make thinking unnecessary, because they do it for you, and may punish you if you try to do it for yourself.” (2018)

This ominous description touches on yet another flaw that has been eating away at American society: the decay of nuance. When members of a society become so entrenched in their beliefs, as Justin Glover points out so well, “[t]he idea of accepting that the opposition has even a marginal point has become akin to treason” (2019). The tendency to ignore the details of a person’s standpoint or situation is harmful to a person’s ability (and to a greater extent, a society’s ability) to empathize and understand those that are labelled as “other.” It is clear in the stories of Lourdes Ortíz: the townspeople create a barrier between themselves and Fátima by creating a mythological identity for her rather than understanding the nuance of what has contributed to her current state. They do not attempt to approach understanding her from various angles: neither linguistically nor by her mental health, and the women who do identify with the anxiety of losing their male partner to the sea do not share this out loud with her. The pimps in the story of Marcelinda do not attempt to find out where she came from, how to pronounce her
name correctly, how she ended up in her current situation, actually believe that she is “better off” than she would be in her homeland, and of course make no attempt to free her from the coercive nature of the work. Finally, Arellano is pigeon-holed into a stereotypical category of a misogynistic man, completely misunderstood by his students, his peers, even himself. He is alone and decides not to seek the help he needs to overcome his psychological afflictions. The Spanish citizens who fail to understand the “other” in all of these stories are a metaphor for the larger problems in current American society. As a result of this oppressive othering, these three characters have to make the ultimate sacrifice of the self in order to take back control of their narrative. Fátima and Marcelinda take their own lives, and Arellano loses his sense of personal identity as well as his sanity. I argue that the translation of these stories into English for the first time comes at a perfect time for American readers. The timelessness of these stories renders them relevant for a contemporary American audience; read and understood together, American readers can grasp the problems that Ortíz exposes with all three stories: the harmful effects of tribalism and ignorance of nuance require huge personal sacrifice in order to regain control of the self. These sacrifices should not be necessary, because a shift must occur in how we approach anyone considered an “other.” This shift must be more than a perceived benevolence like the townspeople and pimps in “Fátima” and “Marcelinda,” but it must be balanced so as not to become a total blurring of identity as with Arellano. Change must be careful, gradual, and full of thoughtful nuance. Indeed, it has been a disadvantage of previous analyses to leave out “Sleeping Venus,” because it contains the quote from Arellano that encapsulates my call to action for readers:

“It’s the gaze. Just the gaze, Miss,” he said finally. “What you see, is there. The work of art, it seems useless to repeat it, is open. The viewer recreates time and again the work, configures it, and in a certain way completes it. It is the always-alive dialectic between
the beholder and the beholden. You look at the work and your vision of the world blends with the suggestion that the work awakens. What you see in it tells us about the work, but also about you.” (126-127, italics my own)

Power lies in our perception, in who controls the narrative, and to whom it is applied. The readers of the stories have the power to change how they perceive others in order to avoid the necessity of the sacrifices made by the characters in Ortíz’s stories.

In fact, during the translation process, the power of perception and the control over the narrative influenced my choices as a translator. I was aware during the translation process of the tenuous border between the author’s voice and my own, and essentially, I had to accept that my identity would mix with hers. When translating “Fátima of the Shipwrecked,” the linguistic challenges included conveying the “broken speech” of the character of Mohamed, especially since there is not an easy equivalent for a Spanish infinitive, such as “yo amar.” Therefore, I made the choice to take some liberties with Mohamed’s speech to convey the mistakes that an English language learner might make, such as “Me love” rather than “I love.” The townspeople’s speech also required me to take some liberties to make it sound more quotidian, which contrasted with the mythic language of the descriptions of Fatima, her actions, and the Almerians’ perceptions of her. For example, when questioning Mohamed after he attempts to communicate with Fatima, Constantino asks “¿Es la Fátima que decías, o no es la Fátima?” (15). “Decías” could literally be “that you said” with a connotation of a repeated action given the imperfect tense, and repeating the name is not a common practice in English; therefore, I decided on the translation: “‘Is she the Fátima you were talking about or not?’ Constantino asked” (15). Undoubtedly, “Marcelinda’s Skin” posed the greatest challenge both linguistically and in terms of conveying a natural tone. While Spanish generally contains sentences that an English speaker
would consider run-ons, this story’s sentences conveyed a stream of narration, as if the narrator was casually relating the events to a familiar and informal listener. I made the decision to break up some of these streams of sentences in order not to overwhelm an English reader, but for the most part, I retained the tone of the narrator’s rambling and conversational style because it is a defining feature of the story. Additionally, some of the phrases in Spanish had to be completely reworked in order to make sense to an English audience; that is, the word order had to be rearranged, or the slang and idiomatic expressions had to be changed to be understandable to an English reader. For example, when describing how impressive the girls’ appearance is, the narrator uses the phrase “agárrate para no caer,” which is literally “grab yourself to keep from falling” (26). I decided to instead use the phrase “that would blow you away” because it is a common English expression which conveys the same meaning. Or an idiomatic phrase, for example, such as “si se te han aflojado las correas,” which is literally “if your straps have loosened,” makes much more sense as “if you’ve lost your marbles” in English (33). Clearly these are completely different words, but the phrases convey the same meaning. Another challenge was conveying the Caribbean accent of the girls. Ultimately, I decided on a way to convey their pronunciation by listening to videos of Patois speakers in the Caribbean as an example, and consulting with a linguistics professor about high and low vowels, which even the narrator comments on as being “mixed-up” when they speak (Ortíz 26). Finally, the story of “Sleeping Venus” posed few major challenges during the translation process, but rather contained difficulties that were present in all three stories: specifically, rearranging sentences’ word order so that the theme and the rheme of the sentence were not separated by too much language (Baker). For example, when Arellano thinks about the phrase “another dimension,” the description in Spanish appears as such: “Se encuentra de nuevo en su habitación y la frase que
hoy ha repetido en el aula y aquel día se dijo a sí mismo ante el cuadro lo golpea” (132). What
strikes Arellano is so far removed from the verb “strike” that an English speaker may find it
awkward; therefore, I decided to reorder the phrases: “He finds himself again in his room and the
phrase strikes him: the phrase that today he had repeated in the classroom and on that day he had
also said to himself in front of the painting” (132). In terms of translation theory, the
motivations for my choices come from a “domestication” and “dynamic equivalence” standpoint;
that is, conveying a meaning which creates for the reader a response that is “essentially like that
of the original receptors,” the original receptors being the native Spanish speakers for whom
Ortíz intended her narratives (Nida & Taber). I also relied on “domestication” of the text, as
some of the conventions of the Spanish language do not directly translate into English, and in my
opinion had to be reworked to sound natural to an English-speaker. (Venuti). The few times that
I used a “formal equivalence” or “foreignization” approach were to preserve names such as
references to Fátima that compared her to the Virgin Mary; otherwise, my choices did not reflect
the ideal of theorists such as Venuti, who hold foreignization as the “ethical” choice for
translators (Gile 2009). I acknowledge that my perspective as an English speaker affected my
translation, but being a translator essentially means being a co-author on a narrative. Conveying
as naturally as possible for an English reader the meaning and the connotation presented in the
narrative is the ideal to which I aspired during the translation process. I now present “Fátima of
the Shipwrecked,” “Marcelinda’s Skin,” and “Sleeping Venus” translated into English for the
first time.
TRANSLATIONS
They called her Fatima of the Shipwrecked. She spent her hours beside the shore, listening to the sounds of the sea. Some said that she was old, and others, young, but it was impossible to determine her age behind that face-turned-mask that bore signs of tears, with oval grooves under the eye sockets. The people of the fishing village had become accustomed to her presence and her silence. The silent one, the children called her, and the police passed by her without asking for her papers, as if, seeing her, standing there, immobile on the beach, transformed her into a statue of pain, they could pay for their sins. “She has the very same face as the Macarena\(^3\), a Macarena tanned by the sun,” Angustias would say, seated in front of the door of her house in his wicker chair. “She is—” she repeated to whoever wanted to hear it—“the Macarena of the Moors; she is the mother who lost her son and still waits and prays for him, with her hands covered by the cape, and fixed, as if she heard the messages of the sea and spoke with it, and waited for the sea to hear her prayer someday.” For the tourists, the madwoman of the beach, the African beggar. There was someone who offered her work in the greenhouses, and a wealthy woman who approached her one day to give her an hourly job; “she seems like a good person and I feel bad for her,” she commented. The local police talked about asylum and a councilwoman approached her once to suggest social assistance and a nearby soup kitchen. But she always lowered her head in a gesture of humility or misunderstanding, and both the wealthy woman and the councilwoman believed they heard a gurgle, a sob that did not seem human, and

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\(^3\) Macarena: also known as Our Lady of Sorrows; a famous image of the Virgin Mary, represented by a wooden statue that is a national treasure in Spain.
understood the silence, so stolid and quiet, as a denial that demanded respect. That was at the beginning, but now, as the years had passed, they all had become used to the quiet and sepulchral presence of the Moorish woman, motionless there day and night, on the beach. At night, curled up next to the boats, covered by a cape every day duller and more threadbare; during the day, transformed into a lookout, alert to any movement of the waters, her eyes lost, fixed on a distant point, listening to the murmur of the wind, unshakable before the waves, whether choppy or calm. There she was, motionless, expectant, with her eyes fixed on a distance that was no longer of this world. “She’s not all there,” said Antonio, the fisherman. “At first, she almost scared me. But now I know she is just a poor woman, a kook who wouldn’t hurt a fly.” And Antonio’s wife would put a double portion in his lunchbox and would wink in a knowing way that he understood without her having to say anything. Antonio would approach the Moorish woman, and like someone bestowing a religious offering, he would leave her the aluminum plate with still-hot lentils, or stewed potatoes. “Without pork; don’t put pork in it, because her God doesn’t approve of pork. If you put ribs in it, she won’t try them,” recommended Antonio to his wife, and she nodded and threw some ground lamb into the pot to give it some substance. When the winter comes, she’ll die of cold, they would say at first. But the kindly southern winter protected her. It was then, one day in December, when the village priest came close up to the boat and deposited at her feet a gently used blanket—that a kind neighbor had brought to the parish—and some recounted how that morning, upon waking up, the woman’s eyes opened wider, she kneeled on the ground and her forehead touched the sand; she remained like that for a long time and later took the blanket and let it fall over her shoulders, covering the cape that had already begun to fade. And Lucas, Antonio’s son, affirmed that when she covered herself in that red- and purple-fringed blanket, there was a light, an aura that made all of her glow, and young Lucas,
frightened, covered his mouth with his hand in fright and went running to his mother yelling that the woman was not a woman but a ghost, an apparition or a dream, who was able to steal the fish’s glow without descaling them. Felisa, the baker, heard one of her customers comment that the woman had otherworldly abilities, miraculous abilities, and that probably with a light touch she could cure the sick. But no one dared get close to her, much less touch her. The silent Moorish saint watched the sea and listened to it, and the fishermen came close to her without bothering her silence or her solitude, and from afar they intoned prayers to the Virgin of Carmen, who, without daring to say it, they thought they recognized under the Moor’s stained blanket. They even started calling her “la moreneta.”

Three winters had passed since her arrival, and only the tourists or the vacationers seemed to be bothered by the presence of that statue made of sand and suffering, that in some way disturbed the landscape and left a dark mark on the horizon. “She’s not bad, you know?” Toña’s son, Paquito, took on the task of explaining to them, “she’s from across the sea. She arrived here one day and she stayed. She’s not really a beggar. She lives like the fishes, almost on nothing. She doesn’t beg, no. She doesn’t bother anyone. She’s just fixed there and watches the sea. There are some who say, well, they’re not going to believe me, but she’s a miracle worker and brings luck to the town. She’s just there, and no one gets involved with her.” Because the whole town had made her their own and with time the rumors had quieted down, but those who had spread them used to say: “If she is crazy, poor woman, better that they return her to her homeland! She probably has parents there or people who would take her in, family like any

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4 Virgin of Carmen: A Black Madonna found in a monastery on Montserrat Mountain in Catalonia, hence its familiar Catalan name, “La Moreneta”
5 La moreneta: Another name for the Black Madonna; literally “the little dark-skinned one.”
person.” The woman from the city, the one from the big house on the cliff, had taken an interest in her that first summer and wanted to know details. And Encarna explained about the husband and the son, which Mohamed had recounted before definitively leaving for the greenhouses. Mohamed was a bright kid who said that he knew her, because he had come with her on the small boat and he was lucky and was able to reach land, like the woman was able to, after a horrible night of fighting the waves. Fatima was her name, claimed the boy, and her husband was strong as an ox; it was inconceivable that he could have drowned, but maybe he drowned trying to rescue the son -- no more than ten years old, maybe nine -- a boy with curly hair who, during the majority of the voyage had rested his head in his mother’s lap. Hasam the father, Hasam the son. Both had bad luck, bad luck, like the other twenty-four: “A small boat, small, not much space. Women, children … Bad idea to bring a woman. Better to leave a woman behind after one begins on a journey.” Mohamed was a Maghrebi boy who stayed several days lost on the hills and ended up finding work without anyone asking afterwards when or with what papers he had arrived. He knew how to work. He had a deep, rich laugh of one resurrected, and it reassured both bosses and workers. The first time he crossed paths with her, a morning when he was going to the town with some others, he also felt a shiver, a shudder, as if he saw the image of death, the body of a mermaid that had come out of the waters. “That is Fatima,” he said to the others, “That is Fatima,” he would repeat, and then the others told him to approach her and talk to her, that maybe if she recognized him she could finally come out of her silence, that strange introspection in which she had stayed since they had found her one day standing there on the beach. “A saved woman, that’s rare, difficult to save one’s self. He, only he, Mohamed, was lucky. Allah was good to him--” he would tell -- “because he good swimmer, he prepared for months, for years, swimming like a fish there, close to El Hoceima, in a brother sea, very similar, a blue sea like
this one, with smooth waves, pretty beaches there also. But woman not strong, woman not tough, woman not possible to save herself, like the other twenty-four who could not save themselves. It was bad wind, terrible sea, huge waves that at first hugged the patera\(^6\) and ended up overturning it. Many miles from the coast. Far, very far.” Mohamed rolled his eyes back when he remembered that night, like the eyes of a fish recently pulled from the sea, eyes of uncertainty, and he repeated the prayer, “Allah is great”; he, a boy reborn from the waters, rescued by a benevolent God who carried him, unceasingly moving his arms, unto the damp sand of an empty beach, a little wild beach without houses, or people. A tiny beach but one that became a cradle where he could stay almost breathless, almost without strength during two long days and two nights until hunger and fainting forced him to move; they made him walk and walk until finally arriving at that house, an adobe house where the woman, an older woman, upon seeing him half naked and with a growing beard, crossed herself and offered him bread and fresh beans. Mohamed still remembers it, remembers perfectly and can describe with detail the plump hand of the old woman that gave him those first drops of water to drink, drops that, upon touching his lips, seemed to burn. Fresh beans and hot water that later fermented in his stomach, producing those forgotten cramps of life, that hostility of the air trapped in his intestines that fought to escape, and provoked the laughter of the old woman and the white smile of Mohamed, the risen one, that strange smile full of blindingly white teeth that still had not been extinguished. A generous old woman and a good man who provided a bed and food that night and who, two weeks later, put him in contact with the foreman who gave him a good job in the greenhouse.

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\(^6\) Patera: a small dinghy often used by migrants to cross bodies of water; frequently overcrowded, resulting in capsizing and fatalities.
Good, humble people with whom he could share salted fish and the delicious *migas*<sup>7</sup>, couscous-like *migas*, with sardines and olives and grapes. *Migas* that restored his strength and allowed him to return to being that Mohamed who had prepared so long in his native land for the journey.

“Me speak Spanish, a little Spanish, me understand. Spanish friend from El Hoceima taught me. Me watch Spanish television. Me love Spain. Me love Almeria also. Friend of mine, friend who also came, also trained, couldn’t arrive. Strange. Strange that a woman save herself, very weak woman, must be witch or ghost woman.”

But they encouraged him, and Mohamed finally approached her, and when he was close he spoke to her in their tongue and she shook her head. From afar the men watched the scene and Paco commented out loud: “Surely she recognizes him, surely she will like to hear a voice that she finally understands.” But Mohamed remained there, as if a barrier separated him from the woman who now kept her eyes down and had covered her whole face with the blanket from the priest, embarrassed or modest in the presence of the boy. The men from afar perceived Mohamed’s fear. “How could she recognize him,” said Antonio, “if she’s not all there? The sea has emptied her brain. The boy says that she is Fatima, but she, if she was Fatima, doesn’t know who she is. As I told you all, she is no longer of this world.” Old Antonio, wise and stubborn, would say “no” with his head: “Don’t I know it.” Virgin or saint, come out of the waters like a premonition, like a warning. “Too many dead, many dead; the sea swallows them, but the sea has returned her to us, to tell us that things are not good, that it’s not good that …” grumbled Antonio, and the others nodded as they watched as Mohamed moved away from the woman and

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<sup>7</sup> Migas: a common dish in Spain made from bread crumbs, thus the author’s comparison to couscous; often also includes proteins such as pork or chorizo.
walked towards them again, crestfallen, with his hands in the pockets of his denim jacket. “She stayed mute like the sea,” said Paquito, “mute and perhaps deaf. How could she not recognize her countryman?” And when Mohamed came back, they all wanted to know. “Is she the Fatima you were talking about or not?” Constantino asked nervously, a man with much sailing experience, a man of few words, causing the surprise of the whole group with his curiosity, since Constantino hardly demonstrated interest in anything that wasn’t his fishing nets; only once did these words come to him as memories of distant places, of ports with women with wide hips and generous lips, only once in a while when the cognac unleashed his tongue and his memories, and the alcohol shuffled and combined fabulous places, which for him were like enormous boats with great drafts. Constantino had been a sailor on a merchant ship for nearly twenty years. He had only recently begun fishing again upon his return to the village. Always fixed on his nets, Constantino, expert at repairing them, silent, far from the whole life of the village, from rumors and things. Only once in a while, but tonight it was not the cognac but the longing for an answer that everyone waited for, which is what compelled him to ask, and why not? He, too, was intrigued by the woman, and was paying close attention to Mohamed’s broken and misspoken words. “That is Fatima. I would swear it with Allah’s permission. But she is a changed Fatima. The Fatima that I saw was younger, more …” He left the sentence unfinished, and everyone filled out the image of the woman’s firmer hips and warmer skin; they removed the wrinkles from the eyes and the traces of tears from the cheeks; a beautiful and warm woman, upright, with firm breasts and dexterous hands. “The Fatima that I saw was young and well dressed. And ch … ch … ch … chatty. She never stopped talking. We dizzy from so much talk, and the husband suspicious. Woman who talks a lot, you have to keep an eye on. But she, the Fatima that I saw, was content, excited about the journey, lively and encouraging. She said, ‘Everything’s fine, nice
trip, good night, good moon.’ She sang songs for the boy, so that he would sleep and not be afraid. She pretty voice. We were waiting and all nerves, a lot of nerves. She calm. She beautiful and young. The woman,” and Mohamed pointed towards the shadow, “wrinkles, the woman old, very old, I don’t know how many years. Different. Not the same, not like the Fatima that I saw.” And the men nodded and traded looks of “See? I told you,” a sorceress-Fatima, a woman from nowhere, who emerged from the waters. “So much suffering,” said Antonio, “dries out the skin and turns the hair gray,” and Mohamed shrugged his shoulders, implying that it could be. But he wouldn’t have claimed it to be true, as if his examination had ended and he wouldn’t say either yes or no, that from afar she looked like Fatima, but up close it might not be her.

The shadow of the woman far away, immobile, silhouetted against the dark blue of the horizon, was slightly illuminated by the moon. “There are some who come back,” said Paquito, “come back from the great beyond,” and Constantino, who that night was strangely animated, said, “I know that they come back. Why wouldn’t they come back?” And they all knew that he was thinking of that wandering sailor who visits ports and passes over the waters, that spirit or ghost that he had come to know in a northern port, back in the 40s. But no one wanted to hear again, from Constantino’s lips, the story of the sailor who came out of the waters, the story of that living dead man who was not allowed to rest and could confuse the sailor on land and bewilder the sailor who slept peacefully on the deck, allowing himself to be rocked by the sea.

But that acknowledgement and those fears have been around for a long time, and the woman remained there without anyone worrying about her presence anymore. Once in a while in the Fonda Maria, the postman’s wife would spread rumors or she would get emotional and say, “If the sea had taken my son and my husband who was strong as an ox, I would be quiet too! She
does a lot just bearing what she has to bear! I don’t know if she’s crazy or if she’s sane. But sometimes, when I see her fixed there, I feel a desire to stand by her side and .. I don’t know, just stay there quietly beside her, because I know well what it is to lose a father and a grandfather, that the sea is very strange and very treacherous! And those who have never experienced pain do not know what it is, what desperation is, what …” And the women were distracted for a moment from their tasks and thought about the son who emerged from the sea, about the husband who, that night, (My God, what anguish!) came back late, or that time when Felipe’s boat wandered adrift to end up crashing against the canal and the men arrived on the beach frozen stiff and exhausted from so much struggling with the sea, or that other time when they had to rescue Blas or when Marcelino lost his boat and lost his leg, tangled in the propeller. A hush fell over the group, and then every one of the women understood the Moor, and put herself in her place, and the Moor was like a projection of their fears and a type of guarantee of a pact with the waters. Ghost, apparition, or saint or Moorish Virgin, her longing was infectious, and the dead family members, the shipwrecked, prey not returned from the waters which were so many times merciless, fluttered with her murmurs, settling on the heads of the women who thought they heard, perhaps like the Moor heard, the wailing of all those who had disappeared in the village that had always lived by the sea and for the sea.

That morning, a June morning of rough seas and strong westerly winds, Lucas, who had risen early to wait for the return of the boat that left in search of sardines, saw the woman bent over the body and ran to the village to tell of the wonder: “The Moor’s son has returned!” he yelled, “and she has him in her lap and she’s rocking him and it seems like she’s singing to him, I’ve seen it, it’s true what I say: an older boy with curly hair, that she has laying over her legs
and she’s rocking him.” The fuss of the women and the men, the word “miracle” on everyone’s lips. One after another and with an attitude of respect they were arriving at the beach that was orange and silver with the light of dawn, and there was the woman rising from the sand, made into a Pietá, that held the brown body of the boy over her solid legs opened like a cradle and with her hands washed off the salt and removed the seaweeds stuck in his hair. A body of a young man, half naked, Michelangelesque and perfectly turned so that it received the first rays of sun and became beautiful, slumped over the knees of the mother. Antonio, from afar, shook his head and said, “That’s not her son. Mohamed told us that he must have been about nine years old, and this is a full-grown young man. The husband maybe. But how could the husband return after almost four years?”

The sun was rising over the beach and enveloped with its most golden light the group of people around the woman, who, sitting on the sand, held the stiff body. The body that had been spewed from the water was dark, the color of ebony, and gleamed, clean and smooth, a black and shiny stain, splendid over the red and purple fringe of the woman’s blanket. “I’m telling you he’s dead, that he’s another of the many who the waters have spit out lately, who has nothing to do with the Moor, he’s from a more inland nation, from Senegal or the Congo or God knows where,” explained Marcelino cautiously, while the rest were approaching without daring at all to interrupt the song of the Moor, who let her tears fall on the round and perfect face of the African Christ. The woman had her fingers entangled in the ringlets, so black and tight, and rocked back and forth. “Maybe he’s not dead yet. Someone should go and give him mouth-to-mouth,” suggested Felipe, who had witnessed the live rescue of many whom at first had seemed lost. “I’m telling you, he’s a corpse,” repeated Antonio, “and it should be taken from the madwoman in
order to do what must be done, and someone should call the authorities so that they can take care of it.” The woman, oblivious to the circle of curious people who were forming only a few feet away, was now kissing the cheeks of the boy with such dark skin, and everyone could see her smile, the smile of a mother who has just heard the first babbled words of her child: ta, ta, pa, pa, ma, ma; a soft smile, content. “Our Lady of the shipwrecked, Virgin of the little boats, Most Loving mother, pray for us,” Antonio’s wife began to murmur, falling to her knees in the sand, and one by one all the women kneeled, while the men bowed their heads. And then there was a silence like a mass on a Sunday, and the Moor covered the son’s body with the red and purple fringed blanket, and only the sound of the sea could be heard, a rhythmic flutter of the coming and going of waves that turned the beach into a cathedral, lit by the increasingly powerful rays of the sun. And then the woman carefully placed the body on the ground, stood up, without her cape, and everyone could see the thinness of her hips, her bony arms and the bent silhouette of her emaciated body. And Antonio’s wife went to her house and when she returned she came to the shore and dropped next to the young man’s body a recently-cut geranium, that purplish geranium that grew in a big can by the door of her house, and little by little, one by one the women of the town came closer with their offerings of yellow and red and violet flowers. And one of them, Clara, dared to get even closer and closed the boy’s eyes: they were so white, exaggerated in the middle of such black skin. And the women’s prayer joined with the stubborn roar of the sea, and over the boy’s body that lay on the earth, a black and white seagull flew in circles, a marine dove, breath of love, and someone thought they heard a voice that said: “This is my dearly beloved son.” Perhaps it was the resounding voice of the woman that came out hoarse from the fragile bowels of that disheveled body, an ancestral voice, rather—as the women would comment later, with a mixture of rapture and fear—that seemed to proceed from the clouds and
ring in the sea foam, creating an echo, reverberating against the white houses. And then she, the woman, without anyone doing anything to stop her, began to walk toward the water and slowly entered the sea. And her cotton tunic revealed her body, like a thorny stem, a vertical and clean line over the blue that became shorter and shorter until it became a dark spot over the tranquil surface of the water, a small dark-haired tousled head that suddenly disappeared from sight. On the beach, everyone stayed still, without making a single movement to stop her, like the woman had stayed still and fixed for so many months: it was as if an invisible hand detained them, a transparent glass blocked their path, or a vapor, diluted in the air, had turned them into statues, impeding any movement. The women held vigil over the drowned body during the entire day and night, and when the authorities took the body away, putting it without any consideration in that black plastic bag, they made a little mound with the pebbles from the shore in the exact spot where the woman had held vigil for so long and where the inert body of the young African had later rested.

Since then, everyone who passes by adds a pebble to the modest burial mound, and some say that, if one stops for a moment and looks toward the sea, one can hear the lament or the prayer or the lullaby of she whom everyone calls the Virgin of the little boats, Our Lady of the Shipwrecked.
Marcelinda’s Skin

It was the year of rain and dead whales. I saw it coming. It’s not good for someone to fall like this, like Chano had fallen.

“She’s a whore, man. Another one just like yesterday’s, and you’re asking for trouble.”

But Chano was all deaf ears. While she worked the day shift, things went fine. We were over there keeping an eye on things, and she did her job like the rest, and Chano fretted and watched the clock, waiting for the moment we had to pick them up to take them to the “house.” But shush, she never did the deed. Ten, twelve hours. She had arrived at the beginning of September with a cool batch of negroes that took one’s breath away; good material that, placed there next to the road, really made an impression, man. Big thighs, hips, and that smooth black skin with a shimmer like recently-shined tap-dancing shoes, amazing to see and to touch! And the customers multiplied. Goyito has an eye for merchandise and this time the batch was first-rate. But, well, the truth is that this time I don’t know where they took them from, because they couldn’t fumble through a word of Spanish and at first Chano and I, with good intentions and to make things easier, took advantage of the downtime to catch them up on some Spanish. Four or five words so that they could manage, and it was funny to hear them with such pronounced S’s\(^8\) and mixed-up vowels when they would say: “I’ll do eet chip for you, five t’ousand for a

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\(^8\) Such pronounced S’s: The regional dialect of Spain in the story’s setting (presumably Madrid, as this is where the Casa de Campo Park is located) has a theta sound rather than a sibilant /s/ sound; therefore, a “marked S” to a Spanish speaker in the Madrid area would sound like a sibilant /s/ and be distinct from the theta sound that is more common.
blowjob.” I thought they were from Brazil or from Angola, the Portuguese were playful and even more so Brazilians, they like to talk, and are friendly and warm. But no, these girls, no, because Portuguese understand me right away; the batch came from Jamaica or something like that, an exotic and Caribbean place, and it was glorious to see them with those legs like trunks, hard, perfect, and those mouths with such white teeth and breasts so impressive they would blow you away. Perky and well-endowed as they should be, so much so that the customers’ mouths watered just from watching them. Things were going so well, cars were lined up around the park that lovely autumn, and Chano and I talked with Goyito to see if things would be renegotiated, because the girls were being overworked and it was already time for a raise. Not that the job is thankless, because you get money, but there is always the risk that a nut might show up, and well, if you’re not aware of it and you’re not careful, a troubleshooter can appear, and you’ve fucked it up; so it’s convenient that they know you’re there, that the girls aren’t alone and that certain rules need to be followed, and if a guy crosses the line, he’ll pay for it. And, even though during the day things are easier, there’s always the braggart or the smartass that thinks he’s going to stick it to you or that gets infatuated with the prostitute on call and asks for things that aren’t agreed to. Because first you give up the money and later, man, if you have paid for a service, don’t demand something different. The thing with Chano and Marcelinda was love at first sight, like a movie. And it wasn’t that she was the most attractive, nor the most splendid, Ferdy and Morosca are quite the women, two brick houses. What long legs and hips that pull you back, such sweet things. Nor was she the nicest, which isn’t much; she’s like a small thing, quiet and shy, and not more than five-foot-seven. A concentrated beauty, as Chano said, as soon as he saw her, and I came to warn him that work is work and none of this growing fond of the merchandise because if you become infatuated, you’re a sucker. That it’s not a thing of pimps, but of control.
But he, melting, said, “She’s a girl, man, a girl. She can’t be more than thirteen,” he would say and he would get in a sentimental mood, like a bleeding heart: poor girl, she’s far from her country, I bet her parents sold her or something like that, or that she was tricked. A softy, as if we weren’t experienced pimps, pain of a guy, who’s got a screw loose, because if someone is going to ask questions in this business, you should just throw in the towel and go home; thirteen or fourteen or fifteen years old, they get like this, busty and very much women, as soon as their period starts. Although it is true that Marcelinda seemed younger, more like a virgin. Lean, that’s true, and tender. It was so enticing to see her with those light blue tight-fitting lycra shorts and that Madonna-style bra with her breasts falling out! Goyito understands clothing, and he shows off the girls how they should be presented: good packaging and quality content. And she, with those Janet Jackson boots, and those highlights in her hair, well yeah, she seemed to be taken right from a *Hit Parade* magazine, and then those teeth--so even and white, and that smile of a scared girl, as if asking forgiveness, that seemed like she was about to pout. Well, yeah, I understand that she was a little different from the others, even though I prefer to see them as they are: material for work, and don’t tell me that if you get hooked on some ass, it’s not going to go badly, because business is business, and I’ve been doing this for four years and I know that the less involved you get, the fewer headaches you get. It’s not a bad life, if we put our minds to it, not for the girls, nor for us. A little bleak sometimes because you have to pass all this downtime and there are mornings that are painfully boring, when it seems like there’s no activity in the city and not a soul passes by. But this autumn, with the nice weather and the trees so full of leaves: brown, orange, almost red, I mean really, the Casa de Campo Park⁹ was great. And with the girls

⁹ Casa de Campo Park: Spain’s largest public park, located in the capital city of Madrid
there, well placed, like a Christmas decoration, it was so nice to see them with that color and that aspect. Even though I’m not one to get emotional, I understand that they get attention, and because of that they work well. It’s been a long time that I haven’t seen so many parked cars at all hours of the day or night and respectable clientele, who pay discreetly, do their own thing, and disappear without saying a word, or getting angry, or splitting hairs. And I would lay there under the trees, calm, while the girls worked, and Chano, instead of relaxing, was tense the whole time, and seemed like a shadow, watching Marcelinda, following her when she worked, not losing her from sight for an instant, which all the others noticed, don’t you know, and made jokes in their damn language, but you could tell from their laughter and gestures. “What’s got eento heem?” laughed Morosca, who’s like that, kind of loose and cheeky, a big, capable woman, who was like a mother to the others, experienced and spirited, always joking and laughing, a cool cat who handles things well and takes care of things on her own. Very willing, very worldly, collaborative, and always that good. I understand that a girl has to have plenty of tolerance for what comes, because there are some guys who are so sad, slimy, and desperate, and Chano was always watching; I think he was praying softly that no one would notice Marcelinda. Chano was always with his gods and the cross on his neck and was always praying, and I saw that he got nervous every time a car started to circle around Marcelinda, and I noticed how he sighed very deeply when the car started again without things going any further. Which was harmful to the girl, because she, instead of breaking out of her shell, she became more guarded and more scared, and I believe that she liked Chano as well, and liked it when he would stand by her side, without caring that being there so much would scare away the clientele, which pissed off Goyito, who would give the girl a scolding: “A girl who doesn’t work doesn’t eat around here, this is not a charity hospital, either you manage and you do at least seven, or you can start
thinking about your return ticket, which of course I’m not going to pay for,” and threats with papers and jail, and she covered her face in her hands and cried in the corner like a child. And then Morosca: “Leave the girl alone, she will learn.” But I know that it was Chano’s fault for not stopping it, he was posted there like a fly, and the clients, if they discover you, back off or go barking up another tree, because they’re scared that you’re there to beat them up or nab your wallet, you have to be there without being seen, they can feel that you are close, they can smell you. I mean come on, don’t screw them over, don’t embarrass them; here, at the Casa de Campo Park, there are lots of shy guys who come, the type who escape from the office for a moment in a discreet way, as if for a meeting or an errand, many family men, many guys with hidden desires. I recognize how, at first, they hesitate and circle around with the car, and think “yes, but no,” and pass by slowly, and their mouths water and they stop but then they accelerate again, and there are some who go around three or four times until finally they decide, but always in a way that no one sees me, no one recognizes me, hardly lowering their windows. And this is how things go and one has to understand them, because, of course, imagine if you were a wuss, a coward with a wife and all that, and you bring yourself to it and you go up there and you see the girl and you’re going to make a move and there’s this random guy at her side, standing there, like a sentry; well no, the guy gets scared and goes somewhere else. And Marcelinda gets herself into more and more problems, and I, hashing things out with Chano: “Listen, you’re nuts, you’re hurting the girl, she’s not your property, and if Goyito realizes what you’re up to, say goodbye. Listen to me, kid, and if it’s that you’re infatuated, let her do her job on her own. Best-case scenario, if she prospers, you can have a slice of it too.” And him, very dignified: “I’ll punch you in the face if you keep talking, I know very well what I’m doing!” But he didn’t know at all, how could he know! When a guy gets jealous, he loses his sense, and I catch the drift of what it is to be jealous.
He almost trembled when Marcelinda--what a little name, it was Chano himself who gave it to her as soon as he saw her, she tried to say in broken language that her name was Marcey or something like that, and Chano said, “Marcelinda, it’s a name that fits you well.” And so with “Marcelinda” she stayed, and it was cute to hear Morosca or the others call her with their half-language: “Mare-see-leenda.” And she laughed and flipped her locks of hair that she always wore tied with little bows, and then she really looked like a schoolgirl and Chano would melt; well, like I say, when she did get into someone’s car to do her job, Chano would begin to tremble and I would notice and I would do something to distract him. “This guy is one of those who will be over in a flash,” I told him, joking around and downplaying it because I could see that he was getting red, and that if I didn’t slow him down or distract him, he was capable of making a stupid mistake, like going up to the car and starting a fight; I saw how he clenched his fists, and even though he struggled to pretend this was normal, in his own way, and hummed or carved signs in the trunk of the tree with a razor, like someone who doesn’t care, he was about to explode. And it was like this every time, and thank goodness there weren’t any other types of problems, because he was so preoccupied with Marcelinda that he was of little use to me, if any of those other guys had screwed up with any of the other girls.

And that’s how things went until it started to snow. What a joke that November snow was! It was unusual, the girls couldn’t put up with it, man, what a week! Their teeth chattered so much, like keys, and the girls, when they had their arms crossed, grouped together and wrapped themselves up as best they could, taking the blanket off when the cars came by to show some skin. It seems that the cold doesn’t discourage the men, quite the opposite! What a string of cars of desperate men, the type that carry a flask of cognac and seek to warm their bodies with
something even more daring! And Goyito, unaffected: “If one has to work, one works.” And Chano starts up: “They’re going to freeze, man, it’s better to bring them inside and wait for it to clear up,” like a Mother Theresa. And Goyito, who wouldn’t put up with anyone raising their voice, threatening: “If you’ve lost your marbles, hit the road sweetie.” And Chano, hellbent, “I’m saying it for your own good,” he said, “you’re going to destroy the goods, they’re going to catch pneumonia, you’re asking for it, you’re going to have to spend more on medicine and doctors than what you’re scraping together right now. It’s all the same to me, it’s whatever you say, but if I were them, I would cross my arms and say no way, let someone else work in this weather that freezes your pussy off.” And Goyito, pissed off: “Don’t fuck with me, man, I’ll punch you in the face. You’re not the one to give me advice, I know very well how to carry out my business, and that these girls are strong as oxen and if I bring them in from the cold, how are they going to make ends meet? You think you’re doing them a favor, but ask them, ask the girls. Besides, they like it.” So, there was nothing to be done and you couldn’t light a fire because the town council was serious about the ecological issue and the danger of fire in the park and the scandal in the press. So Chano and I wrapped ourselves up in clothes, various layers, man, to withstand the cold, which no one can put up with. It was one of those nights when they allow everyone into the subway so that nobody kicks the bucket from the cold; not just the day it snowed, but all week. It was unbelievable! One of the prostitutes who works on her own, without a pimp, went down to the Paseo de Extremadura to take refuge in an abandoned place and started a commotion because the place caught fire because of the bonfire they had set up, you must have read about it in the paper; and so to Chano it seemed like the end of the world and I think this time Chano was right, and Goyito let it slide because the girls were shivering, they were crying from the cold, and neither with shooting up nor with pills could anyone stand it, and to top it off, he had changed
Marcelinda to the night shift as a punishment and to see if she was doing her job. And Chano came up to her like a missionary and gave her hot coffee and cognac and warmed her hands with his and put the car blanket over her shoulders, like someone covering a baby. And that’s how we spent three terrible nights and Chano’s blood began to boil and he came to grumbling that Goyito was a shameless bastard, that it wasn’t right, that these girls were from warm countries, that they should give them something, that at least, if Goyito had a soul, he should let them work with coats on, with a jacket, with something that could cover them up; but of course, it’s not the same. That’s why people decorate shop windows so that it gets the customers’ interest, and they pay, and if you don’t display the merchandise as it should be displayed, well, you tell me! A big part of the success of the business is that those who pass by are dazzled, and if you cover up the goods you’ve fucked it up, so the blanket thing was a temporary solution, something that Goyito allowed, but being that he didn’t find out, because if it was up to him, the girls would be practically naked, like in the summer or the fall or the spring. Because if they don’t see the tits and ass it’s not the same, man, don’t you know? It has to be visually appealing, men are like that, our spirits rise when the bait is well placed, and if not, well, that’s crappy, less so for the passing customers, which are the majority--clueless guys who drive around in their cars looking for excitement, like a guy who goes into a booth for a peep show, or who watches porn, and you tell me how stimulating the girls are going to be if they’re covered up like chestnut sellers. So, from his perspective, I understood Goyo because he who puts a lot of money in this wants to reap the profits just like any other man, he’s not inconsiderate, and the girls, like Goyo tells us, in their homeland they were starving, and here they can just get by and those who are worth it get ahead. Even though, of course, with the cold things get problematic, and therefore Goyito gets them drugs in winter when everyone gets high, don’t I know it, and well, a cycle, later they have to
work just to get their fix, and that’s what Chano was afraid of. “She’s not old enough,” he would say, harping on it, “in a year it’ll be a shame, it’s better if she doesn’t shoot up, man, after that no one will get her out of this,” he would say in a moralizing way, there was no one who could understand him, because I have seen him pass the girls around to earn some money, breaking Goyo’s rules, who also wants to control the profits of the business.

But someone who’s pussy-whipped fucks it up. And it’s not that Chano would have done it with Marcelinda, who he treated with a respect like she was a virgin or a sister; but it’s that he was madly in love with her, I noticed from his symptoms: some sweats, a discomfort, he couldn’t keep still, and he brought her pastries and pieces of pizza, which she really liked, and beer. And then she would laugh, and really, it was so nice to see her, she seemed like she could have been about to play with dolls, happy like when a little girl is given a balloon, and her smile was contagious, with such straight, white teeth, and a blush appeared on her cheeks—which even people of color get—and she said something like “sank yee-ou” which didn’t even seem like English, and Chano would put on a cassette tape and she would skip, sort of like a rapper, and Morosca would move her hips, because it was salsa that suited her.

Well, that’s how we were, in front of the cars, like a day off, and Chano was more calm, happy as a lark, seeing Marcelinda dance. And I saw how he watched the clock to see if it was time to bring them to the “house,” which is a good time, when it is already dawn, and the Casa de Campo Park turns all white with frost, and we put them in the microbus, and they start to tell each other things, whispers, anecdotes from the night in their damn language, and they rubbed their hands together and tucked into the blankets with that sleepy face and those big eyes like an owl’s, tired eyes, dazzled by the light. Chano was happy, because that night Marcelinda didn’t
have to turn one trick, man, even though the rest did, and this left Chano feeling good. But then the car appeared with those four douchebags, four junkies who were really high, and they stopped there, I suppose because of the racket and the festive appearance of the two Black girls dancing and the music was pretty loud. We had forgotten the cold, because of a lot of cognac that Chano had bought, and we were so well-buzzed that we didn’t remember that we were working, because also in this business there are moments of luxury, moments to remember. And then these four idiots arrived—it must have already been five in the morning and they came wasted, the type of guy that can screw you over—and I, having like a sixth sense for these things, immediately put myself on guard and, like normal, I left with Chano to let the girls do their thing, and they went to mess with the girls first, to insult them. There are a lot of guys who get turned on by calling them Black and telling them to go back to their country, treat them like slaves, that’s part of it, like someone who goes looking for transvestites, you know: first the insults and the humiliation, and then like a bigshot: “You suck me off, you’re shit.” Well, it’s the same with people of color, they attract and arouse them, precisely because, well, they disgust them and they think they’re above them, but that is precisely what they’re looking for, what turns them on. And Morosca, who is quick to react, goes up to the window and begins to hustle, and Marcelinda stays quiet and looking at the ground and backs up a little, which is what she tended to do, looking down and saying “Earth please swallow me” to see if it made her invisible, but the truth is that it didn’t help one bit and she had a terrible time every time but dammit! The world is how it is, and surely in her country she would be looking for food in the garbage, that’s what Goyito had told me, who knows very well where they came from, so they should be grateful to be here and not afraid, but she stayed there like that, sort of backed up, and the four of them got out of the car and went towards her without paying any attention to Morosca, who had put her tit
in one of their mouths to suck on like a wine pitcher to see if it excited him. But the guy who was in a bad mood pushes her away and goes directly with the other three to where Marcelinda was, and Chano and I were a little bit apart, like I said, and I was nervous because I knew Chano had drunk more than his share and I feared the worst, and the party had already ended, and I don’t like having to resort to brass knuckles and much less to spikes. But things come as they come, and I heard Chano’s breathing at my back and I told him “Calm down, kid.” And those thieves talked to Marcelinda, stupid thugs, well-connected rich kids, and ill-mannered. One puts his hand on her nipple and pinches her, a twisting pinch out of pure malice, and she withdraws, and another grabs her by the hand and wants to put her in the car by force, and she pouts and we hear her say, “Not four, one, one.” And the other bigmouths who start to show their money, and the cockiest one who goes and kisses her on the neck and the others who grope her, and Morosca gets in the middle and says, “Not four, one.” And that asshole, fucking drunk rich kid pushed her: “You Black piece of shit, the girl will suck me off and you’ll watch.” And the other pulling Marcelinda in a really rough way to put her in the car, and everything was a flash, a second: I sense the knife, but Chano has already launched himself like a madman and I see that he goes directly to the guy with the leather jacket, a short guy with glasses, and wham, so fast: “Fuck!” yells the guy, and the others react and start to hit Chano, I had sized them up: they are the type that only go looking for a fight, to let off some steam! And then I run to help the guy, while Marcelinda and Morosca begin screaming and the mug with the curls, a son of a bitch who had it coming, takes it out before I can see it, distracted by the guy with the leather jacket. And then I see the shine, like a twinkle, all so fast, and then I hear Chano’s shriek and I turn to him, and the other four go running and get in the car and speed off. And there was Chano. “They’ve killed me, man,” he says, and I see the blood, bastards, pieces of shit, and Marcelinda bent over Chano
starts to cry like a little girl, scared to shit: “My Chayno” she cried, “My Chayno,” and feels the blood, and Morosca and the others gathered around, it looked like a funeral with mourners who were wailing, and me trying to encourage Chano: “I’m going to get the car, man, hold on, man, it’s nothing, man.” And him grabbing Marcelinda’s hand, who looked like a Mary Magdalene, laying down on top of him, soaked in his blood, and I saw that it was no use, that moving him would be worse, because the son of a bitch had good aim, someone who knew what he was doing, and had stabbed him in just the right spot; so I grabbed my phone and called Goyito and then an ambulance, one of those private ones, and Marcelinda who was touching him and sputtering things that I couldn’t understand, man. Then the unexpected, so fast, her with a knife in her hand, and wham, she sinks it into her belly, listen, like those Chinese people in the movies, quickly and precisely, no one could do anything. Surely it was Chano’s knife that she had found, from touching him so much, and how melodramatic!: Marcelinda bleeding out over Chano, whose eyes were wide open; a scene from Romeo and Juliet, and Morosca begins to sing and the rest kneel and sing with her, man, what a sight. It was the time of day when everything begins to get lighter, and there were the two bodies, the body with such black skin and those little colored curls and the stain of blood, man, and Chano’s open eyes, which had a look of astonishment or bliss, which made me shiver. And the girls singing with those voices Black women have, a type of lament or prayer that puts your hair on end, those topless almost-six-feet-tall girls singing and all of them with tears in their eyes, and Marcelinda so small, covering Chano, who had not let go of her hand, how scary, man! And I was a nervous wreck, not knowing very well what to do, because the ambulance was delayed, and it was a spectacle. “Hang on, man,” I said just to say something, but suddenly there was that silence: the girls fell quiet and Morosca approached and closed Chano’s eyes, and the two hands let go of each other, and the sun started to come up, and
everything took on a rosy color, a yellowish and very pale rose, and one by one they got up and approached and gave Marcelinda a kiss, and I’m telling you she was beautiful, half naked and like she was made of wax! A shiny brown wax with that red stain below her belly. And some cars had stopped, and the wail of the sirens could already be heard and the police car siren too. And it was impressive to see, and to me, it hit me like a tremor, one can be manly but some things break you, man, and Chano was an honest guy, a little soft but honest, he didn’t deserve to end up like this, and the girl, such bad luck, this business is sometimes bleak, I’m telling you, and I swear if I ever find myself with those sons of bitches, anyway, I wasn’t as fast as I should have been, and I owe it to Chano. If there is a God, if I cross their path, this son of his mother will act as one should act, because I can see them for who they are: daddy’s boys, those guys who throw a rock and then hide their hand, and I know the police will do little or nothing. What the fuck do the police care about the death of a pimp and a whore? Bad vibes, man, I swear. Since that day my saliva freezes and I hardly sleep. It was brown skin like wax, a horror museum, a stuffed doll with crystal eyes like pincushion pins. You should have seen it!
“It’s different. Another dimension.”

The students and the guests in that packed and suffocating classroom saw Arellano’s hand erasing something in front of his eyes, a gesture to wave away a pest; it was a quick motion, slightly nervous, almost panicky, that seemed strange in him, a man who was always so cold, so even-minded, not prone to exclamations and excess. That afternoon he had completed a meticulous tour of the female nude in paintings. One of his favorite topics and in every talk or in every new publication he adorned it with new intuitions. He had compared in front of the attendees, utilizing splendid graphic material, the different Venuses on cushions and fabrics; the pearly blonde sensuality of Urbino’s Venus, the somewhat tawdry mischievousness, however tender, of Goya’s Maja, the smoothness of the tuberose of the Venus in the Mirror, the shamelessness of Manet’s Olympia, the decadent smoothness of Ingres’s Odalisca. And, curiously, he had almost skipped over--in an excessively brief commentary, which had surprised everyone--the Venus of Dresden, of the same origin, in a certain sense, as the rest. It had been a good talk where the technical had been watered down--which always happened in his talks--in the personal and creative aspects of the commentary. He spoke well and it was pleasing to hear him. Arellano knew how to communicate his passion to the audience with the mastery of a Mallarméan poet who never went overboard; his containment he coded in the precise and never exultant nor declamatory use of a concept. An adjective: a bedazzlement. The students and colleagues admired precisely this dizzying and surprising mode of converting color into living flesh and aesthetic emotion into an impulse that he communicated the way one communicates the
brilliance of a metaphor. All of his knowledge and all of the bibliography, the different studies and all of the analysis, were left behind: hidden and firm support assumed and later forgotten in order to arrive at a vision of the work so personal and so charged with suggestions that it could only move one. His interventions were somehow a direct encounter with the essence of art. But he never used rhetoric. He stayed away from the topic and from bibliographical references.

Nothing was left unseen by that precise gaze that bore the deepest root of emotion: a dream of the shapes manifesting themselves that he hardly revealed, but which began to beat in every one of the spectators. Everything seemed rational and, nevertheless, became flesh and blood. His irony, his lightly sarcastic comments, were just support for his mirror game about the painter, which suddenly was erased in front of the painting, and something about the profound mystery of the artist began to reveal itself: that golden-red cascade of hair, the fabric creating the space, the light without air even now. The magnificence of Titian and his overwhelming simplicity. In the dark room it produced a type of trance and in every spectator’s hand the brush once again ran over the skin as if it were suddenly participating, following that dry voice that barely revealed emotions, in the exact instant of creation. Painting made flesh and dream, that every spectator composed momentarily occupying the artist’s place, defeating with him technical difficulties, finding solutions, forgetting that which was learned in order to jump at the risk of discovery: nuances of color, roundness of lines, the curve modeling a gondola-like cadence over the sudden abruptness of the fold, contrasting textures creating internal rhythms, the complacent slack of an assumed classicism from within and broken with the little wink.

That afternoon had been especially bright: the murky and very Baroque mirror of Velazquez with that barely hinted-at face, a child-like face and lost in nostalgia of what could have been; the challenging jump of the hip from that waist so narrow, the tiny almost abandoned
piece so fragile and suggestive, the mastery of that brushstroke converted into a caress to pass instantly, above time, to those golden slippers of the *Maja*, splendid over silvery greens, to stop itself then in her talkative eyes, insinuating, almost hard, those eyes with resentments of *Giaconda* transported to earth. And from there, from that uncomfortable and frontal neck and those open and offertory arms, to pass on a flight of images, that were already cerebral, to the turn of the *Odalisca* of that great voyeur of Turkish baths and oriental pipes, decadent peacock feathers in fans, to concentrate itself in the impossible leg and the back prolonging itself in anticipation of modernity. And at the end the cavalier and mischievous boldness of Manet breaking molds with such a black and flat cat, and the woman’s body made into line, a sketch between the opulent silks and the maid’s great bouquet of flowers.

When they turned on the lights, someone from the back of the room launched the question:

“Why did you forget, or seem to forget, the *Venus* of Dresden?”

And he, so elegant and restrained, turned around while he picked up slides and put away pens and said something about the other dimension, as if inadvertently erasing something in front of his eyes with his hand, ending the speech. But there was in his words, and above all in his gesture, an unusual emphasis that held back the auditorium and provoked curiosity.

“What do you mean by ‘a different dimension,’ professor?”

That was the exact question that everyone would have asked. It was as if he had robbed them of the culminating moment, as if those elusive phrases were not enough and he wanted to share the secret that with his gesture he seemed to hold back. And no one moved. Arellano raised his eyes and everyone could see for themselves that a sudden sweat shone on his forehead that did not square with his appearance, which was always so dapper and so cool. He took out a white
handkerchief from his pocket, dried the sweat with a gesture that seemed operatic and then, distracted, he continued putting away the slides, waiting until everyone stood up and assumed the session was over. But a girl in the first row, the one with the long legs and short skirt--Ophelia out of the water, Arellano had thought upon seeing her as soon as she entered the room--spoke very loudly, with the radical and playful voice of someone who’s been around the block and decides to get the professor in trouble:

“Do you also think that she has her eyes closed, I mean, come on, that she’s asleep, because she just … you know what I mean? The hand that remains in that spot and … Can’t we affirm that it’s almost a pornographic painting?”

There were giggles in the room. The students stirred in their places. It was in that instant that finally the professor’s fondness for the nude in the painting was going to take on its true meaning, the moment when the discrepancy would embarrassingly appear between who he portrayed himself to be and what was probably skirting underneath such elegant words: a *voyeur* himself also, transferring the lyric into movements that were perhaps unspeakable. The direct question demanded direct answers. What dark and essentially trivial movements hid behind so many published monographs, hid behind dwelling on the female nude in paintings, talking about textures, order, balance, qualities? In any case, it was an obsession, a diverted gaze that probably coated itself in concepts and technicalities in order to cover up the perverse pleasure of a horny man or of an adolescent who hides in the bathroom to savor wrinkled and sticky pages from obscene books. Something childish and picaresque made the room uncomfortable.

There was a silence. Very slowly Arellano set aside the box in which he was putting away the slides. Then he looked without seeing and remained quiet for one long minute that became eternal. He seemed lost in thought, absent, and the girl uncrossed her legs: golden,
almost-red hair, Titianesque and spiky. Or maybe like Dante Gabriel Rosetti. Elizabeth Siddall’s\textsuperscript{10} hair, thought Arellano and closed his eyes. Another dimension.

“It’s the gaze. Just the gaze, Miss,” he said finally. “What you see, is there. The work of art, it seems useless to repeat it, is open. The viewer recreates time and again the work, configures it, and in a certain way completes it. It is the always-alive dialectic between the beholder and the beholden. You look at the work and your vision of the world blends with the suggestion that the work awakens. What you see in it tells us about the work, but also about you. It is, and pardon the inappropriateness, like that raunchy joke.”

There were giggles in the room. Arellano opened his briefcase and began to put away papers. Maria Castronuevo, the Aesthetics professor, seated in the front row, sighed deeply and smiled. Arellano really was magnificent. What could the raunchy joke have been? For an instant the question-asker’s curls rustled, and Arellano perceived their shine, while carefully placing the pen in the box of pencils. But Elizabeth, or whatever her name was, didn’t give up. Her voice resounded, mollifying the sounds of the chairs moving, caused by those who had gotten up, assuming the session was over. “Are you trying to say that if it seems pornographic to me it’s because my gaze is pornographic, dirty?”

Maria Castronuevo moved nervously in her seat. That impertinent girl lacked decorum and Arellano would be wrong to take his time again to answer her. It would be like casting pearls before swine.

Arellano closed his briefcase. And now he seemed calm.

\textsuperscript{10} Elizabeth Siddall: wife of Dante Gabriel Rosetti; English author and model for paintings by several English artists. She was the model for a famous painting of Ophelia by Sir John Everett Millais
“Yes. If that is how you want to see it. But we should begin to get ourselves in agreement about what exactly is pornography. But that is not the topic of this talk, nor do I think it has much to do with the work of art. Considering something pornographic or not is a moral problem. And morality changes according to cultures and according to time periods. Would you consider the *Faun* of Pompeii pornographic?"

“You haven’t answered my question and you’re beating around the bush. Why have you avoided talking about the *Venus* of Dresden? Does it raise moral problems for you? And what did you mean about another dimension?”

Again two drops of sweat on Arellano’s forehead. Those who had stood up, had sat down again. Ms. Castronuevo was showing signs of impatience and looked toward the back of the room, as if trying to find allies against that imprudent girl, and why not? Shameless. Professor Arellano was decidedly very patient.

Arellano turned to put his briefcase on the table. He fastened the buttons on his jacket and raised his eyes.

“There is the painting and there is the mystery. And the mystery must never be revealed if one doesn’t want to end up like Euripides, devoured by the dogs. Epiphany is only given to initiates. You must excuse me, but the custodian is waiting for us to leave this room because he has to turn off the lights. It has gotten late.”

He turned, took his briefcase, the slides, and left the dais through the door that opened to the right.

Maria Castronuevo opened her eyes wide. They were words that dazzled--mystery, epiphany--but that she hadn’t totally understood. Professor Arellano could seem disconcerting. The redhead had stood up and her legs sparkled as she picked up a golden slipper. Manuel
Besteiro, a specialist in Fuentes\textsuperscript{11}, was distracted looking at her and shook his head: “This Arellano sometimes takes us along on tangents.” It was evident that he did not share at all that theatrical and not very rigorous ending; Arellano supported his analysis with commentaries like the one about mystery which he, Manuel Besteiro, most abhorred: imprecision, cheap lyricism, logomachy, and theories that were too “literary.” The thing about the mystery and the epiphany made it sound like the nonsense of a charlatan. Decidedly, verbal brilliance could end up playing tricks.

Now Arellano was alone in his house with a glass of whiskey in his hand. He had put on Pollini’s version of \textit{Fantasie}, opus 17, by Schumann in the CD player and he felt dizzy. He was an idiot, and there was no cure. Why the fuck had he made that stupid comment that surely had provoked the bewilderment of the students and the suspicion of his colleagues? He had ruined a good and calculated conference with a disgraceful ending. And it was the fault of the reddish sparkle of that hair and those two long legs, straight like columns that had somehow thrown him off. The Elizabeth with the balls to try to drive him crazy. Saying what shouldn’t be said. Euripides devoured by the dogs.

Arellano leaned his head on the arm of the chair, closed his eyes, and let the music take him away. Telling what couldn’t be told. He was in Dresden again in front of the painting like on that cold morning in November 1992. He opened his eyes and in one gulp emptied the glass of whiskey, then reclined again, leaning against the back of the chair, he too a Venus on cushions, leaving his left hand to rest forgotten on his inner thigh. He shivered. Time after time since that

\textsuperscript{11} Carlos Fuentes: Mexican author, part of the Latin American “Boom” in Literature
day he struggled to forget the images that returned to him. The redhead’s legs, so long, now overlapped the fragile legs of the Venus. A deep mystery. Maybe I dreamed it: Segismundo\textsuperscript{12} tormented by nightmares, prisoner of an obsession, chained. The king dreams he is a king and lives … Dresden on a cold morning in November with streets covered in haze. And the greediness of the collector who finally had the opportunity to directly confront the work of art that until this moment had been prohibited: hands frozen in the pockets of his coat and the scarf covering his mouth and nose. And his child-like enthusiasm facing the gift so long awaited, meanwhile getting closer to the museum by those nearly-empty streets at such an early hour.

And now he was there in front of the painting and his mouth watered like a beggar in front of a shop window packed with sweets. Oh my God, what beauty. No reproduction, no slide could realize exactly those nuances of color, those soft greens, mixed with the ochres of the landscape, with which the woman’s body merged like a challenge to Nature, kind and luminous nature in the golden cup of the tree and in such smooth curves. Culture and nature. The sheen of the fabrics, the glow of that red embracing the inexplicable woman lying there in the middle of the landscape, a stubborn siesta of the goddess for centuries upon centuries, far from the gaze of the mortal, innocent shamelessness of sleep without resentment. He had written about the painting many times and now for the first time, he had it in front of his eyes. And he was alone in the room of the museum. He had meticulously prepared his trip as soon as the German unification occurred, they opened the borders, and one could finally skip the rolls of visas, paperwork, permits. Since 1510, they say, maybe a little bit before, with that technique later used

\textsuperscript{12} Segismundo: Principal character in the Spanish Golden-Age play \textit{La Vida es Sueño [Life is a Dream]}, by Pedro Calderón de la Barca, in which a prince (Segismundo) is imprisoned in a tower, ostensibly to protect him from the negative consequences of a prophecy. After a brief release from the tower, his father convinces him that everything he experienced while outside of it was a dream
by Titian, color over color, they corrected directly on the canvas. Sleeping Venus. No doubt: the controversy over the attributions of the paintings to each other was vain, because there was an unmistakable aroma in the paintings of Giorgione, something intangible and different, a more abstract and dreamy gaze, more distant. Nothing to see. In Titian the carnal, the concrete; in Giorgione the immaterial atmosphere of the dream, that atmosphere that one cannot describe with words, that which is human without being it. Another dimension.

Another dimension. Arellano curled up in the armchair and opened his eyes. He finds himself again in his room and the phrase strikes him: the phrase that today he had repeated in the classroom and on that day he had also said to himself in front of the painting. He gets up and fills the glass of whiskey. Why the same expression? Maybe he should leave. Every time the vision returns, he is afraid. A man can go crazy. The limits of reality blur, like the contours on the buildings blurred on that morning in November, when he approached for the first time, beaming with happiness and optimism, the museum of the city of Dresden to contemplate the painting that he had loved so much and that he had written so much about. The madness.

The houses, almost shacks, the landscape and her forgotten hand. Like an apparition. The luxury of the fabrics and the radiant and innocent serenity of the body, that makes one forget the curious anatomical imperfection of that torsion of a leg that … And suddenly the persistent sound of the planes. Like a buzzing that made the walls of the museum tremble. A drill that came to fuck up his placid contemplation, he thought at first. The sound of motors and then that crash, a light that illuminated the windows, and the girl who crosses the room in a breath. “Oh my God, they’re bombing us,” she said, “run, run. It’s them, they’ve arrived. Let’s go down to the basement. I don’t think they will dare to bomb the museum; in the museum we’re safe, but better downstairs, run, run.” And he accepted the hand the girl extended to him and left running,
crossing hallways and rooms where the paintings seemed to vibrate as if they were going to fall off the walls, while a type of defective commotion resonated in the streets and illuminated the windows of the museum that turned on and off with dazzling special effects. They descended the stairs, while a few visitors joined in their flight, looking for the basement, the safe place.

There he was next to that woman who wore those wool boots and a long hand-made scarf, gray and dirty; there he was, surrounded by the scared faces of those four or five students who cried out in German so thick that he could barely understand. “It’s started,” they said, “it’s started.”

And she grabbed his hand and guided him through those stone passages while a uniformed man cried, “Stay calm, stay calm, downstairs we will be safe” and a group of people burst in from the outside looking for refuge. “The museum. They’ll never dare to bomb it. They can’t bomb it.”

Someone was crying. They had collapsed on those wooden benches and the girl rested her head on his shoulder. He looked at her: so small, so fragile, and so similar to the Venus that he had just been contemplating, as if she had broken away from the painting. And she had dressed herself in a strange way, the garments of a vagabond, layers and layers of shabby clothing to slip into a nightmare, his, or as if he, Arellano, had entered into the girl’s dream, a fitful sleep, made of bombs and frightful gestures. But she was real or seemed real. She wrung her hands and prayed or at least murmured words in a low voice that had the cadence of a prayer. Covered in that coat or sheepskin with frayed sleeves, a very old coat of gray material. “It will stop soon,” she repeated. “They pass, drop the bombs, and go,” she said to herself to calm herself and to calm the others, to that student with the shorts above his knees, teenage knees full of bruises, wearing that hand-made v-neck sweater with a diamond design, and a very small scarf,
and whose teeth would not stop chattering, producing a little sound that could be heard like one could hear the sobs of a woman who had dropped to the floor and like one could hear the faltering breathing of the girl. The boy was no more than thirteen years old and held a notebook and a pencil in his hand with such force that it seemed like his life depended on it.

The girl who was with him was letting out little screams and the old man and woman—a couple, perhaps—embraced like in a Rembrandt painting, dark, full of wrinkles and questions, with gnarled hands and anguish in their eyes.

“We will be safe here,” he said. “The girl is right. They always respect the museums. It’s not going to last, calm down, it won’t last.”

And she, the girl, still holding onto his hand, like a virgin who wakes from a dream with watery eyes. Seated not on cushions, nor on satin, nor on silk, but there on the wooden bench in that freezing basement, while outside the unending roar of firecrackers continued resounding, which everyone around him had accepted with enormous naturalness, something that had to happen sooner or later, that had finally happened. And he, scared, out of place, displaced in time and in space, feeling uncomfortable in such new and freshly-pressed clothes. A swoon, a dizzy spell. What was happening? In the movies you pinch yourself to see if you’re awake. And he, not needing to pinch himself, felt alive down there, irresponsibly awakened by the excessive closeness of the girl, clothed Venus, wrapped in clothes that seemed almost tatters, leaning there, reclined on his shoulder looking for protection, like a little lamb that calms itself and folds up in your lap.

And suddenly the silence, a long silence, cut off only by the persistent sound of a siren and the breathing of the boy who lets go of the pencil and laughs with a nervous giggle, standing
up and making himself out to be the brave one, ruler of the roost, in front of the girl who nibbled insistently at the fringes of one of her pigtails.

“Phew... that’s it. I hope my house is still standing. We can leave now. Sometimes they come back,” said the boy.

And the old woman, getting up, picking up from the floor her little hat and the old man, supporting her and encouraging her: “It’s on the other side of the river; I think the bombs have fallen on the other side. We have to get away from here, we have to return home.”

And she, the girl, letting go of his hand, composing herself, with that blush in her cheeks and the downward gaze, embarrassed to have lost control, to have gotten overly intimate, a closeness too warm and bodily, with the stranger.

“I’m Gertru,” she said. “Now it’s better if we go back up. They don’t tend to return. They say that they don’t return. At least not until a few hours pass.”

“Pablo, I’m …” And he/I extended my hand.

“There have been so many bombs. There may be parts of the city that are burning. I need to go find my parents. Thank you. It’s better that you return to your hotel. Better if you …”

And she was already heading towards the stairs following the others who weren’t running anymore but who ascended slowly, step by step, afraid to go outside, into that morning that was not cloudy but rather strangely luminous and very cold, a morning of rockets exploding in the sky, of wretched dogs that wouldn’t stop howling.

The face of the Venus incarnate in that girl with red hair, almost gray, and her trembling hand in the farewell:

“Your name, sir?”

“Pablo. My name is Pablo.”
We stayed motionless in the entrance of the museum and I felt the stifling sensation, that wasn’t fear, the king dreams he is king, disoriented Segismundo in a museum that had fallen silent and where only the dry sounds of steps on the stone stairs could be heard. Dresden, 1945.

Where the fuck have I arrived? Where am I? Maybe I should look for a clinic, someone who can bring me to my senses. And she, Gertrud or whoever she was, followed at my side, and her shoes, that type of thick-soled galoshes, tied over hand-woven socks, hardly made a sound over the flagstones.

And suddenly the streetlight and the groups of people running from one side to the other and in the background the glow of the fire, many small fires over the roofs of the city. And she, Gertru, so small at my side, breaks down crying, “Oh my God, oh my God,” she says, and then I take her hand again and squeeze it, “Calm down,” I say in clumsy German, full of errors, that academic and flat German, barely practiced. “Calm down. Everything has passed; you’re right, it’s not easy for them to return.”

But I knew that yes, they would return. I knew it without knowing it or that Pablo that I was in that moment, in that setting and in that time that wasn’t my own, I didn’t stop being the other Pablo, the one who knew what was going to happen from that instant: three days—or was it two?—and three nights of intense bombings, and at the end the city totally leveled by the terrible, disproportionate punishment by the Allies in the grand finale. Three days and three nights.

“It’s better if we stay in the museum,” I said. “The museum will save us. Better to stay here.”

“No,” she said. “My parents. I need to go find my parents.”
And then from afar again could be heard the buzz that came closer, the sound of motors, and the shrill screech of the siren began. *They’re already here again,* I thought. *They’re not going to stop.*

“It’s dangerous to go by the street, better to stay here, in the basement; let’s go back inside.”

But she was pulling my hand, she wanted to run.

“No, my parents, on the other side of the river; I have to go, I have to go.”

And again I ran after her. While the planes over our heads began to unload again their unbearable cargo I saw how the old couple embraced again and stayed motionless, waiting, surrendered ahead of time, a Herculean statue for eternity, still, exhausted, with their callous hands, full of knots, clenched, and eyes heavy with so much coming and going: “Sir, Sir, the things we have seen.” And the boy who ran down the street, while the girl with the pigtails followed behind and shouted “Wait, wait.” And the whole city seemed to be moving, shaken by an earthquake, an enticing spectacle, magnificent and sinister, of light and color and sound and I followed Gertru, *gelida manina*\(^\text{13}\) that did not stop trembling. We ran and ran while we saw homes burning and that roar, that roar.

“What day is it?” I ask.

“Today,” she looks at me and nods, “February 13th,” she says. “Yes, I think today is the 13th, because my birthday is in five days. I hate this war. My mother was knitting me a sweater for the 18th. I was going to wear it for the first time. A red sweater of that braided kind. It cost her a lot to get the wool. But now I don’t know,” she concluded.

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\(^{13}\) *Gelida manina*: Italian phrase, translation: little icy hand. An allusion to the opera *La bohème*, at the pivotal moment when the main character Rodolfo meets Mimì for the first time and holds her cold hands
The river reflected the lights, the yellows and reds of the flames, and a multitude of terrified people stumbling over each other and falling, they crowded together, stood up again and fought to cross that bridge that at any moment could explode into thin air. The face of Gertrude lit up as well, and while we watched from the distance, and getting closer and closer, the buildings collapsing, we jumped over the rubble without stopping to look at the dead, I could feel the dread that emanated from their fingers.

City lights. Hallucinatory glows of Bosch, a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer inferno, light trails over shadows of that morning that had become dark from the dust of the buildings that collapsed like toy houses. Flying fish with lizard tails dropping their fatal load, and that buzzing, that buzzing. Rummaging through the rubble, while she cried and plunged her hands digging like dogs in the sand: a cup, glass shards, the leg of an armchair that could have been stylish, some clothes, and the bodies, where are the bodies? Meanwhile the buzzing continued, interrupted by the thunderous bombs that occurred with almost musical intervals.

“We can’t,” I was saying, digging at her side, without knowing what I was looking for exactly. “Better if we take shelter now, look for shelter. There’s nothing to be done, there can’t be anyone alive down there.”

And she stubbornly digging, “Papa, Mama,” she called, while she sunk her nails between the rubble and separated fabrics, a mess of junk:

“They could be alive, they could still be alive. They must be gotten out, we have to get them out.”

Two days and two nights. Arellano gets up from his armchair, goes to the kitchen and drinks a glass of water. He has a dry mouth and feels the dust from the rubble, making him
cough. Tobacco, he thinks, too much tobacco. The red hair of the impertinent girl with her long legs melts into the golden-gray hair of the girl. He knows that he cannot stop it, that he will not be able to do anything except arrive at that ending. To sleep, per chance to dream. Shit. The girl laying on top of improvised cushions in that shelter, where emaciated faces were arriving with blankets, dirty pillows, gutted mattresses. Remnants of a nightmare and that sound of motors and the smell of burned flesh, exploding pipes, ditches of dirty water over the brown mud of a city become a ghost. I was there, I walked between the rubble of an urban landscape made of mud and fire, with the sound of motors thundering in my ears and Gertrude’s hand so soft between mine. You’re crazy, you should see a psychiatrist. Paranormal phenomena, jumps in time. Daydreaming. A glass of water and another glass of water. What thirst that night!

“It’s never going to stop. Never.”

In the shelter no one spoke. Mothers pressed their children to their chests, elderly people looked up, exhausted, mouths open, confused and blind from the astonishment, women half nude covering with their clothes the children at their breasts. Final judgment of an irascible and stern god who knew how to measure out his vengeance. There were no righteous people to save; Day of the Beast with women pulling out their hair, climbing the hills, fleeing through the mountains. Trails of blood and fear. Two long days with their two long nights.

“It’s never going to stop. Never.”

An anthill systematically crushed by the hunter’s boot.

“She,” Gertrude says wiping her running nose with the sleeve of that gray coat, “was finishing my sweater for my birthday party. I was going to make a pumpkin pie. Without cream. It’s difficult, impossible to get the ingredients to make the cream. There’s no milk. You know,
war and scarcity stuff. But the sweater was pretty. I had tried it on yesterday afternoon and it fit me well. All that’s left is to attach the sleeves. I always wanted to have a red sweater.”

Someone began to sing, there in the back between the piled-up bodies, where perhaps prayers could be heard. But the song ceased immediately.

“It was difficult to get the wool,” continued Gertrude, concentrated on that sweater, her mother’s body pierced by the knitting needle, there under the rubble, Our Lady of Sorrows pierced by seven daggers, while the commotion continued, the gloomy play of light and sound over our heads.

“When this ends, I want to visit Italy,” she said suddenly. “If anything is left,” she added and closed her eyes.

A Mediterranean light, a calm landscape and the body of a woman over satin fabrics.

The fabric of the straw mattress and her curled up.

“I don’t know how to pray,” she said. “She, my mother, she did pray.” And that past tense of the verb stopped her and she wiped her eyes. Then she continued in a clear voice, of a conscientious narrator, far from everything that could distract her. “But him, no. He, my father, was wounded on the front in ‘43. He went blind then and had to return home. He used to like Schumann. He would spend whole hours at the piano. Do you like Schumann? He liked it when I accompanied him at the piano. He told me I was his Clara. He didn’t play very well. He was never very good. But he was distracted. He would say that when everything ended we had to go to Italy. He always wanted to go to Italy. But they wounded him on the battlefront of Stalingrad. It was so cold there. He didn’t like to recall it. Mama said it was like a butcher shop. He was lucky. He was lucky because he only lost his eyes. Many of his companions could not return.
Mama thought that for him the war had already ended and she was content. We made plans. Are you familiar with Italy?"

“Yes, I know Italy. I love Italian paintings. That’s why I’m here. I have come to see the *Venus* by Giorgione.”

“It is an unusual painting. When I was little, I liked to look at it, but it scared me. I don’t know why it scared me. I’ve never stood too long in front of it. Maybe it’s that it made me feel embarrassed. It’s sort of childish, prudish, but it made me embarrassed. She’s a beautiful woman. Isn’t she?”

Speaking of Giorgione while the bombs buzzed over the roofs that collapsed, and she, Gertrude, reclined over the undone straw mattress. Talking so as not to think about the rubble, or hear the shrieks, or let one’s self be disturbed by that little song of deaf voices, whimpers or murmurs, there in the shelter. Nothing will be left. Nothing can be left. Why us? Punished city par excellence before the great mushroom cloud. But Gertrude cannot know it and prefers to talk and talk, looking at her hands insistently, a perplexed Lady Macbeth who couldn’t erase blood that would not stop flowing and she doesn’t understand why and what she is guilty of. She looks at her hands and talks to me about Schumann.

“He, my father,” she says, and there is sort of an epitaph in the tone of her voice, “wanted me to be a musician. Before the war. Then, when he came back, I accompanied him. His little Clara. I’ve never been good. I already told you, neither was he, but he spent hours poring over to the keys. He used to prefer the *Fantasie*, opus 17, and the *Arabesque*. I believe he identified himself with Schumann. It was as if he also, upon losing his eyes, the same as Schumann upon crippling his hand, would look for in me his Clara. I was his eyes. I read him the sheet music,
just like Clara was the interpreter for Robert. The story of Clara and Robert was a beautiful love story. Don’t you think?"

_Fantasie,_ op. 17. Arellano gets up and connects the disc again. “I prefer the _lieder_s,” he had responded that day. _Dichterliebe,_ op. 48, “Poet’s Love,” a song of hope with that sad epilogue of acceptance of reality, lost forever the woman he would never reach. You’re crazy, Arellano, like a goat. As crazy as Schumann himself with that strange splitting of personality. You’re going to end up like him in a madhouse: strange carnival-esque visions, “Eusebius” and “Florestan,” half Eusebius with a head full of birds and dreams, half Florestan, that intrepid man of action who would never come into being. In search of his Clara.

Clara-Gertrude, about to turn eighteen, laying there in the increasingly rarefied atmosphere of the refuge, shivering from the cold, with wide-open eyes, and without stopping talking, and you, Pablo Arellano, outside of time, feeling the warmth of her cheeks, ready to fight for her, make her your own, with the stubborn pigheadedness of Robert, confronting the girl’s father, that renowned and successful piano teacher, the very venerable Mr. Wieck, who was not resigned to give up his beloved and beautiful daughter to that youth with a damaged hand and not much of a future.

“Did you know that Schumann heard voices? He said that he talked with angels or ghosts. That was before he threw himself into the Rhine, more or less when he met Brahms, and before they hospitalized him in that sanatorium. My father also heard voices. He had nightmares and he talked out loud. He saw things. I think the shrapnel had affected him. The shrapnel and the memories. He saw without seeing, as if he was in the trenches again. And he told me things that

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14 Eusebius and Florestan: two pieces of music composed for piano by Robert Schumann. Each piece reflected a different aspect of his personality.
made my hair stand on end, that my mother didn’t want to hear. I never knew if it was true or a lie what he told me. It seemed like he had the gift of being able to move throughout space. And suddenly he was there at the gates of Stalingrad and the smell of the gunpowder came back to him and he saw the bodies and he passed his hand in front of his eyes as if he wanted to erase the images, as if he was in another dimension. He would answer someone that I couldn’t see. Yes. Like Schumann. Schumann talked to angels, beings from another world. My father … I don’t know who my father was talking to.”

Eusebius and Florestan.

Making love protected by the mist and fear. Such a smooth body under the rough fabric. Her clumsy virgin hands feeling out my body like a blind person’s who runs their fingertips over the features of a Roman bust.

“You know?” Gertrude had said. “I don’t want to die a virgin. I think Clara was with Robert before marriage. Her father, Mr. Wieck, said that they were kids. But in the end he let them. Surely because they had already done it. I’ve waited and waited, but tonight I know that it has to be, that it should be. It’s dark and no one will know. No one cares besides. Everyone thinks about themselves and their deaths. See? No one is watching us. Hold me. And if I don’t please you that much, think, while we’re making love, of that round and Italian Venus. I, as you can see, am very thin. I would like for you to see me in my red sweater. When they clean up the rubble, there my sweater will be, next to her. She didn’t let go of the needles for a moment. While he played, she knit. But she didn’t like to hear him speak out loud: his visions made her nervous. She was afraid. And that morning she was worried because she said a cake should always have cream to go with it, that if not, it is dry, inedible, and makes you choke.”
The music had stopped. Arellano sat down in the armchair and held his head in his hands. He knew that now he would hear again the girl’s slight moan, clear; that he would again perceive her trembling and the pressure of her arm pushing him away at first in that silent struggle:

“You’re hurting me. Careful, you’re hurting me. But don’t stop, keep going, keep going.” Slight body, that had barely warmed up, of long and firm bones and those two diminutive breasts and the rhythmic beat of her heart that I could feel under my fingers, tic-tac, tic-tac, something very near that dampened the buzzing of the planes and the crashing of the bombs; and her hair, without the wool hat, blonde-gray spilling over the straw mattress. And the two red stains on her cheeks, light brushstrokes of carmine, of a sickly girl.

“Men in statues,” she said, “they’re different. I never saw my father naked. How could I have seen him? And I never had brothers. I would have liked to be a nurse; nurses, my mother tells me, don’t get embarrassed in front of a naked man’s body. They have to treat it and clean it. But they don’t really see it anymore. That’s what my mother says, you know? I on the other hand see you, without seeing you. I see you with my body and I know what you are like. Can you also see me?”

Yes. I can see you. Of course I can see you: sleeping Venus. The statues, the porticos, the museum. A strange divan with golden flourishes, nude women that raise their hands crying out to heaven in a mournful way and in the background the clear arch of the white moon in a black sky over gray and desolate mountains, while she, such an elegant woman with the huge red feather hat and a skirt that was also red, walks toward the skeleton and seems to greet it. Delvaux’s painting in the Tate Gallery, the one I always elude in my talks, the one I want to ignore, it serves me now as a setting for that memory of your sleeping body on opulent fabrics, red fabrics, almost maroon, that luxurious divan over a magnificent rug slightly wrinkled. And that is your
stylized body, the smooth tuft of hair (golden?) between your legs, you sleeping with two arms crossed over your head. Not in the forest, not in a landscape, but rather in an urban and desolate setting, perfect, a frame of columns and imposing porticos, with the temple in the background and the court wall. All stone, the stone of the silent museum. An ideal frame for this frozen memory, without sound, without dust, without debris, a metaphysical silence that nullifies the frozen-stiff bodies in the shelter and the sobbing and the chattering of teeth, and such dirty blankets and the straw mattress. Even the skeleton seems clean, from a laboratory, for anatomical study, impressive and silly in the foreground. The shadow of Brueghel. The skeleton that advances courteously and seems to go to meet the woman, an elegant woman who has left the knitting needles behind, dressed for a party, transformed into a shop-window mannequin.

And now will come the shudder. And the fainting afterwards. Another dimension. Do you think it is a pornographic painting? Would you include the painting by Delvaux, Sleeping Venus as a finale? Occupied Belgium, 1944. And the painter transforming death into a dream. Dichterliebe, “Poet’s Love.” She, Gertrude, blond angel with the strident lights of a Greco painting, illuminating the roofs, obscuring the sky, making it rough and gray, of thunder and terror; calm girl, absent, sleeping on cardboard cushions, while the city of Dresden collapses, just as flimsy wooden structures crumble when pushed by the hand of a child. Dichterliebe. Can you also see me? Arellano passes a sweaty hand over his forehead, gets up and fills his empty glass with whiskey. He pushes the button on the CD player, and the Fantasie, op. 17, plays again, monotonous and reiterative. The quick piano chords, agile, insistent: she, Clara/Gertrude, slides her fingers over the keys, quick fingers, impeccable, precise, and there next to the headboard of her bed the mask of the blind man, a Homer with a military cap, perhaps a German cap, next to
an already-faded reproduction, discolored, of the *Venus* of Dresden. Arellano lays down on the bed and closes his eyes. From afar he seems to still hear the sound of planes that finally withdraw. “They aren’t coming back,” he says and Gertrude, submissive, small, huddled in a ball of dirty and rough fabrics, nods and covers herself up. Then she fades little by little, as the sound of the planes is erased, farther and farther away. Arellano sighs deeply and relaxes. Now he could sleep because everything had ended and the only thing that is left in his imagination is the red hair and long legs of an impertinent girl. Nothing at all, routine, and fine. In the drowsiness that precedes deep sleep, the red and curly hair reminiscent of Elizabeth Siddall’s is confused with an unfinished sweater, a hand-knitted sweater that floats on top of the river’s waters, as Ophelia of Millais floats, a sweater that is only missing the sleeves. And an elegant woman’s huge feather hat that matches the sweater, a woman who, with her porcelain-doll-like face, seems to greet the skeleton that perhaps is smiling.

“Robert Schumann used to speak to angels. Did you know that? He heard voices just like my father.”

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