

TIGERDOG¹

by Raúl Motta*
Illustrated by Santiago Solís**

*Night is an immense mouth trying
to learn to speak an ancient language.*

JUAN VICENTE MELO

“Who’s that?” I ask, looking at myself in the mirror. Nothing, nobody. I take another sip of rum and light up a cigarette. With closed eyes, I spell her name out loud.

“B-r-e-n-d-a.”

I’ve already waited terribly far from her name. That name that necessarily must be the only one that fits her, and, anyway, the only one I can call her so it doesn’t fade away from my lips.

Then I spell it syllable by syllable, touching the roof of my mouth with my tongue as if caressing her skin.

“Bren-da.”

That name is fire, the invocation awakening the night, and with it come flaming snout hounds ready to devour everything. One of them has hidden in the darkest corner of the room, the tigerdog with burning eyes like two pagan pyres. I take another sip of rum, repeating to myself that it’s only a hallucination. You’re drunk, Juan Vicente, that’s all. Is that all? I’m dreaming, I say. Nightmares again, this not knowing for sure where I am, if I’m asleep or awake. I try to calm down, light another cigarette; I can’t stop shaking. The tigerdog is lurking, still, waiting for me to turn my back to bite me. I can see its orange skin with black stripes along its back. It growls

at me, baring its teeth, drooling its white, thick saliva on the floor of the room. He’s the same one I saw before, the one who ripped Brenda’s blue dress apart the night she walked out on me. I yell at him to leave – the yell bouncing off the walls of the room, dying in there. I won’t let him devour me. I rush out to the street, trusting that the beast will lie still and not chase after me. I feel the shadows following me, talking to me amidst the sound of the whistling wind: *Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium et invisibilium. Credo in unum Deum.*

I walk, avoiding looking at anybody; they all look so alike: the same black, shifting eyes. The moon burns in the sky, its reflection guiding me around the embers of the city, that other city of towers and labyrinths. I carry the bottle of rum in my hand, take a sip from it, feel the burn in my throat, coming out through my mouth and my eyes.

My steps lead me to Carlos, my musician friend. I climb the steps to his apartment. I run into a couple down the hallway; looking out of the corner of my eye, something seems familiar about them. They don’t notice me since they’re devouring each other with kisses, destroying their bodies, one against the other. I stop for a minute to smoke, burning my fingers with the match. She’s wearing a blue dress that hugs her shape like an extension of her skin. I imagine

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she smells like fresh grass, or limes. He turns his head to look at me, our eyes meeting, and I recognize him, I recognize them both: it's me; it's Brenda and me. I run down the hallway stopping outside Apartment 33. I'm out of breath, inhale deeply, and knock on the door loudly until Carlos opens. He looks me up and down, asks if I am well. Without answering I walk into the apartment, sitting down quietly on the sofa for a moment, agitated like a wounded animal. I get my wallet from my pants pocket, taking out Brenda's picture. Carlos comes from the kitchen with a bottle of whisky and two glasses, pours for both, and sits across from me. I can't let go of her picture, but I close my fist and crush it. I take a big swig of the whisky. My friend says the only goddess has been broken to pieces, that I should stop looking for her, that all women are one and the same. His words are meaningless. I finish my drink and ask for a refill. I open my hand and look at the crumpled picture, letting it fall inside my glass, so it floats on the whisky with a soft, ochre-tinted movement. I look at the deformed picture floating on the surface; it seems as if it might speak to me or try to tell me a secret I can't understand. I ask Carlos to play the piano. He refuses. I drink the glass down in one gulp. He says we need to talk, that I must forget all the nights, that I must fight the fear, the hope. I peer out the window toward the avenue, the wind blowing in my face. I feel dizzy, the light flickering timelessly around town. I tell him I'm forced to not forget her. He pours more; I light up another cigarette and burn my fingers with the match again. I insist on him playing the piano. He looks at me with a tired expression, maybe a little fed up. He puts his sheet music in my hands and asks me to pick a tune. I open them at random and pick the first one I see. Carlos carefully opens his piano lid, settles himself on the bench, and starts playing. The music seems to be alive, materializing in front of me. The

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sounds multiply, turning into birds, grackles croaking and crashing against the windows. I can't stand it and cover my ears with my hands. Music is no longer music: it's a roar. I tell Carlos I have to leave; he wants me to stay, to have another drink. I try to answer but I can't, words faltering on my lips. I pick up the bottle of rum I left on the floor, get up from the sofa, and stumble toward the exit. Carlos opens the door, hugs me goodbye, and asks me not to turn back. I leave the apartment, tottering toward the end of the hall. I look around, not wanting to run into the kissing couple again. There's nothing there, nobody. I take a sip of rum and go downstairs holding on to the walls, almost clawing at them.

On the street I hear again the voices of the shadows, now louder and closer:

Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium et invisibilium. Credo en unum Deum.

Walking aimlessly down the avenue, I run into a clutch of hookers. One of them comes up to me and asks for a cigarette; I give her the last one and offer a match; she shows me her buttocks, her firm buttocks under a short, yellow skirt. "Wanna fuck?" she asks. "It's 200, 250 if I blow you." I shake my head no. "Why? You a fag?" The others laugh. I walk by them, their faces deformed, expanding and contracting, their laughter sounding deep and low, washing over my skin and giving me shivers. I try to run but my legs won't work; they feel heavy and tremulous. I walk away slowly until I reach a parallel street. I'm looking for a place to buy more cigarettes, but everything's closed and quiet. I need a cigarette. Watching the smoke coming out of my mouth relaxes me, makes me feel lighter, reminds me of the fog rising from the sea surrounding my house at night when I was a kid. A police car comes by,

lights shimmering blue-red, blue-red, blue-red, siren blasting next to me. The squad car stops; I take a deep swig of the rum. Two cops get out, the fatter one asking me, “Your horny ass is looking for hookers, right? Fuck, you went right past them; they’re a block back there.”

The other cop, tanned dark by the sun, stares me down, looks at the bottle of rum and says, “You’re shitfaced; you’re coming with us.”

“I can’t go with you,” I say, “I have to go ahead.”

“Get in the car, we’re taking you in.”

“I can’t go back, Carlos said not to.”

He opens the squad car’s door and drags me toward it. “Get in there and stop talking bullshit.”

“I have to find her; I’m sure she’s nearby, night feeds on her body.”

The fat cop takes the bottle of rum away from me, I try to hit his jaw but miss. The other one punches me square in the face; I fall on the sidewalk, my face is burning, blood flowing down my nose and staining my shirt collar.

“Let’s see if that shuts you up, you fucking drunk.”

Between the two of them, they pick me up and shove me inside the car. They turn their lights on and start moving. We drive down several streets; I see cars out the window, their headlights blinding me. My face is burning. The cops talk to each other, but I can’t make out what they’re saying; there’s some kind of buzz inside my head, surely caused by the blow I took. We drive around the slums until we come to an empty lot. They push me out of the car and force me to walk a few yards. The fat cop punches me in the stomach, knocking me down, breathless. They kick me; I feel their boots all over my body, but there’s no pain. I try to protect myself, covering my face with my arms, but it’s pointless; they’re kicking me harder and harder. When they get tired, they go through my pant pockets, find my wallet, empty it, and throw it near me. One of them —I

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can’t tell them apart anymore; they look so similar—pours what’s left in the bottle of rum on my face and neck. The taste of blood and rum in my mouth is sweet. They walk briskly away, covered by the loneliness of this

place. I lie there for a while, motionless, until I gather enough strength to stand up. I dust myself off; my ribs are aching. I pick up the wallet, fix my hair a little bit. I want a cigarette and a little more rum. I walk straight ahead, but can’t find anything; everything seems to be dying away, vanishing amidst the shimmering street lights. I rub my hands and raise my collar trying to fend off the cold. I cross a few streets suddenly realizing I’m about to arrive home. Night is dying, about to be perfectly still.

Dawn breaks when I get home. I look for my keys inside my pockets; I can’t find them; I must have lost them in the empty lot, but the door isn’t locked. I walk in and go upstairs to my room. Everything seems quiet. I hear a howl in the room and find the tigerdog in the same corner where it had taken refuge. I feel nauseated when I see it and cover my mouth with my hands, trying to hold off the vomit. I take a deep breath, my body aches all over. Nausea turns into heaves. I run to the bathroom to throw up. I look at myself in the mirror and see a reflected face covered with dust and dry blood.

“Who’s that?” I ask myself. Nothing, nobody. I go back to the bedroom and lie on the bed, listening to the shadows chasing me down the street but I can’t see them: *Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium et invisibilium*. The tigerdog looks at me, its snout aflame. It starts barking; it’s waiting for me to shut my eyes so it can pounce and devour me. I’m so tired. I close my eyes. ■■■

Translated by Gerardo Cárdenas.

Notes

1 Original title, “Perro tigre.”

Universidades

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Dossier

Violencia en las universidades latinoamericanas

Martha Eugenia Delfin Guillaumin

La crisis de la universidad venezolana y el imaginario de la paz
(2000-2016)

José Pascual Mora García

Violencia y universidad en la República Argentina.

El caso de la Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, 1966-1983

María Cristina Vera de Flachs

Represión, control y disciplinamiento en la Universidad de
Buenos Aires
durante la última dictadura (1976-1983)

Guadalupe A. Seia

Espacios en disputa: universidades, conflicto y polarización
política

en Nicaragua

Kristina Pirker

Una petición comedia y dos respuestas. La universidad
colonial de Guadalajara

y el libertador Miguel Hidalgo

Gabriela Ruiz Briseño y Armando Martínez Moya

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