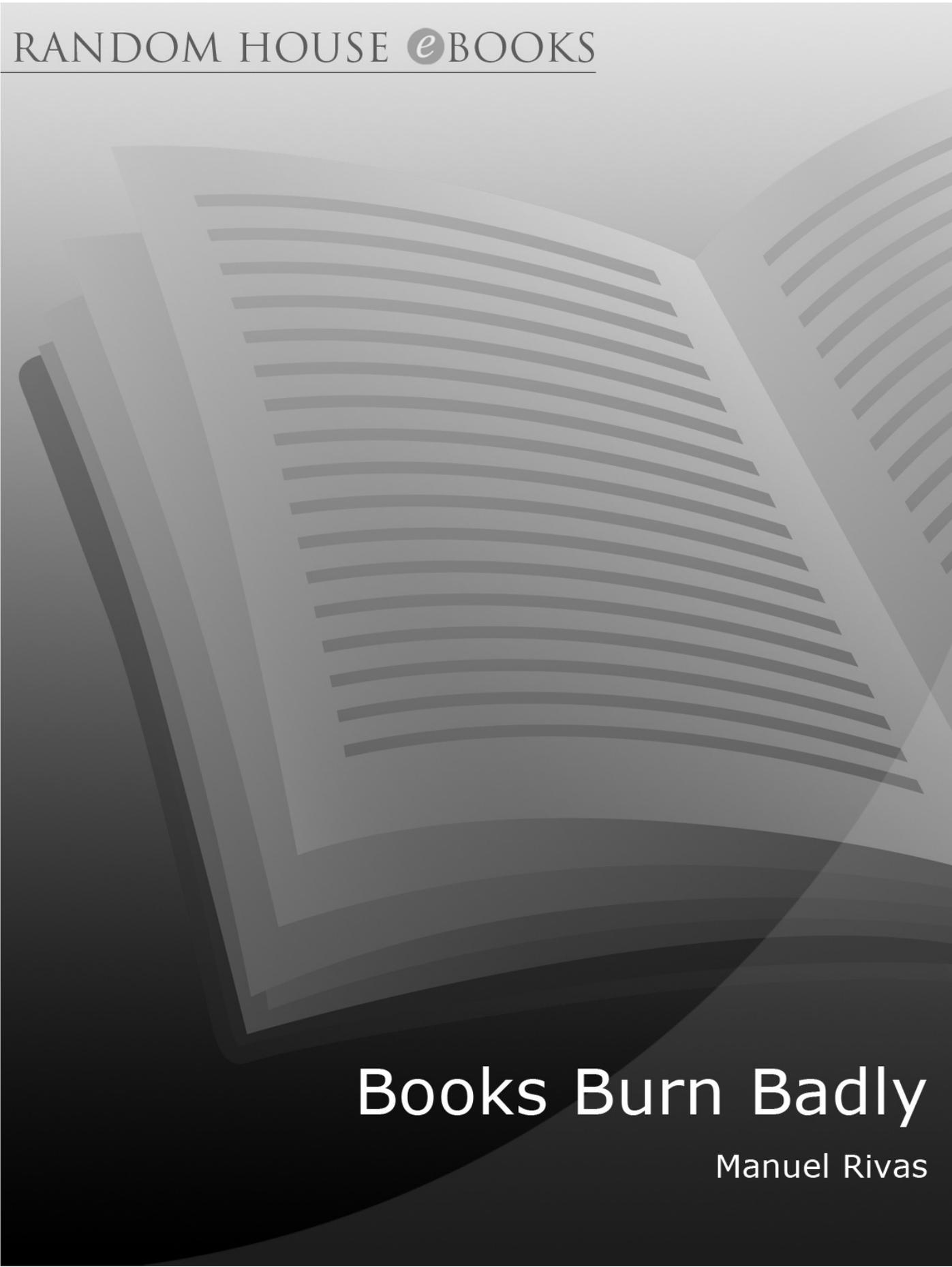

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Books Burn Badly

Manuel Rivas

Table of Contents

Cover

Copyright

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Dedication

Author's Acknowledgements

Books Burn Badly

1. The Water Marks
2. The Night of the Moths
3. The Newspaper Seller
4. The Breadcrumb
5. The Matador
6. The Burning Books
7. The Books' Burial
8. The Invisible Man
9. I'll Just Go and See Who It Is
10. The Rabble and Providence
11. *Natura Est Maxima in Minimis*
12. Live Phosphorus
13. Open Body
14. Dead Man's Slap
15. The Doorknocker
16. The Street Singer
17. The Lead Locomotive and the Flying Boat

18. Dez and Terranova

19. Curtis' Second Fight

20. The White Roses

21. The Prickles of Words

22. Grandpa Mayari's Cane

23. O and Harmony

24. Chimpanzee Language

25. The Strategy of Light

26. The Urchin Woman

27. *Jolies Madames!*

28. The Apprentice Taxidermist

29. The 666 Chestnuts

30. The Gravedigger

31. King Cintolo's Cockroach

32. Acetylsalicylic Acid

33. The Witch's Kiss

34. Pinche's Bike

35. The Woman at the Window

36. The Judge's Drawer

37. *The Mysterious Outsider*

38. *The Yoke Collector*

39. The Supplier of Bibles

40. *I Was Forsook*

41. The Bramble Sphere

42. The Unfalling Leaves

43. The Star and *Romantic the Horse*

44. *The Prohibited*

45. The Championship for God

46. The Photos

47. The Paúl Santos Smile

48. The Inhabitants of Emptiness

49. The *Diligent's* Ball

50. The Roswell Man

51. The *Chemin Creux*

52. O and Famous Men

53. The Phosphorescent Diver

54. Your Name

55. The Price

56. Élisée's Book

57. *Nel blu dipinto di blu*

58. Banana Split

59. Montevideo's Cabin

60. *The Song of the Birds*

61. Leica and Silvia

62. *A Dramatic History of Culture*

63. 'A Sacred Feast'

64. The Compulsive Writer

65. The Lighthouse's Novel

66. O and Animals

67. The Portuguese Architect

68. The Hotel of Mirrors

69. The Lights Going Out

70. The Denunciation

71. The Notebook

72. A Load of Suspicion

73. Judith

74. The Whale's Belly

75. The Tachygraphic Rose

76. Ren's 'Museum'

77. Blue Mist

78. The Arrest

79. Popsy's Delivery

80. The Lucky Gambler

81. Disguises

82. The Camden Town Fire-Eater

83. Felicity of Expression

84. The Medal

85. Purple Rain

86. *Coccinella septempunctata*

87. Working for Eternity

88. Bigarreus

89. You I Can

90. Something Special

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Also by Manuel Rivas

FICTION

The Carpenter's Pencil

Butterfly's Tongue

Vermeer's Milkmaid

In the Wilderness

POETRY

From Unknown to Unknown

For Ant3n Pati3o Regueira, naturalist and book-collector, in memoriam.



Burning of books by the Falangists, Coruña Docks, 19 August 1936

'The future is surely uncertain: who can say what will happen? But the past is also uncertain: who can say
what happened?'

Antonio de Machado, *Juan de Mairena*

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Paco, Sabela and Felicitas.

Sol and Martiño.

Isa.

BOOKS BURN BADLY

Translated from the Galician by Jonathan Dunne

Manuel Rivas

Harvill Secker
LONDON

The Water Marks

At first, he bothers me. He's young. I don't know him. It happens sometimes. They get in the way. I was watching out for the tango singer who appeared on stage at the invitation of Pucho Boedo of the Oriental Orchestra. In a white suit and a red cravat. *Please welcome a friend of mine who sings like the sea rocked to sleep by the lighthouse: Luís Terranova . . .* A real looker. Even more so when he opened his mouth. All his childish features vanished and his bones stood out. It was 'Chessman', about someone who's been sentenced to death. I'd never heard a tango sung like that. It was as if he'd just composed it, was making it up. *It's ten and the clock chimes as I take a step into God's time.* Would you believe the time was right? That was at the dance in San Pedro de Nós. I don't remember now, but I think even the musicians stopped playing. That summer, I went with Ana and Amalia to the different fairs, hoping to hear him again, but he'd disappeared. I would have been singing the tango by the river – *My steps are books, the Lord's passion; my rest a chair the world put there* – and with a bit of effort I finally managed to compose his figure in the water. I know it's cheating. But I also have the right to evoke some images, not just to wait for those that turn up.

Like this one. This one came of its own accord.

He's a soldier. At first, I'm a little shocked. He seemed a bit of a monster. So young and in uniform. Smooth-faced. Baby-faced except for the lips, which are fleshy and more forward than his other features. Maybe the mouth hangs open like that when it's in the water, against the current. He looks at me with curiosity. And a sad smile. He has a round face, like those in our family. He's blond. The water is golden not from the sun's rays, but maybe because of his blondness. I enjoy the figures' company, but I don't like it when they stare. I drop the garment I'm washing in their direction, slowly, not to smash the image, but so that it fades away, lurks under a pebble, has a chance to hide in the reeds.

But this time I don't. This time, I let it be.

A baby-faced soldier with a man's look. A smooth-faced soldier. In a trenchcoat with big buttons and a stiff collar. Framed by a circle of water. His arms are crossed and he wears a badge on his left sleeve. A man's look, that's right. He looks at me without pride, but also without pity. It's what they do, the water figures. They come and see, look when you look.

I asked Mum about him.

I asked her about the young soldier.

She pretends not to hear me.

Slap, slap! Cloth on stone.

I think Mum would prefer not to know about my figures. Maybe she has enough with her own. I notice she avoids shaking the clothes out by the river when she sees me gazing into the water. I think they always move, change looks along the river, because they're extremely restless. When one disappears for a while, it's probably off somewhere in her circles. That's what happened to the boxer. The boxer hung around here for a while, on my part of the river, and then left. I reckon he went to where she washes since Polka told me the boxer liked women who worked in the local factories.

But she pretends not to see my figures, and I pretend not to see hers.

'What's that?'

'A soldier, a baby-faced soldier.'

'There's been more than one soldier,' she said. Slap, slap!

'Right. The one I'm talking about is smooth-faced and blond. And smiles. Or sort of, anyway.'

'You mean Domingos,' she finally replied, 'who died at Annual in 1921. The one with the tubes on his face.'

laughter.'

~~The figure smiled. It was him, the one with the tubes of laughter.~~

'He always smiled,' said Olinda. 'Smart as garlic, but weak. Sickly. Our mother, Grandma Dans accompanied him to the recruiting office.

"This lad's no good for war," she told them.

'And one of them replied, "Everyone's good for war, if not for killing, then for dying."

'One day he wrote a letter, saying he had responsibility for the tubes of laughter, the name they gave the radio operators' poles. He'd carry the radios on the back of a mule. And he learnt things. Said he could not understand the language of birds. All of his letters were a kind of joke. They seemed to have come not from a war, but from a comedy. They were such a joke grandma cried when we read them to her. At the end, he always put *IKTH*, which meant *I Kiss The Hand Of My Mother*. And grandma couldn't stop crying because of what he'd learnt at war.'

And then Olinda opened up. She talked about something she always avoided, about the soldiers in our family and our locality. The Philippines. Cuba. Morocco. 'Go forth and multiply as cannon fodder. An empire of bones, piled up year after year. Followed by those who died in the Civil War. What the army lost abroad they tried to reconquer at home.' That's what Olinda said. Slap, slap! The wet cloth striking against the stone seemed, in someone so taciturn, to be a way of expanding the story. Words with a layer of dust, sweat, iodine and blood, suddenly soaked, twisted, slapped, soaped, twisted, wrung out. Left in the sun. Clean. A white shirt drying. Some trousers. The wind filling the vacant clothing. At the washing place, in the crack in the wall that stops the north-easterly, there is always a robin. When the women fall silent, the robin sings. A tube of laughter. The old burying the young, according to Olinda. That's what war is.

Now there's something funny, and I don't know if it's normal or not, but I can't see myself in the water. I can see Olinda. I look sideways and see my mother both in and out of the water. She's on her knees, her body next to the washing stone. An angular woman's body. The stone seems to have been gradually worn down by the stroke of bellies. The axis in our bellies and the shape of the stone are what link the sky, the earth and the water. As she applies soap, I look sideways, first at her reflection in the water and then at her. The sun's behind her, her hair is gathered by a headscarf tied at the back of her neck, she again adopts an expression of hardness. She's hard on the inside. Her eyes give nothing away. You can see that better in the water.

The Night of the Moths

Oulton Cottage, night of 11 July 1881

‘I asked the steersman if there was any hope of saving the vessel, or our lives.

“None of us will see the morning,” he replied.’

For the second night running, old Borrow recounted the storm off Cape Finisterre. Henrietta MacOubrey, his stepdaughter, decided that this time she’d listen for as long as it took a white moth to collide with the lamp. Two white moths if the first arrived too quickly. It seemed fair enough. He was a good narrator. When he told stories, his whole body became calligraphy in motion, from the flexing of his fingers to the dilatation of his pupils. Having been a Biblical propagandist, he knew the rules of suspense. And that’s why he advanced in stages, subtly, without committing excesses, because he loved to invent, but he despised anything that smacked of implausibility as much as fanatical truth. So he wasn’t telling the story for the second time, but getting a little closer, with inflamed accuracy, to that storm with hurricane winds on the night of 11 November 1836, off Cape Finisterre, the world’s rockiest coastline.

He’d been excitable of late. Spring had been delayed, so summer came to Oulton Cottage like a frenzied agitator. The dwelling was festooned with the modest exuberance of fuchsias, gypsy flowers he called them, poking through the windows like prodigious Lepidoptera. An ardent atmosphere of drones and pollen made use of each crack and charged in, ready to deliver its message. Inside, everything seemed to hang on his renewed magnetism and to breathe a sigh of relief after the winter episode of a grumpy, prostrate Borrow. In the grip of a repulsive current he himself didn’t recognise. Now things were different. He received a few visitors, the occasional gypsy friend who couldn’t tell the time, a virtue Henrietta found annoying. But the old gypsies behaved as if Borrow, the tireless traveller, the polyglot, the youth who could cover a hundred and twenty miles in a day on a pint of beer and two apples, had come back to look after them. Lavengro they called him, which meant *wordsmith*. Spirited Lavengro never failed to return.

‘Lavengro,’ he whispered.

Henrietta glanced at the window in case something was moving beyond the fuchsias.

‘There’s no one there.’

‘A terrible winter,’ he said. ‘Forgive my hedgehog’s tenderness.’

Henrietta thought nothing is quite so tiring as an old person’s excitability. More tiring than tiredness itself. Borrow bravely resisted the temptation to go to bed and spent most of the time tied to his desk, like a helmsman at the wheel, he said. He would read Scripture with the severity of someone threading the needle of eternity or start writing feverishly. But from time to time, which upset his stepdaughter, who suffered from what is sometimes termed caretaker’s syndrome, Borrow would leap up in a fit of madness and take to the road, calling out for his gypsy friends, offering to let them camp in the garden, or begin to recite the poems of Iolo Goch and Dafydd ab Gwilym in the rain, natural prayers he himself had translated from the Welsh.

For the second night running, he went back to Finisterre. Henrietta had had a long day, but she still wanted to listen to the old man, who drew strength and a Biblical voice from the night. She didn’t find such a description irreverent, something must have stuck after so many years travelling on the road with the Word of God. Though Borrow still joked about himself when he appeared to adopt too missionary a tone. ‘Heavens above, I sound like a prophet of doom. Or a St Lupus!’

Henrietta could see the storm at Finisterre in the camera obscura of Borrow’s eyes thanks to the light and

shade in his voice. She saw herself as a moth attracted by the thunder and lightning of the story. The first moth.

George Borrow was convinced that the description of the storm, included in his book *The Bible in Spain* was one of his finest literary achievements. The act of writing it had been like a second storm with gusts of wind and immense waves. He dipped his pen in the chaos of the inkpot, scratching the words in the belief that writing fast would create an inflammatory style. But now it was his translations, the murmur of youthful verses, that stirred his memory:

*The wild Death-raven, perch'd upon the mast,
Scream'd 'mid the tumult, and awoke the blast.*

The sickly steamer left London along the Thames, put in at Falmouth and finally departed with a crowd of passengers suffering from tuberculosis, fleeing from the cold blasts of England's winter in search of some sun further south. This time he gave the story an ironic twist Henrietta hadn't heard before, which referred to the state of the ship's engine: the boat was consumptive as well. This became obvious right from the start. Henrietta knew all the details, she'd heard the story before, but she still liked it when Borrow used the image of cathedrals to describe the clouds of spray and foam. 'The right ship for the time and place,' said Borrow ironically. And he added, 'With the ideal steersman.' The day before, he'd made mention of the captain, a person picked up in a hurry, who took the vessel too close to the shore, but to whom he attributed the utmost coolness and intrepidity, as he did to the rest of the crew. However, the only voice that speaks for itself in the story is that of the steersman. 'In less than an hour,' he says, 'the ship will have her broadside on Finisterre, where the strongest man-of-war ever built must go to shivers instantly.'

He had written, and was about to repeat, how a horrid convulsion of the elements took place and the dregs of the ocean seemed to be cast up, but in the end he said, 'Thank God for lightning. It's good for swearing!'

In a flash of lightning, he saw Cape Finisterre and swore he'd come back with a book of Holy Scripture in thanksgiving. Had the darkness been complete, there'd have been no way of reacting, of putting up resistance. Had the lightning not intervened, with the engine dead and the ship being tossed like a feather, the crew might not have committed the apparently absurd act of hoisting the sails in the face of impending destruction, just as the wind, without the slightest intimation, veered right about.

'I went back. I kept my promise. And there I met Antonio de la Trava, to whom I gave a copy of the New Testament, the only one I ever dedicated.'

The first moth collided with the lampshade. It had a white, hairy head and the uncannily human features of some moths. The savage, stubborn, suicidal collision gave Henrietta a start and she resolved not to stare beyond the second.

'Spain is not a fanatic country, but life there can hang on a single word.'

Henrietta forgot the moth and smiled. She loved this episode in which Borrow, being mistaken for the leader of the Spanish fanatics, Don Carlos himself, and on the verge of being shot by the liberals or *negros* on the Atlantic coast, was saved *in extremis* during questioning, when proof of his innocence was the way he pronounced the word 'knife'. "'Knife'? Did he say "knife"? The man's innocent,' declared Antonio de la Trava, the valiente of Finisterra, knife in hand. As Borrow went into details, Henrietta laughed so much she had to rub her eyes.

'In Madrid, we printed five thousand copies of the New Testament. Soon after I arrived, in May 1837, I distributed a large number myself through Spain by hand. Otherwise they'd have rotted in some dungeon, some of them did a year later, when I was arrested and it was forbidden to sell or circulate the New

Testament. The Papists didn't want the people reading the Gospel! The Vatican assigned Spain the role of butcher and always kept the people apart from the Word of God. A scandal that was never talked about. In the most Catholic country in the world, people were afraid to buy the Holy Scriptures. You could see the nostrils quivering when I put a book in their hands. They could smell the flames of the Inquisition.'

'There's one thing I didn't understand today or yesterday,' said Henrietta. 'Did you actually sign the Holy Scriptures?'

'Not sign. It was an act of thanksgiving, a bold step I never repeated. I wrote a dedication: "For Antonio de la Trava, the valiente of Finisterra". And then my signature. The man saved my life. And there's no denying that whoever saves a life saves mankind. You're inclined to agree with the Talmud, especially when it's you being saved. I presented him with the book on a night like this. He'd escorted me to the town of Corcuvion, to the house of the head alcalde, a conceited man who laughed at me for travelling with the New Testament. Antonio, however, was moved. He told me he would read the Word of God when the wind blew from the north-west, preventing their launches from putting to sea. I think he was a little merry. He'd been drinking brandy during my interview with the alcalde. He addressed me as captain and told me, when the next came to Finisterre, to come in a valiant English bark, with plenty of contrabando on board. He was clearly a liberal through and through.'

A second moth crashed into the lamp. A huge, white-haired saturniid. The moths first banged against the window and then found their way in with the breeze, together with the scent of lavender.

'I'm going to bed,' said Henrietta. 'You should do the same.'

It was the month of July 1881. Summer had irrupted into the old man's body. Now, having told the story of the storm at Finisterre, he seemed to have calmed down. He took a few unsteady steps towards his desk, wanting to translate some Armenian poems.

'Good night,' said Henrietta.

'Knife!' he answered.

The Newspaper Seller

16 June 1904

His. He thought it was his. Just as a new swarm, when it leaves the hive and takes to the air with the queen belongs to whoever catches it. He'd caught a newspaper dated 16 June 1904. Today's newspaper. He was in the docks, on his way to the far end of the Iron Quay, it being about time he embarked, when the newspaper flew in front of him. The sluggish flight of newspapers that haven't been read yet, pursued by the seagulls' mocking calls. Not since his childhood had he been able to let a printed piece of paper take off like that. Others went after bird nests or bats, but he, Antonio Vidal, went after printed matter. Anything would do so long as it had writing on it. Even toilet paper, strips cut up with no respect for the columns' order, so he'd soon learnt not only to read, but to put the pieces back together. Which helped him to see the world. To spot what was missing.

Antonio Vidal trapped the newspaper by stepping on its wings. He then picked it up and folded it. Calmed it down. The newspaper was no longer alone, it now had someone to read it. It contained news of important events. A Greek freighter had sunk off the Lobeira Isles in the Corcuviu estuary. There'd been much fog the members of the crew had been unable to see each other on deck. This was followed by reports of adulterated wine, fishing with dynamite . . . But his eyes were drawn to the section of Telegrams. He had an instinct for the latest news.

MADRID 15 (23 h.) Parliament extremely dull today. Most MPs went to the bullfight.

'What? You collecting stories from the ground?'

A strange apparition with a sunlike halo appeared before him. A woman carrying birds on her head. What in fact she was carrying in her basket were newspapers flapping their wings in the sea breeze. The young girl held out her arm, demanding what was hers, with a magnetism in her fingers. Who could say no, it doesn't belong to you, to someone carrying the weight of the news? He handed back the newspaper and was about to leave when she set down her basket and arranged all the headlines in an extraordinary fan. He stood there while she hawked the news. He'd heard all kinds of things being sold before, animals and fruit at the fairgrounds. He'd heard a blind man sing. But never a girl hawking fresh news.

'What? You going to take the lot?'

His whole body started. He hadn't been expecting to run into a newspaper seller who was only a girl, early teens at the most, but who spoke like a fully grown woman. She spoke in a way that guarded her body and was dressed like the local fishwives. She might end up selling fish too. If he could contain his surprise, Antonio Vidal might end up seeing fish in that basket. A basket that could carry strawberries and cherries, sea urchins and sardines, depending on the season. But now she was hawking the news in a singsong voice that made her the city centre. If she changed position, the centre would also move.

'Is your hand stuck? Don't you know how to tell the time?'

Her last question brought Antonio Vidal back to reality. Over their heads was a scoffing sky, the seagulls' mocking calls. He counted on his fingertips in his pocket. He'd spent a large amount buying his uncle's 'Doctor Ayala's Asian Tonic' and 'The Miraculous Zephyr', inventions that were supposed to stop you going bald. He felt he was being guided with a healthy vengeance by his mother's ghost because in Sucesores de Villar he also bought 'Carmela's Miraculous Waters', a lotion to prevent your hair going grey and to restore

its natural colour. His mother insisted, 'As a boy, he had a receding hairline.' And added, 'A receding conscience as well.' There she stopped and he never wanted to find out more about Uncle Ernesto's receding conscience. In Havana, he had helped to set up a modern school in Cruceiro de Airas and from the pulpit was rumoured the emigrants had turned into 'Masons, Atheists and Protestants' and were trying to corrupt children. 'You can't be all things at once,' observed Antonio Vidal. 'You can't be what?' 'A Mason, an Atheist and a Protestant, you can't be all three things at once.' 'You shut up, what do you know?' his mother Matilde, told him. 'Say hello to Uncle Ernesto and then get on with your work, unless you want to end up with a receding hairline too. And don't go wasting your money.'

'Do you need a bullet extractor?' asked the newspaper seller.

'What for?'

'For your coins.'

Antonio Vidal scabbled in his pocket. What he was really looking for were not coins, but some quick, light-footed, low-denomination words to get him out of a tight situation.

'I'll take one today,' he said. And then thought better, 'No, two. Give me the one that was flying away.'

'Lucky me!' she commented ironically. 'I found myself a tycoon to support me!'

'I'm off to Cuba, on the steamer *Lafayette*.'

'How I'd love to own a news-stand in Havana's Central Park.'

'What do you know about Havana?'

'Everything. Or almost everything. As if I'd been a rich lady sitting in the colonnade of the Inglaterra Hotel. When you get off the boat, don't go up Prado Avenue. People will laugh at you. And anyone laughing at your accent and beret is a Galician who arrived before and now has a white suit and a dancing white hat. Don't go up Prado Avenue at least until you've got yourself a white suit.'

The whippersnapper handing out advice. She really seemed like a chatterbox now. Talking nineteen to the dozen, words spilling out of her mouth. All that talking made her look smaller. Vidal decided he'd wasted quite enough time. He forgot about walking to the end of the Iron Quay. He still had to visit his boarding house and the General Transatlantic Company.

'I'm in a hurry,' said Antonio Vidal. He folded the two newspapers under his arm and left her gawping.

'Keep them, take them with you!' she shouted seriously, sensing his distrust. 'They'll each open a door for you, you'll see.'

She was going to add, 'I can't come tomorrow. Tomorrow I have to collect clay on Lapas Beach.' But she didn't, he was far away by now. Who cared whether she came tomorrow or not? He hadn't even asked her name.

Antonio Vidal felt ridiculous with his bottle of 'Asian Tonic' and other lotions to stop your hair falling out. Uncle Ernesto had a full head of hair and a stylish haircut. 'What you looking at? You like my hair?' He took it off. 'Here you go, a genuine wig imported from New York. The best there is. Made from the hair of a virgin Amazonian Indian.' Having arrived in Havana after a two-week crossing, he still wasn't sure whether his uncle was joking or being serious. But the thick, black wig shone in his hands like jet. 'This is where progress is, don't forget,' Ernesto told him, 'you're the one coming from behind.' Yes, he was coming from behind. What's more, on the steamer *Lafayette*, having got over his seasickness, he spent almost all the time astern, watching the ship's wake and reading the newspapers the girl had sold him. He read them from top to bottom every day of the fourteen the journey lasted, enough to learn everything by heart, including the chapter in the literary supplement that came with *El Noroeste*. He'd read the supplement with the chapter from *Anna Karenina* so often it seemed the most real part of the whole newspaper. "Here, if you please," he said, moving on one side with his nimble gait and pointing to his picture, "it's the exhortation to Pilate

Matthew, chapter xxvii,” he said, feeling his lips were beginning to tremble with emotion. He moved away and stood behind them.’ Everything he knew about the painter Mihailov was in that chapter, but it was enough, he thought. From this fragment, he’d built up a picture of the novel and was convinced it would be extremely similar to the one the Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, had written. Standing astern, he felt a bit like Mihailov. The newspaper, the ship’s wake, mirrored his guilt. He couldn’t get the girl out of his mind, with her basket of newspapers flapping their wings in the sea breeze.

This newspaper would end up in the hands of an even more elegant friend of his uncle’s. There was Fermín Varela in the portico of the Inglaterra Hotel, devouring the pages of *El Noroeste*. Uncle Ernesto was reading it over Varela’s shoulder, a glint in his eyes. Artificial wine? Fishing with dynamite? MPs at a bullfight? He looked at him as if he were to blame. After all, Antonio was the last to arrive. ‘Is ours a country or a scorpion?’

‘What can you do?’ asked Fermín Varela.

‘A bit of everything.’

‘I like the sound of that,’ said Varela.

‘That’s the good thing about being born in the sticks,’ observed Uncle Ernesto. ‘You learn a bit of everything.’

‘Can you fire a gun?’

He couldn’t. But he said he could.

‘Can you give orders?’

‘Give orders?’

‘I mean, can you tell other men what to do?’

He was asking very difficult questions. Antonio Vidal had never thought about that, about the possibility of telling others what to do. He’d come in search of a job. He could work hard, without stopping. But giving orders was something else.

‘He’ll soon learn, Varela,’ Ernesto intervened. ‘There’s nothing that can’t be learnt.’

‘What do you want to do?’

He tried to suppress it, but a voice replied for him, ‘Own a news-stand in Central Park.’

They burst out laughing. They hadn’t been expecting such a remark. But then Varela said, ‘It’s not such a bad idea. I like it, Vidal, I like it. You’ve got potential. The future lies in Vedado, that’s the golden rectangle. But for now your fate’s a little further off. I can offer you a job in Mayarí. Go and work for my wife. A bit of everything, like you say. She’ll teach you how to give orders. She’s a real field marshal!’

Varela spoke with a mixture of irony and boredom.

‘Are you not coming, sir?’ asked Vidal.

‘It’s time for me to be dirty. I’m fed up of the provinces, my Galician friend. I feel like the people of Havana, now I can’t stand the countryside. You’ll feel the same one day.’

‘I come from a village, Mr Varela, well, a crossroads actually.’

‘There you go. But who do you think fills the music halls, gets their shoes cleaned twice a day here, in the colonnade of the Inglaterra, has a drink in the square? We all got off the Central Train, so to speak. And we don’t want to go back. Work hard and you’ll earn enough money to put a wrought-iron news-stand right in the middle of Central Park, next to the *Diario de la Marina*, and still have enough to build yourself a house on Seventeenth Street.’

‘What kind of work is it?’ he asked his uncle when they were alone.

‘It’s a large estate with wood and cattle in Mayarí,’ replied Ernesto. ‘Remember giving orders also means shutting up. His wife will expect you to give orders and to obey them. She’s the really rich one. And there’s something he didn’t tell you. She’s an educated woman. Reads books and the like. Even prefers them to

Varela. What was that about a news-stand in Central Park?’

‘I don’t know. It just came out like that.’

He had a day to make up his mind. Antonio Vidal sat on a bench on Prado Avenue. He was wearing his new linen white suit for the first time and now belonged to the people of light. He’d looked at it from different angles, but realised his principal misgiving was this: he’d just arrived and didn’t want to leave Havana. The second newspaper was spread out on his thighs. He started thinking again about the cynical painter Mihailevich in *Anna Karenina* and the girl with the basket of newspapers on her head by the Iron Quay in Coruña Harbour.

‘What?’

The dark boy’s head had eclipsed the sun.

‘Can you spare a sheet?’

‘What do you want it for?’

‘To make a hat.’

‘Can you make paper hats?’

‘I can’t, but the teacher can,’ said the boy, pointing to a bench further down, where there was a group of schoolchildren accompanied by a young woman who was waving to the boy to come back.

‘Is that your teacher?’

‘That’s right. She’s the one who makes hats. They’re great, just like boats.’

‘Here you go. Take the whole newspaper.’

From the bench, he watched the teacher make hats until there was no more paper. She folded the sheets in a special way. It was true, they did look more like boats than hats. When the schoolchildren came past, what he saw was a procession of figureheads.

‘Thank you, sir,’ said the teacher as she passed.

Sir? He bowed in reply. And then, without trying to stop it, he heard the voice say, ‘Excuse me, madam. It’s very hot today. You wouldn’t have a spare paper boat, would you?’

‘Here,’ she smiled. ‘Take mine.’

The Breadcrumb

July 1936

‘Say Mass for us, Polka!’

The stone cavities looked like thrones, granite chairs. Francisco Crecente, or Polka, the only one who wasn't naked, climbed to the highest rock of the hill-fort's Ara Solis, with a nostalgic sigh spat out the last cherry pip, made the sign of the Cross and mumbled, ‘*In principio erat Verbum.*’

‘Can't hear you!’ protested Terranova. ‘Louder!’

Polka felt the sun pricking his eyes. He shielded them with his hand and almost glimpsed what he was looking for. Down the slope, next to the stream, clothes were spread out like a happy graft of people on nature. He stretched out his arms and his preacher's voice rolled down the hillside on the sun's rays, ‘*Et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt, etc., etc.*’

The second Sunday in July was full of light. There was no trusting that vertiginous sky, the door of all the storms in the Azores, even in midsummer. But this time the mission had been successful. Polka was pleased and proud. They'd accepted his proposal. It was his village. And today it had the feel of paradise.

Everything was a gift of the sun and the landscape didn't seem to want to keep anything back. He was on top of the world. These ruins were the city's first settlement, a fortified mount, at a safe distance from the sea. Between Ara Solis and Hercules Lighthouse, up on the isthmus, there was a visual axis. Anyone at Polka's position could experience that geological view. The city had been reborn from the sea, had surrounded the great Atlantic rock and become a palafitte on the sands and mudflats, making up ground on the bay's belly, with the sensuality of gardens and buildings whose foundations were glass. The sea today was a kind of mirror and Polka thought the second Sunday in July was a true gift and deserved a blessing.

‘A divine office, Polka, if you please!’

Holando had read out the ten commandments of naturism. As they lay sunbathing, naked on the warm rocks, which were carpeted in velvet moss and golden lichen, the cherry pendulum hanging over their lips measuring time from outside in, everything that was said sounded like the flowering of reason. The fourth commandment: ‘Thou shalt not forget to bathe every day in cold water’. This got a boo. ‘Where's the prophet from?’ ‘Dr Nigro Basciano is from Brazil.’ ‘That explains it.’ As for the rest, they were in agreement. Until the tenth one: ‘Thou shalt not eat meat or murder the poor animals, but be merciful to them. *Mens sana in corpore sano. Finis. Amen.*’

There was a pause, which lasted as long as the cherries.

‘After the celebrations you mean!’ exclaimed Polka finally.

‘What?’

‘All that being merciful to animals.’

‘You treat everything as a joke,’ said Holando. ‘Slaughterhouses are a horrific spectacle. Go down to Orzán when there's a slaughter. The sea stained with the blood of animals. It's a prehistoric shame. Cows should be sacred here as well.’

‘That's why we eat them,’ intervened Anceis, who rarely spoke. Aurelio Anceis was serious and thoughtful. When he did speak, he seemed to regret it afterwards. He was about to leave for Pasai San Pedro to join the Basque cod-fishing trawler. He had only two days. He was also a poet. A secret poet. He'd started writing what he called ‘SOS poems’ in the wake of the seafaring poet Manoel Antonio, the avant-garde author of *From Four to Four*. He hadn't published any even in his friends' newspaper *Brazo y Cerebro*. One of the fe

people he showed them to was Arturo da Silva. He saw a connection between writing poems, as I understood it, and boxing.

‘Just like Christ,’ he added.

‘I don’t understand the comparison,’ replied Holando.

‘Why did people want Barabbas released and Christ crucified? It was, so to speak, a question of gastronomic quality. Who to eat. The divine tastes better. A kind of homoeopathy. The cult of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Holy Week with its celebration of Calvary and the Crucifixion. The Sacrament of Communion. The need to feed on what’s sacred. Greek singers ate crickets, the athletes ate grasshoppers.’

He heard them laugh and blinked. He’d made them laugh, no one had imitated his voice. His friends were laughing. They were good fun. They talked of revolution as if it were a party. For days now, they’d been preparing a trip to Caneiros. There was going to be a special train. Then they’d take boats up the Mandeo’s sparkling waters to the heart of the forest. There’d be libertarian speeches, plenty of food and music, lots of music. It was a beautiful day, heaven on earth, it was a sin not to be happy. So he said:

‘Sorry.’

Actually he was thinking about a poem in which words were crumbs of bread on an oilskin tablecloth. He hadn’t slept all night; for the first time, his body seemed aware it would soon leave land on a long journey. The fingers of silence, working like moth wings, had polished rounded breadcrumbs with the inflamed accuracy of the beads of an astral rosary. One of those rounded crumbs was the sun on that second Sunday in July.

‘Sorry, Holando.’

‘You’ve nothing to be sorry about. What I’m saying is we don’t have to sacrifice animals in order to survive. In a more civilised society, there’d be more than enough food. It’s in the richest countries where most animals are sacrificed needlessly. Do you know why the buffalo almost died out on the great American prairies? Because of its tongue. The Indians used everything; wholesale slaughter was down to the white man. Buffalo tongue was a fashionable dish in New York restaurants. Buffalo Bill was a killing machine, an industrial-scale hunter. He’s said to have killed more than three thousand buffaloes in a day singlehandedly.’

‘Three thousand?’

They gazed out over the ripe Elviña valley and on to Granxa by the River Monelos. Three thousand were a lot of buffaloes. At that time, at the turn of the century, four million buffaloes were being slaughtered each year. Four million tongues. With the bones, they could have built another Wall of China. They lacked monumental imagination.

‘Holando’s right,’ said Arturo da Silva. ‘That really would turn things upside down if we stopped being carnivorous. You know what the monks of Oseira used to do during Lent, when it was forbidden to eat meat. They’d drop pigs in the river and then fish them out with nets. The farmers, who couldn’t get a whiff of bacon for fear of being excommunicated, went to the abbot to protest, but the abbot replied, “Anything in a net counts as fish!”’

Galicia’s lightweight champion put his head and elbows on the mossy ground and stretched his legs athletically up in the air. Head down, he said, ‘I need a steak for boxing.’

Terranova approaches him. He walks comically, like a barefoot Chaplin, carrying a stalk of hay like an imaginary stick, and points with it at the champ’s penis while reciting a classic line from his dockside repertoire: ‘I am that vast, secret promontory you Portuguese call the Cape of Storms.’ Arturo can’t stand being tickled with the straw and can’t help laughing at the irony. He jumps to his feet and chases after Terranova, who’s already cleared a gorse bush, scaled a crag and is standing on top like a statue on its plinth. He covers and uncovers himself with his hands, ‘O thou, Great Prick, who art fallen low! *Lurdo Columnata!* Poor bacon of mine cured in Carrara marble.’

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