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August Rain: A Translation of a Novel by Francisco Álvarez

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Francisco Álvarez

August Rain: “Who Fired the Shot that Killed Buenaventura Durruti?”

Translation by William Egan

To Margot, who made the world a better place every day she lived in it.

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Introduction to the English Edition

Historical Context

At around four in the afternoon on June 4, 1923, a black car pulled into the Terminillo estate, a finca located on the outskirts of Zaragoza and home to St. Paul's School and Orphanage. From the surrounding underbrush, two unnamed gunmen emerged and fired thirteen shots, one of which pierced the heart of the vehicle's most dignified occupant. Cardinal Archbishop Juan Soldevila y Romero, the founder of the school, senator of Tarazona, and leader of the Spanish episcopate, died instantly. Local officials were struck with fear, and the working class, jubilant. The following morning, the Madrid-based newspaper *La Acción* attributed the crime to Los Solidarios, a band of anarchist terrorists led by a young man named Buenaventura Durruti (Paz 3). A new, fearless, and violent class of Spanish Anarchism was born.

Soldevila's death marked the culmination of decades of popular discontent among the Spanish proletariat. At the turn of the twentieth century, Spain's economy, political systems, and foreign policy were all in deep crisis. Poor leadership in what remained of its overseas empire, including Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, led to uprisings among the local populations. To quell the insurrections, King Alfonso XII's wife, María Cristina, the queen regent during the vacancy of the throne between her husband's death in November 1885 and the birth of their son, Alfonso XIII, in May 1886, authorized the use of force to crush Cuban and Philipino revolutionaries. Both rebellions were brutally suppressed, leading to the Spanish-American War two years later, which would effectively bring an end to Spain's colonial empire.

Instability also loomed domestically. Agriculture, a major source of Spanish income, was unproductive (compared to its Western European neighbors), its technological development was nonexistent, and its financial institutions underdeveloped (Conesa 3). The cost of living was high and workers earned close to nothing. In addition to poor living conditions, the State did little to serve its people, overspending on defense systems and the maintenance of order, including institutions such as the Spanish Armed Forces, the Civil Guard, the National Police, and the Spanish judiciary. On July 14, 1896, Buenaventura Durruti was born into this struggle.

Although his family was better off than most in the northwestern city of León at the turn of the 20th century, since Durruti could remember, he saw suffering, not only in his family, but among his neighbors. In a letter sent to his sister Rosa decades later, Durruti reflected on his youth: "Intuitively, I had already become a rebel. I think my fate was determined then" (qtd. in Paz 49).[1] However, his fate may have been decided even before he was born. Buenaventura's family members, including his uncle Ignacio and his father Santiago, both leather tanners by trade, were pioneers of the Leonese resistance movement. Santiago participated in workers' strikes and Ignacio founded León's first workers' association, located on Badillo Street.

As a teenager, Durruti began to show interest in following their footsteps. When Buenaventura turned fourteen, his grandfather, Pedro, especially fond of his grandson, encouraged Buenaventura to study in Valladolid and even offered to pay his tuition. However, Durruti declined, wanting to become a worker like his father, and shortly after, became an apprentice to the master mechanic and furious revolutionary Melchor Martínez.

While working for Martínez, Durruti learned the principles of mechanics and of socialism. One evening, when the master and his apprentice were alone, Martínez brought Durruti over to the furnace and removed some reddened iron from the forge. He began to beat

the iron while saying: “This is what you have to do. Hit the iron while it’s red hot until it takes on the form that you want…However, you must direct your blows carefully. Force alone isn’t enough. You need intelligence, so you know where to hit” (52). Durruti would never forget these words. While they were active, Los Solidarios, and their later incarnation, Los Errantes, were the most successful Spanish anarchist group, considered responsible for not only the assassination of Cardinal Soldevila, but for robberies of the national banks of Spain and Chile, and an attempt on Alfonso XIII’s life during one of his visits to Paris. Durruti knew his blows were limited and learned where and when to strike.

After two years at Martínez’s workshop, Durruti was told by his mentor that he had nothing left to teach him and urged Buenaventura to move on. Shortly after, Durruti got a job at Antonio Mijé’s shop, which specialized in assembling machines used to wash minerals from the mines. During his second year working with Mijé, Durruti, like his father before him, joined the Spanish General Union of Workers (UGT). His work and union life were deeply intertwined thereafter.

Throughout the rest of his life, Durruti was periodically on the road, either at large, in exile, or planning his faction’s next move. Following his involvement in a UGT workers’ strike in August 1917, Durruti fled to Paris and worked as a mechanic for three years before returning to Spain, just across the border in San Sebastián. While he was in Donostia, top-ranking members of the National Confederation of Labor (CNT) convinced him to travel to Barcelona to coordinate the Catalonian anarchist movement, which had suffered tremendous suppression from the state-backed Pistoleros (thugs hired by the Church to kill unionists and other notable workers). In the Catalonian capital, Durruti met many of those who would become his life-long

accomplices, including Juan García Oliver, Francisco Ascaso, and Aurelio Fernández. Together, in October 1922, they founded Los Solidarios.

However, only months after the assassination of Soldevila, the group ran into a wall. In September 1923, General Miguel Primo de Rivera overthrew the Spanish parliamentary government and seized power. Primo de Rivera's iron first threatened Durruti and his comrades, who quickly realized that the CNT lacked both the support and the funds to maintain its resistance. A year later, Durruti and Ascaso set off for Latin America, where they traveled widely, robbing banks and garnering support from Spanish emigrants. Upon their return to Barcelona in 1931, Durruti and Ascaso, reunited with García Oliver, joined the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), one of the largest Spanish anarchist organizations at the time.

Durruti worked closely with the FAI and the CNT to help the Second Spanish Republic, which had claimed power following Alfonso XIII's deposition in April 1931, to mount an armed resistance against General Francisco Franco's popular Nationalist faction. During the Battle for Madrid in November 1936, a critical moment in the Nationalist bid for power, Durruti led his militia of 4,000 men (known as La Columna Durruti) to help the Republicans defend the city. On November 19, while leading a counterattack in the Casa de Campo neighborhood of Madrid, Durruti, like Soldevila before him, died from a gunshot wound to the heart.

Yet who pulled the trigger remains a contested debate. While the anarchists immediately claimed that Durruti was gunned down by a Nationalist sniper, others offer conflicting theories. Manuel Bastos Ansart, the surgeon who treated Durruti shortly after he went down, said that "Those around him didn't hesitate to let me know that his own followers bore responsibility for his wound" (674). Durruti's lifelong partner, Émilienne Morin, suggests that he shot himself by mistake while carrying a notoriously unreliable automatic rifle. Some even believe that Soviet

leader Joseph Stalin was to blame. But despite the true cause of his death, Durruti's passing marked the end of the classic age of Spanish anarchism, and its mystery is where *Lluvia de agosto* begins.

Encountering Durruti's Story

I came across Durruti's story and the author of *Lluvia de agosto*, Francisco Álvarez, almost entirely by chance. In April 2023, during the final months of my semester studying abroad with the Institute for Field Education in Gijón (a small Spanish city located along the Cantabrian Coast), I hoped to interview a few translators to supplement my final thesis on the values and dangers of machine translation. Of the dozens of translators my internship supervisor, Rafa Gutiérrez Testón (the owner of La Buena Letra Bookstore and a contributing writer for the Asturian daily *El Comercio*), had come to know throughout his years of involvement in the Spanish literary world, he suggested that I meet with a certain Mr. Álvarez.

As I sat down to interview Álvarez, a novelist and an Italian-Spanish translator, at Café Central, a 1940s-themed bar tucked away from the nearby bustle of El Mercado del Sur, he set a short stack of books on our table. For the next hour, he explained his understanding of a faithful translation, the skills a human translator must possess to achieve such a feat, including intuition, creativity, and a "critical spirit," among other abilities, and ultimately why artificial intelligence could not yet compare (personal interview).[2] As he prepared to leave, he mentioned that the books he had brought were for me. Atop the stack was the cover of *Lluvia de agosto*, which features a profile of Durruti, his head tilted slightly downward and with a look in his eye that Álvarez would describe in a later interview as "that look of dynamite."

Besides Álvarez's generosity and his enthusiasm for literature and translation, I was interested in translating one of his works for my senior thesis for a couple of reasons. First, following the interview, he encouraged me to stay in touch in case I had any questions in the future – such correspondence would be an advantage if I were to center my thesis around one of his novels. And second, none of Álvarez's works had been adapted into English, which would afford me a chance to use the project to make a real contribution to Spanish literature in translation. But it wasn't until I read the first few chapters of *Lluvia de agosto*, one of which details the 1923 robbery of the Bank of Spain in Gijón orchestrated by Los Solidarios, that I knew that Durruti's story, and the fight for workers' rights that his character represents, would inspire me throughout my project and beyond.

Like my encounter with Álvarez, Álvarez's encounter with Durruti was also unexpected – he hadn't even entertained the idea of becoming a novelist or a translator until later in his career. Born in Gijón in 1970, Álvarez studied journalism at La Universidad Complutense in Madrid, and after earning his degree in June 1992, returned to his hometown to write for one of its competing dailies, *El Comercio*. Yet Álvarez's career took a turn in the late 1990s, when his involvement in La Insumisión, an antimilitarist movement that practiced civil disobedience to protest military conscription in Spain, would land him in a local prison for fourteen months.

During his time behind bars, Álvarez wrote his first two books – *Patiu de prisión* (Prison Yard) and *En poques pallabres* (In a Few Words), both collections of short stories that would be published in 1998 – launched a prison magazine, and organized an Asturian language course with fellow inmates. In addition to the camaraderie he developed with Los Insumisos, Álvarez also enjoyed the support of a revolutionary from beyond the grave. As he reminisced about his days in prison during a March 2024 interview (also held at Café Central), Álvarez mentioned that

the CNT had sent him a poster of Durruti, which he had hung on his cell wall. Every morning after he would wake and think to himself, “Dammit, I'm still in prison,” Álvarez would turn toward the wall and see Durruti. “It was an image that gave me the strength to carry on.”

More than 25 years later, while presenting *Lluvia de agosto* in Madrid, he asked a somewhat distracted crowd, “Did you know that Durruti and I did time together?” Those who had lost their attention quickly refocused and some even replied in disbelief, “You can’t be that old!” Then Álvarez explained: “Well, Durruti wasn’t in jail when I was there, but he was with me every day” (personal interview).

In the years following his release from prison, Álvarez resumed his work for *El Comercio*, and on occasion wrote lyrics for the Asturian rock band Dixebra at lead singer Xune Elipe’s request. Among the songs he wrote for the group was a piece dedicated to famous 20th-century bank robbers, including John Dillinger, Bonnie and Clyde, and Buenaventura Durruti’s Los Solidarios. Although the song was never performed, it motivated Álvarez to pursue a more ambitious literary project on Durruti. He had never intended or even thought he would “dare” to write a long form piece about his cellmate in spirit, but after reading Spanish anarchist and historian Abel Paz’s biography of Durruti, *Durruti en la revolución española* (1986), Álvarez began to think to himself: “Wow, there’s plenty of material here. Let’s see if I dare.”

During the summer of 2014, following the end of a serious relationship and while in between jobs, Álvarez literally “took refuge” in literature and wrote *Lluvia de agosto* in just over four months. Now, he playfully refers to that summer as his “short summer of anarchy,” a clever nod to Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s *El corto verano de la anarquía* (1971), a collage novel that chronicles Durruti’s life and struggles, using dozens of testimonies, reports, speeches, pamphlets, and memoirs. However, it is my contention that *Lluvia de agosto* sets itself from Enzensberger’s

novel, Paz's biography, and other writings about the revolutionary's life because of Álvarez's commitment to high journalistic standards, his leveraging of such standards to cultivate a cinematic writing style, and his employment of a frame narrative set decades later. These techniques allow the novel to not only analyze Durruti's character and legacy from a contemporary perspective, but also to straddle various literary genres.

Literary Analysis

But how does *Lluvia de agosto* achieve these literary goals? First and foremost, Álvarez explores Durruti's story while making a sincere effort to anchor himself to the empirical information available, especially when he describes historical events. Although Enzensberger and Paz's texts largely served as reliable sources for Álvarez's novel, there are instances in both where Durruti's character is glorified. Paz's biography (considered to be a "hagiography" by Álvarez), which is widely considered to be the most important text about Durruti's life, uses an article published in the Madrid-based daily *El Imparcial* to narrate the robbery of the Bank of Spain in Gijón (personal interview). While Durruti's men looted the vault, Luis Azcárate, the branch manager, emerged from his office on the upper floor to confront the gang – Durruti promptly warned him not to move. According to the article, "Mr. Azcárate ignored the threat and continued down the stairs. The thieves shot at him several times. One of the bullets seriously injured him in the neck" (qtd. in Paz 111). Following the article, Paz identifies some of its purported factual errors, including the severity of Azcárate's injury. Paz writes: "With respect to the bank manager, the press said that he had to give his statement to police in a first aid post because his injury was so serious," but maintains that "this is untrue (his wound was little more than a scratch)]" (qtd. in Paz 113).

However, while documenting the incident in preparation to write the novel, Álvarez found that Azcárate had died from the gunshot to his neck, fired by none other than Durruti. As he explained to me, "I saw the death notice in the press and pictures of his funeral in the [Gijón's] newspaper archive." Towards the end of *Lluvia de agosto's* third chapter, which details the robbery, Álvarez uses these primary sources to revise Paz's claim. Immediately after Durruti fires at the bank manager, we read in *Lluvia de agosto* that: "…he fell flat on the floor. Durruti, stunned, looked at the man lying at his feet, who was losing blood from one of his cheeks" (47).[3] In the following chapter, Álvarez makes an additional effort to indicate the true severity of Azcárate's wound, when Provincial Chief of Police Fermín Granados reviews his lead inspector's investigative file on the robbery. Granados fixes on a medical report that specifies Azcárate's injury, which prompts the inspector to mention that "the prognosis doesn't look good. In fact, he's already received last rites" (64).

As a longtime journalist, Álvarez has always "stuck to the hard facts" and while writing *Lluvia de agosto*, he intended to reflect "the good and the bad of [Durruti's] character" (personal interview). In my view, his honesty pays dividends, as it allows the novel to explore multiple layers of Durruti's character and the Spanish anarchist pursuit of justice. In the above-mentioned excerpts, Álvarez indirectly questions the morality of the tactics employed by Los Solidarios. Although Durruti and his comrades faced tremendous economic disparity throughout their lives, they often turned to violence to challenge the State's financial malpractice, which presents a potential conflict with their libertarian principles. This is one of the several ironies of history that are powerfully suggested by the novel.

Moreover, Álvarez's journalistic integrity humanizes the revolutionary's character. When Durruti realizes that he has likely killed the innocent Azcárate, the narrator describes the man

known for his "look of dynamite" as "stunned" and later even "disturbed" (48). He marks a contrast between Durruti the revolutionary and Durruti the man, as the man suddenly becomes vulnerable when faced with the moral implications of his actions. In displaying this moment of weakness for Durruti, Álvarez fleshes out the revolutionary's character and makes him more approachable to readers.

Another example of Durruti's glorification appears in Enzensberger's *El corto verano de la anarquía*. In his fourth commentary (titled "The Spanish dilemma"), which features a section on daily life during the Second Spanish Republic, Enzensberger includes an anecdote from Manuel Pérez, a founding father of the FAI, who recalls:

> One evening we paid him [Durruti] a visit and we found him in the kitchen…washing dishes and preparing dinner for his daughter Colette and his wife. My friend wanted to kid around with Durruti, so he said, "Come on, Durruti, this is women's work." Durruti responded gruffly, "Take this example: when my wife goes to work I clean the house, I make the beds and I cook the food… If you think that an anarchist has to be lounging around in a bar or a café while his wife works, that shows that you have understood nothing." (qtd. in Enzensberger 99).[4]

Curiously enough, the anecdote caught Álvarez's attention one day while scrolling through his Twitter feed. He came across a post that screenshotted the passage and suggested that it implied that Durruti was a feminist. "I said [to myself], 'No, Durruti was no feminist, who on earth was [really] a feminist during those times?'" (personal interview). As with his revision of Paz's portrayal of Azcárate's injury, Álvarez employs a primary source to indirectly debunk the anecdote's effort to idealize Durruti. In the novel's eleventh chapter, Álvarez recreates a real interview between Spanish writer and film director Pedro Costa Musté and Durruti's partner,

Émilienne Morin (published in *Interviú* magazine's February 12, 1977 issue), where the protagonist of the novel's frame narrative, Libertad Casal, acts as the interviewer. During the conversation, Casal asks Morin, "What was Durruti like… at home and in everyday life?" Morin replies, "He wasn't perfect, because nobody is, right?… He was one of those people who laughed inside… When he would introduce me to one of his colleagues, he used to say: 'She's just a union gal…plain and simple' And he knew that wasn't the case, but he loved to tease people, but without malice, without meaning to offend" (Álvarez 159).

Álvarez's decision to include this excerpt from Costa Musté's interview not only suggests that Durruti likely wasn't a feminist, but further develops his character. In her response, Morin communicates that Durruti didn't do the dishes every night, nor would he go drinking whenever she worked, but that in addition to having "eyes that cut like knives," he had a sense of humor (47). In portraying Durruti outside of an epic context, Álvarez affords his character nuance, which ultimately makes him more relatable and appealing to readers.

However, there are instances where empirical evidence isn't available and Álvarez must rely on his creative skills as a novelist to tell the anarchists' story. While some of his descriptions may not meet his journalistic standards, neither do they contradict them. An example unfolds in the novel's twelfth chapter, following Durruti and Ascaso's return from Latin America, when the two comrades meet to chat about their faction's next move in El Bar La Tranquilidad, a sanctuary for militant anarchists in Barcelona and, in the words of Abel Paz, "the most un-tranquil café…in Catalonia" (Paz 306). While researching the bar, Álvarez could only find photographs of its exterior, which gave him "total freedom to invent" the establishment as he pleased (personal interview).

With no concrete evidence on which to anchor himself, Álvarez opens the chapter with a completely fictional account of the bar, describing the festive gatherings it would host, the accordion player who would often perform there, and even the drinks that were sold, among other details (170-171). Yet his journalistic integrity isn't compromised by such details because they have no influence over the significant historical events involving Durruti or Los Solidarios. Álvarez reminds us that "ultimately, it's fiction" (personal interview).

Moreover, even inside these entirely fictional passages of the novel, Álvarez manages to insert historical information. In his description of the accordionist, Andreu Ormella, the narrator mentions that Ormella is seated just below a portrait of the Catalonian anarchist Francesc Ferrer, followed by a short biographical sketch of Ferrer's life (171). While no primary source can confirm that Ferrer's portrait was hung in La Tranquilidad, not only is the detail plausible, but its plausibility makes the scene feel more realistic. By inserting this detail into his description of the bar, Álvarez also takes advantage of the opportunity to educate his reader about one of the pioneers of the Spanish anarchist movement.

Álvarez's employment of factual evidence, whether to offer his reader a more realistic portrayal of Durruti or to make a fictional scene more convincing, also contributes to a cinematic experience created by his prose, especially during the novel's climatic scenes. In Chapter Two, which narrates the afternoon that Cardinal Soldevila was assassinated, Álvarez specifies not only the name of convent that the prelate had intended to visit that day, the approximate time he had arrived, and the name of his driver, but also the make, model, year, color, and plate number of the car that he rode in, and even the class, capacity, and manufacturer of the guns that the assassins had fired at the vehicle (26-28). Furthermore, he concentrates such information near the height of

these pivotal moments to maximize their impact, a strategy that allows the chapter's culminating paragraph to read, in my translation:

> One of the men, in his twenties, tall and thin… confirmed the target from the other side of the roadway: a vehicle marked with the Zaragozan plate number Z-135, chauffeur in uniform, and two passengers wearing religious vestments of differing rank… he gave his partner the signal, discreetly moving his left hand back and forth while drawing the concealed seven-round Alkar pistol with his right… When they were just over three meters away from the vehicle, they stopped, raised their weapons…, aimed with steady hands, and pulled the trigger. The bullets shattered the window panes and sparkled on the sheet metal – like the Perseids – while the Labourdette, shiny and new, colored a funereal black, shook as if it had St. Vitus' Dance. (28)

While Álvarez's prose is naturally descriptive, whether he is narrating fact or fiction, these concrete details help to transport his reader into the scene's climax by affording them specific and visible images throughout. His mention of the vehicle's plate number encourages his reader to imagine the lettering "Z-135" on the front and rear bumper of the "new," "shiny," and "funereal" black-colored Labourdette. Likewise, his reference to the "seven-round Alkar pistol" prompts his reader to envision the firearm and the length of its magazine. These details, alongside Álvarez's precise descriptions of the dignitaries' attire, the hand gestures exchanged between the gunmen, and the simile drawn between the bullets and the Perseids, offer his reader a prose that bears resemblance to a screenplay; every element of scene's climax is represented by a specific image, strategically included to absorb his reader during this pivotal moment.

A similar example occurs towards the end of Chapter Fifteen, which narrates the death of Francisco Ascaso during the July 1936 military uprising in Barcelona. Like his portrayal of

Soldevila's death, Álvarez includes specific details that bring the historical event to life, such as the precise make and model of both the truck and turret gun that the anarchists had used during their assault on the Atarazanas barracks, as well as the name of the street where Ascaso lost his life and the book stalls that were once located there. Álvarez's inclusion of such details enables the chapter's penultimate paragraph to recapture this cinematic feel:

> The vehicle, an Ebro B-35 padded from top to bottom with mattresses,…began to move at the pace of a funeral hearse…while the Hotchkiss M1914 machine gun…began to spray bullets in between convulsive movements…As it approached Santa Madrona Street, the gunfire that fell like hail from one of the barracks' sentry boxes compromised the advance…Ascaso ran into one of the booths of the used book market and waited there…to clear his mind…He didn't think twice. He ran out from behind the wooden parapet with a flaming gaze…but a gunman with olympic marksmanship…caught him in his tracks. The shot hit Ascaso right between his eyes. Death, with its mission completed, let his body dance in the air for a few tenths of a second before dropping him to the ground like a marionette whose strings that had tied it to life had been cut. (236-237)

Similar to the previous example, Álvarez deploys historical information in an effort to envelop his reader in the scene moments before its climax. His reference to the Ebro B-35, a vehicle that is likely unfamiliar to contemporary readers (because of its discontinuation in 1961), encourages them to imagine or research its appearance (*Ebro B-35 | Trucks - Vehicles*). The same could be said of the Hotchkiss M1914, a standard heavy machine gun that hasn't been in service since the 1960s (Domínguez). The cinematic moment that Álvarez establishes, not only through his incorporation of specific historical information, but also through the simile that he makes between the gunfire and hail, the metaphor of Ascaso's "flaming gaze," and his symbolic

reference to a funeral hearse, allows the paragraph's culminating sentence, which includes a striking and hauntingly graceful simile itself, to deliver an experience that leaves a lasting impression on the reader.

However, there are instances where Álvarez introduces factual evidence, and the cinematic writing style that such evidence helps him cultivate, well before the climax of a scene. An example of this transpires at the beginning of his account of the Bank of Spain robbery. The narrator opens the scene with a specific description of the vehicle used by his protagonists (an "ash-gray" Jeffery Special Model), but also mentions the date (September 1, 1923), time ("just a few minutes past nine"), and precise location of the robbery (Instituto Street) (43). Several pages later, he capitalizes on this contextual information to offer his reader a more comprehensive description of one of the scene's climactic moments – the getaway.

As the thieves pile into the vehicle with their plunder, they spot a police officer rounding the corner of Instituto Street. Moving swiftly,

> The Jeffery pulled out with its engine bellowing like a gale, as Suberviola opened fire without warning. The officer,…unaware of what awaited him around the corner, had just enough time to drop to the ground as he heard the rattle of two bullets biting into a lamppost beside the doorway of 15 Instituto Street. As the vehicle fled, it passed the officer, who from the pavement tried to draw his gun with his right hand, but his nerves forced the pistol to slip out like a live fish. He managed to collect it and still had time to fire an aimless shot that shattered the window of the shipping company, la Compañía Transatlántica Española. (48-49)

Since his reader is already familiar with the Jeffery's body style and color, Álvarez can use the first sentence of this excerpt to introduce an auditory description of the vehicle while it takes off

at full speed. Likewise, the previous reference to the bank's location on Instituto Street allows the reader to visualize where Suberviola's shots landed. Yet a key moment in *Lluvia de agosto* wouldn't be complete without a literary device. Similar to the aforementioned excerpts, Álvarez employs concrete evidence to create an environment that amplifies a simile that serves to heighten the climax of a scene.

Although this technique affords his readers a cinematic experience that has certain literary value, shortly after the novel's release in October 2016, one of Álvarez's close friends asked him a valuable question: "Is it really necessary to mention all of this information?" While Álvarez acknowledges that he could have told the anarchists' story with fewer details, he figured that since he had access to them, he might as well include them. "I like to be precise and particular…without overwhelming or boring [my reader]" (personal interview).

But perhaps the most notable difference between *Lluvia de agosto* and other texts that recreate the character of Buenaventura Durruti is the novel's highly conscious narrative structure, which supplements Álvarez's analysis of the anarchist and explores the stories of "peoples who suffered history," a theme that ultimately motivated Álvarez to transition from journalism to historical fiction (personal interview). Contrary to Enzensberger and Paz, Álvarez opens his work with a frame narrative set in the early 1980s, which features Libertad Casal, a fictional journalist absorbed by the mystery of Durruti's death. Casal's pursuit of the truth affords Álvarez's reader several contemporary perspectives on Durruti's life and the legacy that he left behind, as well as a window into the hardship faced by those who lived through one of the most violent periods in European history.

In the novel's opening chapter, Casal travels to Moscow to have an off-the-record interview with Andrés Tudela (another fictional character), a former political commissar of the

Spanish Communist Party (CPSU). Tudela, for the narrative's purposes, happened to be with a CPSU film crew that interviewed Durruti just hours before his death. Casal, hoping to coax some undisclosed information out of Tudela, asks him for his personal account of the afternoon of November 19, 1936. Although the Communist speaks only in vague terms about that particular day, he offers some of his impressions of the revolutionary. Tudela describes Durruti as a "rash man" and later even suggests that he was too brave for his own good (18-19).

While Álvarez often presents Durruti as a brave and committed figure to the anarchist movement, Tudela's critique of the revolutionary allows the reader to question his leadership style and even to consider the potential conflict his character may have posed for other anarchist leaders. However, Tudela's remarks, like Casal's investigative reporting, also underscore the significance of Durruti's legacy, as these critical assessments demonstrate that his character is worthy of curiosity and scrutiny.

Moreover, Álvarez takes advantage of the imagined interview, and of Tudela's critical nature, to indicate that the purpose of *Lluvia de agosto* isn't necessarily to solve the mystery of Durruti's death. When Casal is on the verge of asking Tudela about Durruti's killer, the aged Communist anticipates the question and answers before she can ask. Puzzled, she asks him, "You know what I was going to ask you?"

> "Yes ma'am," he answered confidently. "You'd like to know who killed Buenaventura Durruti and I haven't the slightest idea. Or maybe I do: war killed him. War, which has devastated more than a hundred million lives this century. Durruti was just another one of many victims, so many, too many…Call it luck, chance, coincidence, destiny – whatever you like. Because whatever you call it, it's the same, what's important is that you have the answer." (20)

On the one hand, Tudela's response is truthful. The cause of Durruti's death cannot be confirmed because all of its witnesses have since passed away. On the other hand, Tudela puts the revolutionary's passing into perspective, as his response asks a rhetorical question: Is Durruti's death somehow unique in comparison to the hundreds of millions of lives claimed by armed conflict throughout human history? Tudela's stance on Durruti's death implies that the significance of his life was in fact its journey, "not its destination" and more importantly, that Durruti's journey reflects those of so many others who suffered during that moment in history. Álvarez only chose to center the novel around the revolutionary because "he is the most magnetic, attractive, and appealing character of that historical process" (personal interview).

Yet Álvarez also uses the scene to explore a part of Tudela's story – the experience of a person who suffered but wasn't remembered as a hero. Before Casal probes Tudela about Durruti, she asks him about life in the Soviet Union, which prompts him to reflect on the hardships of living in the country under Joseph Stalin's regime: "I stopped sharing my opinion the day I arrived in the USSR. During the Stalin era, having a personal opinion wasn't necessarily healthy. Those who shared their own views often ended up preaching them in a Siberian gulag, and that was in the best of circumstances… Believe me, times were tough" (16-17).

While Tudela offers Álvarez's reader a limited portrayal of Soviet life during those times, he articulates the fear that he has lived with since his arrival in 1939. The novel emphasizes this fear by including an image of the notoriously cruel Soviet labor camp system, which many of Tudela's friends and colleagues likely had to endure. Furthermore, the year of Tudela's arrival in the country (mentioned a few pages earlier) deepens the reader's understanding of his suffering, as it implies that he was exiled from Spain shortly after Francisco Franco's Nationalist faction

defeated the Spanish Republican forces in April 1939 (14). Casal's encounter with Tudela, whose character doesn't return following the interview (though his voice does), allows Álvarez to both analyze Durruti from a certain distance and to enrich the novel's historical context by including an additional personal narrative.

A similar example unfolds when Casal travels to France to interview Émilienne Morin. However, Morin's relationship with Durruti introduces a more intimate perception of the revolutionary and explores some of the challenges of being his partner. When Casal asks Morin to reflect on the couple's return to Spain from Belgium in 1931, shortly after the establishment of the Second Republic (which terminated Durutti's exile order) and while she carried their daughter Colette, Morin discusses their financial difficulties but also a shift in their household dynamic, as Durruti catapulted himself back into Spanish union life:

> Those were the hardest years. Pepe [Durruti] spent more time under arrest or in prison than at home, and when he wasn't held in custody, he spent all of his time at congresses, meetings, rallies, assemblies, demonstrations.... He made it seem like he didn't care all too much about our financial troubles, and I didn't take that very well. It was difficult for him to get hired, he was on every employers' black list. We got by with the help of some comrades from the CNT, some money sent by my parents from France, and from the jobs I was able to find. (162)

Although earlier in the interview, Morin clarifies that before agreeing to live with Durruti, she had accepted that his top priority was his allegiance to the Spanish anarchist movement, she articulates certain frustrations about his commitment to their relationship. Like Tudela's criticism of the revolutionary, Morin's remarks challenge Durruti's role in the movement, but for different reasons, which lead to different questions. Instead of evaluating his leadership skills, Morin's

response questions whether Durruti's dedication to the movement compromised his ability to be a good partner or even a good father. Her perspective of Durruti further humanizes his character and offers the reader a glimpse into the complicated nature of sharing intimacy with a person who is always in certain danger, an experience toward which she expresses ambivalent feelings later in the interview.

When Casal addresses the subject of Durruti's death, Morin explains that even though she had come to accept that his life would likely end in tragedy, she was still completely unprepared for his loss:

> I had thought so many times about the possibility of him dying in a labor strike, under arrest, or when he was deported to Africa… So many times… that I didn't even think about it. But when the time came, it was tremendously difficult. And yet his funeral, in Barcelona… was a funeral that was full of life. I felt that even though they were burying a man, his ideals lived on in that crowd moving around his coffin. (164)

Despite the grief that she faced as Durruti's partner and later as his widow, Morin's response indicates her appreciation for the sacrifices he made for the anarchist movement, which ultimately, she made as well. While under financial stress, having to raise their daughter virtually on her own, and supporting Durruti regardless of his employment status, Morin made her own contributions to the movement as a writer and later as a member of the Durruti Column. In addition to offering the reader another perspective on the revolutionary and deepening the novel's historical context, Álvarez employs Morin's character to honor both the purpose of the anarchist movement and the people who gave up the little stability and security they had to fight for change.

The novel's final chapter, which marks the end of her journey to solve the mystery of Durruti's death and to deepen her understanding of his life, Casal discloses her indirect connection to the anarchist. In doing so, she not only offers Álvarez's reader her interpretation of Durruti, but also builds on her own notion of commemorating the anarchists who made sacrifices for the sake of freedom. At the beginning of the chapter, Casal reveals the identity of her mother, Rosalía (another fictional character), a nurse who served the Spanish confederal militias and, for the novel's purposes, treated Durruti while he was on his deathbed. Casal explains that in his state of delirium, caused by the fatal bullet wound, Durruti, whether he already knew or if his fading intuition had told him, asked Rosalía about the baby she hadn't yet discovered she was carrying:

> "What will you name it if it's a girl?" The question took Rosalía Casal by surprise. No one knew that she was pregnant. No one, not even her. "I don't know... Libertad is a pretty name," the nurse answered at random. For the sole purpose of pleasing a dying man. Not to take away his reason…They say that Rosalía Casal said that Durruti smiled at that moment…When he heard the girl's name. My name, the word that had given meaning to his life. And his death. (282-283)

The relationship that Casal establishes between Durruti's purpose in life and the name Libertad reinforces the solace that the revolutionary found upon hearing the child's name. In a word, it assured him that the anarchist fight for freedom would live on. Casal's likening of the word to his life also suggests that the bank robberies and assassinations executed by Los Solidarios, while morally unjust, were done in the name of freedom and that the courage of Durruti and his comrades, in the face of the harsh governance of Miguel Primo de Rivera's regime, cannot be overlooked. Moreover, Álvarez's decision to name the novel's contemporary protagonist

Libertad, a tribute to an anarchist's daughter whom he once interviewed for *El Comercio*, symbolizes the pursuit of freedom that never died among the Spanish, even during the Franco years (personal interview).

At the very end of the novel, Casal expands on her admiration for the anarchists' sacrifice and reflects on the timeless charm of their story. Her narrative concludes in her older age, following the end of her journalism career, where even then she communicates her affection for the story that never left her:

> I stopped investigating. Although I never stopped thinking about it. All of it…About their broken lives, consumed before they were complete. And about the longing for justice [that] they shared…From these green fields of Upper Normandy… on this rainy afternoon, I watch them pass by…The merchant ships. And the cruise liners…Sailing southwest. And today I let the fantasy seduce me…I think that one of those ships I see is headed for the Barcelona of those times. To sound the sirens that announce the revolution of a people. And that in another ship Durruti and Ascaso head for exile. Captive but free. Or that they're traveling to America. With false passports but real dreams. (283-284)

Casal's closing remarks emphasize that the magnetism of the anarchists' story lies in the true grandeur of their struggle for justice. Against all odds, they chose to lay down their lives, fully aware of the risks that would ultimately overcome them, for the sake of a brighter future. And because of their courage to resist, while they lived, even when they were held in captivity, they lived in freedom. Álvarez employs this image of Casal, in her advanced age, watching the ships sail along the northern French coast, to underscore the timeless nature of the anarchists' story and its ability to transcend generations. Ultimately, in *Lluvia de agosto* and especially in the

characterization of Libertad Casal, who breathes life into the stories of Durruti, Ascaso, Tudela, Morin, her own, and so many others, Álvarez creates a space in which the dead continue to live.

Lluvia de agosto, which authentically represents Buenaventura Durruti's character while capitalizing on the epic nature of his story, and through his story, remembers those of so many others, achieves not only significant literary value, but also the capacity to reach across multiple literary genres and thus to attract a broad readership. Considering the novel's fidelity to historical fact and its innovative analysis of the past through a plausible frame narrative, *Lluvia de agosto* is broadly recognized as a historical novel. However, it could also fit into several other genres, including that of a memory novel because of its contemporary analysis of the anarchists' story introduced by the frame narrative, a political novel because of the political conflict that drives the main plot and the social commentary offered by its characters throughout, and even a thriller because of the suspense and sense of danger created by the elaborate descriptions of climactic moments. Readers of *Lluvia de agosto* have mentioned all four genres and more to Álvarez; however, he shows little interest in the distinction: "I don't cling to one label… none of them strike me as incorrect" (personal interview).

Translator's Note

When I first met Álvarez, in April 2023, before I saw Durruti's "look of dynamite" and learned of his epic story, Álvarez described his parallel career as a translator in a way that would shape the beginning of mine. In our discussion, he referenced an excerpt from a novel that he had translated almost ten years earlier, Algerian-Italian writer and translator Amara Lakhous' tragicomedy, *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (2006) (Clash of Civilizations over an Elevator in Piazza Vittorio). Towards the end of the text, the novel's protagonist,

Amadeo, explains: “Many people consider their work a daily punishment. Whereas I love my job as a translator. Translation is a journey across a sea, from one shore to another. Sometimes I think of myself as a smuggler: I cross the frontiers of language with my booty of words, ideas, images and metaphors” (145).[5]

While translating *Lluvia de agosto*, I worked to smuggle the riches of Álvarez’s prose, which allows him to communicate the anarchists’ truly epic story from multiple angles, across the Atlantic to anglophone readers likely unfamiliar with its historical context. And for the most part, my spoils reached the American shores intact; however, along the way, some were damaged or lost, and what remained was exchanged for other riches, which in one particular case (in my humble opinion), became more valuable than the original.

Among the typical alterations that I executed to make Álvarez’s prose compatible with the expectations of English readers while allowing its richness to shine through, included my simplification of some of his elaborate sentences that lose their fluency in English, and an effort to foreignize the text while maintaining its accessibility for my reader. But most importantly, I tried to stay consistent with the decisions that I made.

While Álvarez’s cinematic style can elevate a scene, there are moments where his descriptions are too detailed to read well in English. For example, as the vehicle carrying Cardinal Soldevila passes through the Delicias district of Zaragoza, the narrator states: “La ciudad estaba echando la siesta habitual de las tardes del final de la primavera y en las calles del centro no había apenas tránsito de automóviles, ni carros, ni paseantes siquiera” (27). A preliminary English translation (“a trot”) could be: “The city was taking its usual late spring afternoon siesta and there was hardly any car or even foot traffic on the downtown streets.” Although the Spanish reads naturally, the English trot becomes awkward for two reasons: (1)

The word "siesta" is modified by far too many adjectives or adjectival phrases, which in English, typically come before the noun that they modify (whereas in Spanish, modifiers can naturally come before or after a noun) and (2) this is what we would call, considering English prose style, a run-on sentence because it combines two independent clauses ("The city was taking…" and "there was hardly…") without proper punctuation.

In my translation, I relocated the subject "la ciudad" to after the prepositional phrase "del final de la primavera" and replaced it with the dummy subject "it" to evenly distribute the sentence's modifiers between the new subject ("it") and the noun "siesta." I also used an em dash to separate the two clauses and to isolate the leading image of the sentence (the quiet downtown streets during the siesta), while allowing the second clause to build on the first without ending the sentence. My final version reads: "It was late spring and the city was taking its usual afternoon *siesta* – there was hardly any car or foot traffic on the downtown streets." Furthermore, I eliminated the adverbial phrase "ni siquiera" ("or even" in this context) because the emphasis on the lack of foot traffic, as opposed to car traffic, didn't strike me as noteworthy considering that most people are typically off the street at this hour.

A similar example occurs at the beginning of the novel's ninth chapter, which narrates the final days that Durruti, Ascaso, and another member of Los Solidarios, Gregorio Jover, spent in Paris before Durruti and Ascaso were deported to Belgium. The first clause of the chapter's opening sentence, which reads, "Los primeros días de libertad de los Tres Mosqueteros Anarquistas transcurrieron con el ritmo reposado del paseo y la tertulia…," could be literally translated into English as follows: "The first days of freedom for the Three Anarchist Musketeers were spent at a leisurely pace of strolling and socializing," (125). Although in the original, the noun "ritmo" and its subsequent modifier, "reposado," are naturally connected to the nouns "el

paseo" and "la tertulia" by the contraction "del," the English equivalent of "del" in this context, the preposition "of," makes the clause verbose. Considering that the activities that Álvarez mentions in this clause are inherently relaxed ("strolling" and "socializing"), I felt that it was appropriate to omit the prepositional phrase "at a leisurely pace of " in my translation. My final version reads: "The first days of freedom for the Three Anarchist Musketeers were spent strolling and socializing…"

Another topic that I wrestled with during my process was whether to foreignize or domesticate my translation. However, liberally adhering to the principles of the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, I found that I could simultaneously do both, as long as I established specific criteria for when to employ each tactic and consistently followed those criteria. In Schleiermacher's famous essay, "Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens" (On the Different Methods of Translating), he argues that if a translator wants to afford their readers "the most correct and complete understanding" of an original text "without forcing them out of the sphere of their mother tongue," the translator must either "leave the writer alone as much as possible and move the reader toward the writer, or leave the reader alone as much as possible and move the writer toward the reader" (Biguenet and Schulte 42).

Throughout my translation of *Lluvia de agosto*, I chose to leave vocabulary terms familiar to English readers, including "encantada," "camarero," "cojones," and "siesta," among others, in Spanish to move my reader closer to the ideas and images that Álvarez communicates in his text. In addition to familiar terms, I also included culturally significant Spanish words that are likely unfamiliar to English readers, including "cocido" (a traditional Spanish stew) and "jota" (a traditional dance and music genre native to Aragón), to further engage my reader with

the text and to encourage them to explore the meanings and implications of these terms. Furthermore, I italicized the Spanish terms to emphasize these moments where the reader is drawn into the original text.

My decision to foreignize these lexical units was further solidified by a remark made by Ortega y Gasset in his essay, "La miseria y el esplendor de la traducción" (The Misery and Splendor of Translation). In his conclusion, Ortega y Gasset maintains that "a country's reading public do not appreciate a translation made in the style of their own language. For this they have more than enough native authors" (112). Ortega y Gasset's comment assured me that my reader, who may not be familiar with the anarchists' story, would enjoy the experience of being linguistically transported to a historical process so different from that of the present.

Nevertheless, despite Schleiermacher and Gasset's principles, I encountered several instances where I thought that foreignizing the text might in fact move my reader away from the original. An example unfolds in Chapter Three, when Durruti and another member of Los Solidarios, Rafael Torres Escartín, walk along the San Lorenzo beach in Gijón the day before the group's robbery of the Bank of Spain. As the comrades prepare to leave the beach, they notice two police officers walking towards them. Escartín, worried that Durruti might be armed, asks his companion: "¿Llevas la herramienta?" (Álvarez 36).

Given the context, a Spanish reader could easily understand that the word "herramienta" refers to the pistol that Durruti may or may not be carrying. However, the word itself, which translates literally as "tool," and the playful way in which Álvarez employs it, is likely to be more challenging for an English reader to understand compared to the words "cojones" or "siesta"; leaving "herramienta" in Spanish could potentially force my reader out of the sphere of their native language. Furthermore, considering that Escartín's covert exchange with Durruti

resembles the suspenseful sequences characteristic of the American gangster theme, I felt that in this case, it was appropriate to move the text toward my reader. In my final version, which reads, "Do you have your piece on you?" I chose to translate "herramienta" as "piece" because it respects Álvarez's selection of a more playful word for a gun and capitalizes on the former prominence of the gangster trope in American media. Although Durruti and Escartín's characters bear little resemblance to Henry Hill and James Conway from Scorsese's *Goodfellas* (1990), the question, "Do you have your piece on you?" evokes a distinct and arguably cinematic image in an American reader's mind that transmits the covert nature of their communication in this context.

A similar example occurs in the same chapter, when the bank manager Luis Azcárate confronts Durruti as his men loot the bank. Azcárate demands that the anarchists immediately leave the premises, but Durruti warns him: "Mire usted, podemos hacer esto de dos formas: nos vamos con el dinero sin más, con todos sanos y salvos, o nos vamos con el dinero y dejamos a alguien en mal estado" (47). Although Durruti's threat suggests violence, the third clause of the sentence, which in English literally means "or we'll leave with the money and leave someone in bad shape," isn't necessarily convincing. Considering the suspenseful nature of this moment and the mention that Durruti made the threat with "eyes that cut like knives," I felt that his dialogue demanded a more sinister tone. My final version, which reads: "Look, mister, we can do this one of two ways: Either we leave with the money and no one gets hurt, or we leave with the money and someone gets it," encourages my reader to picture the classic heist scenes from Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), Michael Mann's *Heat* (1995), and countless other films, in which the robbers use intimidation tactics to command the room or to underscore the apprehension they face in such extraordinary circumstances. In my view, the colloquialism

"someone gets it," paired with the imagery that the phrase may evoke for English readers, elevates the cinematic experience that the novel communicates in this moment.

However, a certain number of my translations either didn't or couldn't match the richness of Álvarez's prose once they reached the American shores. An example appears in the novel's opening chapter, when Andrés Tudela's daughter, Varnika, receives Libertad Casal at the Spanish Society of Moscow. In nearly perfect Spanish, Varnika asks Casal to enter and says, "Deje su equipaje ahí mismo, si quiere, donde el mostrador," which makes Casal think to herself: "Llamó mostrador a la barra del bar. Sí, estaba claro que no era española" (13). Varnika, who uses the noun "mostrador," a term commonly used by Spanish speakers to refer to any type counter or service desk, prompts Casal to consider that a more idiomatic way to describe the bar counter in question would have been "la barra del bar," which specifically refers to the counter where drinks are served in a bar or pub. The challenge that I faced in this scenario was that the English word for "mostrador," "counter," could be idiomatically used to describe any type of counter, including a bar counter; I struggled to find two words with similar meanings yet slightly different connotations to replicate the language transfer error made by Tudela's daughter.

In my final version, which reads: "She referred to the countertop as 'the tabletop.' It was clear she wasn't Spanish," I tried to leverage the phonetic resemblance between the words "countertop" and "tabletop"; however, I find "countertop" to be too precise of a word for the informal tone of Casal's internal dialogue. While I considered translating the phrase "la barra del bar" as "counter" or simply "bar," I had trouble finding synonyms for those terms that sounded awkward and that had a slightly varied meaning (to take the place of "mostrador").

Another example occurs in Chapter Nine, where Durruti and Ascaso roam the streets of Paris shortly after visiting the Ukrainian revolutionary Nestor Ivanovich Makhno. Durruti turns

to Ascaso, throws his arm over his shoulder, and asks his comrade: "¿Qué quieres que hagamos esta tarde, maño?" (133). The colloquial adjective "maño," which refers to a person from the Spanish autonomous community of Aragón, doesn't have an English equivalent; the nearest translation would be "Aragonese," which would sound awkward in this context ("What do you want to get up to this afternoon, Aragonese?"). Although my final version, which reads: "What do you want to get up to this afternoon, pal?" captures the informal and amicable tone of Durruti's dialogue, it fails to communicate the meaning of his question in its entirety. In this particular instance, the frontiers of language compelled me to domesticate the text, which ultimately dilutes its original meaning.

But despite its unexpected triumphs and its inevitable shortcomings, my partial translation of *Lluvia de agosto*, like the novel's editions in Asturian, Spanish, German, and most recently, Greek, allows the end of the golden age of Spanish anarchism – and the promise felt by the working class during its brief "summer of glory" – to live on in the minds of anglophone readers across the globe. So that a person like Casal, who, from the green fields of Upper Normandy or anywhere else in the world, can imagine Durruti and Ascaso on a ship heading for exile, "captive but free," "building universes," and "searching for a new world." Under an "August rain" (284).

Notes

1. Unless stated otherwise, all English translations of Paz's biography are sourced from Chuck Morse's 2006 translation of *Durruti en la revolución española*.

2. Unless stated otherwise, all of Álvarez's comments are my translations from Spanish.

3. All English translations of Álvarez's novel are mine.

4. All English translations of Enzensberger's novel are sourced from Mike Mitchell's 2018 translation of *El corto verano de la anarquía.*

5. The English translation of the excerpt from Lakhous' novel is mine.

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To all the men and all the women. Because the story belongs to them. I just tried to find the right words to tell it.

1

The trip from Sheremetyevo International wasn't fast, it was meteoric. That saffron-colored Lada 1600, the distant cousin of the Seat 124, popularized in the last decade by the Spanish middle class, crossed the wide avenues virtually on its tiptoes, like a ballerina at the Bolshoi, cutting across the stage with trained, nimble movements. The afternoon withered away and the capital of the Socialist Empire offered a picture that grew sadder and sadder as daylight faded. The taxi driver and I shared no common tongue, so we made the trip without saying a word, listening to the rhythm of the windshield wipers – like elevator music – slapping away the rain that fell from above. Despite the fury of that summer downpour, I decided to roll down the window a little. I searched for the smell and sounds of a metropolis that aroused such interest, or such morbid curiosity, in its Western European visitors. The asphalt gave off a musty smell, like Parisian streets under a summer rain. In the words of García Lorca, in that moment, I felt like I was "under a silence of a thousand ears and tiny mouths of water."

After a few minutes, we arrived at Kuznetsky Most, a cobblestone street in the old downtown lined with practically-designed houses, compact, like giant wardrobes used to store people. The driver left the car in neutral and yanked on the handbrake, which sounded like a ratchet. He turned toward me, pointed like a hitchhiker and said: "*Ispanski Zenter Moscovi*."

I looked at the building from the ground up, intrigued, while I handed him a bill worth twenty-five rubles, taken from my purse. The man turned around and gave me my change, stepped out to open the trunk, and took out my suitcase all in one go. Without much care, he left

it on the ground under the Moscovian downpour and bid me farewell with a gesture that seemed more like protocol than politeness.

"*Spasiva*" I said to thank him, inadvertently mispronouncing the word, while he closed the rear door of the Lada, which took off like an arrow shooting through the downpour.

The entryway, open, was dimly lit. I went inside and felt along the wall until I found the light switch, so small and out of reach that in that moment, it felt like the Soviet Union's greatest secret. I climbed up the stairs and at one of the landings, took the chance to shake out my jacket, rearrange my wet hair, and try to cover up the look of weariness I'm sure was etched on my face. The door was flanked by a sign in both Russian and Spanish, with the yellow and red flag in the background, and a piece of cardstock, not much bigger than a business card that read: *Ring the bell*. I rang and felt someone's steps approaching from the other side. A woman, about thirty, with long, straight hair, pale skin, and small, round, black eyes – like caviar fished from the Capsian – opened the door. She smiled with the sweetness of a *Matryoshka* doll; it was the first smile I'd seen since landing in Moscow.

"Good afternoon, my name is Libertad Casal. I have an appointment with Mr. Andrés Tudela. Sorry I'm running a bit late, I came straight from the airport," I said introducing myself and apologizing at the same time.

"Come in. That's Andrei, sitting at the table in the back next to the large window," the young woman answered in perfect Spanish, but with a pronunciation that sounded closer to Russian. "You can leave your bag here, if you'd like, on the tabletop."

She referred to the countertop as "the tabletop." It was clear she wasn't Spanish. It occurred to me that perhaps she used the term "tabletop" on purpose, that perhaps it was the most suitable word, suggesting this bureaucratic notion that not even the establishments that served

drinks were free from Soviet orthodoxy. I walked around the room greeting the eight or nine senior citizens in a hushed voice, whom I assumed had emigrated during the Republican exodus. They were spread out across several tables, frittering away the afternoon between chatting and games of dominoes and chess. The room was dominated by a large, old-fashioned television that looked like a piece of junk and, even though it was turned on, emitting black and white images, no one paid it any attention. I took prudent steps towards the old man in the back, who was playing solitaire with a Spanish-suited deck. The withered look, the wrinkles that covered his face with trenches and the white, patchy beard, like a snow-covered steppe, traced a meticulous map of an existence that was already facing the cold days of winter.

"Take a seat. You're late," he scolded me without looking up from the green felt on which he was haphazardly spreading and stacking the cards.

"I beg your pardon. My flight left a half hour late and then, you know, baggage claim and passport control… I haven't even had a chance to check into my hotel."

"De Gaulle?"

"Excuse me?"

"Didn't you fly out of Charles De Gaulle airport?"

"Ah, yes. I flew directly from Paris with Aeroflot. Have you ever been to France?"

"No," he answered, accompanying the monosyllable with a shake of his head. I haven't left the Soviet Union since I arrived in 1939, after we lost the second war.

"The second war?"

"Yes, the first took place in Asturias, in October 1934. And that was a half century ago, no?"

At that moment he made eye contact, slightly anxious, waiting for me to confirm the dates and accounts of the Republican defeat. I nodded and looked around before asking:

"Has the Spanish Society of Moscow been around for long?"

"Almost twenty years. This was the former headquarters of the Spanish Communist Party here in Moscow, did you know? I shared hundreds of conversations and arguments with Pasionaria here, before she returned to Spain. Have you heard anything about Dolores Ibárruri?"

"I know she lives in Madrid. She's there, carrying on, well on her way to ninety."

"Mm. Time is an insurmountable enemy," he said in a languid voice. By the way, if you'd like anything to drink, ask our *camarada camarero*, it's getting late."

"Our *camarada camarero*." I pursed my lips to suppress a smile. I found the fortuitous play on words to be fitting, although I didn't forget the fact that his invitation fell somewhere between courtesy and urgency. I shook my head. The man who was wiping down the counter gave us one of those looks that implied it was almost time to start cleaning up the place.

"I'm just going to steal a few minutes of your time Andrés… Do you go by Andrés or Andrei?" I asked, mostly to break the ice.

"Whichever you prefer. When I was a kid, in Asturias, they called me Andrés, but when I joined the Party I became Tudela, and everyone here knows me as Andrei. So it's up to you to decide."

I decided to call him Andrés. It was his given name, and given names are to be respected, because someone chooses them for us with all the love in the world when we come into existence. At least that's my story…

"Andrés, when we spoke on the phone I informed you the reason for my visit."

"But surely you didn't cross all of Europe just to talk to me. I wouldn't want you to have gone to all that trouble just for nothing."

The comment was intended to sound courteous, but it made it clear that the seasoned Communist wasn't going to reveal any valuable information or fill me in on any extraordinary detail. But I didn't give up.

"No, don't worry," I said. "I actually came to write a few articles for the magazine I work for in France."

"Which magazine?"

"*Le Nouvel Observateur*. Have you heard of it?"

"No, but don't be surprised. Not a lot of news makes it past what you folks like to call the *Iron Curtain*."

To me, his response sounded like an ideological barb from the glory days of the Cold War, which was already beginning to thaw. But whether it was cold or hot, it was never my war, so I didn't give it much thought.

"It's a weekly that covers culture and politics," I told him without going into much detail. "Tomorrow I'm going to Stavropol, the city where the new Secretary General of the CPSU was born."

"Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev," he recited the name solemnly, although I couldn't tell whether that solemnity was merely a cultural matter or if it reflected an ideological affinity with the politician.

"What do you think of him? In France they say he presents new ideas."

"New for whom? For you or for us?" The former political commissar asked without waiting for a response. "I don't think what I would say would be relevant. Besides, I stopped

sharing my opinion the day I arrived in the USSR. During the Stalin era, having a personal opinion wasn't necessarily healthy. Those who shared their own views often ended up preaching them in a Siberian *gulag*, and that was in the best of circumstances. It was better to leave state affairs to the State although the problem was everything was a state affair. Believe me, times were tough.

Almost robotically, the people sitting at the two tables closest to us began to pick up their dominoes and chess pieces all at once. After their games were over, they prattled and laughed on, switching in and out of Russian and Spanish throughout their jumbled conversation.

"Well?" the Asturian asked, pressing me. "What do you want me to tell you? Between what I never knew and what I've forgotten, I'm afraid I won't be of much help to you."

"Please, at least let me give this a shot. I just want to hear your version of what happened that day. You were in Madrid's Ciudad Universitaria…"

"Yes, I still remember it like it happened yesterday. November 19, 1936, at about one in the afternoon. I was with a CPSU film crew who briefly interviewed him, a few hours before. It was his last interview. And I'll say more, although I suppose that you're good at your job and are already aware of this: I was one of the last people who talked to him before that bullet brought him down.

Yes, I was aware. I kept quiet, with the fragile hope that the old member of the Spanish Communist Party, with by now nothing left to lose, would continue to speak on his own accord. But he didn't. It was clear that the man knew well when to share and when to keep quiet.

"What did the two of you talk about?" I asked, seeing that his story was at a standstill.

"We exchanged only a few words. Not during the filming, but later on. We ran into each other again at the roundabout in Cuatro Caminos. I saw them arrive in a car – him and two other

National Labor Confederation members – and I gestured for them to stop. I had gotten word about how things were a little further ahead, on the front line, because Communists from the International Brigades were also fighting in that area. I told them to be careful. There was a fascist sniper on one of the top floors of the hospital that could hit them.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He nodded to show me he was aware and thanked me. Then his vehicle, and his escort vehicle, took off with great speed. He wasn't much for taking advice from those outside his column, and even less so from the political commissar of the Communist Party…"

"And?" I said, encouraging him to finish the sentence.

Andrés Tudela took a deep breath, drawing in air with urgency. It seemed like our conversation was wearing him out, or bothering him, but I couldn't say for sure. Then he took a few more seconds to respond.

"Well, I always thought that Durruti was a rash man," he said. *"U strakha glaza veliki."*

"Which means?" I asked about the sounds so far from my phonetic register.

"It's a Russian proverb. It means that fear has big eyes. And big eyes see more than small eyes, don't you think? Durruti had bigger *cojones* than Espartero's horse, but valiant men must know the limits of their value.

"I don't get the horse thing."

"Ah, pardon me. It's a common Spanish saying. You are Spanish, no?"

"Yes and no. It's a long story," I said, making an effort to evade the subject of my ancestry.

"Ah, ok. The saying refers to a bronze, equestrian statue in Madrid, dedicated to General Espartero. And it so happens that his horse had big ones… you see where this is going."

"Yes, now I see what you mean."

"Yeah, Durruti was a brave man, no doubt, but if life has taught me anything, it's that you can't fear death or go looking for it, you just have to wait for it.

Besides the philosophical lecture on life and death, I was moved by the fact that he spoke of valor and value like two sides of the same coin; or like communicating vessels, or the two plates of a scale, or two antagonists. Who would've thought that a reflection, that began by citing an equestrian statue's genitals, would have such a profound epilogue?

"Tell me one more thing, just one more thing…" I added, realizing we were running out of time.

"I haven't the slightest idea," he immediately replied, without even giving me a chance to ask the question.

"Excuse me?" I said, taken aback.

"I answered the question you were just about to ask me."

"You know what I was going to ask you?"

I looked at him intently. I tried to read his mind like he had read mine. But it was of no use, his mind was written in Cyrillic script.

"Yes ma'am," he answered confidently. "You'd like to know who killed Buenaventura Durruti and I haven't the slightest idea. Or maybe I do: war killed him. War, which has devastated more than a hundred million lives this century. Durruti was just another one of many victims, so many, too many… That day, it was his turn, just like in Trubia, Madrid, or Leningrad it could've been mine. Call it luck, chance, coincidence, destiny – whatever you like. Because whatever you call it, it's the same, what's important is that you have the answer.

I kept quiet, crushed, reduced to nothing in an instant. Heedless of my bewilderment, he began to gather the cards that were scattered across the table, one by one. When he had the full deck in hand, he tied it together with a rubber band and left it on a corner of the table, on the edge, so it was almost hanging off. On the television that no one watched, a Soviet hymn began to play, accompanied by patriotic images of parading soldiers, stiff as spatulas, goose-stepping, red flags with their gold hammers and sickles waving in slow motion. The final notes gave way to a fade to black and the device fell completely silent.

"The TV programs are short here, no?" I said. It was a trivial comment, I felt disoriented from the trip fatigue.

"No, don't be fooled. The programs in central Russia are over, but in other republics they continue. Keep in mind that this is the largest nation in the world. When it's midday on one end, it's midnight on the other."

"It's a giant country, and a great one too I suppose." A ridiculous comment to cover up a dull comment. I was off my game that day.

"It was, at some point. In its own way," he answered, linking half-formed sentences together, as if he wanted me to imagine what they were missing. "Do you really think it's important to find out who killed Durruti? That was a long time ago. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then."

"Yeah, I do think it's important. And I'd like to think that others would too," I explained in a tone that might have sounded arrogant.

"For who else? Your Parisian readers? How many people gave their lives to the Resistance, fighting against the Nazis during their occupation of France? How many people, both

French and foreign, did De Gaulle's colonial wars in Algeria, Cameroon, and Indochina leave dead? Do you intend to find out how each one of them died?"

Touché! as we French like to say. I was losing the dialectical fencing bout, but I didn't drop my foil.

"Durruti was one of the dominant leaders of the Republican faction," I reminded him. "Don't you think it's worthwhile to at least try to determine whether the shot that killed him was fired from the enemy line or not?"

"Ah, I know where you're going with this… You think we communists killed him, that Stalin gave the order to take him out. Well, I'll tell you something: Stalin ordered many deaths, here and in Spain, but Durruti's wasn't one of them."

"That was one of the theories."

"There were others too. For example, that it was really an enemy bullet that killed him because his column was infested with Moorish troops. Or that he shot himself by accident with his MP28, those automatic rifles were quite unreliable. Or that the anarchists themselves killed him, that some of them had a feeling the tables were going to turn."

"What do you mean?"

"The militarization of the Durruti Column. Although it would have betrayed his anarchist principles, I suspect he would've ended up accepting it. He knew, just like we Communists knew, that the primary objective was to defeat fascism, and from there, everyone would defend themselves. And the anarchist militias lacked important things like discipline, order, and rank."

"In fact, the CNT militias ended up joining the army."

"Yes, it was necessary and inevitable. Six months after his death, Durruti's column became the 26th Division of the People's Army of the Republic."

At that point, he stopped talking. Only the waiter, Andrés, and myself were left in the room. A deaf-mute silence, one without ears, joined us. I shrugged my shoulders in a mimed response. It was my way of recognizing and accepting that I wasn't going to get any more information out of him. I suppose the old communist noticed my change in attitude because a wide smile of relief was sketched on his face. Hearing footsteps, he lifted his head and turned his blurry gaze to the back of the room and exclaimed:

"Here comes Varnika! She's my granddaughter, she's taking me home." Somewhat surprised, I found that Varnika was none other than the woman with caviar eyes that had opened the door for me a few minutes before; we exchanged smiles for a second time when she came to our table.

"*Encantada*," I said.

"Varnika is a journalist, like you," Andrés told me. "Well, not like you… Soviet journalism is practiced differently. Here, journalists don't bother to go after the truth, they know there are more important things to do. The truth is an ethereal and malleable concept, that easily changes its color, shape, and posture. Don't you think?"

I raised my eyebrows. The fatigue from the long day which I had begun battling for a taxi during the Parisian rush hour, had turned into exhaustion – I didn't consider breaking a lance or even a splinter in defense of my profession.

"Where do you work, Varnika?" I asked the woman of angelic appearance.

"At Radio Moscow International, in the Spanish broadcast service."

The old Communist stood up awkwardly, placing his hands on the table for support, and interrupting our budding conversation.

"We've got to get going Libertad. Would you like a ride back to your hotel?"

"Um, I don't know… Sure, if it's not a bother."

"Where are you staying?"

"At the Maksim Gorki."'

Grandfather and granddaughter exchanged a few sentences in Russian, citing the name of my hotel two or three times, as if they were trying to agree on the location or the best way of getting there.

"No problem. It's practically on the way," Varnika said with her perennial smile.

"Who said that we Muscovites weren't hospitable with our visitors?" Andrés Tudela added, almost acting as a tour guide. "But tell me, what do you think of Moscow?"

"I don't know if I can answer that question yet," I lied. I didn't want to tell him that at first glance, I had found the city to be depressing. "I came straight from the airport and the taxi driver drove like a maniac. Also, it was raining cats and dogs."

"Ah yes ma'am, the August rain. It may seem strange, but August is Moscow's wettest month."

2

At 3 p.m. sharp, as usual, the cardinal stepped out onto the porticoed courtyard of the palace and looked up to the heavens as if he wanted to gauge the air temperature of the capital with his gaze alone. The chickpea *cocido* continued to dance an Aragonese *jota* in his belly and left him feeling swollen and gaseous like a zeppelin. With an annoyed look, he adjusted his mozzetta and rochet and gave his partner precise orders from higher up:

"Tell Sister Mercedes to start preparing lighter meals," the cardinal said. "It's June and I don't do too well if I have to face a full-blown *cocido* in this kind of weather. These copious lunches will end up doing a number on my health."

"I shall discuss this matter with her tonight at the latest, your eminence," his secretary answered.

"Luis, do me a favor and drop the act when we're alone," the bishop grumbled. "I'm sick of having to tell you."

"Whatever you say, uncle."

The cardinal placed a hand on the forearm of his nephew-secretary, using it as a moving crutch, and walked slowly toward the garage, leaving a penetrating scent of perfume at his heels that fumigated the flowerbeds. The prelate always made the trip after lunch well-dressed, but that day, he smelled like he had dunked his head in a font full of cologne.

The chauffeur, a middle-aged man who waited with his peaked cap tucked underneath his arm, received them with one of the car's rear doors already open.

"Good afternoon, your eminence," the driver said in a neutral tone. "Please, make yourselves comfortable."

"Good afternoon and God bless, Santiago," the old cardinal answered routinely.

The man with the peaked cap patiently waited for the clergymen to take their seats in the vehicle, a 1921 Hispano Suiza Labourdette, new, sparkling, and black as a cassock. After a few seconds, he checked the back seat to make sure that his passengers were settled, delicately closed the door, put on his cap, and hastened around the vehicle to take the driver's seat and start the engine, which purred softly, like a tiger cub.

"Sorry to insist uncle," the cardinal's secretary interjected, "but I should remind you that the communities along the Imperial Canal are waiting on us to set a date for the hearing they requested. I tried to give them the runaround, but they won't let up."

"May the Lord grant us patience. But what do they want now?"

"That you use your influence to support their petitions before the political authorities. You know, he who has no godfather is not christened," the prelate's nephew said, turning to a collection of religious idioms.

"Fine, set a date for the end of the month at the earliest," the cardinal muttered with resignation.

"Could it be sooner?"

"No. All in God's good time. And there are more pressing state affairs that require my attention."

The chauffeur maneuvered the vehicle with purpose to pull out of the garage and set course for the Delicias district. It was late spring and the city was taking its usual afternoon *siesta* – there was hardly any car or foot traffic on the downtown streets. The two men of faith,

granted privacy by the latticework partition that resembled a confessional, entertained themselves along the way exchanging opinions and criticisms, and theories and suspicions about the country's growing political and social instability.

It was a few minutes before three-thirty in the afternoon when the cardinal's vehicle arrived at its destination, the Terminillo estate, on the outskirts of Zaragoza. The car parked in front of the elegant wrought-iron gate that protected the entrance to St. Paul's Home School and Orphanage. For Cardinal Archbishop Juan Soldevila y Romero, who came Monday through Friday to meet with the hospitable and pious institution that he himself had founded and sponsored, the time and place were marked with sacred capital letters in his daily routine – inviolable. Systematic visits sparked rumors about a possible affair between the Prince of the Church and one of the servants of God who headed the center, although such hearsay had little to no effect on the cardinal, who by rank and age, was isolated from worldly gossip.

The chauffeur named after the Spanish patron saint tapped the horn twice to cause the least possible disturbance during those hours of rest and digestion and gripped the wheel, waiting for a novice to come open the gate. Usually, this took about a minute, maybe a minute and half, although everyone knows there are times when seconds feel like minutes and when minutes drag on like hours. The two gunmen, who had been standing nearby for a good while, acted swiftly and smoothly. One of the men, in his twenties, tall and thin, dressed in a light-colored suit, beret and coveralls, confirmed the target from the other side of the roadway: a vehicle marked with the Zaragozan plate number Z-135, chauffeur in uniform, and two passengers wearing religious vestments of differing rank. After spotting their prey, he gave his partner the signal, discreetly moving his left hand back and forth while drawing the concealed seven-round Alkar pistol with his right. With nerves of steel and lead in their hands, the two men approached the car diagonally

from either side, their pistols in ready position. When they were just over three meters away from the vehicle, they stopped, raised their weapons with synchronized movements, aimed with steady hands, and pulled the trigger. The bullets shattered the window panes and sparkled on the sheet metal – like the Perseids – while the Labourdette, shiny and new, colored a funereal black, shook as if it had St. Vitus' Dance.

With their clips nearly empty, the two shooters kept moving toward the car, still idling. They peered inside and found one dead and two wounded, paralyzed like statues on a mausoleum. The cardinal's body was face-up, his mouth slightly ajar, and his eyes stuck open like a trout. The gunman of shorter stature, dressed in a cheap suit and hat, opened the passenger door and inserted the weapon's dark muzzle, still smoking, and an unusual odor – a blend of gunpowder, blood, and cologne – permeated the interior. He pointed the pistol at the chauffeur, and then at the secretary. The driver, his neck wounded, instinctively buried his face in his hands, as if trying to spare himself from the utter misery of bearing witness to his own death, while the cleric recited a prayer in Latin and used his unwounded arm to bless his uncle.

"Tell the authorities that this is the response to the deaths of anarcho-syndicalists Salvador Seguí and Francesc Comes, murdered in Barcelona by the cardinal's hitmen," the gunman in the suit said, almost whispering, as if he was afraid to wake the dead man.

To the two survivors, the sentence sounded like a last-minute pardon and they didn't have to time express their consent with little nods, like automatons, although their state of shock would hardly allow them to remember the names, city, and ideology included in the brief demand following the attack.

The novice who had come to open the door and one of the nuns who heard the gunfire, dared to poke their heads through little slits in the gate.

"Holy mother of God! Murderers! Criminals! the nun cried, hysterical as she witnessed the Dantesque scene. The gunmen took off running, skirting along the sanctuary's walls to protect themselves from prying eyes. Just past the first bend, they hurled their pistols into the bushes.

"It's done," one of them said panting.

"One more bastard in the Kingdom of Death," the other added without slowing down.

That same day, the *Heraldo de Madrid* reported the ecclesiastical assassination in its evening issue:

Attack in Zaragoza

Cardinal Archbishop Soldevila, Shot to Death

By way of an urgent conference call between Zaragoza and Madrid, we learn of Mr. Juan Soldevila y Romero's murder, the acting cardinal archbishop of Zaragoza, who was shot to death this afternoon in the Aragonese capital. Monsignor Soldevila was preparing to make a visit to a charitable center when the car in which he was traveling was attacked by two or three gunmen, who after committing the vicious attack, fled on foot.

A doctor from the nearby Provincial Asylum of Zaragoza traveled to the scene and pronounced the prelate dead, informing us that he had received a bullet to the chest and another in his arm. Msgr. Soldevila's two partners miraculously escaped death. We refer to Mr. Luis Latre Jorro, a priest and the cardinal's nephew and private secretary, who suffered wounds on his wrist and forearm, and the vehicle's chauffeur, Mr. Santiago Castañera, who received a bullet in the side of his neck. It was Father Latre who gave the cardinal archbishop his final spiritual assistance as he was dying.

Upon learning of the events, top-ranking Aragonese civil and military authorities came to the scene. The district judge of El Pilar ordered the removal of the body and took testimony from

the first people to have arrived. Mr. Soldevila y Romero was 79 years old, born a Zamorean, but an Aragonese at heart. In 1889, he was consecrated as the bishop of Tarazona and in 1902, Pope Leo XIII appointed him as the leader of the Archdiocese of Zaragoza, naming him cardinal. Being a minister of God did not separate Msgr. Soldevila from worldly affairs as he also assumed political responsibilities, serving as a senator to represent the Archdiocese of Valladolid. A humanist and distinguished theologian, he was known for his wisdom and charity – it was easy to predict that he would be called upon to occupy the highest position of the Spanish episcopate.

The immediacy with which we inform our readers of this mournful news makes us unable to confirm those responsible for this latest act of barbarism. However, a representative of the Ministry of the Interior (who wishes not to be named) has informed us that this was another attack carried out by the anarchist groups responsible for recent killings, including the murder of Prime Minister Eduardo Dato e Iradier, shot dead fifteen months ago by gunmen who attacked his vehicle from a motorcycle with a sidecar near the Puerta de Alcalá in Madrid and the former Civil Governor of Biscay, Fernando González Regueral, gunned down last month as he was leaving the Teatro Principal in León with his escort.

3

That August afternoon, the Cantabrian sea was a plain of calm water under a sky with large stains shaped like leaden clouds. A few couples, the occasional solitary rambler, and a few families with children, all of them dressed like tourists and moving at a leisurely pace, walked along the shores of Gijón. Near the San Lorenzo chapel, the shopkeepers began to tie up bags with goods and pack up the tents, tables, and easels from the stalls where, day in and day out, they sold fresh fruit, clothing, tools, and hardware. The fishmongers had already left, carrying what they hadn't sold in their wooden baskets and leaving behind a powerful fragrance of fish and sea that lured the gulls.

Escartín and Durruti had a calm but watchful look in their eyes, observing everything with the curiosity of strangers. They came down from Cimadevilla, walking until they reached the main square, where they turned toward Campo Valdés and from there continued on to the Adobo Market, which would house the local fish market in a few years' time. Wandering aimlessly, they reached the bustle of voices and moving crates from the market's closing. Escartín, more interested in the goods than Durruti, slowed down, browsing the few stands that were still open, and had to whistle to get his companion to wait while he stopped to buy a couple of red apples from a local vendor. He bit into one and put the other in his jacket pocket after Durruti turned it down.

"Why don't we go down to the sand," he proposed as he took the last bite of the apple.

"Don't tell me you want to go for a swim to wash all that filth off of you," Durruti replied jokingly. "The water's colder here than in Barcelona."

Escartín finished chewing, tossed the apple core on the ground, and said:

"They look the same, but they're different."

"What do you mean?"

"The oceans. The one in Barcelona and this one," Escartín said.

"Not really. They're all made of the same stuff, water and salt. And the sweat of the sailors who work on them."

They began to walk on the sand, skirting along the wet and compact shore at low tide. Over the horizon, where the sky sought an impossible encounter with the sea, the smoking silhouette of a steamship sailing westward appeared. The two buddies stopped to watch for a few moments.

"Last night I had the strangest dream," Durruti blurted out.

"How strange? Were you named the Chief of Police?" Escartín returned the favor for the filth joke. "That would be like putting a vampire in charge of a blood bank."

"Ok, enough… We were in a big city. I won't say which, but it had a port."

"Who's we?"

"Los Solidarios. All of us."

"Ascaso too?"

"Yeah. There were boats, some anchored and others docked along the pier," Durruti said, going into detail. "And I'm not sure why, but all of the steamboat sirens started to sound at the same time, making a terrible racket. It was like a signal for people to take to the streets and storm the city. There were people everywhere: in the plazas, on the avenues and boulevards, and in streetcars… Some with guns, others with flags… And get this, not a single policeman stood in their way. There was a feeling of joy, but also of unease and fear."

"Joy and fear?" repeated Escartín, who couldn't make sense of the sum of both factors.

"Yeah. I told you it was strange."

"You'll have to ask one of those fortune tellers. I'm sure there's one who's affiliated, you might even get a discount with your union card."

"Fortune tellers read your future, not your dreams, idiot," Durruti assured him.

They both laughed and walked another hundred meters or so before stopping to scan the nearly deserted stretch of land that overlooked the sea from the east, between the open-air café in Casablanca and La Providencia. Then they turned back to retrace their steps without leaving the beach, circling around the wooden huts and stilt-like structure that supported the spa at La Favorita. They were just about to step onto the El Muro promenade, coming from the ramp near Campo Valdés, when they saw the caps and uniforms of two policemen. Escartín tried to change direction, but his companion grabbed him by the arm, firmly but discreetly, to steer him back.

"Be quiet, don't do anything stupid," Durruti ordered him. "They've already seen us. Don't worry. You already know, we're on vacation."

"Do you have your piece on you?"

"No, I left it at the boarding house, underneath the bed. If they stop us, let me do the talking."

One of the officers, the younger of the two, walked a few meters in front of the other and when the two young men reached the top of the ramp, he stopped them.

"One moment," he ordered them without any frills in his manner. He looked out of the corner of his eye, waiting for his senior officer, in his fifties, with more muscle than uniform.

"Where are you both from? Gijón? The province…? the veteran began asking the standard round of questions.

"No, from out of town," Durruti quickly replied. "We're spending a few days here."

"For work or leisure?'

"Leisure. We're on summer vacation."

"Not much summer left. Tomorrow's September," the officer said, as if they were unaware of what day they were living in and what awaited them tomorrow.

"Enough for us. We're leaving tomorrow."

"Your names?" the younger officer interjected, hoping to get in on the action.

"That's Pablo Guzmán Fernández and I'm Abel Martín Hidalgo," Durruti answered with the two names and four surnames he had made up and memorized a few days before. "We're buddies, we work at a glass factory in Valencia."

"Jeez, you guys have come a long way," the young man in uniform said. "And where are you staying?"

"In Oviedo, with some relatives. Today we came to visit Gijón."

"Which one of you has family in the province?"

"Me," Escartín said at last to make sure his silence didn't raise suspicion. "A first cousin. He works at the weapons factory in La Vega."

The conversation was left floating in the air for a moment, while the officers briefly scanned their clothes and features, looking for something that didn't add up. The guards were running out of their usual questions and up until that point everything was in order.

"And if you're both from out of town, why're you carrying a Gijón newspaper?" the younger officer inquired, pointing with his baton to the copy of *El Noreste* that stuck out from one of Escartín's jacket pockets, the same one where he had stored the other apple.

“We bought it to see the theater listings. It’s not beach weather,” Durruti improvised, lifting his chin to look up at the sky, “we’ll have to spend the day doing something.”

“It looks like it’s going to end up raining, don’t you think?” Escartín asked, playing his wild card, the weather.

“I don’t know, buy a copy of the Zaragoza Almanac,” was the testy response of the senior officer, who was losing interest in the conversation.

At this, he made an ambiguous gesture with his right hand, implying that they could go on their way. Durruti and Escartín walked off without haste or fuss, but with forced smiles, sure that the four eyes of the two public safety employees were still watching them.

“What was with all those questions?” Escartín muttered. “These goons are getting more and more uptight all the time.”

“Everyone’s a little on edge these days,” Durruti replied. “I’ll bet you anything that the king is already negotiating with the generals to try to straighten us out with a military government. We need tomorrow to be a success because time isn’t on our side.”

“You sure this Zulueta guy is trustworthy?”

“Yeah, and the rifles are waiting for us in Éibar, fresh from the Gárate and Anitua factory. But you know how this goes, no cash, no weapons.”

They set the matter aside and crossed the green strip of trees and grass that separated the sidewalk from the street. Just ahead, they crossed Ezcurdia Street between a car and a cart and while they headed towards Jovellanos, the pleasant aroma of fine confectionery from the La Playa bakery drifted over them.

"It smells like marzipan and custard," Escartín said pompously a few meters from the premises, from which a stylish and attractive woman was just stepping out, clad in a satin dress, a brimmed hat with silk trim, and black patent leather shoes.

"Why don't you go in there and ask for a job?" Durruti joked. "It's one of the most luxurious bakeries around, all the fancy ladies come and have coffee here."

"You can tell that it's a well-run business. And that you know the plaza well."

"Yeah. After the revolutionary strike in 1917, I had to leave León. First I hid in Gijón, then in Mieres and La Felguera. Let me take you to Café Dindurra for a horchata. It's a quiet place, perfect for plotting.

Little by little, the silvery sky was turning a grayish blue, with a slightly blackish tone, that foretold rain for those final hours of August. At the end of the Paseo de Begoña, known as "Alfonso XII" during that decade of the twenties, the clouds were already dispensing the first raindrops, just a few, but plump like whale tears. A few meters before they reached the café, the two young men noticed the marquee at Teatro Dindurra, which would later become Teatro Jovellanos. They came over to see the cast of the silent film that premiered that week. Escartín read aloud:

"*Buenos Aires, ciudad de ensueño*. Directed by: José Agustín Ferreyra. Starring: Lidia Lis, Jorge Lafuente, and Enrique Parigi. The best Argentinian film of 1922.

"Do you like movies?" Durruti asked him.

"Not too much. I prefer theater."

"Why theater?"

"Because they don't talk during movies and I get bored having to read those signs that pop up giving explanations… But it'd be nice if they made a movie about us, right?"

"Yeah man, a novel too… Alright, don't get too high on yourself," Durruti said, bringing him back to earth. "I think you're getting a little big-headed."

Escartín smiled like a naughty child and gave his buddy a friendly smack.

"The last time I set foot in a theater was three years ago. At The Alhambra in Paris. When I was a refugee in France," Durruti told him. "But I didn't see a play. A well-known magician performed… Harry Houdini. Have you heard of him?"

"Nope," Escartín answered.

"An escape artist. They call him 'The King of Handcuffs.' He manages to free himself from ropes, chains, handcuffs, a coffin… anything, you name it. What a genius."

"We should hire him to get Ascaso and the others out of jail," Escartín fantasized. "Minister Rosales would look like such a fool."

They were just about to walk into Café Dindurra when they were approached by a boy with a strong build and good looks, but with a lifeless expression, who had just rounded the corner from Covadonga Street.

"Any spare change for something to eat?"

"Spare change? Go ask the priests, we don't give out change," Escartín answered.

The needy boy, unaware that the "we" referred to the both of them, turned his gaze and hand toward Durruti, hoping he might have better luck with him.

"It doesn't look like you're missing a leg or an arm, you're not even paralyzed," Durruti said with a serious expression. "Do you have any handicaps?"

"I'm whole and healthy, thank goodness," the boy replied boastfully or thoughtlessly.

"Ok. You're young and healthy… So what are you doing begging? Where's your dignity?" Durruti fired back.

"Times are tough, there's no jobs."

The comment put a definitive end to Durruti's patience: he put his hand in his jacket pocket, pulled out a pistol, and holding it by its muzzle, offered it to the boy in a gruff manner.

"Take it, it's loaded," he told him. "If you have what it takes, walk into a bank with this and make a buck. It's not a job, but it's more respectable than begging."

The boy turned pale and fell silent. He stared at the butt of the gun, his eyes wide like an owl's. Durruti's visceral reaction also stunned Escartín, though he was quick to respond. He snatched the pistol, wrapped it in the newspaper, and threw the apple he was carrying on the ground to make room in his jacket pocket. He took out five cents, gave it to the boy to buy his silence, grabbed Durruti by the arm, and yanked him away. They walked, checking behind them a few times to make sure they weren't being followed, until they reached Santa Doradía. There, Escartín took a stride in front of him and forced him to stop, putting a hand on his chest.

"I ought to you a couple of times. Once for the scene you just made and again, even harder, for lying to me when we saw the officers and you told me you didn't have your piece on you. What would've happened if we had to shoot our way out of there? Tomorrow's plan would've gone down the drain."

"Ask yourself this, what would've happened if they'd caught us unarmed? How do you think we would've gotten out of there if the officers weren't convinced by the Valencian tourists story and they took us to the police station? Delivering a speech? Talking to them about the weather? Don't be so naive. As anxious as they are to put you away for what happened in Zaragoza."

"Don't remind me. But between us, we need to be truthful with one another from here on out. I want to know what we're up against at any given moment.

Durruti thought to himself: Escartín's reasoning seemed right, although his answer was halfway between an apology and an excuse.

"You're right," he acknowledged. "I did it so that you wouldn't worry. I told you that I'd take care of business with the guards and it worked out alright, didn't it?

"The same way it could've gone wrong."

"Everything was under control, man. It was in the bag."

Escartín also understood, to some extent, his friend's rationale, but he prolonged his anger for a few seconds more.

"And pulling out the pistol in the middle of the street? Don't fuck with me Pepe."

"I snapped, what can I say?" Durruti said, forcing a smile to close the case.

"It's clouding up, we'd better head for Oviedo. Tomorrow's gonna be a long day and we need to be fresh."

The drops of whale tears soon gave way to a steady rain that turned into a furious August downpour. The two anarchists hurried toward North Station, while the water lashed their faces and pounded their heads. They were like two Argonauts who the gods wanted to drown to keep them from stealing the Golden Fleece.

***

It was just a few minutes past nine in the morning when an ash-gray Jeffery Special Model, packed with a half-dozen men, parked on a corner of Instituto Street, without drawing attention, near the entrance to the Gijón branch of the Bank of Spain. Gregorio Suberviola, a construction worker from Navarre, got out of the passenger seat alone. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, walked toward the bank's door, entered, and approached one of the two windows that were open. He took a hand out of his pocket and with it, a green bill worth 50 pesetas, which

he placed on the counter before the teller's eyes. He requested that it be exchanged for coins and while the clerk gathered the money, he looked around the room as if he had a photographic plate embedded in his eyes.

At that very moment, Durruti, who sat with three others in the back seat of the car, quickly repeated the final instructions: "We wait for Suberviola to come out and give us the lowdown. Then, we move out onto the sidewalk in four-second intervals, keeping our distance from the person ahead of us, without stopping. Aurelio, you'll go in first."

Aurelio Fernández, a mechanic from Oviedo, the only Asturian in the group, nodded as he wiped the sweat from his palms with a linen handkerchief that had turned into a ball from having been squeezed so tightly.

"When we're inside, Aurelio and I will make our way toward the sides of the room," continued Escartín, a baker from Aragón. "We watch the stairs that lead to the top floor and the teller's cage, just so we don't get any surprises. Then…

"Then I come in," said Eusebi Brau, a blacksmith from Catalonia. "I stand in the middle of the room, take some coins out of the bag, and start counting them to avoid raising suspicion."

"And finally I come in and the four of us will show them the machinery," Durruti added. "Suberviola will be outside, guarding the entrance, and you, Vivancos, keep the engine running and watch for any living creature that moves down the street."

Miguel García Vivancos, a stevedore and flour merchant from Murcia, nodded without taking a fingertip off the steering wheel.

"We have to tread carefully, act quickly, and get our fucking asses out of town," Durruti graphically summarized.

"Compañeros, the time has come to make some cash for the working class," Escartín proclaimed to raise the group's morale.

Suberviola exited the bank as calmly as he had entered. He tilted his head to one side, with an absent-minded look, and performed two discreet gestures: He adjusted the knot of his tie with three strokes and brushed his pant leg a couple of times with one hand.

"Ok, there are three customers and two clerks in sight," said Escartín, in charge of translating the visual account that Suberviola had made. Durruti glanced at his watch. The hands were open in the shape of a cross, marking nearly quarter past nine. With the decided time intervals, like a tuning fork, he recited the three names:

"Aurelio… Escartín… Brau…"

Before getting out of the car, closing ranks, he gave García Vivancos a pat on the shoulder, making an unspoken promise that everything was going to be alright. He jumped out of the vehicle like an aerialist from the circus and zeroed in on Suberviola, who had his back against the wall of a building for a better line of sight. Durruti walked into the bank with determination, drew a nine-millimeter Luger and pointed it straight ahead.

"This is a robbery! Hands up and nobody moves!" he shouted the classic line.

At that moment, the three other members of Los Solidarios showed their weapons to back their partner's words. The three customers and the two clerks, all men, obeyed without hesitating. Durruti moved toward the window on the left, where the teller, a man with a long, languid, and faded countenance that resembled one of El Greco's figures, waited with his hands raised, trembling, and his heart in his mouth.

"Put all the money you have under the counter in here. Don't forget a single peseta, we don't usually leave tips, least of all at banks," Durruti said, handing him a canvas bag.

Simultaneously, Aurelio broke the lock of the cage that protected the two clerks so that Escartín and Brau could enter to search the room and empty the cash desk, which they forced the other teller to open. Durruti retraced his steps and positioned himself by the doorway, where he had a panoramic view of the scene. Aurelio ordered the customers to step aside, indicating with the barrel of his pistol where they should stand, to clear the open area in the middle.

Alarmed by the commotion, a man nearing his sixties appeared on the stairs that led to the bank's top floor.

"What's going on here?" he asked, taken aback, as he took a few uncertain steps down.

"Freeze! Don't take another step!" Aurelio threatened him from below, pointing his gun at him.

Durruti approached the Asturian and asked him to cover his post by the door so that he could speak to the newcomer.

"Are you the manager of the bank?" he asked him, intimidating him with the Luger.

"Yes, I'm Mr. Luis Azcárate Álvarez. And who are you?" the man asked him back.

"Read the newspapers in the next few days, they'll tell you. Now shut up and stay right where you are, while we finish what we're doing, which is nothing more than a mass withdrawal of capital."

Luis Azcárate said nothing. He clenched his fists, glued to his body, to express his anger and helplessness, leaving all the actors on the scene in suspense: the four thieves, the two clerks, the three customers. He searched, under Durruti's bushy eyebrows, for the impassive gaze of the one who appeared to be the leader of the group, trying to determine the extent of the threat. And he came to a conclusion.

"Leave the bank immediately!" he said with the same tone of voice as someone used to giving orders. "I hope you're all aware of the gravity of your actions and the consequences they may entail."

Escartín and Brau burst out laughing in unison, causing the manager's warning to take on ridiculous overtones.

"Look, mister, we can do this one of two ways: Either we leave with the money and no one gets hurt, or we leave with the money and someone gets it," Durruti warned him with eyes that cut like knives. "Don't try to be a hero."

To Luis Azcárate, that sounded more like insolence than a threat. He came down the final steps and when he reached Durruti's height he looked into his eyes again, closer, in case he might find something new in them that would warn him that the level of risk had risen. He concluded that the level of risk was manageable and rushed the thief to grab both his wrist and his pistol. The two struggled for only a few seconds, until the muffled, deceiving sound of a gunshot from point-blank range put an end to the manager's resistance. The shot hit him in the face and he fell flat on the floor. Durruti, stunned, looked at the man lying at his feet, who was losing blood from one of his cheeks. None of the witnesses said a word – fear had imposed a dehumanizing silence.

A shout from Brau, who had just stuffed the final wad of bills into a sack, announced their departure.

"All the grapes here have been harvested! Let's go!" exclaimed the Catalan.

Escartín moved a few meters toward the wall, where there was a calendar with the day of the month marked with clearly visible numbers. He looked for the date, aimed the barrel of his pistol, pulled the trigger, and the bullet perforated the box that corresponded to the first day of September 1923.

"A little reminder of our visit," he said.

The four armed men fled the bank in an orderly fashion, in a single file with Durruti, who was still disturbed by what had happened, bringing up the rear. Suberviola waited for the others to get inside the car before getting in himself, and when he went to close the front passenger door he saw, at the end of the street, the peaked cap and uniform of a local police officer.

"It's a cop!" he warned them. "He hasn't seen us yet, but surely he will."

Hesitating, García Vivancos, left his foot hovering over the accelerator and looked at his partner, waiting for him to confirm the escape route, which would pass right in front of the officer.

"Go! Go! Go!" Suberviola shouted repeatedly as he leaned out of the window with his pistol pointed at the end of the street.

It was the confirmation that the robbery, in addition to being loud, was going to be resounding. The Jeffery pulled out with its engine bellowing like a gale, as Suberviola opened fire without warning. The officer, who had been patrolling alone and on foot from Jovellanos Street, unaware of what awaited him around the corner, had just enough time to drop to the ground as he heard the rattle of two bullets biting into a lamppost beside the doorway of 15 Instituto Street. As the vehicle fled, it passed the officer, who from the pavement tried to draw his gun with his right hand, but his nerves forced the pistol to slip out like a live fish. He managed to collect it and still had time to fire an aimless shot that shattered the window of the shipping company, la Compañía Transatlántica Española.

As the car turned onto Gumersindo Azcárate Street, it rocked like a cradle moved by a nervous hand, without tipping over, and raced down Covadonga Street at full speed, following the exit toward the south. The bank employees immediately phoned the Civil Guard and within

minutes, four motorized units left the city in four different directions: Oviedo, Avilés, Villaviciosa, and Pola de Sierro. All to no avail. The ash-colored Jeffery Special Model, with six cylinders, six men, and more than six hundred thousand pesetas on board, had disappeared with no trace, as if it were driven by Houdini himself.

9

The first days of freedom for the Three Anarchist Musketeers were spent strolling and socializing, while the asylum committee that had been organized to find a way out of their case rushed through the options and deadlines to find a country that would accept them. Paris had long ceased to mourn the victims of the First World War and the most cosmopolitan city in the world at the time was a hive of culture, people, fashion, and politics.

As agreed, Jover and his family moved to the south of France, near the Spanish border, and Ascaso and Durruti took advantage of the days of legal residence they were given in the country to mingle with exiled anarchists from across Europe who had found refuge, security, and work in France. The deaths of one and half million soldiers in the fields and on the seas of Europe between 1914 and 1918 obligated France to open its borders without many demands or reservations to replace the labor force that had been lost on the front lines.

Durruti and Ascaso set aside one of those summer days to pay a visit they had been waiting to make. They left early in the morning from the apartment where they were staying, elegantly dressed. Ascaso wore a granite-gray suit, an aquamarine shirt, and a brown tie. Durruti wore a tan suit, with a white shirt adorned by a maroon-colored satin bow tie.

They strolled along Rue La Roquette and looked for the Seine's eastern bank across La Bastille Boulevard. After crossing the river, they followed Hospital de la Pitié-Salpêtrière Boulevard, and from there took Sant-Marcel Boulevard, which was very quiet at that time of day. They arrived at Hotel La Demeure, entered, greeted the receptionist, and asked where the man with the strange surname they wanted to see was staying – the woman announced the visit. They

walked up the three flights of dry, creaky wooden stairs. Ascaso vigorously knocked on the door and it didn't take long for a small, brown-haired woman with dark-rimmed glasses and a complexion as pale as cream to open the door.

"Hi, you're the Spanish anarchists, right?" she asked.

"Good morning. Yeah, that's us. This is Francisco Ascaso and I'm José Buenaventura Durruti."

"Please come in. I'm Halyna Kuzmenko, Nestor Ivanovich's partner. And this is our daughter, Yelena," she said, introducing a young girl reading a book by the window. "He's in the bathroom, he'll be right out. He's not doing too well."

"Anything serious?" Durruti asked.

"Bullet and shrapnel wounds, lots of them, and poorly treated. He was hit seven times. That and years of forced labor. It's a gift of fate that he's still alive."

"Yeah, we owe fate a few too," Ascaso said.

At that moment, a bony hand opened the bathroom door and behind it emerged Nestor Makhno. A small, gaunt man with almond-shaped eyes and a penetrating gaze with thick, brown eyebrows. His mustache, orderly and artistic, forming a semicircular arch, looked more like that of an office worker with a desk job than that of the man who had established the most powerful anarchist militia in the world. The thick, black mop of hair was one of the few healthy features about his appearance. The emptiness of defeat was written on his face. Ascaso and Durruti masked with a smile the distress they felt at the sight of him. They stood before a thirty-seven-year-old who resembled an old man.

"Brothers, we welcome you to this humble hotel room, which in the language of exile, is the only place we can call home," he said while he embraced the two visitors. "I've been

following your legal troubles in the papers and from what the French comrades who come to see me tell me. I haven't gone out much lately."

Halyna requested that the three men sit in the chairs arranged around a stretcher table with a crochet tablecloth.

"We just wanted to pass along to you the regards of Iberian anarchism and express our admiration for the effort of the libertarian movement in Ukraine," Durruti began.

"Also to wish you a speedy recovery," Ascaso added with a mundane touch. "You're missed."

Makhno closed his eyes for a moment and pressed his lips into a faint smile before he began to speak. "Wounds to the body hurt less than wounds to the spirit," he said. "The betrayals, the disorganization, those internal enemies. We built our Black Army from nothing and when Lenin wanted to hand over our territory, we held off the White Army from the south, the Red Army from the north, and the Prussians from the west. We became big and strong like a mountain. But we were unable to defeat those internal enemies. We didn't know how to get our soldiers to understand that every person's freedom is the responsibility of all and that the freedom of all depends on the responsibility of every person."

"But you achieved so much with so little," Durruti said.

"Yes, although we lost it just as quickly as we had earned it," Makhno replied. "When I was a boy, my mother used to tell me at night, around the fire, stories about the Zaporozhian Cossacks, the Ukrainian and Belarusian serfs who fled from the feudal lords to live in freedom along the banks of the Dnieper. They settled beyond the rapids of the river, and from there defended their liberty from the Polish aristocracy with their weapons and their lives. I could

never have imagined then that one day I would feel like an heir to their struggle. *Step ta voliakozats 'ka dolía*."

"Nestor, they don't speak our language," Halina gently scolded him, stroking his cheek with the back of her hand.

"Excuse me. It's a Ukrainian proverb. It means that the steppe and freedom are the Cossack's destiny."

Ascaso and Durruti nodded ecstatically. Makhno continued: "We started with a handful of peasants and managed to assemble twenty-five thousand men and women. And we collectivized a stretch of land equivalent to half the size of France. All we wanted was to unite the peasantry with mother earth. We simultaneously fought against the Tsarist and Bolshevik Russians until we were defeated. There were betrayals from within. And Trotsky sent an army of a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers after us – there was nothing we could do. They shot every living being who stood in their path.

A violent tubercular cough interrupted his account.

"His lungs are weak from years of forced labor during the times of Tsar Nicholas II," his partner explained.

"But that's old hat," Makhno said, playing it down. "And I didn't get off that bad considering that at first they wanted to send me to the gallows. For 'acts of terrorism' they claimed. I hadn't even turned eighteen, so they changed my sentence to a life sentence at the Butyrka Prison in Moscow. It wasn't a nice place to be. When you walked into one of those cells, you felt as if half your body was already in the grave."

"And you were released with the amnesty of 1917," Ascaso said, encouraging him to continue.

"That's right. The Bolsheviks let the political prisoners out into the streets. At the time, it was all nice words, promises, and hope. We came to believe that it might be possible to establish a common homeland in which the Bolsheviks and the anarchists would defend themselves without coming into conflict."

"We already know that's impossible," Ascaso claimed. "The Bolsheviks want a strong state, but there's no place for freedom in any state. Freedom and statehood are like oil and water, they don't mix."

Makhno agreed with a nod before he continued: "The thing is, our worker and peasant battalions had managed to drive the Austro-Germans out of Ukraine on their own. And when I had to travel to Moscow to meet Lenin, I already had grown suspicious. He told me, in this patronizing tone, that he considered our peasants to be contaminated by anarchism and that we anarchists were obsessed with conquering the future, while the Bolsheviks were focused on conquering the present. The truth is that they wanted absolute power and didn't hesitate to turn the battle of ideas into a brutal war between men.

The Ukrainian stopped speaking, as if he didn't want to keep remembering. Or as if he had already mentioned everything that was worth mentioning. Durruti and Ascaso exchanged a brief look before raising the subject of their departure from France.

"The committee that's trying to find us a host country has been in touch with the Soviet embassy in Paris," Ascaso blurted out. They say that in Moscow they'd be willing to take us."

Makhno's expression darkened as he heard the news. He shook his head from side to side with an intensity he hadn't shown until then.

"No, you guys can't do that," he said hurriedly. "If you set foot into the Soviet Union, chances are you'll never be able to leave. They would demand from you a public declaration of

submission to Soviet power and even then you would both be placed under suspicion – to them you're both dangerous elements.

"The truth is, we don't have much to choose from," Durruti acknowledged. "Belgium has already refused us asylum, France doesn't want us, Mussolini's Italy is out of the question… In Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, and Uruguay we're wanted by the justice system for a few jobs we did there during those years… And we already see how things are in the United States, where comrades Sacco and Vanzetti are on their way to the electric chair, unless somebody helps them. That leaves the Soviet Union and Germany, but in Germany, the Catholic Party that governs alongside the Social Democrats says that it's unwilling to accept anarchists implicated in the death of a cardinal.

"If we had killed the King instead, they'd take us, no problem," Ascaso said. "The bourgeois governments are such hypocrites, aren't they?"

The three of them looked at each other with complicity. At that moment, Durruti remembered that Nestor Makhno had written poetry in the past.

"Are you writing anything these days?" he asked him.

"No, not anymore. Those were intended to be my memoirs," he said, pointing to a stack of sheets lying on top of a dresser. "The product of two years of writing, during the sleepless hours given to me by my illness. But by 1919 I had stopped. That year the Bolsheviks executed or deported a half million Urkainians to Siberia, accused of collaborating with the Makhnovists. It's painful to write about. But the hardest thing is to think that it might not have been worth it. So much blood, too much to water a garden of defeat.

Durruti steered the conversation to new terrain to make it more bearable for Makhno.

"Nestor, we've been told that you work at the Renault factory."

"Yeah, but I'm on sick leave right now because of this lung thing," he replied.

"I used to work for Renault too. In 1917, when the revolutionary strike in Spain failed and I had to come to Paris. And look, ten years later here I am again."

"I think that in Spain you have better conditions to launch a social revolution," the Ukrainian resumed, "the peasantry and proletariat have a fighting tradition. I trust that when the time comes, you'll do better than we did. But Makhno has never backed down from a fight, so if I'm still around when yours begins, which will also be mine, you can count on the man speaking to you as another soldier. As long as the enemies of our freedom resort to arms to suppress us, we're obligated to respond with arms as well."

And with that he ended his manifesto, which seeped into Durruti and Ascaso's spirits as if they were living an unrepeatable epiphany. Makhno was already showing signs of fatigue and they both understood that it was time to leave. They bid the commander of the Black Army, his partner, and their daughter farewell, and returned to the Parisian streets, which by that time were already taking on color and warmth.

"Did you see Makhno's eyes?" Durruti asked Ascaso when they were halfway down the boulevard. "He looked like someone who had seen a new world and then suddenly lost sight of it, as if it was just a mirage. It must be hard, real hard. He's got nothing left."

"Don't exaggerate," Ascaso challenged him. "He has a partner and a daughter. And people who admire and respect him. And he still has his dignity, that no one can take from him at this stage of his life."

"Yeah, but on the land that he fought for and encouraged thousands like him to fight, Soviet propaganda has turned him into a bandit, a murderer, and a drunk. What do you think

would be worse, to never see that new world or to have it right under your nose and end up losing it for good?"

Ascaso bent his head to distract himself from the Parisian cityscape as he pondered the answer to such a bitter and pessimistic question.

"The worst would be to live a lifetime without catching a glimpse of that new world, even from afar," he said at last. "Pepe, if we ever get within reach of it, a single bullet could keep us from conquering it."

Durruti stuffed his hands in his pockets, in a characteristic gesture, and walked a good distance without speaking, mulling it over. Then, returning to the moment, it dawned on him that they hadn't heard from their Venetian guardian angel in a day and a half.

"Hey, any word from Vaporetto?" He asked his companion.

"He's tied up. He's helping out with the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee."

"What do you want to get up to this afternoon, pal?" he asked Ascaso, throwing his arm around his neck.

"I don't know… Should we stop by the Anarchist Bookstore again? If it's open it's thanks to the help from Los Solidarios, we ought to follow up on our investment."

"Hey don't take credit for that patronage, wise guy," Durruti replied, "you weren't there when we hit the Bank of Spain."

"For Pete's sake, I was in prison. It took you guys too long to get me out of Predicadores. You know how much I like to 'visit' banks…"

"There were far more important matters than getting you out of prison," Durruti teased him. "Cut the crap and take me out for a coffee, I don't even have half a franc on me."

"I don't know how you do it, but you're always broke."

"We true libertarians don't believe in money," Durruti stretched the joke further. "C'mon, I'll find a nice café and you can pull out your wallet. I'll get you back next time."

"Yeah, I already know about your three-payment plan: late, bad, and never."

They made the most of the little change Ascaso had in his wallet, which was enough to buy the Anarcho-Communist daily *Le Libertaire*, along with a couple of cups of coffee and some baguettes for lunch, the kind of sandwich that was becoming popular among the French working class and that had been born indirectly following a workers' victory. A 1920 law regulated the working hours of bakers, which exempted them from having to work before four o'clock in the morning. To meet the demand for bread among workers who had breakfast early in the morning before leaving for work, they made loaves that required a shorter baking time, because they were thinner, and ended up calling them *baguettes*.

Around dusk, as a bronze light varnished the Parisian sky, they returned across the Seine and wandered through the twentieth arrondissement, which they wouldn't leave until the end of the day. They reached the foot of Belleville Park, the highest park in the city, and, briskly climbed the hill along a cobblestone path to contemplate the lofty Paris that broke the plain with its garrets, roofs, chimneys, and the slender iron silhouette of the Eiffel Tower, which had housed the first radio station installed in Paris.

As they descended the scenic hill, they headed toward the Ménilmontant neighborhood. They continued on to 72 Rue des Prairies, where the International Anarchist Bookstore was located, which they had already visited over the past few days. They entered, warmly greeted the owner, Berthe Fabert, and began to leaf through volumes, each one following his own way and literary tastes. For several minutes, it was just the three of them occupying the store, until a young woman in her twenties with crystalline, sapphire-blue eyes, short hair, and a bell-shaped

hat pulled low over her brow, walked through the little fern-colored door. She carried a handbag and wore a white chiffon blouse, a pleated black skirt, and closed-toe shoes without heels. Durruti couldn't help but to look and give her a little welcoming smile before returning his attention to the books, playing hard to get.

The young woman approached the counter, chatted with Berthe for a few moments, and began to wander through the bookstore in a leisurely manner, feeling the covers and spines of a few hardcovers with her hand. When she reached the man with the little welcoming smile, she stopped, and without drawing attention to herself, glanced sideways at the cover of the book Durruti held in his hands.

"*En cualquier caso, ningún remordimiento*," she read aloud. "Quite a suggestive title. Is it a novel or a collection of essays?"

Durruti was caught off guard by the intrusive voice that tore through the liturgical silence of books and bookshelves, although he had sensed her approach by the delicate scent of laundry that the girl gave off. "So nosy," he thought without wanting to think it, because in reality the question had sparked his interest.

"It's a novel about Jules Bonnot," he answered. "You ever heard of him?"

"Yeah, I know a little about him," she said. "French anarchist, bank robber, a gun and car lover, British writer Arthur Canon Dolye's chauffeur…"

"And the first to use a car for a heist. A 1908 Delaunay-Belleville with twenty-eight horsepower."

"Do you know about that?" the girl asked.

"About cars or heists? What do you mean?"

"Both."

The clever game of double-edged questions and answers amused Durruti.

"Me? Not much," he became cynical. "Only what I've read in the odd magazine at the casino, Señorita…"

"Émilienne. Or Mimi. Whichever you prefer," she replied, offering him her hand courteously but firmly.

"I'm Pepe," he said, returning the greeting. "And the one who's rummaging through those shelves is my friend Paco."

Ascaso waved from the other end of the store when he heard them refer to him.

"Spaniards?" Émilienne asked him.

"Yeah, we came to France for a few months to work during the grape harvest."

She wrinkled her nose, in a gesture that confirmed her disbelief.

"The grape harvest? In Paris?"

"No, in the south…We're just visiting Paris for a few days," Durruti continued fabricating.

"And tell me, are grape pickers wanted by the law in Spain? And in Argentina?"

"Excuse me?" Durruti said, taken aback by the two questions.

"That would explain why they wanted to extradite you two, and that other 'grape picker,' Gregorio Jover."

Durruti put his hand over his mouth to cover a little rascal's smile. He then realized that it was absurd to try to go unnoticed when their case had received such judicial, political, and media attention.

"Drop the act," she advised him, making a dismissive gesture. "You're not talking to a clueless lady from the Parisian bourgeoisie who wanders into an anarchist bookstore by mistake."

At that moment they were approached by Berthe, who from the counter had already noticed that there was a certain chemistry between the two.

"I see that you've already introduced yourselves," the store owner said with a knowing look. "Mimi worked as a stenographer for *Ce qu'il faut dire*."

"*What Must be Said*," Durruti translated the name of the newspaper as if he were thinking out loud. "The anarchist newspaper that was distributed in the trenches demanding France's withdrawal from the Great War."

"That's the one," Berthe said. "And she was very active in the propaganda campaign to secure your freedom."

Hearing those resume points about the girl, Durruti felt embarrassed by the joke he had tried to play on her regarding his identity – he had to ask for forgiveness.

"Does Bonnot's story interest you, Comrade?" he asked, now addressing her as a fellow member. "I'd like to give you the book."

Without waiting for Émilienne's reply, he shot a look at Ascaso before blurting out:

"Paco, gimme five francs!"

"Yeah, come and get 'em!" his companion shouted back. "Five francs… If you want I can paint them, but you'll have to give me some brushes first. We spent the last of it on sandwiches, you know that. Besides, what was that about true libertarians not believing in money?"

"Alright, no worries. I have a feeling that they'll let us put it on credit, 'cause of what we've done for them," Durruti said, giving Berthe a sweet look. "If necessary, we can sign a promissory note payable to Los Solidarios."

Berthe smiled and motioned to him, repeatedly opening and closing her palm, to bring the book over to the counter so she could wrap it for him.

"I really only came to see my friend Berthe," Émilienne explained. "But I appreciate the gift."

"What do you think of characters like Bonnot?" Durruti asked.

"Bonnot was killed by the police. And three members of his gang ended up under the guillotine. Don't you think the State has the upper hand in that scenario?"

"It depends on how you look at it," Durruti replied. "Anyway, I hope you like the book."

They exchanged a cool and deep look, like a stream of groundwater. Berthe turned off the lights in the bookstore, an unmistakable sign that it was closing time. She and Ascaso leaned on either side of the counter, chatting in a confidential tone. At that moment, Durruti wondered whether it was possible that life could grant them a truce in the midst of an era as cruel as that one.

Be that as it may, that morning the Parisian summer had shone down upon them. And that afternoon, a romance between Francisco Ascaso and Berthe Fabert was born. And a love story between Émilienne Morin and Buenaventura Durruti, impervious to exile and war, which would last more than a lifetime, a lifetime and a half.

19

I like the ocean, but I hate beaches. I've got a good reason for this phobia. My first residence in France was on a beach. I'm not talking about a normal residence, on just any beach. It was an obligatory residence, on a disfigured beach. A sandy beach that had been turned into an internment camp. I was only two years old. I have no memory of it. I couldn't yet reason. But I do know that many people died there. And that many more wished to die. People who could reason while they were held there. My mother was one of them. One of those who had wished to die for many months. Until death came to call. My mother: Rosalía Casal Domínguez. Born in Aragón. A nurse in the service of the Republic. Scratch that: A nurse in the service of the confederal militias. Although perhaps it's unnecessary to make the distinction. The French Government of 1939 certainly didn't bother. It made no distinction among those refugees who reeked of misery. They were all one and the same. A migration problem. Vomit from the war. Defeated civilians who invaded the Pyrenees one winter. A procession of grieving souls. When Barcelona fell. Hundreds of thousands of grieving souls who didn't want to fill Franco's mass graves.

Nor enjoy the peace that shrouds the cemetery walls. Nor rot in jail. Nor live in a country that denied them freedom. Entire families crossed the border on foot through La Jonquera and Portbou. And through the mountain passes of El Pertús and La Tor de Querol. With the few belongings they could fit in their arms. As the Condor Legion's *Stukas* strafed their trail. The trail of despair and exile. Carrying the sick and the wounded on their backs. And their broken

ideals, which had a weight of their own. There was only one place for them. And for their hunger, their cold. Somewhere they wouldn't bother Édouard Daladier's government. Venomous internment camps. In Rieucros and Saint-Cyprien, Le Barcarès and Rivesaltes, Septfonds and Gurs, and in Argelès-sur-Mer. Yes, in Argelès-sur-Mer I became French. And in Argelès-sur-Mer I also became an orphan. Thirty-five kilometers away from a Spain that no longer wanted us.

I was told that disease had killed my mother. I was told that when I was old enough to understand. I knew nothing more. If I believed it, I myself could choose the disease that killed her to complete the corollary. Between typhus and tuberculosis. Between avitaminosis and scurvy. Because there was everything in Argelès, it was a carnival of death. I could give the disease that left me without a mother a diagnostic name. If I believed it. Because I never did. I know that Rosalía Casal Domínguez was killed by sadness. That invisible bayonet that pierces the soul. That sucks away hope until it empties your spirit. She died of sadness. When we were separated. Death and separation were daily occurrences in Argelès. Along with cruel irony. Because it's cruel and ironic that mothers were separated from their sons and daughters, for humanitarian reasons. So that the little ones wouldn't have to grow up among the latrines dug in the sand. Or in the barracks made of rotten wood and gnawed canvas. The barracks that were home to coughing and wailing. And the curses of defeat. On a beach enclosed by the Mediterranean and by barbed wire. Under that harsh sky that froze the north wind. On that dirty, putrid sand. Guarded by African soldiers in the service of the French army. Colonial troops from Morocco and Senegal watching over new immigrants. Another cruel irony. Such cruelty, such irony that sets the ships of war afloat. War, which is a bottomless sea without shores.

I was brought to safety. To the Swiss Maternity Hospital. In the French commune of Elne. My mother was already ill. Elisabeth Eidenbenz found me one cold morning, shivering, crawling

through the wet sand. Like a small crab finding its way to the ocean. Elisabeth made rounds through the internment camps. She came and went looking for women in labor. To free them from that undeclared prison. As fate would have it, that day she hadn't found any. Not one among the fifty thousand refugees in Argelès. And she took me. To the Swiss Maternity Hospital. A place meant for birth, not for life. A place of passage. But a worthy and beautiful place. I wasn't born there, but I stayed there. Among babies and cradles. Diapers and rattles. In that three-story blue palace. Built at the turn of the century. Topped with a glass dome. Surrounded by fruit trees that scented my childhood. Facing south. Looking out at the golden sun of high noon. Toward the Pyrenees and toward Spain. Next to the main road in Montescot. Yes, a worthy and beautiful place. A home. My home.

Elisabeth Eidenbenz. A Swiss teacher and nurse. A non-confessional angel. She saved lives clinging to the cross. The cross of the Swiss flag. And later, to the Red Cross, who protected that hospital when France was invaded by the swastika. That Elisabeth who, at the age of twenty, had traveled to Spain. A war-torn Spain. To bring aid to children and pregnant women with the first group of Service Civil International volunteers. Into Republican territory. And who later founded the Swiss Maternity Hospital in Elne. Five hundred children were born there. Sons and daughters of Spanish refugees. And later, those of persecuted Jewish women. She would outsmart the Nazis as she knew how. "This building doesn't belong to France, it's Swiss! This is neutral territory protected by the Red Cross! Leave immediately!" she would say, raising her voice to the gendarmes. And to the exterminating angels of the swastika. While she and the midwives hid the Hebrew children. Under their long, clean, white skirts. They wouldn't allow for a single one of those children to be taken away from them. The children that I loved like brothers and sisters. It operated until 1944. Until the Gestapo closed down the center. And Elisabeth

disappeared from my life. The second mother I had lost. And this time I could reason enough to mourn the loss. And I mourned her with a sea of tears. She moved to the north of France. To work in soup kitchens for children. And the following year she left for Austria. At the end of World War II. To care for the orphans left in the wake of defeat. That's how she was. Always moving up the troubled waters of the river of history. Willing to make a diaper out of a bonnet. My mother gave me life. Elisabeth gave me faith in the human race. Through her example. Through her tenacity, love, and courage.

France gave me everything else. A childhood in a lay orphanage in Toulouse. A solitary but serene childhood. A citizenship and a passport. And a college degree. And an exciting and intense profession. And the only man I loved and who loved me. Until we let it get away from us. Because there are some loves that can be conjugated with the same incongruity as an irregular verb. But that was a long time ago…

Toulouse was also a long time ago. A little less than a lifetime has passed since then. Or maybe several. It was what marked my existence. Like a red-hot iron. An iron that engraves strange words into your soul. Words that fate spells out for you when you least expect it. And that leave you in the dark in the middle of an alleyway. Not knowing what to do. Not knowing whether to retrace your steps or to continue onward. To dig into the earth searching for the seed or to fill the furrow with the quicklime of oblivion. I chose the former for a while. I chose the endless search and the difficult questions. To give them a voice and a face, to breathe life into the loved ones I never had. Or the ones I no longer have. The ones I never had because fate wanted it that way. Or chance. Or coincidence. "Call it luck, chance, coincidence, destiny…," that man in Moscow said. Andrés Tudela, the old Communist. Thirty years ago.

It was chance or fate that brought me to Toulouse. When the Nazis shut down the maternity hospital in Elne. Of all the cities in France, it had to be Toulouse. The capital of Spanish anarchist exile. And as fate would have it, Mr. Le Brun decided to find me a Spanish teacher. Marcel Le Brun, the director of the orphanage. A kind man. With noble sentiments. A holistic outlook. And an open heart. He didn't want me to lose the language spoken by my parents. The parents I didn't have. And he found me a teacher. A Spanish teacher to fill my free afternoons. And so Isidre Borrell arrived. Another shooting star in my life. A typographer and FAI militiaman from Catalonia. Born at the turn of the century. He fought in Aragón. And in Extremadura. Then he followed the trail of exile, where he met my mother. And me. He helped us cross the border. Pulling her along. Carrying me. When Rosalía Casal's strength had failed her. Then Argelès separated us. The three of us. He never knew of my mother's death. Until chance, on a whim, told him about me. In Toulouse. And he walked into my life. To tell me part of my story. The one that fate had wanted to hide from me.

I was seven at the time. I never forgot his first Spanish class. Its first two sentences: "Libertad is Rosalía's daughter. Rosalía was Durruti's nurse," he said. Then he pronounced the words, syllable by syllable. And then he spelled out the syllables, one by one. So that I could write them down in my notebook. The rest of the class and all of his classes were dedicated to grammar. And semantics. And phonetics. And the forgetting of that false misstep that fate put in Isidre's mouth. "*Ne perdez jamais ce cahier*." He said that in French. To solemnize the request. That's how the Spanish teacher said goodbye to me. One October afternoon in 1944. It was his way of showing me that he had left the door to my past ajar. So that one day I could look through it. If I wanted to. If I dared. He said nothing else when he said goodbye. Just that. "*Ne perdez jamais ce cahier*." "Never lose that notebook." A seemingly absurd piece of advice. A notebook

with poor notes. Notes on basic Spanish. Yet, with those two sentences from the first day. Isidre Borrell had a placid air about him that afternoon. Wearing his usual tie. Plain, chocolate-colored. Short, ridiculously short. Tied tight as a drum. And his brown French-style beret. And his modest blazer. And the tips of his fingernails enameled with fresh printer's ink. From the printing press on which he used to write beautiful words. Words like justice, dignity, and freedom. And his cheerful, kind face. That afternoon he wrapped me in a warm embrace. It was the first time that he had hugged me. And the last. And his blue, marine, Mediterranean eyes grew misty. They shined like two diamonds. He knew he wouldn't be back. And I did too.

Marcel Le Brun waited a full year to tell me half the truth. The half truth that I had missed about Isidre's departure. He waited until the end of the Nazi occupation to tell me. Isidre had returned to Spain. But not to request a pardon. That wasn't true. He had returned to fight. And to die, if necessary. With many others. Thousands of *antifranquistas* crossed the Pyrenees. Retracing the trail of exile. In October 1944. Motivated by the allied landing in Normandy. It was the time to defeat Franco. They thought that the people in Spain would revolt. They captured the Aran Valley. And nothing more. Isidre died at the end of a tunnel. Riddled with bullets by General Moscardó's troops. One of the survivors told Marcel about it. He told him that he had died in his homeland. Fighting for it. A logical, coherent thing to do. "Because anarchists live for freedom. And if necessary, they die for it too." That's what the survivor told him. Isidre's death was the final lesson he taught me. He taught me that in this life even pain is gain.

I kept that Spanish grammar notebook. Just for Isidre. To honor his memory. Years later, I don't know when or why, I returned to it. And I reread those first two sentences. And I felt the urge to push that door open. The door that led to my origins. That's why I became a journalist, I think that was the only reason. To learn to investigate. To ask questions again and again. To

never stop looking for the answers. To dig into the earth in search of the seed. In Toulouse I gathered the first testimonies. Many of them. They were diverse, different. Then I traveled to the country where I was born. When that Spain that no longer wanted us had already died. I talked to people and visited places. Explored archives and frequented libraries. And the pieces of the puzzle began to fit. One after another. Forming a figure.

Rafael Barrios Llopis was my father. A stevedore working in the port of Valencia. A militiaman of the Ascaso Column. He gave his life to the battle of Monte Pelado. In Huesca. He was thirty-two years old. He died without knowing he was going to be a father. My mother left for Madrid shortly after. She hadn't known she was pregnant either. Until a dying man told her. The man in room number 15. On the second floor of the Ritz Hotel. At the hospital run by the Catalonian confederal militias. When she started her night shift. Rosalía Casal Domínguez, a thirty-year-old nurse. They put that patient in her care. The doctors had already given him a fatal prognosis: hopeless. The medical staff was given strict orders. No one was to enter room number 15. Except for one nurse who would administer him morphine. Lots of morphine. So that he wouldn't be able to feel. So that he wouldn't suffer. So that the bullet that had already killed him wouldn't hurt him any longer.

Sometimes the patient dozed in silence. Other times he whispered in delirium. Then suddenly he opened his eyes with lucidity. It was after midnight. He fixed his gaze on my mother. A hazy but tender gaze. And he spoke. "What will you name it if it's a girl?" The question took Rosalía Casal by surprise. No one knew that she was pregnant. No one, not even her. "I don't know... Libertad is a pretty name," the nurse answered at random. For the sole purpose of pleasing a dying man. To let him be right. Not to tell him that he was wrong, that she wasn't pregnant. Not to show him that he was delirious. And they say that Rosalía Casal said that

Durruti smiled at that moment. With serenity. When he heard the girl's name. My name, the word that had given meaning to his life. And his death. And the nurse understood that that smile had justified her deception. The innocent deception of coming up with a name for an imaginary child. A man ended his life announcing the beginning of mine. The life of a non-existent girl. As if he and I had crossed paths in a waiting room shared by life and death. With time to introduce ourselves in that precise moment. A non-existent moment in human time.

I kept investigating for a while. After I discovered my roots. I don't know why I did it. I don't need to know. Maybe because I became obsessed with it. Or because I was good at it. Or because I pretended to live other people's lives. The lives of those who didn't get to live through it all. Of the men and women who had more life to live, struggles to fight, dreams to fulfill, and words to say. I never learned what you were expecting me to reveal. I don't know who fired the shot that killed Durruti. To tell you the truth, it doesn't really matter, does it? Death is never the most important part of a life. The end of that mystery wouldn't have added much to it. Half a paragraph, at most, in the book of a man's life. Nothing that would twist his story. Nor change the judgment of his rights and wrongs.

I stopped investigating. Although I never stopped thinking about it. All of it. About all of them. About Rosalía and Rafael. About Isidre and Durruti. About their broken lives, consumed before they were complete. And about the longing for justice they shared. I still think of them to this day. From these green fields of Upper Normandy. Teasing my old age on the cliffs of Étretat. Walking, on these long summer days, into what is already the short winter of my life. And on this rainy afternoon, I watch them pass by. The merchant ships. And the cruise liners. Beneath the flowering wind. Blurry and trembling in the squall. Like phantom ships passing through time. Sailing southwest. And today I let the fantasy seduce me. I let the daydream deceive me. And I

imagine that the story lives on in some harbor. That it happens in every instant. Rinsed and repeated. Fresh and fervent. Like the rising and falling of the seas. I think that one of those ships I see is headed for the Barcelona of those times. To sound the sirens that announce the revolution of a people. And that in another ship Durruti and Ascaso head for exile. Captive but free. Or that they're traveling to America. With false passports but real dreams. Building universes. Searching for a new world. Under this August rain.

Appendix

Transcript of Personal Interview with Francisco Álvarez (March 18, 2024)

WE: Antes que nada, quería darte las gracias y decir que ha sido un placer para mí y mi consejera traducir tu novela.

PA: Soy yo el que está agradecido. Es muy complicado en este mundo editorial, que no es un mar, es un océano, es muy complicado… que alguien fije la mirada en ti. Y es un tema que a mí me emociona y luego repasando esas traducciones en griego y en alemán, no entiendo nada del texto, pero cuando veo por ahí Gijón metido siento cierto orgullo. Hay un lector, una lectora de Atenas o Viena que está dando un paseo virtual por el Paseo del Muro, por la Calle Campo, de Gijón y creo que es una de las cosas mágicas que tiene la literatura

WE: ¿Qué te impulsó a escribir una novela sobre la vida, la muerte, y el legado de Durruti? ¿Por qué no otras figuras ilustres como García Oliver o Ricardo Sanz u otros anarquistas?

PA: Juan García Oliver tiene un libro de memorias, El eco de los pasos (1978), que publicó en el exilio mexicano y es un libro que está muy cuestionado por el anarquismo porque dicen que cuenta bastantes hechos inciertos. Se atribuye el protagonismo, como que tenía celos hacia Durruti que fue el personaje más mediático y más potente de esa época. Durruti tiene una carga épica tremenda. Es un personaje literario y cinematográfico, creo yo. No soy el primero que escribe un libro de Durruti desde la ficción. Desde la no ficción, hay unos cuantos y el libro de referencia es la biografía de Durruti escrita por Abel Paz, que es un anarquista, que está traducida

a quince idiomas y a mí me sirvió de mucho ayuda. Es el libro fundamental, teniendo en cuenta las circunstancias. Estamos hablando de un libro escrito en una época muy anterior a internet, redes sociales, el autor estaba exiliado en Francia, en Burdeos, creo. Y claro, el acceso que tenía a las fuentes informativas era muy limitado y es un libro bastante panfletario. Durruti parece como un santo laico, solo falta que lo canonicen. A mi me sirvió de básica, pero por ejemplo en el libro niega que en el atraco al Banco de España de Gijón que muriese ese director de la oficina Luis Azcárate, dice que eso fue un invento de la prensa burguesa, que reciba un disparo pero que era una pequeña herida. Entonces yo bromeo, digo [en algún acto público de presentación del libro] «la herida debió de infectarse» porque yo vi la esquela en la prensa y vi fotos del entierro de él y esto está ahí en la hemeroteca. Es decir no podemos negar los hechos, tú puedes sentir respeto hacia la figura de Durruti pero yo no voy a ocultarlo. La honestidad que tengo como periodista y en este caso como escritor, yo siempre me había pegado a los hechos reales. En este caso quise reflejar las luces y las sombras del personaje. El tener que ser Durruti porque ya te digo es un personaje que tiene mucho magnetismo y yo suelo decir en presentaciones y entrevistas, digo mira que no se me ofenda ninguna de las dos grandes familias ideológicas, pero la figura de Durruti a nivel internacional es como la Che de Guevara para el comunismo, para el anarquismo. Vas a la Wikipedia y encuentras una extensísima biografía de Durruti en chino mandarín, en alemán, en inglés, en italiano, en portugues, en lenguas de todo el mundo. Es un personaje que por ahí hay cierto paralelismo con Che de Guevara, murieron muy jóvenes los dos, murieron en combate por decirlo así, y en el caso de Durruti además, está el aro de misterio que cae en torno a su muerte. Nosotros en la edición en castellano, introdujimos un subtítulo de «¿quien disparó la bala que mató a Buenaventura Durruti?» No quiero hacer espóiler, pero claro tú que leíste la novela sabes que yo al final no cuento quién mató a Durruti por honestidad

porque nadie sabe lo que pasó. Hay muchas teorías que si fue un disparo accidental, de un compañero, del sargento Manzana, era un subfusil conocido como el naranjero que fallaba más que una escopeta de feria como decimos aquí. Que si fue un disparo del bando facista, que si lo mataron las gentes de Estalin, hay muchas teorías. Por honestidad, yo, que vengo del periodismo, no me atreví a dictar sentencia. Es decir yo dejo el final abierto en ese aspecto. Y además yo creo que no es lo más importante del libro. A veces uno suele decir que lo importante de algunos viajes, y sobre todo en la literatura, no es el destino sino el viaje en sí, el recorrido. Te decía que hay otros autores que ya escribieron novelas antes que yo de Durruti, autores españoles, hay un chileno incluso que cuenta el breve periplo de Durruti y otros dos compañeros por Sudamérica y uno de ellos, Jorge Díaz, escribió una novela que se llama La justicia de los errantes, que habla de la etapa de Durruti, Ascaso y Jover en Sudamérica. Ahí operaban no con el nombre de Los Solidarios sino con el nombre de Los errantes. De ahí viene el título. Esa novela tampoco tuviese un gran éxito pero el autor si es muy conocido hoy en día porque forma parte de un colectivo que se llama «Carmen Mola» que ganó el Premio Planeta, son tres escritores que escriben detrás de ese seudónimo femenino. Y me acuerdo cuando vino a presentar la novela aquí en Gijón porque además estaba la prensa que le interesaba por el referente del atraco al Banco de España, que fue uno de los atracos más audaces y más importantes de la historia española. Entonces él contaba en El Comercio, el periodico para que trabajo yo, dijo una frase muy elocuente: dijo «si Durruti en vez de ser español fuese estadounidense, hubiesen hecho ya dos superproducciones» y yo recuerdo algún paralelismo con la figura de John Dillinger, hay una pelicula de él del cine negro de los anos 40, hay otra mas reciente de Johnny Depp, Public Enemy, enemigo público, algo de esto. Claro, esto es otro mundo pero tiene mucha más capacidad para sacar rendimiento a la épica. Aquí por desgracia no había esto. Entonces decidí escribir algo sobre Durruti. Yo no era

consciente, pero la figura de Durruti estaba presente en mi vida ahí desde hacía mucho tiempo porque estudié el periodismo en Madrid en la Universidad Complutense y un compañero mío de clase y de piso, es periodista en Oviedo, trabaja en La Nueva España, Juan Ardura, y cuando saqué la novela me dice él, «Tú en la universidad ya te sentías atracción a la figura de Durruti». Yo no me acuerdo pero dice «Sí, sí me acuerdo que ibas a clase con una carpeta», en aquella época teníamos carpetas plastificadas con fotos, «y llevas una foto de Durruti» con, como cuenta la novela, esa mirada de dinamita. Y con la frase esa de «y llevamos un mundo nuevo en nuestros corazones» y que no me acordaba. Luego hay otras circunstancias biográficas pero tampoco te quiero enrollar para contar esto.

WE: Pero no pasa nada.

PA: Bueno. En España había un momento, en los años 90, antimilitarista. Era obligatorio el servicio militar en España hasta el año 2001. Entonces en los años 80, se creó un movimiento de jóvenes antimilitaristas que nos negamos a hacer el servicio militar. Abrimos un debate social también sobre los gastos militares y tal. Teníamos una serie de lemas así «gastos militares para escuelas y hospitales». Queríamos más gastos sociales. Entonces al final entramos digamos en un conflicto con el estado, que luego se articuló la prestación social y sustitutoria que si tú nacías en un año de mili, tenías que hacer un año y medio de servicio sociales. Entonces fuimos un poco más allá y nos negamos. Dijimos, no queremos hacer esto porque esto es legitimar la mili y porque además estaban eliminando puestos de trabajo. Imagínate que tienes un chico que no quiere hacer la mili que va a trabajar aquí dieciocho meses gratis – servicio social. Entraba desde Cruz Roja y se puede decir oye estás haciendo un servicio que a lo mejor si tú no lo haces, Cruz

Roja no tiene capacidad para pagar a otra persona, pero al final entraron sindicatos, asociaciones de vecinos. Y luego aparte un castigo. No duraba lo mismo, duraba más. Yo tenía la posibilidad de librarme, además yo estaba trabajando en El Comercio y me dijeron no, me decía un compañero que había hecho la PSS, la Prestación Social Sustitutoria. Dice «Sí, yo estuve en Cruz Roja y en un año y pico lo único que tuve que hacer fue el anuario de actividades» que debía de llevarles dos días. Mucho menos con la tesis de fin de carrera. Era «un coleadero» como decimos aquí. Yo pude haberme librado incluso la mili por cuestiones familiares pero digamos que abrimos un debate social con ese tema. El movimiento hizo su misión y fue muy importante en España, fue un movimiento bastante potente y al final empezaban a encarcelar a los insumisos y yo fui uno de los que estuvieron en la cárcel. Nos condenaron a dos años y cuatro meses y estuve catorce meses en la prisión. Tuvimos mucho apoyo internacional, la verdad. En esos tiempos llegaron mil y pico cartas manuscritas, las contestamos todas, a mitad de condenado empezaron a llegar cartas del Reino Unido, Estados Unidos, Alemania, ¿y esto que es? Resulta que la War Resisters' International, Las Resistentes Internacionales a la Guerra había hecho una gambeta internacional para apoyar a los insumisos. Y yo en la celda mía de la cárcel, tenía un cartel que me había mandado un sindicato, la CNT, el cartel con la imagen de Durruti. Y todos los días cuando nos despertaban en la cárcel a las ocho de la mañana, despiertas y dices «Joder, estoy en la carcel otra vez, una otra vez, siempre en la cárcel (se ríe), pero veía aquí la imagen en la pared de en frente y «Llevamos un mundo nuevo en nuestros corazones». Y fue una imagen que a mí me dio bastante fuerza para seguir adelante. Una vez cuando presenté el libro en Madrid y parte del público estaba despistado y dije «Espera que voy a soltar una frase efectista». Dije «¿Sabes que yo estuve en la cárcel con Durruti?» y me miraban y alguien dijo «No eres tan mayor». Y entonces lo expliqué, dije «Bueno no estuve con Durruti cuando estuve en la cárcel pero me

acompañaba todos los días». Para mi fue una experiencia muy positiva aunque suena muy extraño estar en la cárcel. Y empecé a escribir, escribí mis dos primeros libros – un diario de vivencia e historia de la cárcel de compañeros que estaban ahí por otras circunstancias, un libro de cuentos. Creamos una revista de presos, organicé un curso de asturiano para presos, nos implicábamos mucho. No íbamos ahí a tomar el sol, que también se puede tomar el sol. Entonces es una figura que siempre la tuve muy presente y hacia 2013-2014, dije la verdad es que me apetece escribir algo sobre Durruti pero ni me planteaba hacer una novela. Tenía un tremendo miedo escénico, yo nunca había hecho una novela, de hecho el primer libro de cuentos que te dije que hice en la cárcel en asturiano se titula En poques pallabres (En pocas palabras), porque fueron cuentos muy breves. No me atrevía nunca con la distancia larga. La idea inicial fue escribir una letra para un grupo de rock asturiano, Dixebra, colaboré con ellos alguna vez como letrista, fuera de Asturias lo llamarían rock étnico porque tiene un gaita, hay guitarras eléctricas, es un grupo histórico en Asturias. Siempre el cantante Xune Elipe me pedía letras, estaban preparando un disco entonces yo escribí una letra en la que hablaba de atracadores famosos, de John Dillinger, de Bonnie and Clyde, y de Los Solidarios de Buenaventura Durruti. No me cogieron esa letra, me cogieron otra, he hecho cinco o seis letras, pero dije bueno ya que tengo voy a hacer algo. Dije voy a escribir un cuento, la otra cosa no me atrevo, un cuento de ocho folios, de diez folios, pero empezaba a argumentarme dije «Hostia, aquí hay mucho material» y la biografía de Abel Paz y dije «A ver si me atrevo». Fue un verano también de cambio en mi vida, había roto la relación así más importante con la mujer con la que estaba, entonces aquel verano digamos que yo me refugié en la literatura literalmente. La novela la escribí en un verano, siempre hago un juego de palabras con un libro de Hans Magnus Enzensberger El corto verano de la anarquía, que cuenta la historia de Durruti, pero también es muy mitificada. Cuenta unas

historias, a mí esas cosas las veo mucho en las redes sociales, en Twitter hay gente que pone capturas de una parte del libro de Enzensberger sugiriendo que Durruti era feminista. Y digo no, Durruti no era feminista. ¿Quién cojones era feminista en aquella época? Él cuenta una anécdota en la que Durruti está un día en casa y llegaron los compañeros del sindicato y Durruti estaba lavando los platos después de comer y dicen «pero ¿qué haces tú lavando los platos si tienes mujer?» Entonces él soltó alguna proclama «Compañeros, a las compañeras hay que ayudarlas y tal…» es mentira. Intenté desmitificarlo en el capítulo donde hay una entrevista con Émilienne Morin, eso está basado en una entrevista real que hizo Pedro Costa, que era un escritor y cineasta español, para la revista Interviú, que desapareció hace unos años pero fue una revista histórica en España. El entrevistó a Émilienne Morin en Bretaña y yo metía un estrato porque le preguntaba por qué Émilienne le decía «No, Durruti machista no era», pero feministas no era ninguno. Digamos que ahí también da una imagen muy mitificada, pero bueno, es un libro de referencia, El corto verano de la anarquía. Me apropio de esa cosa y digo que mi corto verano de la anarquía fue el del verano del 2014 que lo cogí en entero, no tenía tampoco trabajo en ese momento, tenía un poquito de dinero ahorrado y dije pues mira voy a invertir esto en hacer una novela. Y fueron cuatro meses, algo más de cuatro meses. Me llevó más tiempo la documentación histórica que la escritura de la novela. La novela la escribí en un par de meses. Claro, dedicándome ahí. Hay compañeros escritores que dicen «Joder, yo tardo dos años en escribir una novela» y digo «Ya, pero tú estás trabajando, eres profesor, tú escribes en tus ratos libres». Yo digamos que todos los días me levantaba y me dedicaba, entonces la hice así de tirón. Y me vino muy bien. Yo en ese momento necesitaba una inyección de pica mi vida, por falta de autoestima y demás cosas. Y luego decidí presentarla al Premio Xosefa Xovellanos porque dije la verdad es que necesito dinero también. También curiosamente nació por una necesidad económica, lo digo

abiertamente. Había ciertas personas que me dijeron «Madre, eres un fenicio», digo «No no no, yo necesitaba el dinero». Entonces dije voy a presentarla en el Premio Xosefa Xovellanos, en aquella época era un premio de 3.000 euros ahora son 7.000. Entonces apuré, la presenté el último día de plazo. La novela por lo menos en aquellos tiempos tenías que entregarla físicamente en el registro del Principáu y tenía que ir hasta Oviedo. La noche anterior estaba yo allí a las cinco de la mañana delante del ordenador y digo «Es que no sé qué es el final de la novela». No tenía el final. Y estaba pensando «Ya verás voy a ir metido toda la noche sin dormir». Nunca había hecho esto, ni siquiera cuando era estudiante. Siempre algo dormía. Siempre digo de broma, como con los dibujos animados, cuando se te aparece el ángel y el demonio. Y te dice el demonio, «¡Vete a dormir, hombre! Que escriba otro una novela de Durruti, que estás cansadisimo». Y el ángel diciendo «Joder, llegaste hasta aquí con todo esto esfuerzo». Dije «Ya verás, tendría una novela, mañana cojo el coche, me voy a Oviedo y en la autopista me pego una hostia y me mato y va a ser un best seller» porque en este país cuando mueres es cuando triunfas. Y al final se me ocurrió un final y lo dejé tal cual. Mira que luego hubo mucho proceso de reescritura, cuando la corregí en asturiano, cuando la adapté al castellano, hubo muchas cosas que cambié, pero el final lo dejé tal cual. Y hay gente que me dice «Joder, el final es lo más emotivo de la novela» y ahí donde desvelo un poco la identidad de la protagonista y el tema del exilio español, como fuese todo en el sur de Francia.

WE: Algunas preguntas sobre Libertad Casal: ¿En qué te inspiraste para crear su personaje? ¿Qué representa para ti en el contexto del legado de Durruti y por qué sentiste que la necesitabas para contribuir a la historia de Durruti y su memoria?

PA: Libertad es como el médium que dispone contacto a los vivos con los muertos de la historia. Un poco siguiendo el esquema clásico de la novela yo quería hacer dos tramas: una trama principal y una secundaria. El principal está protagonizado por Durruti, Los Solidarios, la gente de esa época. Y la trama secundaria la protagoniza la periodista que medio siglo después investiga las circunstancias. Entonces dije ¿Cómo hago distinguir al lector en qué momento histórico estamos? Pues con el tiempo verbal. El tiempo verbal en la trama histórica es en tercera persona, lo que llamamos un narrador omnisciente, que lo controla todo. Y en la trama actual, bueno ya no es actual, es de los años 80, el tiempo es en primera persona. Es Libertad la que habla no sé que no se cuánto. Viene bien, siempre es una figura muy socorrida. Me recuerda que hay una novela de Javier Cercas, Soldados de Salamina, que está ambientada también en la guerra civil, en la novela no aparece pero en película de David Trueba es muy interesante porque también se creó la figura de una escritora que está investigando mucho tiempo después las circunstancias de un hecho que pasó en la guerra civil española. Entonces ese por ejemplo me sirvió un poco como referente, necesitaba a una figura de apoyo para analizar la figura de Durruti con cierta distancia temporal e histórica. ¿Por qué es periodista? Pues para mí era lo más cómodo. Hay un refrán que dice que las cabras tiran para el monte. Pues en este caso, para mí era lo más cómodo. Yo vengo del periodismo, llevo treinta y pico años y el periodismo es una figura muy recurrente. Además un periodista digamos que está autorizado para investigar. Si dices que era arquitecto, pues hombre, es más complicado que una arquitecta se ponga a hacer una investigación sobre Durruti. Y el nombre de Libertad es un nombre muy vinculado al anarquismo. Aquí conocí a una mujer, no sé si viviera aquí en Gijón, en el barrio del Carmen, pero cuando saqué la entrevista la entrevisté ahí. Era hija de un anarquista histórico de Gijón. Y la mujer se llamaba Armonía, eran ese tipo de nombres que ponían los anarquistas a sus hijas

hijos como Libertad, Armonía, Progreso, era muy habitual. Pero también digamos que estoy inspirado en la figura de la mujer que conocí, que también murió hace unos años, del pueblo del que era mi padre, un pueblo que se llama Cuero de Candamo, en Asturias. Libertad tenía un bar tienda, que es una figura muy habitual en Asturias. El bar tienda es, en los pueblos pequeños es un bar que aparte de ir a tomar un vino o una botella de sidra, te compras un kilo de lentejas o un litro de leche – hacen las dos funciones. Eran para los pequeños que no tenían capacidad para tener, desde luego no habían supermercados pero ya ni siquiera… Entonces el bar tienda era una figura histórica. Comprabas de todo ahí. Un bote de mayonesa o lo básico. Entonces ella y yo le habíamos hecho una entrevista para El Comercio porque era una mujer además de familia republicana, el padre estuvo preso en un campo de concentración en Celanova en Galicia. Claro, cuando triunfó el régimen franquista el nombre de ella prácticamente lo prohibieron, «Libertad». Me contaba que al padre le mandaba cartas desde la cárcel y el nombre que ponía era «Berta», de Alberta o Roberta por similitud fonética. Entonces siempre lo tuve muy marcado, el nombre de Libertad que curiosamente Libertad tenía una hermana que también murió – la hermana se llamaba «Fe». El padre era republicano ateo y la madre, ¡a lo mejor era católica! Entonces una cosa de negociar. Dijeron, las hijas, vale, a esta le ponemos «Libertad» pero a la otra vamos a poner «fe»… Me recuerda un poco a una película que estaba viendo el otro día, una pelicula de Spike Lee, la de Do the Right Thing, que hay un personaje negro que tiene un anillo y dice «Aquí pone ‘hate' y aquí ‘love’», los poderes. Y la labor y el odio, era una pelea constante. Pues eso, necesitaba un apoyo para la trama secundaria y la periodista por cercanía a ese mundo que mejor conozco y porque me parece que es un personaje social legitimado o podía ser un profesor universitario o un estudiante que estuviese preparando una tesis sobre Durruti, o un escritor incluso, pero bueno me resultaba bastante cómodo. Y lo del nombre ya te digo, tiene esas dos

orientaciones, porque digamos que ya da un indicio al principio al lector y dice «¿Una mujer que se llama Libertad?», y además que creció en Francia pero no se llama Liberté, se llama Libertad. Entonces ya das a entender que tiene origen español y que tiene algún antecedente familiar a fin de los perdedores de la guerra. Libertad no es un nombre que se pusiera mucho.

WE: Una de las cosas que más me llamó la atención de la novela y de su estilo literario fue el acierto que tuviste al crear una ambientación en constante evolución. ¿Cómo te preparaste para transportar a tu lector por los paisajes culturales de Moscú y París a finales de los años setenta, así como por la España de los años veinte y treinta, a la vez que retratabas sus matices distintivos?

PA: Creo que fui bastante temerario porque por ejemplo la descripción que hago de un distrito París cuando salen ellos de la cárcel y están dando un paseo y se van a comer un bocadillo, una baguette para haber hecho cuento a la historia de las baguettes, que se crearon para los obreros porque era un pan que si se cocía rápido era más delgado. En ese aspecto me gustan las historias que son como las matrioskas rusas, las muñecas esas que las abres y hay otra historia pequeña dentro. Me gusta mucho trufar. En Asturias es como un bollo preñao, lo abres y dentro tienes algo. Contar pequeñas historias dentro de la historia. Ya te digo, creo que me arriesgué bastante y no sé hasta qué punto estuvo… pero claro yo no conozco París, ya lo digo el París de hace un siglo, es como aquí. En Cabeza alta, el último cuento también está ambientado en Nueva York de los años 50 y nunca estuve en Nueva York. Intento hacer bastante labor de documentación y buscar cambios... el callejero así cambió, en Nueva York me imagino que no habrá cambiado mucho el callejero, pero en Francia y en España, sobre todo el nombre de las calles en el último

siglo cambiaron mucho, por el régimen. Aquí lo que es la Plaza del Instituto o Plaza del Parchís eran la Plaza del Generalísimo, el Generalísimo Franco. Y luego hay muchas calles que tenían nombres franquistas, en Oviedo hasta hace poco está la Plaza de la División Azul que es muy polémica. La División Azúl fue un aliado de los nazis en el asedio a Stalingrado. Eran tropas franquistas que lucharon al lado de los nazis y todavía en Oviedo había una plaza que llevaba su nombre. Entonces intenté documentarme al máximo con ese tema hasta donde pude. Me gusta ser detallista pero no aburrir mucho con las descripciones. Es que incluso como lector a mí me cansa a veces. Si me pongo a describir este bar en ocho páginas digo hombre, no, es una literatura muy preciosista, pero al final creo que distraes la atención. Me gusta documentar las historias y ampliar, por ejemplo cuento la historia de un bar, el Bar de la Tranquilidad, que realmente existió, era el santuario de los anarquistas en Barcelona. Ahí tuve la suerte de que estuve buscando y hasta donde podía encontrar, no había ninguna foto interior del bar. Hay fotos exteriores. Entonces eso me dió libertad total para inventar el bar como me dió la gana. Conté que hacían veladas ahí, que tocaban el acordeón, que había leche merengada, no sé que no sé cuanto. Así que digamos que me envolví un poco en la descripción, pero no me gusta ser muy extenso a la hora de hacer descripciones. Pero sí, muy detallista, que a lo mejor demasiado, no lo sé. Quizás viene de mí formación profesional como periodista, del tener que dar todos los datos. Un amigo mío que también es escritor-periodista y es profesor de historia contemporánea en la Universidad Complutense y cuando leyó el libro dice «Está muy bien pero ¿es necesario que des todos estos datos? ¿Es necesario que cuentes que Durruti, Los Solidarios, atracaron el Banco de España en Gijón el 1 de Septiembre de 1923 a las 9:10 de la mañana en un coche Jeffrey Special con matrícula de O-434. Hombre, necesario no, pero ya que tengo los datos, sin abrumar, sin aburrir, los suelto. Y la matrícula era real y ese modelo de coche, un coche estadounidense que se

usaba mucho en aquella época. Digo sí que me gusta ser preciso y puntilloso hasta donde pueda. Hay gente que dice que mis novelas son muy cinematográficas – yo no lo sé. Había una época en la que intenté formarme como guionista de cine, era un tema que me interesaba. De hecho, cuando estaba con este de Durruti, en un ataque de megalomanía, antes de la novela, dije «¿Y por qué no escribo yo un cinematográfico?» Me acordé del tema de lo que te decía de Jorge Díaz, si Durruti fuese estadounidense… y estaba con esa idea, pero dije «Anda, ¿a donde vas a ir tú, que no escribiste un guión cinematográfico en tu vida? Y ¿vas a ponerte al primero con esto?» Todavía algún lector me dice «Jolín, eso tiene que haber alguna película algún día, hombre». Es que llevar esto al cine será un mínimo de ocho millones de euros. Esa es la diferencia entre hacer un guión de cine y una novela, con la literatura tienes carta blanca. Puedo contarme aquí la batalla de Barcelona y decir, «Y salieron cinco mil militares a la calle» y los ves a los militares. En el cine llega el productor y dice «Cinco mil no vale – que sean cincuenta». Y de momento ¿sabes lo que es meter a cinco mil en una escena? De ahí digamos que hay cierta diferencia. Entonces yo no sé. Es verdad que tengo una cultura muy cinematográfica, soy un gran consumidor de cine y quizás eso se materializa a la hora de escribir, yo no lo tengo tan claro. Pero vamos, me dijeron varias personas que hay varias escenas muy cinematográficas. Cuando cuento lo que es la batalla de Barcelona a primeras horas, ese momento de tensión cuando llegan a la Plaza Cataluña en un coche, la verdad me lo tomo como un agrado porque mejor que me digan eso «Jo, me leí diez páginas en la novela y pasó nada». Yo tengo muchos defectos pero creo que en mi literatura eso no ocurre. Tiene su mérito también, ¿eh? Esos tipos de literatura, y luego también depende de la maestría del escritor, que yo no la tengo. Un autor al que más traduje en italiano, Marcello Fois, es de Cerdeña, que tiene un libro de una trilogía, no sé si es el segundo, El tiempo del medio, es genial porque las treinta primeras páginas no pasa nada. Un

hombre desembarca en Cerdeña después de la Primera Guerra Mundial, estuvo combatiendo en el bando italiano y hace una peregrinación a pie para volver al pueblo de ciento y picos kilómetros, y está él solo. Discurriendo entre el mar y la montaña y no pasa nada, pero son treinta páginas maravillosas, magistrales porque en esas páginas te hacen un tratado de botánica, que yo sufrí como traductor porque había especies, árboles que yo no conocía ni en castellano, más son propias del mediterráneo. Nosotros somos del clima Cantábrico. Pero digo «Joder, la verdad es que esto es tremendo». Porque se cruza con un par de personas durante el trayecto y va recordando historias y realmente no necesita agarrarse a la épica como en este caso yo para contar. Pero ya te digo, es uno de mis mayores maestros como escritor.

WE: ¿Aprovecha Lluvia de agosto la tragedia de la vida de Durruti para explorar temas más amplios sobre la memoria y el sufrimiento del siglo XX en España?

PA: Sí. Creo que básicamente es un libro, aunque el término esté muy manoseado, muy utilizado últimamente, de memoría e histórica. Aquí se llama una novela histórica, me vale también una memoría democrática, me valen los dos. Bueno sí que necesitaba un poco reivindicar la figura de los perdedores. A lo mejor desde una mirada externa, como es la tuya, te puede chocar. Puedes decir, «Oye estos españoles están muy obsesionados con el pasado», pero es que lo vivimos. Yo viví en la dictadura, tenía cinco años cuando murió Franco y a mí me pegaron de crío porque yo soy zurdo, escribo con la zurda y me pegaron porque dicen eso es de comunistas. Un niño de cuatro años que no sabe lo que es el comunismo, ¿sabes? Entonces vivimos muchas situaciones, el mal robo de la memoría, muchos de nuestros familiares eran presos, fusilados. Creo que es un deber del régimen democrático, sin revanchismo. Pero sí recupera ese tipo de memoría histórica

porque además, es gente muy noble. Yo lo cuento al principio, que al final la historia es de ellos y de ellas, yo solo la conté. Cuando me piden una firma del libro, digo bueno, es una historia de gentes que vivieron, lucharon y murieron por la libertad. Lo cuento al final en las últimas páginas cuando cuento la historia del tipógrafo anarquista que ayuda a Libertad y que el tío desaparece y al final es un cuento histórico real con mucha ingenuidad. Intentaron invadir España, el grupo de antifranquistas. Ellos estaban confiados en que las potencias mundiales después de derrotar a Hitler y a Mussolini que acabarían con Franco también. Es gente que hizo un sacrificio importante por la libertad y yo ahí no soy nada sectario. Cualquier militante antifranquista me parece justo reivindicarlo. Pero bueno yo tengo escritos de historias de militantes comunistas, anarquistas y estoy documentando, no sé si alguna vez la escribiré, una novela sobre La Nueve, que era una división de soldados españoles, republicanos, que acabaron exiliados en Francia al acabar la guerra. Muchos de ellos acabaron en campos de concentración como cuento ahí, pero al final, los necesitaron para luchar contra los nazis. Y muchos de ellos, socialistas, comunistas, anarquistas, se integraron en el ejército francés y fueron los primeros que liberaron a París. Pero ese es un tema muy silenciado además porque el nacionalismo francés los silenció. Charles de Gaulle vendió la historia de que esos no eran franceses, muchos de ellos eran españoles que habían perdido la guerra aquí y estaban librando una segunda batalla contra el franquismo. Muchos murieron, pero algunos hicieron un sacrificio ideológico importante porque el caso de los anarquistas, por ejemplo, acabaron integrándose en el ejército francés, con uniforme – cosas que no quisieron hacer aquí en la guerra civil, no quisieron militarizarse. Además, estaban bajo el mando del general Leclerc, un general francés que estuvo luego en Indochina y murió después en un accidente de aviación. Y curiosamente Leclerc era un tío de derechas, durante el golpe de estado en España, él apoyó a los franquistas. Y al final, tuvo bajo su mando, para participar en la

liberación de Francia, soldados republicanos. Es interesante esas idas y vueltas de la historia. Era gente además que tenía preparación militar porque ya venía de tres años de guerra civil y les machacaron a las unidades de la Waffen-SS, les tumbaron bastante, anduvieron persiguiéndolos hasta Alemania. Entonces es una historia muy curiosa porque además, la gran decepción que se llevaron ellos, los supervivientes de La Nueve, no se les reconoció el valor, las historias que eran soldados franceses, eran republicanos. De hecho en las tanquetas de ellos, algunos entraron en París con color de republicanas y los vehículos los bautizaron, ponían nombres en español, de batallas de la guerra civil española, la batalla del Ebro, la de Belchite, la de Guadalajara. Intentaron pero ya el mando no se lo permitió, que era Leclerc. Uno de los vehículos los quisieron bautizar con el nombre de Durruti. Y Leclerc dijo «Esta ya es demasiado, hasta ahí no llegamos», pero la decepción que recibió esta gente, primero los ningunearon, no recibieron mucho reconocimiento hasta hace pocos años, les hizo un homenaje el gobierno de Pedro Sánchez, estuvo ahí en Francia por la primera ministra, la fiesta. Y por otro lado, ellos pensaban que realmente los aliados, los Estados Unidos, el Reino Unido, la Unión Soviética iban a seguir. Es decir, bueno ahora os vais a liderar España, un régimen fascista que colaboró con los nazis, que mandó soldados a Rusia. Pero digamos que ahí hay una ruptura con ese tema. Entonces yo siento empatía por esa gente, los eternos perdedores de la historia. Bertolt Brecht decía que él sentía más atracción no por las gentes que escriben la historia sino por las gentes que sufren la historia, los personajes que pasan sin pena ni gloria. Me resulta muy gratificante poder escribir sobre esas gentes. Ya te digo, intento hacerlo con honestidad, con ética periodística. No es un tema de blanco y negro, de buenos y malos, porque al final yo creo que el color dominante de la condición humana es el gris. Todos podemos en un momento tener sentimientos bajos. Yo por lo menos lo intenté, no sé si lo conseguí. Intenté que no fuese un libro panfletario. Lo intenté

escribir de forma honesta sobre Durruti y sobre todo, la gente de Los Solidarios. Lo centré en la figura de Durruti porque es el personaje más magnético, más atractivo y más atrayente de ese proceso histórico.

WE: ¿Crees que perteneces a una generación o movimiento concreto de escritores? ¿Has notado un interés creciente por el género de la novela histórica en los últimos años? En caso afirmativo, ¿conoces a algunos otros escritores que contribuyan a este género?

PA: (Se ríe) Pués fíjate nunca me habían preguntado lo de la generación y no tengo ni idea porque además escribo en asturiano y en castellano. Tengo ahora mismo una docena de libros más y menos en castellano y ni siquiera en asturiano, o sea ¿a qué generación pertenezco? Porque se habla mucho de la generación del «surgimiento», que es la época en que hubo surgimiento, al acabar la dictadura en los años setenta. Hay críticos que hablan del primer surgimiento, el segundo surgimiento y el tercer surgimiento. Y yo creo que estaría en el tercer surgimiento y pondrían «pos-surgimiento», no lo sé. Pero nunca me lo planté. Tu pregunta es curiosa pero creo que ahora mismo en España no se habla de generaciones. Hablamos de generaciones en pasado, la generación del 98, la del 97, la del 56. Es que vivimos tiempos tan líquidos y tan profusos que en España, yo siempre lo digo, se publica demasiado. En España se publica una media de doscientos y pico libros al día. Todos los años los datos del premio de editores dice «el año pasado se publicaron cincuenta y pico mil…» haces la división y tienes doscientos y pico. Claro, no hay una librería que los soporte. Ya no te digo La Buena Letra ni si conoces La Cervantes en Oviedo, que es una librería de cuatro plantas – es que no hay ninguna librería que tenga esa capacidad de rotación. Entonces muchos pasan sin pena ni gloria. Al hablar

de generaciones es muy complejo y es que no existe tampoco el sustento o el ecosistema. Por ejemplo en un café histórico como este, nos juntábamos una vez por semana, seis, ocho escritores, para hablar de literatura y ahora eso no ocurre. Ahora en estos tiempos, cada uno va a su historia de las redes sociales. Antes sí que se hacía y por ejemplo en Madrid, yo cuando estudiaba, había un café de referencia de la gran intelectualidad que se llamaba el «Café Gijón». No tiene nada que ver, o a lo mejor los primeros dueños hace un siglo eran asturianos, pero era un café de referencia. Por ahí pasaron grandísimos escritores, cineastas, era uno de los cafés así más cool de Madrid y es verdad que había un ambiente literario, se juntaban escritores, poetas, artistas, pero ahora eso no lo hay. El concepto de la generación no lo reconozco muy bien. El género tampoco lo tengo muy claro. Hay gente que me dice que es una novela histórica, digo sí me parece bien. Hay gente un poco más preventiva hacia el término histórico, se considera como un género menor. Esa idea de que las novelas históricas son de lectura fácil, pero a mi me parece un género tan digno como otros. La novela negra antes era un género que tenía una imagen de pertenecer a serie B o una segunda división. Para mí siempre fue algo muy moderno porque estoy en una ciudad en la que se organiza el festival de novela negra más importante de España, que es la Semana Negra. Y mis primeras prácticas de periodismo fueron en el periódico de la Semana Negra, que todavía se edita. Eran dos géneros que antes estaban mal vistos, la novela histórica y la novela negra. Se consideraba como una categoría inferior. Hay gente que me dice que «esta es una novela histórica», «es una novela política», «es novela memorialista». No sé, tampoco me agarro a ninguna etiqueta pero tampoco me parece mal ninguna. Siento que tengo cierta obsesión por escribir sobre temas históricos. Y lo contaban en el libro este no sé si en la edición asturiana dice el hecho de que estos cuentos estén ubicados en las actitudes temporales y en las escrituras espaciales muy distintas. O sea que hay muy pocos que estén en Asturias…

Varios cuentos, uno ambientado en Nueva York, otro en una reserva india de los Sioux, u otro en Waterloo, la batalla de Waterloo, y también en otras épocas. Ese hecho creo que dice bastante sobre la necesidad que tiene el autor, en este caso yo, de evadirme, de escaparme del tiempo y el lugar en el que le tocó vivir. Siempre se dice que la literatura «te ayuda a viajar», pero te ayuda a viajar no solo como lector sino como escritor. A mí me ayuda a vivir en otros tiempos y en otras sociedades. Y creo que en el fondo soy historiador frustrado. Si tuviera que volver atrás en el tiempo, a lo mejor no me iría a estudiar periodismo en Madrid, estudiaría historia o relaciones internacionales. Es un tema que siempre me interesó, el tema histórico. Aquí sí lo conseguí, el unir la historia y la literatura con un tamiz periodístico. Me gusta girar en torno a acontecimientos históricos y a personajes históricos que fueron reales o inexistentes algunos. Lo contaba aquí, que hay cierta literatura que tiene que ser igualitaria e igualatoria y estoy orgulloso de que en mis libros convivan en plano de igualdad personas reales y personajes históricos. Personajes históricos y personas que existieron o que no existieron. O que no existieron como tal y que son paralelismos. Libertad a lo mejor en la vida real se llama Josefina pero vivió esa historia, vivió el trauma, el desgarro del exilio. Ese desdoblamiento de personalidad que tiene un emigrante que al final no sabes dónde pertenece. Es el caso de mi amiga Paquita, que lleva ahí en Nueva York casi más años que los que estuvo aquí. Además el choque que ella siente cuando viene de la Gran Manzana al pueblo de los padres, uy es que son ciento y pico habitantes, ese contraste. Me imagino que al final llega un momento en el que sientes que tienes una parte de ti en cada sitio, al otro lado del charco, una parte en Estados Unidos y otra parte aquí. Esto también lo intenté reflejar, el caso de la emigración, que está muy presente, el caso de Libertad o aquí el cuento de Cabeza alta que te contaba de los emigrantes asturianos en West Virginia. Son temas que a lo mejor eran un poco recurrentes, pero sí tienen bastante presencia en mi literatura. La

emigración, el periodismo como elemento de transmisión, de historias y el trasfondo histórico. En la segunda novela que escribí después de Lluvia de agosto, la publiqué en asturiano solo, fue un cambio brutal. Se llama Los xardinos de la lluna, «Los jardines de la luna», una novela más bien intimista. Dije «Mira, voy a pasar de la épica a la lírica porque aquí lo tuve muy fácil». Está novela triunfó, siempre lo digo honestamente, pero yo tengo una parte de éxito muy pequeño de ese triunfo. Otra parte es, primero que detrás hay una editorial muy activa y audaz como Hoja de Lata, que se movía mucho a nivel internacional para conseguir traducciones, para conseguir difusión. Y luego el propio personaje, la imagen icónica… es como si sacas un libro con la foto icónica de Che Guevara… Yo entrevisté además al fotógrafo que se la hizo, un cubano, Alberto Korda, que vino a Gijón. Estaba veraneando aquí y me contó un poco cómo una foto que nació por casualidad… ahora hay millones de reproducciones y camisetas, llaveros, pegatinas, libros. Claro, son imágenes que te aportan mucho. Reconozco que la figura de Durruti pues también tiene mucho tirón histórico y ayudó a aquella novela. Por ejemplo, a mí cuando dijeron «Oye, hay una editorial griega interesada» no me extrañó mucho porque en Grecia hay un movimiento anarquista e histórico, no es muy potente pero es muy constante. Ahora me está costando más conseguirla en Italia, es lo que me me haría ilusión, como traductor de italiano. Tengo amigos y amigas italianos que me dicen «Joder, a ver cuándo la podemos leer en italiano» y digo ya intenté con cinco editoriales, es muy complicado. Pero la verdad yo me siento muy afortunado porque es muy complicado que te traduzcan porque te digo que esto es un océano. Imagínate cuando hay cientos y pico de libros al día… Para las traducciones, aquí la lengua dominante lógicamente es el inglés. Lo que más se traduce al castellano son historias de Estados Unidos, del Reino Unido, literatura irlandesa ya menos o australiana muy poco. Digamos que tenemos bastante dependencia literaria del mercado anglosajón. Y Estados Unidos me imagino que es más

complicado todavía. El tema de traducir por ejemplo obras de autores europeos que no sean clásicos. Hay una editorial que se llama «Brepols» que trabaja mucho en esta temática así de literatura social y política. Ahí lo estaba intentando mi editor con ellos, pero me siento muy agradecido, la verdad es que nunca pensé que iba a tener este recorrido con la novela. La hice sin ninguna pretensión y con muy poco autoestima y nunca imaginé esto, un audiolibro que hizo una plataforma sueca, lo presentaron en la feria de Londres o que algún día ibas a estar tú haciendo un trabajo sobre este tema. Es un recorrido impensable para esta historia, pero vamos yo creo que lo merece, lo merecen los personajes.

WE: ¿Quién crees que disparó la bala que mató a Durruti? ¿Las pruebas, o la falta de ellas, son lo suficientemente convincentes como para señalar un culpable u otro? ¿Y sigue siendo el misterio de la muerte de Durruti algo que merezca la pena investigar para gente como la Sra. Casal?

PA: Mi opinión personal, pero es estrictamente personal, que no lo reflejo aquí, es que Durruti murió de un disparo accidental. Estaba manejando un subfusil con una sola mano. Para mí, tiendo a creer que fue eso. Ahora bien, aquí no quise reflejarlo por honestidad, creo que tampoco era mi labor – quiero decir, es una labor de los historiadores. Yo creo que es un secreto que no se va a desvelar nunca porque ya murieron los protagonistas y pasándome la entrevista que le hizo a Émilienne Morin Pedro Costa, lo cuento aquí y lo contó ahí en la entrevista que cuando le entregaron una prenda de Durruti, la que llevaban en ese momento, ella vió en el agujero, en la entrada de la bala, rastros de pólvora. Eso refleja que fue un disparo cercano. No fue como la historia oficial de que fue un francotirador de ciento y pico metros. Estamos hablando de la

propaganda de la guerra, dicen que «En las guerras, la primera víctima es la verdad». Ahora te coges la guerra de Ucrania y dicen «Mira cayó un misil y mató a diez civiles y no sé dónde». Rusia dice que «¡No, fue Ucrania!» y Ucrania dice «¡Fue Rusia!» – no me creo ninguno. Alguno probablemente es el responsable pero está muy mediatizado todo. Entonces claro, en plena guerra y con la figura épica de Durruti, lo que no iba a reconocer, el bando republicano, es que Durruti murió por un disparo accidental. Es como si una gran estrella de rock se mató en la ducha porque se resbaló, que muere de una forma indigna por decirlo así. Digamos que se extendió la idea de que había muerto por un disparo de un bando franquista, las teorías ya sabes que son muchas. Las fundamentales son esos: un disparo del enemigo, segunda teoría, un disparo accidental, tercera, lo mataron las gentes comunistas a servicio de Estalin, era cuando ya empezaban a ver pulgas en el bando republicano, el estalinismo tenía mucha fuerza interna y quería tener la hegemonía del bando republicano. Otra teoría es que lo mataron sus propios compañeros anarquistas porque se decía que Durruti estaba a favor de militarizar las columnas anarquistas, de integrarlas en el bando republicano y que había gente que no lo aceptaba. Que esto además está sin demostrar, Durruti nunca dijo eso. Se agarran a otra frase que le atribuyen a él y que Durruti nunca dijo. Una frase que se repite mucho, que dice que Durruti dijo en una entrevista que «Estamos dispuestos a renunciar a todo, menos a la victoria». Es decir, si hay que militarizar las columnas, las militarizamos. Es una teoría también minoritaria, pero que la hay. Esos son los fundamentales. Luego habrá a lo mejor incluso alguna teoría esotérica, que fueron los extraterrestres o alguno que cuenta que sigue vivo como Elvis Presley. Pero te digo, mi opinión personal es esa que te expuse, tiendo a pensar que fue un disparo accidental. Que al final, lo cuenta aquí Libertad que eso no cambia la valoración del personaje, no es tan importante. Es importante para los historiadores, pero desde el punto de vista narrativo, ella lo cuenta más o

menos así: «¿Qué podría suponer eso?» Una línea más o menos, de matiz, de morir por un disparo del bando franquista o por un accidente – al final es lo menos importante. Murió joven, murió luchando, fue coherente como cuenta Émilienne Morin. Durruti no tenía estructura militar pero era como un general. Decía ella, «Claro, yo tenía miedo porque ningún general se expondría a lo que se exponía Durruti». Un general sigue la batalla con prismáticos pero él… Seguimos la jugada desde fuera, me imagino al General Patton, Eisenhower en la Segunda Guerra Mundial, yendo el primero ahí a pegar de tiros. Hay cierta curiosidad histórica, pero no es un tema que a mi me quiten sueños, saber quién o qué mató a Durruti. Pero da bastante juego desde un punto de vista narrativo porque añade un componente de thriller, de misterio, de enigma que también puede ser otra etiqueta. A lo mejor no es una novela histórica ni memorialista ni política, a lo mejor es un thriller. Hay otra novela de las que te decía de Durruti en castellano, el autor se llama Pedro de Paz y se titula El hombre que mató a Durruti. Esa novela ganó un premio que duró muy pocos años, un premio de José Saramago de novela. La novela se centra en la investigación, es un oficial de la república, un teniente creo, que le encargan investigar las circunstancias de la muerte de Durruti – es una novela policial por decirlo así. El personaje tiene muchas estadistas, afronta desde cientos de puntos de vista. El punto de vista del suceso de la muerte de él, o del punto de vista de la historia de la vida de Durruti y de la gente de su condenación.

WE: ¿De dónde sacaste lo que parecen ser fuentes primarias que aparecen en la novela, incluido el artículo del Heraldo de Madrid sobre el asesinato de Soldevila (capítulo 2), la carta que Durruti escribe a su familia desde París fechada el 17 de diciembre de 1926 (comienzo del capítulo 8) y el mitin que pronuncia en el campo de El Petardo (capítulo 13)? ¿Se trata de fuentes primarias? En caso negativo, ¿en qué se basaron?

PA: Distintas fuentes. De internet, de bibliotecas y mucha de lo que te digo, la biografía monumental de Abel Paz, que son ochocientas y pico páginas. Ahí tiene mítines completos, el mitin de León, las cartas a los padres… Por ejemplo en el caso de las cartas y del mitin que dió en León, cuando volvió porque había muerto el padre, ahí hice muy pocos retoques en cuanto al estilo narrativo. Y lo que me llama la atención es lo fresco, lo vigente que está en el discurso Durruti, porque es un discurso, a nivel sindical, que puede tener mucha actualidad a día de hoy, contar poco las circunstancias del trabajo en España o en Europa. Es un personaje bastante vigente, por lo menos la oratoria de él. Y ya te digo, las fuentes fueron literarias, historiográficas, leí las novelas de las que te hablo, El corto verano de la anarquía, etcétera… y a través de internet ahora es posible conseguir muchas cosas, no sólo directamente en Google sino accediendo a plataformas, archivos. Lo que te contaba del libro que estoy preparando, está aquí la fototeca del Museo del Pueblo de Asturias, es maravilloso. Tienen un fondo de imágenes tremendo que va creciendo cada año porque ahora ya mueren fotógrafos, a lo mejor conocidos, y la familia de él dona todas las fotografías… Entonces tú puedes acceder a través de la página web, con la fototeca de Gijón…

WE: ¿Todas?

PA: Bueno no te aparecen todas, aparece una muestra, pero luego si necesitas algo, te pones en contacto con ellos, hay dos funcionarios del ayuntamiento, les escribes un correo y te buscan… Dices «Necesito fotos del atraco del Banco de España en Gijón»… Tienen un fondo estupendo de Constantino Suárez, que fue un fotógrafo republicano gijonés, que tiene fotos muy

impactantes de la guerra civil. Por ejemplo en La Escalerona, la escalera cuatro, llena de sacos terreros y milicianos apuntando al mar, que era donde estaba el Almirante Cervera bombardeando la costa. Tiene fotos además históricas de Fritz Krüger, que era un filólogo y etnógrafo romanista que hace un siglo, en 1927, recorrió el sur occidente de Asturias haciendo fotografía de hábitos e instrumentos de trabajo en el campo que están desaparecidos ya. Es una auténtica joya, luego en agosto, murió justo hace cincuenta anos, murió un en Argentina, porque era militante del partido Nazi en Alemania y tuvo que exiliarse. Entonces a mí me llama la atención, digo «Un tío que tenía esa sensibilidad para valorar y fotografiar pueblos perdidos, pueblos no arios como era en Asturias rural y sin embargo al final pertenece al partido Nazi». Digo «¿Qué es la condición humana?» Que contradictorio. Pero ya te digo, ahora por internet cada vez más tienes posibilidad de conseguir muchas fuentes y la literatura sigue siendo también una fuente muy importante. Y el resto lo inventas porque al final es ficción, es la fortuna. No es lo mismo escribir un libro de ensayo que tienes que ser absolutamente riguroso sino que hay datos que forman parte de la ficción.

WE: Pues nada, eso es todo lo que tengo. Muchas gracias por tu tiempo.

PA: De nada. Perdona tú por el rollo, bueno luego otro día organizas lo que necesites y cualquier cosa que te haga falta, dímelo de distancia. Ya te digo, me hace mucha ilusión que te haya interesado este tema.