MAMBRÚ DID NOT GO TO WAR

by Aída Cartagena Portalatín

No, there isn't, and never was a more deplorable caste

Mambrú went off to war
What pain, what pain, what sorrow.
Mambrú went off to war
Don't know when he'll be back.
Oh, do, re mi; oh do, re fa.
Don't know when he'll be back.

—Nursery Rhyme

I'm among the broken-up. You are broken up. He is broken up. We are broken up. We are all broken up. But your fissure is not like ours. You lost your balance before you got to the top, and, powerless to counteract the force of gravity, you rolled downhill. Your falls multiplied themselves dizzily like in the Physics theory of the inclined plane, which you understood well enough to get excellent grades in school but appalling results in real life. In your place, I would have remained silent about it all. Not even with a noose around my neck, on the verge of being hanged, would I have uttered a single word, but you believe in a conscience, and though not quite repenting of the things you've done, you love to vomit out your affairs to one and all. You speak about yourself. It doesn't offend you to spill things out. You want to be listened to. We're finally listening.

You go on and on and on. Talking. Talking Talking. Talking until its very neverendingness tires me out, and without stopping I let out a scream, a halt, leaving those still alive to consume themselves in rectifying their intimacies until time immemorial, amen, and to think this is the Boulevard St. Michel, from numbers 27 to 31. I let my eyes fall on the newspaper vending machine and read the *France Soir* headlines: *Black Crusade. African Liberation.* These are not front-page headlines; Black Africa has been wishing and struggling for its freedom for decades. I gaze at another headline: *The Secret Life of Cats.* That business about cats on roofs meowing erotic nonsense is such a hackneyed theme it can't rouse my curiosity. I laugh a mocking, negative laugh that infuriates a guy walking along the same sidewalk, close to me. This is the Boulevard St. Michel in the Latin Quarter of Paris, in the year nineteen hundred and . . . something. I'm sorry about that guy, I would like to offer him an explanation, and while I try to locate him, glancing up and down the street, I sense upon me a band of male and female teenagers going by, squeezing each other. Male or female. Female or

Callaloo 23.3 (2000) 1076–1079

male. I can't identify them by gender, it's impossible to tell them apart, because they wear the same outfits. As they walk they push me against a restaurant window. Behind the glass I read: today's special 10.50 francs. I can't believe they want so much money, very soon I'll go hungry again, I won't have anything to eat, I'll roam the low neighborhoods, I'll sleep on park or boulevard benches, or on the angles formed by the walls and buttresses of St. Severin. I think of so many things at once, even of those coffins at the Louvre Metro exit across from Pont Neuf which made such an impression on me. To die, what a dammed thing it is to die. People have no right to die in Paris. I think of my life and that of Lilá. She repeated it to me three days ago: you have to find yourself another room before the whole thing blows up, I don't want to compromise you. But now I am waiting for the bus, I'm looking out for the number 21, the one that climbed from the University City up Glacière-Berthóllet-Claude Bernard and at the end of Gay Lussac, entered St. Michel, going on across the Seine to Chatelet, to the Opera and ending its run at St. Lazaire. It was my route when I arrived in Paris as a student. A few buses have gone by. And I kept waiting for one that took a long while to appear, finally showing up with its luminous green eye on which you could read the number 21. It is an indescribable thing, as if two clandestine lovers had suddenly found each other again in an inexplicable place. All this notwithstanding, I let the bus go by.

I am Claudio, trying to find lost time and nail it to a paneled wall. Today it occurs to me that my brain is not working well, that something is failing, that I have fallen from I don't know where to this corner. Claudio, Claudio, I tell myself, calling myself over and over again and several times more. Hurry up, you must go further on. My brain cannot fix on ideas very well. I would say that it is somewhat foggy. At eight o'clock in the morning Paris is all fog. It is June. All is fog just like my brain, and guided by that very brain I march on until, tired of walking up and down, I decide to sit down on one of the empty chairs on the improvised sidewalk terrace of the Select Latin, with its scandalous prices. On the opposite sidewalk, under Marcuset, is the brasserie Glacière, which further excites my hunger. I have ten francs in my wallet. I have a little bit more money in the room I occupy in the hotel. I need to put it all together, and I remind myself several times that I must go and get it. I also remember the guy that works as a receptionist behind the counter. I will have to greet him and observe his oh-so-carefully coiffed mane, done at a woman's beauty shop. He is exaggeratedly unpleasant, but I must go back, and the necessity of doing so means that I must humiliate myself, I must beg him: *la clé, s'il vous plait, monsieur*. I must go—I will go. I am before him. I speak to him like an automaton, without looking at him. He hands me the key, I walk to the elevator, push the button, and climb up. The door opens, and I'm on the third floor. The staircase is at the end of the hallway. I must still climb eighteen steps to the landing right across the door to Room number 46, which is on the fourth floor. I go in, take the money, and go back out. Once on the street again I stop and re-read: University of Paris-School of Sciences. It's on the Place de la Sorbonne with its statue of Auguste Comte in the center. The world advances, crowds up with people, with ideas, with vehicles, with car accidents and deaths. Auguste Comte is not now a positivist who ignites intellectual fires. He did that once, but he has been assimilated. The monument serves to guide the parking of vehicles, those

who enter, those who exit, those who remain. It also serves as a support for peeing dogs. I remember: I forgot to return the key to the receptionist guy, but I will not go back to drop it off. Guided by my right index finger, the disc with the 46 gyrates with the key. Six months with all their details clench my memory, swallowing almost all of my time on this humid and misty morning.

Last night when we walked past Notre Dame, Lilá held on to me tightly, squeezing my arm. I thought we would both collapse; we joined efforts in an attempt to avoid a tragedy. A few steps ahead, at the entrance to rue de l'Arcade, in front of the Quasimodo Bar, a stream of blood came down her legs. She said, anguished: let's hurry, let's hurry, it's getting worse. She began to lose her strength, I don't know how we advanced several more meters, which seemed like an endless distance. I don't know how we made it, I don't know. Right at the entrance to the Hotel Dieu she collapsed. She yelled at me: run, run, you must avoid the police. I left her. No, I didn't leave her. I abandoned her at the entrance to the Hotel Dieu, the public maternity clinic in Paris. She aborted right then and there. I was the only witness to that misfortune. I didn't agree with her, I didn't want her to get rid of the creature. On various occasions she had said to me: this has to be gotten rid of, it would be such a humiliation for my family, it's not worth our being forced to get married, you are not the type of man who accepts responsibility, besides, they would stop sending the dollars that we both live on.

Lilá aborted last night. Now it is morning, I reach the corner, sit down, and glance up and down the Boulevard. The great human river circulates up and down, running to cars, buses, entering or exiting the Metro. I get up and retreat to the narrow rue Champollion, the one with the movie houses for students but with rich-people prices. Yesterday Lilá and I attended the 4 o'clock showing. I'm ashamed to admit it, but we had quite an argument over *Z*, the film by Vasilis Vassiloff. She was very supportive of the actions of the revolutionaries and applauded deliriously when they sentenced the military officers. The disruption of the entire web of spying and torture excited her so much that I had to force her to control herself. She wanted to get up and yell like the other revolutionary students who were applauding and stomping their feet like madmen. The press has said that they are FLN members from the colonies. I shouldn't have felt uncomfortable, but my nature rebels against these types who clamor for the liberation of this or that region or country. I was upset and kept riling her because it bothered me that she could think like her fellow university students. And besides, she shouldn't forget that I fled the war of 1965 in Santo Domingo. However, we left *Z* holding hands and walked to a small restaurant across from the Seine where we frequently had dinner. While they got our order ready, I took a pencil out and calculated how many francs *Z* had cost—tickets, tip to the usherette, a pack of hot chestnuts, etc. Lilá interrupted me: Claudio, it doesn't matter, I love feeling well-to-do, it's so pleasant. Whatever it cost has been paid, why are you always counting pennies, don't be melodramatic, you knew that the prices weren't for cheapskates. She was humiliating me, making me turn pale, forcing me to admit to myself that I was also a cheapskate living at her expense. She had the upper hand in our situation, but emotionally and sexually she was lost without me, she needed me. I am conscious that she has a problem with sex but that she is incapable of taking a different man every

day. She is not sleeping around. Her links to her family prevent her from going from one man to the next. Poor girl, so generous with me. She appreciates my wisdom so.

I finally get to the corner of St. Michel and the St. Germain des Près-Cluny Metro. I enter the Metro. On a second class coach I go up to Menilmontant. I make several line changes on the Metro. Above, on the surface, is Lilá. I'm still thinking of her. She has aborted. Last night she was picked up at the door of the Hotel Dieu, the public maternity hospital in Paris. The clock strikes ten o'clock in the morning. I take it as a fact that by this time she has been questioned over and over again. Her identity card has been withheld. She has refused to give the name of her uncle, the ambassador. I, rolling underneath the city in the Metro, sweating from the disagreeable, metallic heat let off by the machines, choking in this dirty heat that remains suspended in the closed-off vacuum of the tunnels, or sticking to the tunnel walls. It isn't coal, it's electrical, I don't know, but it's dirty, and I'm letting myself be dragged through the Parisian underground like a rat. When the engine stops, I read: Gare de Austerlitz, my heart contracts again, I think of the police who must have taken all of Lilá's things, even her School of Letters identity card. No, she is not a professional prostitute. The doctor must have noticed that it was her first loss. The engine follows its established route. I am an idiot, I reproach myself, but I'm comforted by the fact that in three days they will leave her in peace and will drop her off at a doorway she will say is hers. No, she will not go to the embassy. I roll on. This is a heaven beneath the ground. I feel the engine take off again, slow down again. I transfer to the number 5 line, to Eglise de Pantin. I am sleepy and move like an automaton. My eyes close, and I keep them closed. I count with my eyes closed as the engine slams its brakes down seven times before reaching République.

I immediately transfer to the number 3 line, Pte. des Lilis, and one, two, three more stops: Père Lachaise. I leave the car and run to the number 2 line, Nation Etoile. One station more and I'm at Menilmontant. When I exit the Metro, the clarity of the daylight and the overwhelming crowd jolt me so that I feel revealed in the nakedness of my own weak nature, and I must accept that I'm a failure. It's true I fled my country in '65, when it was again occupied by the Yankees. It wasn't just that I was not going to fight against a superior foe, but that I was also not interested in defending my own people. Lilá knows all my shortcomings, and I have the suspicion that she won't return with me to the Rosetta apartment.

She will not go back to that dilapidated dwelling where we installed ourselves six months ago to enjoy our love or to make love. One single dingy room we had, but we lacked nothing. She took pains to make me feel secure, and I accepted without argument everything she offered me in that Rue de Solferino with its aura of a hideaway. We possessed the enchantment of the Rive Gauche; we walked the narrow winding alleys. We hopped around in zigzag. We zigzagged in an embrace until we reached Cluny, and four blocks to the west, the School of Letters where I left Lilá every morning.

I don't know, but one day someone will finish this story and call it Mambrú, Mambrú didn't go to war. I can't continue it now.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert