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ALLOTROPES

by *Ángela Hernández Núñez*

I recall how Felipe Alfonso, obsessed as he was with his possible inexistence, would at times forget his own name. Day after day I watched him immerse himself in minutia that would not have warranted his attention before, extracting from it forced reliefs with the sole instrument he had mastered: words. I appreciate the anguish he felt about arranging each daily event in poetic coordinates that could conjure his voluble discourse and connect his inner world to immediate materialities.

It wasn't unusual for him to break into a poem, improvised on the spot, while we waited for the coffee to cool down a bit. Pedro Nicio once commented amidst laughter: "How does that coffee taste, with that burst of words?" Felipe Alfonso would reply to the joke, while adding in a parenthetical monologue: the Other still persists in my creation.

This hallucination of concrete simplicity covered the first stage, subsequent to his release from jail.

He created with the flame of a match, with the dust on the book page, with the ant squashed under his foot, with the neighbors' verbal guerrilla wars and the stupor of a dizzy lizard in a breach under the zinc eaves. He declaimed the wax in his ear, his sandals, the hoarseness of the old Chinese man who lived in the rear of the rooming house, the bodily précis compelled by the cold, the clear traces that linger after a child's run, the purport of my glances, and the span of nails.

His crisis of originality was most original.

I think of Dinorah and her brown eyes, of Dinorah and her forty kilometers of kindness just to come to me. She disapproves of what I did. It was a temerity born of my miseries. But she understands. She arrives, smiles and chats, avoiding events, not urging me to do anything specific. I watch the ceiling, painted an impure white, her eyes diluting. I pick up the telephone and return to Dinorah. I need her glances in my thoughts, her certainty in my stomach, the tranquil vivacity that she instills in things, and above all, her faith in my aptitude for writing. What sensations do I awaken in her? Could she be depressed? Does she cry or vacillate? I return to the newspaper. My attention is called to a Latin American poetry, short story, and essay contest.

She will bring me paper. But what if she doesn't return? She'll come. She will not deprive herself of reading in me the joy her presence brings. Her perseverance wins over my sentimental compulsions. She will return for her own good. I made sure the others never learned the facts about me. To those other fresh and pretty girls I am a mystery of simplicity, starving for philosophy, who half-closes his eyes to be enigmatic.

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It is different with Dinorah. I avoided living with her, but it is not possible to detach myself from her allure. Her foolproof intelligence, her determination to find solutions to problems that would crush me, the glances that disentangled the soul—they are all irresistible. She possesses the lightness of a butterfly's step and the daring of a self-taught electrician. She states her opinion with as much nonchalance in an academic setting as at the Manganagua Youth Association. She has mastered mathematics and cooking, and gives them equal importance.

Her harmonious contradictions are perturbing. She tells me that, like all poets, I am enraptured by simple common sense, and laughs at me when I speak to her of my fear of her brightness and assuredness.

She is too much woman for you, Pedro Nicio tells me.

It will please her to see me write again.

Rosa would be an excellent subject matter. A prostitute since she was sixteen, raped at fifteen by her stepfather, stabbed at twenty by a pimp, she possesses an imaginative power with more redemptive strength than any religion.

A tender subject could be the children who live in the sewers by the embankment; the salty stupor, the narcotic lull that makes their world a harmless place, their wanton freedom. These are, however, dramatic, not literary, situations. Palomos children and idealistic prostitutes are too true to be credible in fiction.

I could write of the abrasive rebelliousness of prisoners, but I lack the talent required to draft anything coherent about this irritating sordidness, where one is forever, every day and every hour of the day, in danger.

I must find a different theme. Social and political affairs deluge me; in my attempts at abstracting things whose ramifications are extreme, things with which I can feel a certain degree of kinship, they turn outlandish under my pen.

My favorite subject matter, in fact, is that which eludes perception, that which exists and is not, which astonishes us and toys with us. My friends tell me that the path will lead me to dying of hunger. I don't arouse quiverings, only perturbations.

His unforeseen eagerness to participate in a literary contest was almost miraculous. He had not touched a pencil or a typewriter for more than three months. On those occasions when I visited him in prison, I found him dazed, incapable of understanding the rules of the game in that dirty and violent place, looking at me with eyes whose very harmlessness hurt.

The change in his mood was now noticeable. But this resurrection would not last long. Insecurity would again consume his lucidity and his flesh, making futile my attempts to make him realize that there were things he could hold on to which did not threaten what he called his original essence.

When I heard for the first time the tale on which he had worked with such energy, I could not conceal my perplexity. That diaphanous and simple story seemed familiar in its plot and solution. He refused to re-read it to me, arguing that he still had to polish it.

Originality had been a constant preoccupation of his. I have watched him tensely scrape away at a text when he had gleaned someone else's subtle influence. He seeks purity of expression, the manifestation of his own essence, his singular passion, capable of sketching new profiles in perception. He drives himself, mortifies himself

to the point of tears, in pursuit of his goals. Why was he not troubled by influences in this case? He had roused in me, nonetheless, a definite effect of familiarity. Over and over again I made an effort to link this impression to the realm of the known.

Determined to discover his genesis, I tied together words and emotions until I rewrote Felipe Alonso's tale. I remembered it entirely; this reconstruction would not have been possible through the sole reading he did in jail. Paul Eloy Faxas (a name that heretofore would bear a great weight on my life, on our lives, as on his own) flowed through my memory. I had come to know his work some seven years before, in the library of the poet A. Blonda. It wasn't difficult to get copies.

Without a doubt, the plot was identical.

A solitary writer lives in a square-shaped room whose only door leads to a hallway that links many other similar rooms where several people live.

Each morning he is assaulted by a rare impression. He awakens without feelings. The interlaced paths to his senses erased, his memory awakens ignorant of emotions. There are no passions or afflictions. At the start of each day the writer samples the taste of blankness.

A glass window of disproportionate dimensions opens to a resplendent landscape of black plowed earth, flowering hibiscus, the broad ribbon of a well-paved road, and the irregular architecture of a nearby town.

The writer spends the period of time that elapses before the rebirth of his emotions in indifferent contemplation through the window. He watches people walking hurriedly someplace, eight o'clock people, nine o'clock people, ten o'clock people. At eleven he has his breakfast and begins to write, after pushing open the glass window.

One Monday, as he watches the nine o'clock people, a woman turns her face and briefly looks at him. The incident repeats itself on the next day. On the third glance he notices that the nine o'clock feeling of blankness has dissolved.

The woman's face is clean. A loose grape-colored blouse covers her body to the knees. The hair, curly like plowed land, would reach the middle of her back if the breeze did not keep it aloft.

He dreams of her, reinventing her in tens of scenarios. He guesses anxious messages in her eyes. He wants proximity but he fears the dissipation of the enchantment. He is attracted by beautiful women. Beautiful and exotic women mesmerize him. But many among them think and speak trivialities destined to deceive. Perfection is a metaphor, true only at a distance.

In his moistening dreams, his imagination overflows. In love despite himself, he wishes her near but wants her far. He desires her uttering virtuous words of fire but wants her mute. He desires to venture into her most intimate niches but wants her unattainable. He desires her as an imprisoned body but wants her as blithe fantasy. He desires her exuberant, intact, but wants her overflowing in sweet milk. He desires her as chaste fragility but wants her remedying his awkwardness. Opening of golden flower, he desires her; dove and sprout of orange blossom, he wants her.

The interregnum of ambiguities concludes one festive Wednesday, when he awakens at dawn to the figure of the woman at the window. Her hair shines in diluted calm. Wrapped in a blanket, he covers the distance that separates them. He stares at the transparent gaze that stares back, the light down on her upper lip, the white-stone

stud on her left ear, the three tiny moles configuring a triangle on the rise of her nose. Eyes with eyes, lips with lips, the faces converge on the plate glass. Pacific and sweet vibrations fly back and forth between them.

The certainty of perfection confirmed, he withdraws, smiling.

From a wooden box at the other end of the room he takes out a piece of metal tubing. The blow spatters the glass outward, leaving an ample opening with sharp-edged borders, through which one could see the black plowed earth, the road with its brilliant curves and the purple clouds of the dawn floating above the puddles left by the rainshowers.

I erase Dinorah's eyes. I would like to scrape her away entirely. A tear. I must annihilate her. Plagiarism. What is that butterfly doing leaving dust on the wall? It doesn't fly. Butterflies fossilize in a matter of days, flight, and color annihilated in a few hours. A drop jells. I let it dangle. The bell rings. Does it compel sleep? (Plagiarism . . .) Does it command us to dine? (Plagiarism . . .) Does it dictate exercise? (Plagiarism . . .) She smiled at me, assuring me that I had plagiarized a Mexican. Were her words accurate? No. They never are. They jest, metamorphose themselves into liquid correspondence. At this moment the words watch me from that misty little butterfly.

She comes every Sunday. I don't want to see her or the books or the food, or the newspapers. You laugh? You mock? What do you know?

How to avoid fatality, especially when its origins are so ungraspable? When I was freed, I got all of Paul Eloy Faxas' works and—Oh, my consternation!—there I found texts that could be easily recognized as the story I had written about the reflections on the window, the tale about Rosa, which I never got around to developing, and a long poem about America. I perceived in the latter the allegories slowly maturing in me, still shapeless.

I went to that Mexican Embassy, seeking information about Paul Eloy Faxas. I interviewed old writers, scrutinizing my genealogy to the sixth generation. The Aztec writer had never visited the Dominican Republic. I couldn't find the link between his fate and mine anywhere. I couldn't even claim adventurous ancestors who could have disseminated genetic clues for fate to reproduce.

My relatives, near and distant, have always been the type of people who cry at their births and die with a stifled moan, who invariably recite the holy rosary, who work to eat and live to work. They fit snugly within the benevolent term pronounced almost with tenderness by the conservative: the people.

I completely discarded the genetic coincidence when I learned of the suffragist mother and general father of the Mexican writer. My forebears lifted one foot off the ground higher than usual only to climb on a horse or avoid a pile of manure. They were people comfortably settled between the for and the against.

I carefully pored over the photograph of the writer many times. He didn't look disagreeable or hard, only stiff, as if he believed that a smile or thought would upset the camera. How to guess a temperature in this congealed personality? That well-fed gentleman, with a thick mustache, black suit, and bow tie didn't kindle any intimacy in me.

In the throes of the inconceivable, the inconceivable becomes normal.

I started thinking about the impact of casual memory. It was a well-known fact that we only use a portion of our brain, while the capacity of the rest remains a mystery. A fortuitous event

must have activated one of my latent zones, goading the fleeting exercise of a photographic memory. Some specific stimulus later unleashed the literal reproduction of what had thus been fixed. This being the case, some underlying flux surged from within me, oblivious to my will. But I perused my readings without finding any indication of any previous knowledge of the Mexican's work.

Believing this to be the only coherent explanation, I succeeded in exasperating Dinorah, attributing to her the strange memory, as well as the projection into my mind of what she had photographed into her consciousness.

This theory finally fell apart when I received some new materials, a gift from the Mexican Embassy. Paul Eloy Faxas had been jailed, as I was, and for analogous reasons. As a boy a piece of glass had pierced his left foot, damaging it permanently; the same thing had happened to my left hand. He preferred hydrangeas to any other flower and left the University during his second year in law school. There were similar details in my life. I am sure, however, that many other people love hydrangeas, have suffered imprisonment because of an outburst of survivalism, and left the University. It was exceptional, however, for two men to have been born on the seventh day of April, in the shadow of a solar eclipse, exactly a century apart.

Pedro Nicio's presence brightens the atmosphere. Despite the differences between us, a friendship had grown, forged out of everyday events. The old baseball player enjoyed his own stories, the strumming of a guitar, a cup of coffee, and the calculations of his progress at work. Faced with his spontaneous enjoyment, it was impossible to maintain a somber mood.

He had noticed his writer-friend's gradual decline in spirits as he moved from one lack of control to another, clinging to rudimentary details, as if he perceived in them the secret of his very existence.

A gather of fissures in human behavior, Felipe Alfonso now began to discern them in himself; he diluted his very being in the stress of understanding and healing them. Pedro Nicio conjectured that the conflicts of the Poet, as he called him, were of a nature different from his own. He was incapable of grasping the origin of his self-absorption, but he increased the frequency of his visits nonetheless; he invited us to play dominos and cooked fish for all three of us when he went fishing. He must have been more familiar than I with accidents of fate, since he responded more calmly than I did to his friend's behavior.

Poetry sprung from him at any time, suddenly. Felipe Alonso would gaze into the distance, as if he were drinking a sleep-inducing draught, and from the thinned lips leapt arduous verses.

On one occasion we prepared dinner between the three of us. The poet interrupted the dialogue between me and Pedro Nicio to recite a poem to a grain of salt he was holding on the palm of his hand. I continue to grate a piece of yucca in silence. The baseball player replied: "Yes, Poet, it sounds pretty; throw it into the soup. It will be a pleasure to eat all these words in a hot broth." It seemed to be a pre-agreed game between them. The writer said: Why aren't there more Pedro Nicios born? The player took it as a compliment. But then Felipe Alfonso added: I'm sure they would not care. They don't mind repeating themselves, that's why they don't.

Half in earnest, half in jest, the friend and neighbor let his concern show: "Get a grip on yourself, Poet. What brought you to this point? Jail or the woman? If you carry on like this, you'll end up in the madhouse or she will leave you. No one wants to have more than one shadow."

Day after day Felipe Alfonso immersed himself in small daily tasks, which he attacked with the fervor usually devoted to acts of grandeur. Hanging a sheet, lighting the coals, washing his underwear, soaking the beans in water to soften them, organizing his papers and books, were all ritualistic acts, carried out with a gusto fed by compulsion.

He planted three small twigs of purslane in diminutive pots, placing them outside during the hours when the sun was least aggressive and inside when the shadows were about to disappear. Retaining a detail was the same as trapping an instant, and this was a step in living. The deductions that led him to slip constantly towards the fleeting did not stem from philosophy but from fear.

Just then, when my writer was getting lost, I began to know and feel the meaning of making love to the fullest. I proceeded patiently, investing every sense, first separately and later in varied combinations. In ceremonies over my body I learned what it was to be a labyrinth of smells. I was salt, grass, pine, submarine earth, a pot of boiling herbs, and memories of asylum. I was the consciousness of the soft pinks of my cavities. Water contended with its thick wave, a tributary of a weightless ocean. I learned to sparkle from nipple to the thought, from the extremity of the finger to the sprout of death.

This change in the way of taking each other, together with its penchant for itemizing domestic tasks, I attributed to his fears. I was wrong. I would realize later that in this way of loving each other neither his fears nor his imagination were involved.

I thought several times of returning to my literary projects, of putting the ghosts behind me and returning to the typewriter. The coincidences had to cease at some point. However, by then, I had so scrutinized the verses and tales of the Mexican, discovering in his language my own, my words in his favorite words, in his inflections, those familiar to myself, that when I attempted to write he rushed forth like a floodtide.

Overcome by weariness, I capitulated before him, I being, when with him, he. I would diffuse my reality.

The singularity of the events would call attention to my work. My earlier books, in which the rhythmic pulse of Paul Eloy Faxas was already evident, were finally going to sell. Feverish delirium. Nobody would believe me. It was like asking for faith in a writer and trust in the impossible. How to clamor to the formless multitude to believe in me, how to persuade them that I am true, when I cannot manage to believe in myself? How to counsel them to give a deaf ear to reason when I myself must awaken in the middle of the night to search for a stone, hold it tightly in my hands, fuse myself into its surroundings and lie down crying over its solidity, to convince myself that I exist?

My double inhabits a parallel time. I cannot speak to him or elucidate anything. I see him, I listen to him. He gesticulates, chatters, and laughs on a television screen. I watch with mute coldness and awaken to my ambitious reality.

This dumb ant buried in a heap of sugar is similar to the one circling the jar. The peculiar Black Princes, patient in their flower vase of clarity, cannot be distinguished one from the other, black-red roses, reminding me of Dinorah's affection on my birthday. Perishing butterflies, on their obstinate voyage on the southern highway, yesterday looked identically dead and yellowing on the pavement. The sunflowers compact this image. The army traces the terrain of battle. The lions are indistinguishable in their majesty. But no piece of rock repeats itself in another. Why should I be the one replicated?

Dinorah trusts in me out of love. She bears with me on these absurd hours. She hides her bewilderment as we converse about celestial immensities that do not fit in the imagination, vertiginous and overflowing aches in the understanding, uncatalogable passions and select chromatic combinations.

The plasticity of her thought is admirable. In her opinion, what is happening to me is a case of extreme coincidence. The probability of two works created by two different authors, in different eras, being identical, is practically zero. But, if pushed to its mathematical limits, it is not. That is to say, one divided into ten billion is conveniently expressed as zero, but in truth it is not.

I lack the power to represent in my head a number higher than ten figures. If this hypothesis is true, I must resign myself to not understanding what is happening to me, an exception among exceptions.

The believers would speak of miracles; the Rosacrucians of reincarnation, the writers of shameless plagiarism, the mathematicians of probability. I refuse to be the prodigy of an extinguishing faith. The notion of bearing testimony to human immorality does not appeal to me either. It horrifies me to be a number in an infinite series, a number that appears once each interminable interval.

He started to become the negative image of Paul Eloy Faxas. He disciplined his spirit to find solace in the darkness, only because he was afraid of it. He forgot geography because of the Mexican's professed inclination towards that discipline. He avoided the color blue, white horses, Chinese drawings, metaphysics, spicy food, fruit candy, abstract themes, politics. As he delved deeper into knowledge of the Other, the latter invaded him more and more deeply.

I feared being rejected for my female condition, for having long hair or for conversing about mathematics and demography. Fortunately he clung anxiously to the everyday minutia of which I had become a part.

I learned through Pedro Nicio that on his last days he barely slept. From the room next door, the player heard him pacing in the dark, smoking ceaselessly, and speaking to himself in a low voice.

We spent a long time together and enjoyed little of it (by then we made love without hurry or tenderness). He claimed my daily presence with excuses of all sorts. He wanted my opinion on his own reflections, and awaited detailed commentaries on the meetings I attended. On those occasions when he exploded into emotional frenzy, I had to care for him and monitor the stress of his ardors. I agreed to move in with him in return for his acceptance of my proposals for change.

I reorganized his room. I took out all the books, sending them to my mother's house. In one package I placed all the works and information on Paul Eloy Faxas he had gathered in one year. I told Felipe Alonso that I had thrown it into the sea.

Every evening before going to bed, I bathe him in warm water in which I have steeped aromatic and soothing herbs. While it is still dark, I wake him for a long run up the embankment. He has abandoned writing and is taking lessons in carpentry and woodwork in the small workshop owned by Pedro Nicio. On Sundays we go fishing or play baseball in the company of the old ballplayer.

I have reduced my workday by half. I leave at seven in the morning and return at six in the evening. I work only till noon. The rest of the time I employ in activities I can't share with Felipe Alonso. I reread the works of the Mexican writer, reexamine his biography, seeking to clarify the points of contact between the two men. This intimacy with Paul Eloy Faxas had kindled in me a singular fascination. I detect astounding details in his verses. They bring me a feeling of confused pleasure, the pure vehemence of a living imagination piercing through me.

Felipe Alonso lets himself be guided by me. He is calmer, not happier. He works with Pedro Nicio, performing the carving of dining and rocking chairs with great care. This labor absorbs him. But when I see him thus enraptured, making minute cuts in wood, until the contours of leaves, stars, bells, and geometric figures appear, I cannot but ask myself what could be going through his mind.

He trusts he will return to writing when he surpasses the age at which the Mexican died. This belief strengthens him, although a deep flame of anxiety continues to burn him. He eats well, but has not gained a single pound of those he lost during his crisis.

The notion of a possible incongruity in time perturbs me. I ask myself what the relationship is between intensity and extension. Will the extent of his life be measured by the number of years the Aztec writer lived? What will happen if one year in the life of one of them corresponds to two of the other's, or vice versa? What is a year of life at the beginning of the century now equivalent to? I calculate different mathematical ratios, but time increasingly appears to me as a key of adjustment between us and the world, and when I think of its mobility, it slips away from me.

In the meantime, every fifteenth of March, Felipe Alonso stays at home, almost always in bed. This date marks the death of Paul Eloy Faxas, run down by a car when he was forty-one.

With the passing years he has begun to recover. He laughs, goes fishing, plays and works with zeal. He often reproaches me for my inattention and aloofness, however. He tells me I have changed. He suspects there's someone else in my life. He is not mistaken.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert