

# Albalucía Ángel (Colombia)

Excerpt from

## THE SPOTTED BIRD PERCHED HIGH ABOVE UPON THE TALL GREEN LEMON TREE . . .

Alirio was the best *tiple* player in the region and was famous for his missing toe. In the afternoons, after he finished his work on the stables, he sat by the path that led to the paddocks, and the others would ask him, play *Esperanza*, and he would get inspired and play anything from *pasillos* to *bambucos* until it grew dark, or until it was time for the Christmas novena.

Let's go look for sandpiper nests, he proposed to her that day, and she went, unconcerned, since on her previous vacation they had gone to the cane fields searching for nests; and he had explained to her how the sandpipers get really furious if one goes near the chicks and many times they had to dive to the ground because the sandpipers flew straight at them, their wings outspread, with something like spurs in their claws and their eggs were beautiful, like those of guinea hens. Was it here that you got bitten by the rattlesnake?, and he said yes, it grabbed my big toe, and before I knew it I felt the cramps and since I was cutting grass I grabbed the machete and whooz!, I chopped it in half with the machete, all in the wink of an eye, and she asked, did you cut your own toe . . . ? Of course. If I hadn't chopped it off, I would have been history in ten minutes, those blasted things are deadly, there's no antidote around here: shall we sit here?, and he arranged a pile of fresh hay, because it was a bit wet from the morning dew. He covered it with his poncho. Are you cold . . . ? And Ana said yes, because the sandpipers had to be caught before the break of dawn, and she had not worn anything over her nightgown and had come out barefoot so that her brother couldn't hear her and bug her to take him with her, and then he proposed, come here, lie down under the poncho, and he tucked her under it, and laid down next to her. Aren't we going to look for nests? In a little while, it's still early, and they remained lying there and she could smell his scent, which was a mixture of the smell of the stable and Alhucema Negret, which she knew well

because it was the same perfume Flora wore, are you wearing Alhucema? she asked him, since he was so quiet, and Alirio exclaimed, you're so smart! How did you know?, and he took a bottle of perfume out of his pocket and offered to rub a little on her, you'll see how the cold goes away, but she said no, because it'll tickle, but he said don't be silly, it's such a fun game, and she said well, ok I guess, but watch it, and he began to rub her and pinch her here and there. Bumble bee, bumble bee under the barn, when it comes out, it goes buzzzzzzzzz!, what a pretty little belly you have, and Ana said, you're getting fresh, but he said, come on, I'm only playing, the problem is that you prefer Nebridio to me, I've seen you, and she said well Nebridio is my age and my mother lets me play with him. So what's wrong with me . . . ? I'm not looking for trouble, don't think I don't know my place. I am a farm-hand and you're the boss's daughter, but that doesn't mean I can't tell you how pretty you are, right?, and he started asking her questions about school, about who her friends were, and she told him about Irma and Pecosá and he roared with laughter as he listened to her stories, and then he said, come sit here, and he squatted down, but Ana said she was very comfortable where she was and he said, let's play horsey, didn't you like to play horsey?, yes, when I was three years old, and how old are you now?, almost thirteen and I'm not the asshole you think I am, and he said, Holy Mother! what ugly language, and came back to lie down. He wrapped himself well in the poncho, until even his moustache disappeared under it, and then, suddenly, without knowing why, she decided to tell him about Montse. Did you know I killed a girl once? Ahhhhh?, Alirio jumped, and she said, well, yes, but it has remained a secret and you have to promise me that you will never ever tell anyone, I swear by this Cross, Alirio said and he made her get comfortable, come here, cuddle up with me, now tell me how that happened . . . ? and now at last he was being serious, no longer mocking her, since every time she told him a story he burst out laughing, as if she were a comedian; you have to promise me you won't ever tell a soul, no matter how many years go by, and he said, I swear to God. But when she started to tell him that Montse was six and she was five, he made a you-must-be-joking

gesture and started to smile, and she stopped right then and there. If you don't believe me I won't tell you anything. But he said, don't be so touchy, of course I believe you, don't be like that, go on, and it was just like she wanted things to be, with him treating her like a grown up, begging her over and over again to go on with her story. Are you cold again? and he started to rub her very slowly. No, it's just that I shiver when I remember, and he said, poor thing, come here . . . and how did you kill her . . . ? while he looked at her and petted her, and she started the story from the point when her mother had warned them don't climb that wall, that it was too high, but Montse insisted, come look at the hens. She didn't refuse, and they climbed up to the railing, and then Montse screamed and Ana saw her almost in the air and managed to grab her thighs but Montse was heavy and very slippery and she let go, and she fell on the pavement, face down, and there she remained, dead, with her arms spread out, until some men who worked down below, in the pharmacy, picked her up and brought her up the stairs between them, and Alirio caressing her, and she clearly seeing their white gowns soaked in blood: your mother, where is she . . . ? they asked her, and she started to feel a tingling warmth on her legs and his body rubbing against her, what a horrible thing, and she not daring to say anything because if she moved he would stop petting her and the shaking had gotten worse and he climbed on top of her to keep her warm but all the rubbing was to no avail. Don't tell anyone, and he said, no, of course not, rest assured, what a horrible thing, tell me, tell me more . . . and she seeing the blood dripping down the staircase, and Montse's face, I don't know . . . I don't remember anymore, because the man from the pharmacy was suggesting they cut off her dress but it was a sticky mess, and he was slowly opening her legs, searching with his fingers and she didn't let out a peep, because she had to tell him: I didn't kill her, she explained to them persistently, of course you didn't, her mother said, don't be silly, and they took her out of the room, I killed her . . . ! it was me . . . shrieking because he was poking inside her. Don't do that, it hurts! No, no, it doesn't hurt, I'll be very gentle. But he was penetrating her violently, and she could feel his sweating hands on her tense

body, no! I don't want to . . . ! but with a calm voice he said: tell me more about your friend, was she as pretty as you are . . . ? and he stopped for a moment. I like to hear your stories, it doesn't hurt, see? and he moved slowly, but that really hurt and she said, I don't want to! but he said I'm not hurting you, be still, and he covered her mouth to make her stop, do you like it like this . . . ? it's so good, and it was like she was being cut open with a knife, and he saying it's so nice, and wouldn't stop, and the world spun around with every one of Alirio's thrusts, and he started to moan and to breathe heavily: Alirio . . . ! Marco's voice came from the orchard, and she prayed for someone to come, but Marco's voice faded away. Oh please Lord, help me get away . . . ! She made an enormous effort, but suddenly something jolted her like an electric charge, everything became blurred and she lost track of things: and when she came back to her senses, Alirio was still on top of her, not saying a word. Very still.

Alirio!, and this time it was Pancho, whistling like when he called the horses to the trough, and Alirio jumped up, don't move, but Ana couldn't have even if she had wanted to because she felt as if she had been put through a mill. He put his poncho on, adjusted his belt, I have to go cut hay, are you coming tomorrow to look for nests?, and she said yes, and he took off running, disappearing into the canes, and she heard him whistle, and she listened carefully for noises but couldn't hear anything, no cows mooing, only the flowing waters of the Leona. I'm going to bathe, she decided, and she rose with a great effort, because her body felt battered and bruised, and then she understood what had happened to Satura that time, when they thought that Lisandro, the Montoya's farm-hand, was beating her. When she got to her feet, she was covered in blood: he ripped my insides!, and she started running wildly, not thinking of the pain or the weariness.

She couldn't get the blood out and then she decided it would be best to bury her panties in the garden, where the soil was

loose; there wasn't much blood on the nightgown and she left it to dry while she bathed in the brook, which was cold as ice. The thorns of Christ . . . ! Sabina would say if she caught sight of her like that; it would be best to crawl behind the garage and go in through the garden, and she stretched out on the grass, shivering, but it wasn't the cold, because she felt like an oven inside. What if the same thing that happened to Satura happens to me?; and she imagined herself binding her stomach with an inner tube, and the baby being born in a corner of the bathroom, because Satura hadn't said a word to anyone and her mother hadn't even noticed what was going on until they heard the screams, and later Satura had another baby and for three dollars she would let the cattle-drivers fondle her. She would do it in the hay fields with any passerby, I once heard Sabina telling Flora; fifteen years old, and look at her . . . ! and then she buried her face in the ground because the grief was too much for her to bear, and she broke into tears, into heart-breaking sobs, and she cried and cried until slowly she was overcome by sleep, and she dreamt of Montse, who was not Montse but her sister, who was a year ahead of her in school and whom Father Medrano left in detention each Thursday because she staunchly refused to sing when they played *Cara al sol*,<sup>1</sup> I won't sing, oh no', we'll see about that, Little Miss Know-It-All, and he kept her until five o'clock, and nobody could understand what was going on, until the grandmother explained that it was that her parents were Spanish refugees from Catalonia; and Montse asked her, are you going to the morning rosary?, and she pushed her into the procession, which was starting to traverse a city with high towers and very small squares surrounded by trees that she had never seen before, and Juan José's scream woke her up: they're looking for you, Ana!, and then he stopped, facing the brook, not daring to say more when he saw her sprawled on the grass like that, naked.

Translated by Elizabeth Paravisini-Geber

<sup>1</sup>Hymn of the Falange Española, a Spanish political group which joined forces with Franco during the Spanish Civil War. —Eds.