

María Luisa Mendoza (Mexico)

Excerpt from AUSENCIA'S TALE

Former militia officers with pretensions to dandyism who served in the Dardanelles and the Iser condemn—if not violently at least with firm conviction—the wearing of coattails for formal dinners, theater events, or other ceremonies that without exaggeration can be considered obligatory in daily social life. Coattails are only worn by poor devils with no clue about men's fashions or by newcomers to pseudo-bohemian circles. It's just that the tendency of gentlemen who have held commissions in military campaigns leans towards a relaxed elegance that had formerly been antagonistic to true distinction. But let's not be too inclined to severity in matters of current fashion. We can very well forgive—those of us who understand the vastness of our nation, isolated amidst wheat and corn fields and millions of head of cattle—local ignorance in matters of fashion, though we have noted that smoking jackets are now the trend in London, but worn with matte silk linings, that shiny lapels are unacceptable, not even as a joke—crows' mirrors, my father used to call them—as are felt hats and outrageous spats, that Parisian design has maintained silk-like bindings on the lapels, although cut of the same fabric, that's true. Besides, we all know that only waiters don American-style tuxedos.

The wardrobe situation is in continuous metamorphosis, my dear lady. You can very well understand, given your obvious financial position, that it's been a long time since plush hats were the item of choice to cover the old noggin . . . they're only worn by niggers . . . that a belted overcoat—a coachman's dead giveaway—has been soundly defeated by the perfectly-cut evening cape or the great coat. And, begging your pardon, boxer shorts that fall below the knee, and shirt tails reaching below the hip have been relegated to what is impossible, unforgivable to wear.

(how long will my skin last without a final go at it. In what coming day, tomorrow, today even when I get to my hotel room,

will it show the imprint of so many stories—stories lived, heard, tangled in the dark lines that seem even more pronounced when I speak and remain in the r's or the m's that brush against them, like fishes heaped on a net, quivering, their mouths open, with scales like knives capable of scraping away the softness, leaving behind only dead flesh, fishes of words? Why in heaven's name this downpour of sadness? Ausencia seemed to absent herself from this game of oneupmanship, not giving logical answers, more than normally forgetful about names, titles, synonyms in French, designer labels, breeds, definitions, qualifiers or nouns of real, independent, and individual existence. More past than pluperfect. Then, distracted by the feast of oysters and white wine, of asparagus and "centurion eggs," as she blushing called the caviar, making an effort to focus her beam of light, which had nearly faded without warning after spending a sleepless night in order to catch the grand zeppelin, the lady understood that she didn't give a hoot about Reinaldo Olavarrieta, this man from Tabasco who inspired in her such grammatical ideas: ferns, lizard-fish, swamp, new corn, gnats, coconut tortillas, sweat, beans and plantains, hammock, green turtle, crocodile, cocoa, laughter, vice, alcohol, chewing gum, heresy, liberalism, terms of endearment . . . , and that nothing was more absolute than the subtle beige of the restaurant with its private alcove where they lunched on delicious tidbits, or than her mind's hopeless efforts to conjure more words to identify this man from Tabasco with the sexual impulse that her companion left behind like forgotten cards on a game table in a run-down ship detained in a jungle customs station and seized without further inquiries, the police taking away sequined prostitutes and frock-coated card sharps among gringa heiresses of tobacco plantations, vacationing delegates, uneven pairs of faggots caught in the act, or sweet grandmothers accompanying a grandchild with a penchant for mad escapades but without capital or friends to finance them. Ausencia thus resigned herself to one of those floodings of her lacunae, from exhaustion, "you'll have to forgive me, there are moments in which fatigue makes me seem absent-minded," and stopped trying to climb the hill of names. And with-

out further ado she said:)

"I would very much like to eat seafood, Reinaldo, but I very much prefer the catholic diet of green and red, maybe accompanied by a smattering of yellow, a bit of white, absolutely no purple, never any beige, and frankly nothing black; I will take a little something, pink maybe, but I'm only doing it for you who are my compatriot and whose voice, despite what you're telling me, Olavarrieta—a very distinguished and elegant voice, by the way, without any s's—fills me with such an ebb and flowing of nostalgia, familiar airs, revolutionary revolts, profanations of church virgins, and lots of textile-plant money since I assume that's the source of your wealth, or am I mistaken?"

Reinaldo opened his eyes wide, understanding the latter but ignoring, like any intelligent, conceited and solemn being, the former. He let his rambunctious and lusty tropical laugh loose as he listened to this teaser regaling him with such absurd perspicacities which he supposed, not making an effort despite himself, referred to the food in her diet and which, contrary to what his companion, exhausted from the effort of calling green by its proper name, salad—red was for tomato, yellow for mustard, white for bread, purple for beets, beige for butter, black for caviar, pink for salmon—would have expected, did not disappoint him, nor did they make him pick up his hat and take off running to look for someone who spoke Spanish properly, it didn't even make him lose interest, right now the woman looked even more adorable than in the zeppelin, more than in the car that took them at breakneck speed to the La Cupola Restaurant, specializing in sunfish and not in steak alla fiorentina.

Ausencia was not too keen—between little sips of coffee and cognac—on going to bed at dusk with this compatriot of hers who had plunged headlong into a rigmarole of tailoring and high fashion. Reinaldo was not precisely enthusiastic about the idea of taking his pants off that sunset, and then dressing again. He was just back from that, from the nonchalant squeeze-me-tightly-there, with God's help he was retracing his steps to his homeland, where one made

love like drinking a mammee juice, even though that pulpy fruit was short of juices, just like he and Ausencia were short of lusting to trot in bed. But despite this sluggish calm in both their loins, Reinaldo proposed and Ausencia accepted.

(it was the rush, the sleepy Sunday, it was the obstinate stiffness of my legs, the unknown, the rustling of my petticoats, the whiteness of the linen below his navel, it was his youth, it was mine. All that panting, all that pricking, first gently and then hard and then nothing but the comings-in and the goings-out and then the cascade in my squeezing neck from his bulging rod. It was that Virginia didn't know about it and I would have to explain it to her, it was that Enedina wasn't absent, nor was Ausencia—I, Virgin, she—each one of us in a room separated only by blood, Virginia thinking of me, I thinking of her, Enedina thinking of both of us, the three of us with him who came that afternoon for a Scotch; he with me in that my bed which then was made for him, only him. It was the exhaustion of our flesh and his electricity which led to so many unknown streets, towers of lace, and ships' sirens, sounds never heard by me who only knew of the chants of gold and the sighs of urine . . . It was his joy, yes, it was the mad generosity of his dark youth, it was the game of The Pussy in the Well—no sense in covering it up now—it was the delight of all those new Sundays, one on, one off, and his voice like a closed mine, his broad-shouldered back, well-muscled and lean under my breast and the charade of my violation of his delicious behindnesses. It was the ceremony of his dancing in the buff for me, veiling himself with an Arabian cloth, with linen that had belonged to the other, the one that "had been," it was the way he raised the banner to let his sex peek out, up, down, sideways, and ending up bursting out laughing with feminine then masculine grace in a naked boxing match which I watched in a trance seeing the fluttering of the dove between his legs, whirling like a kite wanting to fly away but being held tight by a boy's string, as if that dark-skinned appendage had been expressly made by God to gyrate against the pubis and the pouches of pleasure that could barely keep up with its rhythmic adorability as it spun in the air and

then the uppercut, the jab, and the final knockout which released that watered-down paste over me and my bed, his bed now, in order to start again...it was that.)

"What are you thinking of, queen, sitting there so pierced with silences?" The blue-eyed youth once undressed had given evidence of slightly twisted knees, not quite knock-knees or bow-legs, just somewhat curved legs, as if the well-made patrician trunk, perfect in all its attributes, weighed more than it should have, giving eloquent evidence of sound nourishment, ablutions, brushes against good fabrics with fine labels embroidered in English, French, in Italian, but never in Spanish, good beds, good daybreaks, good evenings, good horsebacks, good berths in luxury liners, good everything, that is.

(when Gerundio died I could have been better, not decent, no, since we cut that word out and made it into paper cones for salted seeds, but better, yes, free. But I didn't want to, I loved my home too much to stray far from it, my ceilings painted with angels and other sillinesses, my former and present properties for me alone...)

"Sir: my new properties are for me alone. It's like you, Mr. Olavarrieta, you, Reinaldo, for example, sitting here next to me. I don't know you, I don't know much more about you than the language you speak, and you were nonetheless destined for me. You would have to buy a ticket to climb to heaven and let out a scream; your life is a never-ending descending from zeppelins to meet the flashbulbs of the cameras photographing us. And this coming month she'll see our faces, she alone, Enedina, in the Zig-Zags, the monthly magazine she reads looking for me, your photo was in the paper, make believe it's a souvenir . . . Enedina is my maid—if one can call her that—. She lives in a very big house of mine, with a door that sometimes—once—resounds like thunder . . . You have no idea. You're the type that springs to life after three o'clock, worried about properties you don't inhabit, like me, and concerned about the statement you make in your elegant clothing, as if the smoking jacket were the answer. I was thinking of my silences, do you understand?"

"No, beauty, I don't understand."

"It's just that going to bed with a man it's not what you'd call something out of this world. We women jump into bed with the ease that men boast of but don't actually feel. We like feeling you down there, ah, how we like it!, but it doesn't go beyond that, a matter of doing what one must once one said one would. The bad part is the memories, the damned piling up of what happened to you before, there, a thousand years ago . . . I don't remember."

"Tell me, Ausencia, speak to me . . ."

"You know? One day we buried my father. His name was Gerundio Batista and he was a miner between the blue of the Spanish sky and the dark night of Sonora. I was still very young in those days, but for five years I'd been threading elusive Sundays: a lover at the plant, no less, and a lover at the mine. I drew lots for them on weekends, without working myself up about it. The truth is that houses of many rooms are very tempting. He 'was' a gringo, but with Arab blood, the other 'had been' Mexican. My 'was' and my 'had been.' Was for him, had been for him."

"Tell me."

"I broke the rules of every day, of every hour. Once my father died I was covered in tinsel and coins. On the desk in his study I learned to sign with the constancy of a millionaire, I collected and bestowed, I acquired and gave away, I took and distributed: the kind of first class deed that is never forgiven by those who only open their mouths to let out their bile—the damnable habit of damning everyone to hell—. If I had not thought of anything beyond the giving and taking, I would not have gotten even with the devil, but would be, on the contrary, in the same boat as all the rich people in the vicinity . . . I wore mourning for twenty days, complete mourning, with veil and gloves. I wore half-mourning for twenty days, white collar and cuffs on a black dress, I wore white without fail for twenty days, white from head to toe, including my curls. I covered three years in sixty days. On the sixty-first day I gave a farewell tea party for a mining colleague who was leaving for New York on personal business. On the sixty-second day society sent me the normal

invitations to shindigs and what nots . . . His name was D. H. Haller, you know?, and I loved him. My first long awakening into sex. His chest tangled with white hairs, his power . . . but I'm getting sidetracked . . ."

"Tell me."

"I could go on and on telling you the story of a beautiful life since I've never held back before, but the truth is that women chroniclers of their coituses invent fifty percent of their tales, and the true bed-hoppers are the quiet ones. I only narrate my life story to my lovers, in their own manner and style, tailoring my tale to their image, since in their "tell me Ausencia," they know what they want to hear. It's different with women; other women's tales leave them cold, since they have their own: jazzed up stories if they haven't had much luck and want to boast of their non-existent whoring; and discreet, cleaned-up tales if on the contrary they have run wild horizontally. In other words, whores act like real ladies in front of their friends, and vice versa. That's the way it works, and it's the same with age. All women take years off their age, and the moment one turns forty a woman finds herself celebrating birthdays in a world of contemporaries who'll be thirty-nine forever. I don't have to tell you my story: you're not my lover, not even my acquaintance, a fleeting fuck doesn't count, it fades away, like the face of the customs officer who reads your vital statistics, stamps your passport, and is forgotten. Besides, cheer up, you would end up boring me, everything has been boring me for centuries. And besides, you're not remotely similar, you're not my type, if only you looked like them . . ."

Ausencia began to cover the tip of her foot with the listless parsimony of the idle woman who gets out of bed after reading the theater listings in the paper and choosing the play for the evening. She had just finalized her plans and chosen her adventure. If puddle jumpers could buzz from Paris to Mexico in three hours she would take the eleven o'clock express to Balbuena—now an airport. But she was not in such a rush to move. There was Duvivier awaiting her in downtown Rome, and a whole long week before getting to the port

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and choosing an ocean liner, and countless sleepless nights, and the memories, and time stretching ahead of her in a wretched row of long and identical days. There was the clockwork care of her eyelids that were beginning to sag under their own weight, and which she pressed half an hour mornings and evenings under compresses of chilled tea, rose water, camomile, salt, and banyan flowers. There was just what no longer appealed to her: life, and no other choice but to await old age.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

Andra Pizarnik (Argentina)

WORDS

We wait for the rain to stop. For the winds to come. We
for the love of silence we utter useless words. A joined,
without escape, for the love of silence, for love of
I would speak, language has always been an
It's my way of expressing my unspeakable weary
The real order of things should be reversed. Words should
reduce the one we love, but through pure silence, I have
for the silent one. Now I used those no longer words I
too much. But who has so often pressed heavy over those
deeper leaning to the edge of silence. The shadow of
the life of language. This is my life now, it is with words
every word, tempering words by cooling. The silencing
the things that I have heard and tried about the things that

The fact that I enumerated, analyzed each component the
shared from my readings or from that of others. I thought
that I was right, that love was right, I promised him that if he
was a piece of perfect justice would be his. But I wanted in love
and I only wanted to be loved by him and no one else. It's so
with those. When I saw his face for the first time I wanted it
to be more out of love. I wanted his eyes to fall deeply into
mine. I wanted to speak. Of a love that's impossible because
of the way that I speak. I speak too soon. There
the way that I speak out the other night
I thought. Now I am without love. Or