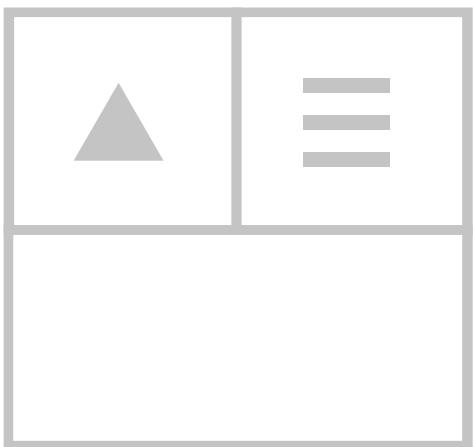




LA POLLERA
EDICIONES

CHILEAN
DELEGATION
20-24 OCTOBER







INTRODUCTION



To define Chile, even from its origins, there are many voices. Some of them say that its name comes from the Trile bird (*Xanthornus cayenensis*) that, when flying over the skies, sings “thrile”, which later evolved into Chile. Others claim that it comes from the Quechua word 'chiri', which means cold or snow, as the tall mountain range of Los Andes, which crosses it from north to south, or like the crystalline glaciers. However, the most accepted definition would come from the Aymara word “chilli”, which has two meanings: “the end of the world” and “the deepest place on Earth”.




Chilean literature has a position as a Latin American referent, writing its own history, yesterday thanks to the poetry of its Nobel Prizes Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda, today with a well-stocked ecosystem of books that enables one to integrate aesthetical, symbolic, cultural, and politic values to the debate.

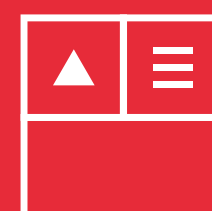
In 2020, the pandemic crashed into the reality of the world, and also of the publishing industry. The difficulties went from the logistics in the chain of production to the intermittent closure of the markets. However, the Chilean publishing scene was able to do the unthinkable, and digital and physical copies in all genres followed an upward trend.

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INTERVIEW



INTERVIEW

LA POLLERA EDICIONES

NICOLÁS LEYTON / SIMÓN ERGAS / DANIEL CAMPUSANO
lapollera.cl / ediciones@lapollera.cl / [@lapolleraediciones](https://www.instagram.com/lapolleraediciones)

To rescue and taste authors is the task that this publishing house has set for themselves, as they have been working since 2007 with a Latin American vocation. To talk about it and their future projects, we had a conversation with Nicolás Leyton, Latin American Literature and Linguistics graduate, Master in Written Journalism at Pontificia Universidad Católica (PUC), and cofounder of La Pollera.



LA POLLERA

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LA POLLERA EDICIONES

I would like to talk about La Pollera's hallmark, its narrative, and heritage rescue, which have been a fundamental part of your publishing house since its beginnings. How has the audience received it?

Indeed, we began by doing heritage rescue, or what may be understood as heritage rescue, because that is a very capricious name, but it is, fundamentally: picking works by recognized authors and placing them again for the disposition of the audience. It was an accident with a piece of work by a writer named José Edwards, of whom there was practically nothing published, that allowed us to get in this path and begin making books. The good thing about this is that we immediately had a good reception from book sellers and the media.

Once we had a steady pace on this path, we opened our contemporary line, which is a little more difficult, as the authors are unknown. It is not the same to publish Gabriela Mistral or Juan Emar as publishing Marcelo Vera, an Argentinian whose publication is a wager. The catalog also opened towards other countries, and it like our vocational side, so to speak. Of consolidating our publishing house as a professional and organized space, but that also fosters new voices in contemporary narrative, in novels and short stories in particular, Latin American as well. Of course, one works more with Chilean authors, as we live in the same place, but little by little we have been bringing authors from other parts of Latin America, such as a Salvadorian, a Cuban, and three Argentinians. We are slowly working on that.

This publisher was born in 2010. What have been the main changes you have experienced internally, in harmony with the changes that society has undergone?

Strictly speaking, the publisher began in 2007 as a college project between Simón, my partner, and me, as a non-specialized cultural magazine, but formally, we began in 2010. That year we decided to professionalize that magazine and take it seriously, to get sponsors, and we did terrible. Then we had de chance to make a book, and we went all in. We then applied to a grant fund and were selected. We did that project, but we kept working in more books, and that is how we began.

Regarding how we have evolved along with society, there are two things that come to my mind. On the one hand, there is the specific issue of the bookmaking industry. When we began, there was a huge debate on digital books versus printed books, and they told us that it was not a good idea to make books, but little by little we kept pushing by our side, a small cart in this huge world, but we keep pushing. Slowly, the tendency has reverted. Nowadays, of course, there are more printed books being made than digital, and somehow that has been consolidating the revaluation of the book as an object done with care and of cultural importance.



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And now, regarding social changes, accidentally, we had decided, in October 2019, to dedicate full time to the publisher. We made the decision just before the upheaval, which allowed us to realize that we could, as publishers, contribute to the critical thinking on this kind of things that were taking place, and it was then that we opened our divulgation lines, which were something that we did not do earlier, and we left literature aside to begin publishing things like, “La hoja en blanco” (The Blank Page), for example; a book about the Constitution, the limits of force over human rights. We now published 'Un cuerpo equivocado' (A Wrong Body), by Constanza Valdés, on trans people's identity and rights.

And that is how it has been working, searching, little by little. Now we are going to experiment on ecology, on the oceans. In that sense, now that the publishing house exists, is working and it has momentum, in which it keeps going steadily forward, we have taken advantage of this strength to redirect it towards issues that we think that are relevant for the public knowledge.

Let us now talk about the future. Your books are already being distributed in Chile and Argentina. What are the following steps? To what new territories would you like to take your catalogue?

We have noticed that La Pollera has a Latin American vocation, so to speak. Nowadays we have, indeed, a total distribution in Argentina and Uruguay, with formal distribution operating in both countries. In Mexico

and Uruguay, we are being distributed by the same company. We will arrive to some Spanish bookstores soon. And, in parallel, we are working to get to those countries we have not reached yet, such as Colombia and Perú. When I say that we are working, it is meant at various levels, but it must not be understood as if we are only working to make business there, but it has also to do with searching for authors that we find attractive and interesting in those countries, and trying not to arrive only with the books, which is the job that the distributor does, but also with communication and media strategies.

Right now, we are giving our next step in Argentina, which is to hire a press management for certain specific books. We are beginning to print books there to obtain a better price and a better positioning, and we are considering having an autonomous social media department there as well. We were going to open an e-commerce, a website, but finally decided not to, due to the way the industry works over there.

But, in the end, in all these countries, the frontiers are, as in all Latin America, just geographical and operational. The audiences are very similar, so we would like to be able to reach those different audiences in these different countries. Our catalogue is very transversal in that sense.

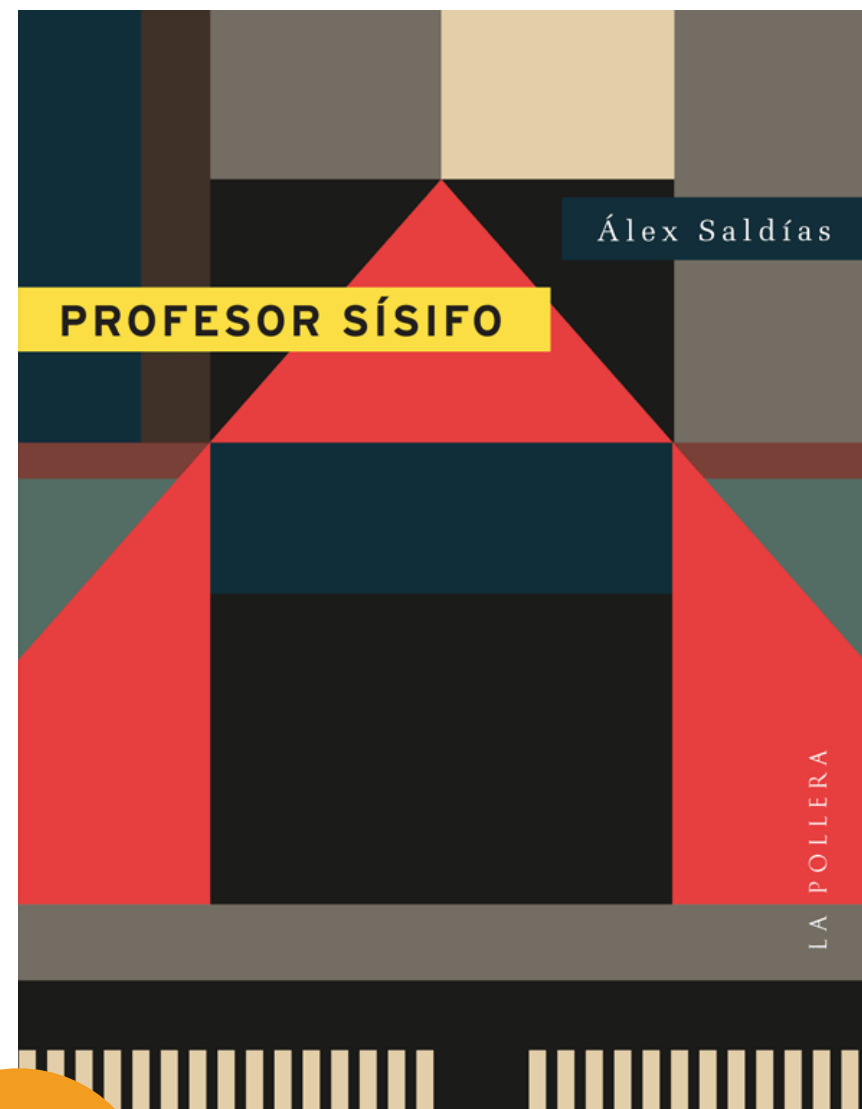


LA POLLERA EDICIONES

Narrative and heritage rescue. Those are the fundamental aspects of La Pollera publishing label. A place made by professionals, where recognized authors are tasted and rescued, rekindling the voice of a written past; and where one may find as well the necessary voices for the dialogue through books in Latin America nowadays. Since 2007, this publishing house has been involved with the book as an object that is able to endure the test of time and progress of history. Since its very beginnings, it has moved and shifted through this path, which is the path of the trade of book-making. A difficult task, specially when the motor of this task is the search for words as told by their protagonists.



ISBN 978-956-6087-15-1



PROFESOR SÍSIFO (MISTER SISIFO)

Author. Álex Saldías

Genre. Fiction

115 pages / Year 2020

This novel is the second book by Alex Saldías, a new voice in Chilean narrative, who presents us to a recently graduated teacher who is beginning his journey through a pathetic, yet revealing, path, when he has to do classes, for the first time, to students without any will to learn, who dwell in a system that, at the same time, shows no intention at all for educating them. This teacher is willing to carry the rocks that imply to attempt to educate people in this context, yet the mountain he is facing is quite bigger than he thought.

ISBN 978-956-9203-92-3



SOLO (ALONE)

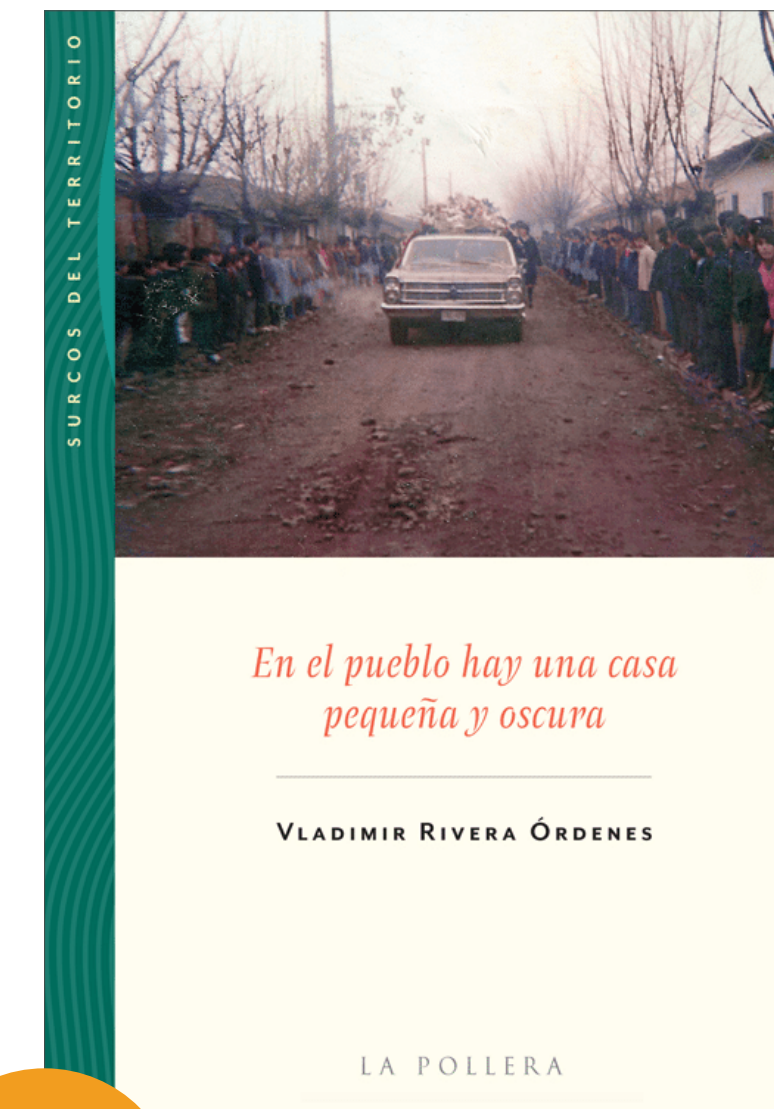
Author. Marcelo Vera

Genre. Fiction

93 pages / Year 2020

Published in the year 2020, this book got its author selected for the Hot List at Frankfurt that same year. Pages with a transversal theme, narrated by an author that is read in all of Latin America. We are before the representation of a tale that is common for the whole human kind, written as a novel that talks about loss from in a luminous tone, which is necessary nowadays. It teaches us about mourning, coming from the most intimate place.

ISBN 978-956-6087-24-3



EN EL PUEBLO HAY UNA CASA PEQUEÑA Y OSCURA (IN THIS TOWN THERE IS A LITTLE DARK HOUSE)

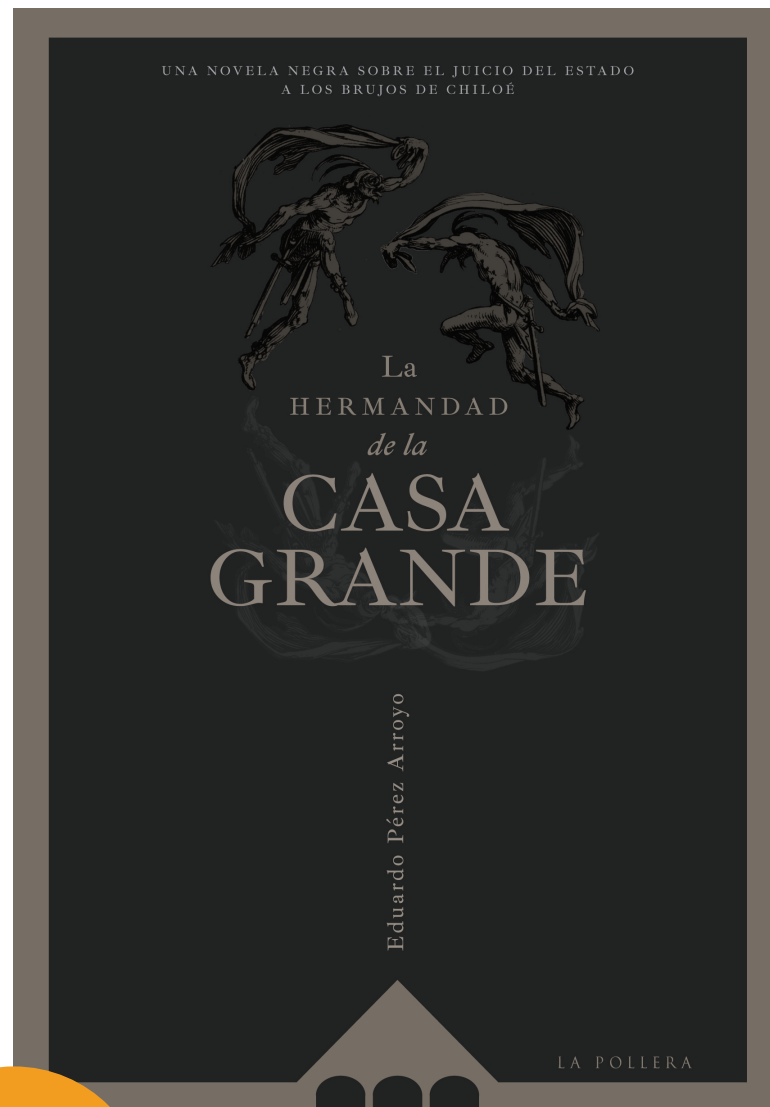
Author. Vladimir Rivera Órdenes

Genre. Chronicle - Nonfiction

162 pages / Year 2021

In the form of chronicles that dance with the letters, we meet someone who is narrating their everyday life. From a small and dark house in the district of Parral, we get to know the social conflicts, the politics, the territories, all this through a mixture of biographies that present an eloquent intersection between what we understand as fiction and what we know as non-fiction.

ISBN 978-956-6087-43-4



LA HERMANDAD DE LA CASA GRANDE (THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE BIG HOUSE)

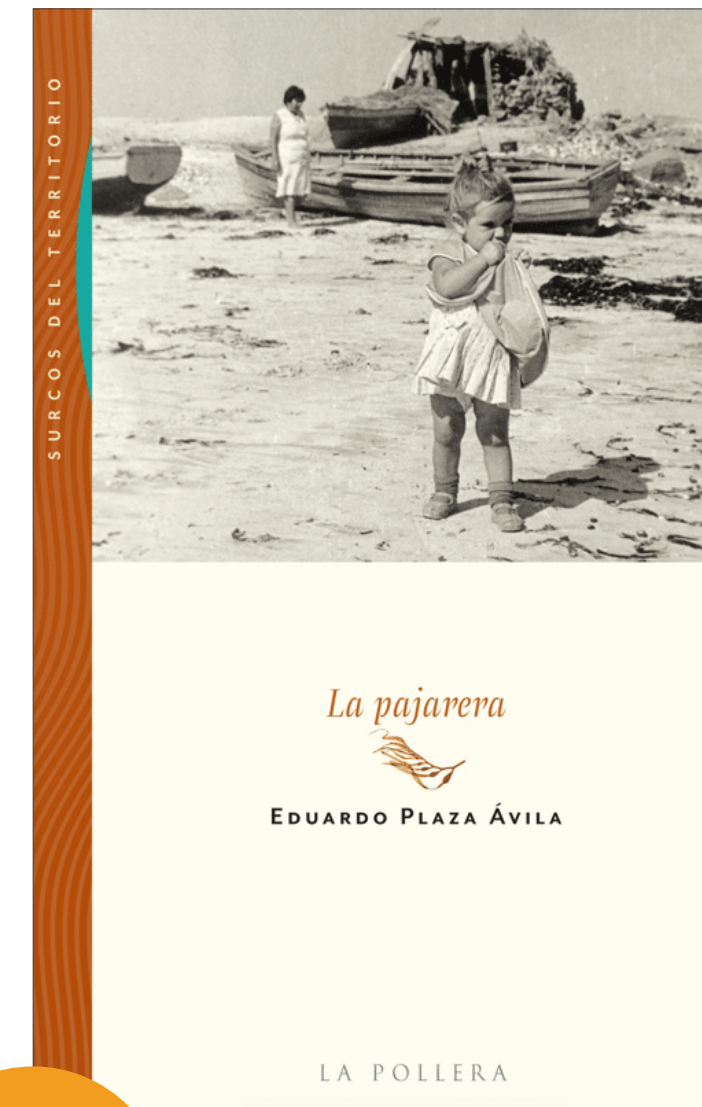
Author. Eduardo Pérez Arroyo

Genre. Fiction

550 pages / Year 2021

A literary take on the Trials of the Sorcerers in Chiloé during the 19th Century, and how the Chilean State, in the middle of the War of the Pacific, interferes in the autonomy of magic to take control over an island. A well-written historical drama, dated in 1871, packed with action and swift dialogues with the past. An echo of the sorcery of those times that reverberates in the present of La Pollera. Debut.

ISBN 978-956-6087-31-1



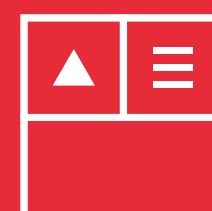
LA PAJARERA (THE BIRDCAGE)

Author. Eduardo Plaza

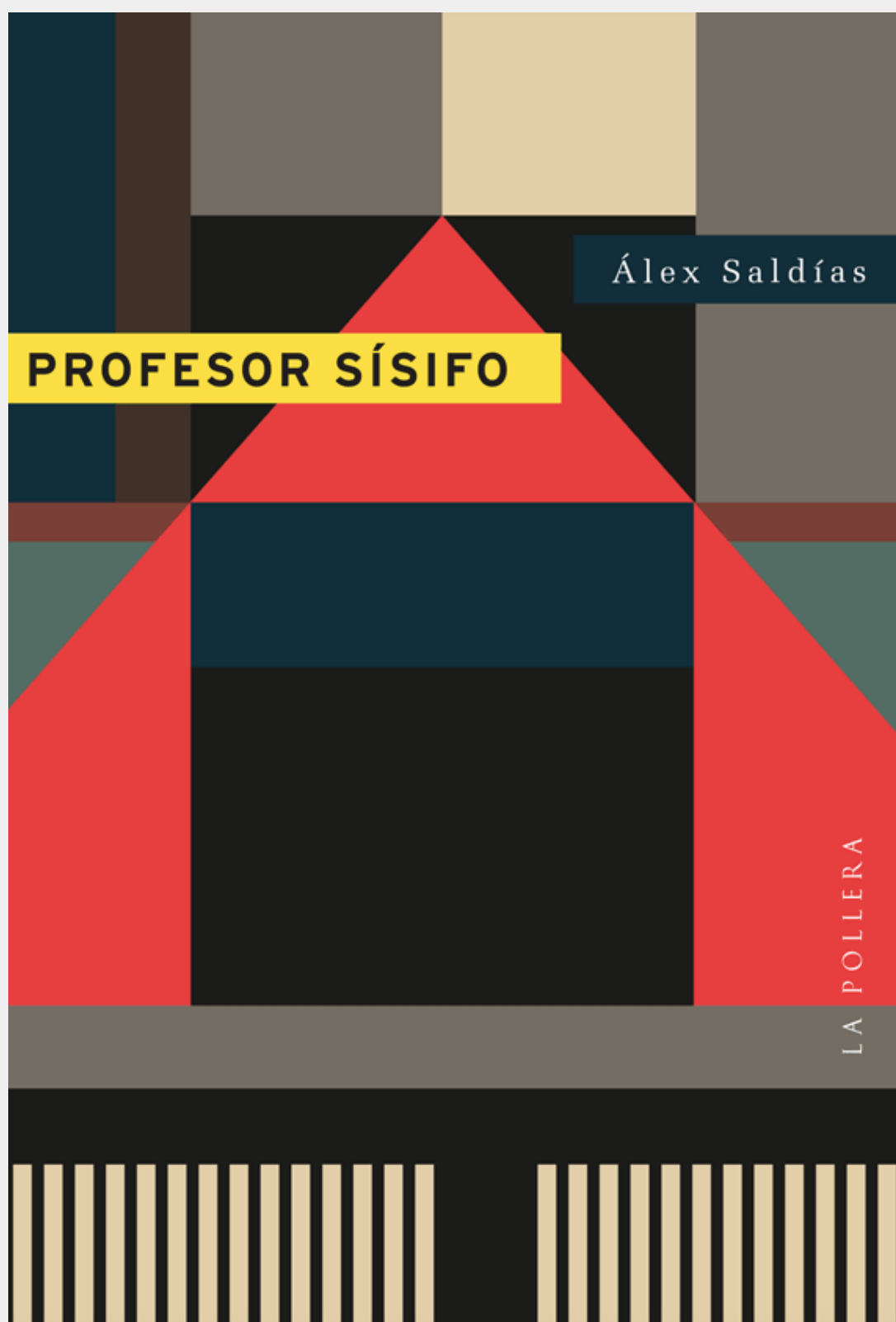
Genre. Chronicle - Nonfiction

105 pages / Year 2021

An admirable narrative range to outline Coquimbo or, more specifically, its nooks and its imagery. A chieftain intends to turn the city into an epicenter of a pirate tourist operation and, at the same time, in a showcase of all the powers in the world. An annual celebration arouses a collective frenzy, but also chatterboxes and criminals; the guitarist of a famous cumbia band chooses —after touring through the whole country and abroad— not to move from his nest; an addictive investigation alerts about the presence and the negation of the Changos as the First Nations of the bay; and, as a background, always dormant and delicate, a family portrait filled with cracks, ghosts, shifts and rearming. A hybrid and significantly book that is halfway between being a chronicle, a novel, and journalism.



EXCERPTS



PROFESOR SÍSIFO
(MISTER SISIFO)

Author. Álex Saldías

Genre. Fiction

115 pages

Year 2020

ISBN 978-956-6087-15-1

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Professor Sisyphus

Address: Styx Avenue #3611

Age: 25

Date of Birth: 1993 BC

Education: Aristotle's Academy

Graduate Professor of Language and Communication

Personal achievements and qualities:

King of Ephyra and Puente Alto.

I ratted Zeus out. I fooled Hades.

I'm Odysseus absent father.

I roll a boulder up a hill every day. I roll it down at night.

I read sad novels. I'm a hysterical narrator.

Working class professor. Armored heart.

Certified stairs athlete.

Oenologist in perpetual training.

Constructivist educator, sometimes.

Behaviorist educator, ad nauseam.

Educational experience:

First internship in 2013 BC Educational complex in Cerro Navia, the capital of Hades.

My colleagues were preparing coffee. They gave me a mug. I mixed the sugar and the salt, and we laughed about it, which broke the ice. Maybe I did it on purpose. We were the mascots, the clowns of the gang. We were amiably ignored. You could tell the great work that time and life experiences had done on their self-confidence. They chatted about school trips and problem students. They made jokes, mocked other people, talked about wages and bonuses. We took out our notebooks and put on our white coats. We looked like churro-sellers or pharmacists. We had to be identifiable from the rest. We weren't teachers yet. We weren't representatives of the authority. We reeked of fear.

Persephone was assigned to a ninth grade, I got an eighth grade. The smell of armpit and pot inside the classroom were the first to greet me. My Guidance Teacher had a beautiful mother-cat face. A Mother-teacher in Styx was one who knew of every disappointment in education (hard times, disrespect, disillusion, yells), but still manages to feel love towards her students. I wanted to be a Father-teacher, but my personality and my looks relegated me to the Mascot-teacher category.

There were twenty-five students that seemed like fifty. I remember, above all, their lethargy. They wrote a couple of words, at best. If they came close to the knowledge, a tiny bit, even an inch, they had to be rewarded with a grade in the form of a number. They did it for us, so that we could stop interrupting their naps.

-Come on, Eduardo, wake up, you've done nothing. Did you understand how to do the activity?

-Hey, stop bothering me, teach – he answered -. Look, there it is, a micro-short-story. «A long time ago-rilla». Get it? A long time a gorilla. Do you want me to illustrate it? Perfect, there you go.

I looked at the drawing as if I were looking at myself. All the life experiences that drove me to study teaching, hanging by a thread:

Fourth grade: I read Fantastic Mr. Fox in one day.

Seventh grade: I wrote two poems and two love letters to a classmate who also happened to be my best friend. She rejected me abruptly, embarrassed, as if I had done something wrong. In time I would feel the same about the directors of the Technical-Pedagogical Unit.

Ninth grade: I ran to a shelter place after my first romantic breakup with a nymph. I went inside the Puente Alto library and asked for two books by Lovecraft and one by Nietzsche. I didn't understand anything about the latter, but at least I was already someone who read Nietzsche.

Tenth grade: I discovered poetry, that was the point of no return. Parra was my grandfather, Neruda my step-father, Mistral my mother, De Rokha was the father that visited on weekends and Huidobro a high-class uncle. They appeared everywhere: in the afternoons, the trees, the smiles, the pain, the beer, the smoke, the saliva, the lips, the solitude, the words themselves, the action of writing them, the inspiration, the breathing, the music, the rhythm...

Twelfth grade: what could I do? There was no chance that I would become a poet, my personality would not allow it. I'd never live like Arturo Belano or Ulises Lima. How I wish to be a character in novel by Bolaño, I thought, and flirted a lot with that idea, even though deep down I knew my life would be much more similar the that of a character in a novel by Kafka or Levrero.

In the end I chose a profession that would let me stay near literature, but not on top of it; smelling it but without tasting it; looking at it through a mirror that, after some years, wouldn't show anything but students and books to be used as teaching material. Language teaching. Done, fuck it.

I studied for the PSU and had a beer with my friends while we checked the grades on the Internet. I had the lowest points, but it was enough to get into college.

I reminisced about all the sleepless nights studying Barthes, Kristeva, Chomsky and Saussure; I saw the fifteen-page essays about the psychological building of the student, the comings and goings in the subway, the insufferable pilgrimage from Puente Alto to Baquedano, from the puddles of dirty water to the marble fountains, rolling the boulder up from the border to the center and from the center to the border for more than four years and a half; the end of semester, marijuana, the parties, the insomnia, the drowsiness, the sex, the excess, exhaustion, the anger, the awesome Teachers and the shitty Teachers, the thumb drives, the powerpoints, the essays, the thesis, the thesis, the thesis, the final exam, the final grade, curtain drop, the applause, and that's it, throw yourself into the machine, Professor Sisyphus.

All of that was reflecting from that attempt at drawing a gorilla that seemed more like a chimp.

I wanted to punch the desk as I imagined a father-teacher would do, but I diverted my anger like removing a cobweb from my face. I tried to focus on the rest of the students, but the scenario was always the same. That was the first bullet shot on an infinite battlefield.

I once asked them about the future. No one wanted to go to college. «College is for dumbasses», they said. (I went to college, ergo...). The others wanted to join the army, to work in whatever job they could get to earn some money, to ride «some big wheels». Girls, on the other hand, seemed to leave all their job prospects behind the great wall of motherhood, as if that wall were eternally insurmountable.

«The violence of this place is insufferable», I thought at least three hundred and sixty-something times. I had only worked for a short time and I was already sick of it. There were teachers who had spent more time being teachers than I had spent being a person. How did they do it?

At least I learned to wake up early and to rise the volume of my voice. I found that I have a wide baritone range when it is time to ask to remove your headphones and pay attention. I could say that I intimidate the kids with my vocal capacity, but the truth is that I just annoy them. Everything depends on the sensibility of my students to be scared by the sound of a thunder. Unfortunately for me, the kids at that school seemed to have grown up in the middle of a big storm, but the situation was much worse in the classrooms of my trainee colleagues. Especially in Persephone's, my girlfriend.

She had forty-eight students. The sacrifice in that classroom was so big, that three trainees were required, not just one like in mine. One day, one of the trainees who helped Persephone was absent. I was in my free period, so I offered to replace her. The noise, the smell, and the sexual tension inside the classroom were as dense as a bondage party in a bus. In that context, we had to do a small activity based on one measly parameter: the students infer and interpret the global meaning of a text.

Just that: infer, deduce, understand something that's not explicit, but that if we read carefully we can discover. For example, with Hemingway's «For sale: baby shoes, never worn», I'd have to ask the student: Why were the shoes never worn?, and the student would have to answer: «Because the baby died before he could wear the shoes his parents had bought him». I could also ask: How are the parents of the baby?, and they would have to answer «Sad»; and so on. That way I would know that the parameter was fulfilled and we would all be fine: the system worked; teaching was something beautiful.

As I said, there were three of us trainees, each in charge of one third of the classroom. Despite this division, the effectiveness and attention paid in that class were zero. The students slept, played, looked at their cellphones and kissed while they pretended to work in the microstories printout. I was sweating under my white coat trying to insert some literary taste into their heads, but nothing entered.

Hemingway, Monterro

so, García Márquez. All of them trapped in a printout trampled by shoes with mud, shit, and chewing gum. Barely written over, completed with apathy, full of drawn penis protruding in the corners. Overcrowding and dizziness caused by noise were caused every second to last for a year. I imagined myself in the middle of a huge ocean of bodies, screaming at me in some secret language: «You should have studied engineering». Teaching seemed like a big joke. I felt like laughing when I saw one of the students making white lines with pieces of eraser. That was his game: snorting cocaine. As a joke and maybe pretending to be a brother-teacher, I told him: «Okay, let's not get you too excited about this», and I took the folder over which he had put the eraser scraps.

Evidently, the class was a total failure, as all classes at that level, in that school and probably in that municipality.

The following week we went back with the same energy, but the atmosphere was different. Teachers looked at us as if we were survivors of the holocaust. Since when did we get so much attention?, I thought, but the mystery didn't last long. During the first recess we were summoned by the director. While we walked towards his office, one of the teachers who acted as a liaison between the college where we studied and this school told us: «Relax, it can happen to anyone». What was that that could happen?

The director interrogated us. He wanted to know if we had anything to do with what happened last week. We declared that we had no idea what he was talking about, so he explained that, after our lousy class, the kids had snorted cocaine. The student from whom I took the disintegrated eraser was actually practicing the right method to prepare the lines. During recess between our class and the next, Rómulo, the kid I had scolded, produced a bag and distributed it among everyone. According to the director, forty out of the forty-eight students snorted. They got so high on coke that they started fighting in the middle of history class, ending with a brawl worthy of a Brueghel painting. The drugs belonged to Rómulo's drug

dealing brother. He stole it from some drawer. The school had to call the police. While we returned to the university to complete the internship reports, Rómulo was being detained in front of all of his classmates. Then the police parked outside his home. From the police wagon, Rómulo heard his family's tumultuous screams during the raid.

Persephone started crying when the director finished his story. I don't know if she cried because she was fond of her student or afraid of consequences. I was stunned. I knew it wasn't our fault. I told the director repeatedly that we had not seen anything, but he didn't believe us. How could we be so blind? Almost the entire class had fucked their septum up right there in the classroom, and we didn't notice. He was right, so I mentioned the eraser episode as a conciliatory detail, something that could save us or enlighten us a little, although I didn't think it was necessary, because I saw that it was eraser powder, I'm not stupid enough to mix it up. The director replied:

-Yes, I know about the eraser and I know what you told him, he stated, while fleetingly pointing his finger at me.

I prefer to remain silent. I knew he was threatening me. I had been easily put against the ropes. If he wanted to accuse me, his story would be much more convincing than mine. The parents don't care about the truth, but about the container where that truth is put. I immediately understood that most things worked like that in a school. It was better to let him think I agreed with him: I had failed. Yes, I made a mistake by not setting some clear boundaries. I should have been a police teacher, not a Brother-teacher; it was not advisable, especially in my position as a trainee. The students would never come to my defense; I would never be their friend. Moreover, later I found out that they tried to protect their classmate, so they spread the rumor that I was the one who brought the coke to the classroom. They betrayed or punished me for bothering their trust. Who did I think I was, being their Brother-teacher right from the start, without

knowing each other? At least they learnt how to build an argument through the post hoc ergo propter hoc fallacy. That is to say:

- 1.- First there was no Prof. Sisyphus and no cocaine.
- 2.- That day Prof. Sisyphus arrived and the cocaine appeared.
- 3.- Therefore, Prof. Sisyphus brought the cocaine.

Maybe we did manage to teach something back then. The system works. Teaching is a beautiful thing.



SOLO
(ALONE)

Author. Marcelo Vera

Genre. Fiction

93 pages

Year 2020

ISBN 978-956-9203-92-3

Clara has died.

I'm informed via telephone by an anonymous cop while I watch Duck Soup, laying in my bed, chewing the leftovers of the food we ate together last night. I can feel the threads snapping over my head. The brief feeling of disbelief vanishes quickly. I mutter some empty words that disintegrate in the air. Clara is dead and outside it rains incessantly. On the TV Groucho writes down the telephone number of a dancer tattooed on Harpo's forearm. In the distance, barks can be heard. That's all I can remember.

After a while I go outside and reality shatters in front of me. Something or someone stripped everything of their colors, and I fearfully realize that the world I knew has vanished forever at one point in the small hours. Everything is filled with blurred faces and mechanical pats on my back. A box of tranquilizers appears, to ease the trip to the morgue. Different landscapes follow one another. None of them feels warm. For a couple of hours I obediently go from one place to another, making absurd decisions, filling forms, and answering questions that nobody should ever ask. The phone takes advantage of the confusion and disappears silently. Goodbye, goodbye. It's a long day of goodbyes. A long time later, when the circus finally goes away, I return home carrying Clara's belongings in a bag and the big prize of some ridiculous funeral catalog under my arm.

At first sight, the cinerary urn looks like a simple toolbox. It's completely made of some engineering material, weighs about one kilogram and four hundred grams, and has a small metal plate with Clara's name hand-written with childish calligraphy. That's all, there's nothing else.

At night I fall asleep with my clothes in, numbed by the tranquilizers and hugging the urn as if that useless action could give back the life I don't have anymore. When I wake up, it's still raining, I feel nauseous, and Clara's name is carved in negative on my left cheek. Somewhere in the house the phone rings endlessly.

The answering machine offered by the telephone company announces twelve new messages. A new record that no one will bother to celebrate. I'm a little surprised by the machine's loyalty, tirelessly dealing with every idiot willing to showcase his melodramatic aptitude in a ridiculous recorded message. After entering the numeric code a collage of empty phrases floats in the air for a couple of minutes. Every expected extra appears, and some unexpected ones. Even a distant cousin, a douchebag who lives in Miami and works as a cosmetic assistant in a funeral home -meaning he helps the guy that puts make-up on the deceased- takes the opportunity to give a long-distance monologue and complain about the lack of commercial sense of the local funeral homes, because back there, he says, body embalming is the foundation of the mortuary industry. For example, embalming the body is a legal requirement if the deceased has to cross the borders of Alabama, Alaska, or New Jersey. On the other hand, another three states (Idaho, Kansas and Minnesota) require the embalming of the body if it is to be moved by public transport (trains, planes and trucks are so considered). Before saying goodbye, he manages to mention that often Krazy Glue has to be used to keep the eyelids and lips shut on rebel dead bodies.

Five seconds after the last message, neither explodes nor the tape self-destructs. What a shame. I close my eyes and try to think of someone to keep me safe while the pieces adjust in my head, but I am unable to hold onto any concrete idea. Maybe it's too soon. I barely manage to disconnect the phone before sinking in a new wave of tranquilizers.

After the effect of the pills vanishes completely, I begin to perceive the advance of solitude as it takes possession of the place. I can still hear Clara asking me how my day was. The Wilhelm scream of her voice resonates across the entire house. I feel the cold in my bones and the terror in every detail. I'm fatally alone. More alone than I could ever imagine. Our Wonder Twins powers won't activate again. No more Montauk. The room becomes unstable and I think of all our secret codes that'll be lost forever. There will be no more domestic arguments, late apologies, nor W. H. Auden poems were scribbled on a piece of

paper in addition to the breakfast cups. There are no confused pets, nor inconsolable children to shamelessly lie to with textbook answers. No, mommy is not in a better place now, she is not watching or protecting us from heaven. No, none of that.

During the following days, I float in a delicate chemical bubble. My emotions writhe in some far away place. I barely move, I get dizzy easily, and hundreds of alarm lights blink in my head, although the basic mechanisms still work with apparent normalcy. I pass the time smelling the perfume on the closet's clothes and crying while hugging the urn that contains her ashes. I don't feel hungry or sleepy, and I don't understand how to act towards Clara in her new format. I limit myself to ration the tranquilizers and roam around the apartment, carrying the urn from room to room, waiting for some kind of late miracle. On the other hand, with Clara's belongings, I have no doubts. As soon as I gather my strength, I'll begin a preservation process to keep fragments of her memory in every corner of the house. Everything will be kept clean and tidy, and the last clothes she used -as well as her books and other personal belongings- will forever remain in the random disposition in which she left them before going away. So far that has become my only certainty, and I plan to cling to it no matter what.

Taking tranquilizers is like covering the smoke detector with a cushion in a burning house. The phrase appears while searching for information about tranquilizers on the Internet, and it is so stupid that it manages to make me smile. I try to memorize it while I lurch around with the camera, recording Clara's traces in this place. Every image breaks my soul, but one day my memory will start to fail and I can afford the luxury of forgiving.

The tranquilizers fade too quickly, and the hours pass in a strange way. I perceive changes of light outside, but I'm unable to focus on anything in particular. Images and sounds merge in an endless doze. In a brief moment of lucidity, I realize that making so many relocations is absurd, and I decide Clara will stay in three fixed positions in the house, strategically selected so she's always within my range of vision.

Then I then choose the living room table to cover the general views, the upper side of the microwave for inside the kitchen, and her side of the bed in our bedroom. For some reason, maybe due to modesty, I arrange for her to be out of my sight when I'm in the bathroom. Apart from that there are no other restrictions.

I barely get out of bed, and if I do, it is to collapse on the living room sofa, where I pass the time in silence, with a vacant stare lost in some corner of the room. I notice it when I walk to the bathroom like an automaton and I make a mental note in case one day I regain my sanity and decide to solve that particular problem.

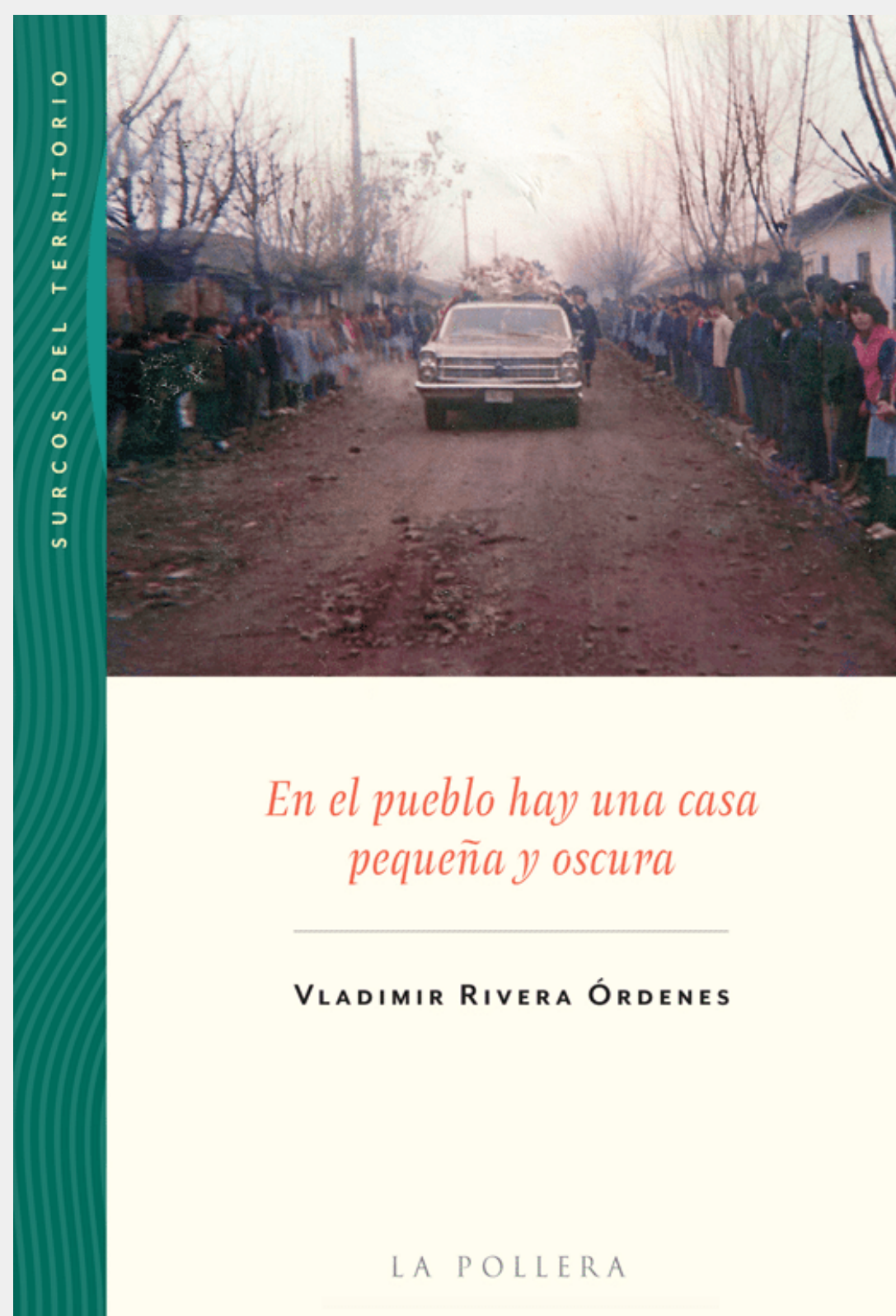
By the third day the TV comes back to life among the dead appliances. It's inevitable, I guess. The exact amount of time for a car accident to completely disappear from the media. No need to take unnecessary risks. The schedule is followed flawlessly. During the first twenty-four hours the show is presented on location, and the screen is smeared with fresh blood and dead bodies. There's plenty of wide shots of the wrecked vehicles, close-ups for lonely shoes or toys with macabre deformations, and the sloppy notes with semi-illiterate witnesses. The following day, things calm down a little, and the discussion moves to the studios, where various personalities give their takes on the seriousness of the matter and assess some preventive measures that will never be implemented. That is all. Seventy-two hours later, the topic magically disappears without a trace. The world goes on, and so does the programming.

The first thing I stumble upon is a reality show in which a dozen morbidly obese people try to lose weight on camera. The participants wear t-shirts with the show's logo, their names and their initial weight printed in huge letters. In each block they're subjected to different torments with the purported goal of strengthening their will power, although some pretense of fun was put in between. After a while I watch them dancing, practicing sports, or attempting romantic approaches. In a particularly sadistic segment, the obese people were taken to a restaurant where they face their favorite dishes. Some of them sweat and look

down, others jump at it with no shame, and one if them breaks (165 kg. according to his t-shirt), puts a pasta dish in front of his eyes, sheds some tears and, addressing the noodles, sorrowfully mutters: I missed you so much. Luckily, a commercial break follows.

My face is falling apart. The old atopic dermatitis got worse and expanded its territory. My epidermis gives up millimeter by millimeter, and the scraps of peeling skin float in the air like the artificial snow on those little decorative crystal spheres with miniatures inside. Maybe my face is not mine anymore, and it disappears little by little after Clara's trail. I don't blame it. When I walked by the bathroom mirror to assess the magnitude of the damage, I barely recognized myself and just stared painfully at the dark and nervous animal that looked back at me.

It's been days since I took a bath or ventured out of the house, and my only contacts with the outside world are limited to the dead hours in front of the TV and the few words I exchange with some delivery person when I feel like eating. The rest of the day the door phone stays disconnected and the messages of the answering machine vanish without having been heard. Only from time to time I manage to detach myself and watch carefully how the mechanism keeps working while the insides dry like an empty shell. In dreams, I distinguish Mr. T tearing apart the door of a false kitchen where a solitary redheaded woman prepares tons of food. They seem to be old friends, although I cannot imagine where they met. While the redhead cooks and smiles nonstop, Mr. T tries to explain how an oven with infrared technology works. He looks deteriorated, but at least he still sports the Mohican crest. According to Mr. T, now you can roast, cook au gratin or fry without fat nor oil, and that must be really good, because the people in the studio scream and applaud. I wonder what is Murdock selling right now.



EN EL PUEBLO HAY UNA
CASA PEQUEÑA Y OSCURA
(IN THIS TOWN THERE IS A
LITTLE DARK HOUSE)

Author. Vladimir Rivera Órdenes
Género. Chronicle - Nonfiction
162 pages
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Tan fuerte como una torre (As strong as a tower)
(At some point in the 2000s)

Have you ever felt the beating of another being close to you, in your heart? Have you noticed that, suddenly, everything stops existing when something alive palpitates in your hands? You remember that warm February morning when you hold him in your arms: he was big for newborn, you probably thought he'd grow to be stronger than a bull, because bulls are strong. And a bull chased you once in Parral. You had to jump several fences, and the bull only stopped when something distracted it. You thought about that and probably said: «This kid will be as strong as a bull». That's why nobody believed you when you said that the baby wasn't breathing normally.

The doctor and the midwife examined him and checked his saturation. It was a long night, labor and birth at home, old-fashioned. Your mother once told you the story of your aunt Gracia in Parral, she was a midwife and had ten children, one after the other, all products of rape by her husband, a one-armed man who did not respect anything nor anyone. There's no good one-armed man, goes the saying. And aunt Gracia, who was a good person and a good midwife, knew about these things. But now babies are delivered in hospitals, in clean clinics. No one is born in a house. But you did, son, you thought, you, the tower, because that's precisely what your name means, «as strong as a tower».

The baby had trouble breathing and nobody noticed but you. Maybe it was your fear, you were always a coward for this type of thing, you took too long to have children, you didn't want them because you knew it was a great responsibility. Kids get sick, kids suffer.

And you knew about suffering, your dad, a guy nobody remembers anymore, was arrested, tortured, and disappeared. He left you alone. You have never spoken about loneliness before, of course. So, when your children began to appear, you became more of a coward. Everything scared you, that's why when you noticed your son wasn't breathing, you thought: «He will be breathing soon, stop being scared, Vladi, nothing is going to happen». But your son wasn't breathing correctly and you decided to call a doctor you knew. He said to you «put him on the phone» and you complied. The doctor listened for a couple of seconds and said: «Take him to a hospital right now» and you agreed. You called your father-in-law and asked him for help. You wanted to cry, remember?, you were scared to death. You felt him breathe in your arms, you saw the enormity of life in his tiny hands. You called the midwife and told her everything, she spent a moment thinking and then suggested a clinic: «Take him there because the other clinics will make you trouble if he was born at home». 'Sure, sure', you answered automatically, but you weren't thinking about anything, just his tiny hands, so small and so red that they pulsated in your arms, and you covered him and took off. It was cold. Truth is, it was hot as hell, but you were cold, very cold, so you thought the baby was cold too.

The nurses admitted him, took him to a small room, and connected him to some machines. It was a small clinic, and you don't remember its name or its location anymore, of course. You remember that the rural clinic was larger in the Arrau Méndez neighborhood, back in Parral; but the midwife recommended this one, she would know better. You didn't know anything anymore, didn't think of anything, only his tiny hands. They told you 'go home, get some rest', you said yes, but deep down you just wanted to run away from yourself. On the way home you ate Chinese food and drank a beer. Your son will be fine at the clinic, you said to yourself, better there than at home, better there than with you. Because nobody is fine near

you, you thought, you're a piece of shit, yes, that's what you thought. And his tiny hands? You held them, yes, of course you did. The child was beautiful. Yes, like all babies. But no, babies are ugly, I don't know why people say they're beautiful, they're really ugly. But he was beautiful. He was your baby. Sitting at the corner of the table, in a dump of a Chinese restaurant, you smelled the food and didn't feel nauseous. Do you remember that you spent several months feeling nauseous? You got the heaves passing by the food joints downtown, those smells got everywhere inside you and got you nauseous. You stopped eating meat, couldn't stand it. Of course, now you swallowed it and didn't even feel the smell. You were just cold.

You phone rang.

You know what, sir, you have to come pick up your baby, they told you.

But why?

Because his condition is serious, and he has to go to a bigger clinic.

But how do I do that?

That's your problem. But the baby cannot die here.

But help me find a clinic!, you asked, do something.

Then you called Ale, a midwife friend. You explained to her, you told her. You started crying. Yes, you cried very easily at that time. You waited in the parked lot. It's so weird that the Sun doesn't feel warm! You thought about Parral, about how to tell everyone that the baby was dying.

But in Parral all the neighborhood friends were gone or dead. Some of them, you don't even remember their faces. The only thing you know is that they're dead.

At some point in the 80s

I came to Parral because I was told
That my father lived here

Somebody screamed: «A girl is being murdered». And we all ran to the canal that was close to the train tracks. There was somewhat of a quagmire in that area, where two rail roads merged: one going to Cauquenes but fell in disuse; the other going south. Between them there was an improvised football field and, by the side, a dirty canal and lots of mud. Beyond the tracks, on Alessandri street, there was a railway workers' house and several whorehouses. Behind those there was the animal fair.

The railroad was some sort of passageway, a shared border among Parral's biggest neighborhoods. Arrau Méndez, where I lived, 21 de Noviembre, Viña del Mar. The three of them were known as the slums, where you had to enter walking backwards to make people think you were on your way out, where «the brave went to die».

The railroad was our frontier. And I remember crossing that frontier very few times. Every neighborhood was an independent republic in itself. All those were distant and inhospitable places for many people, but for us it was the whole world. A group of ten or twelve kids that spent most of the mornings in the 14 School and the afternoons chatting in a corner, playing football on the street, fighting, listening to music, and killing time somehow. Pancho, Iván, Tototo, Luis Rivera, Robert, Jano, Guille, Juan Pistola, Felipe and others in the corner.

My street, Francisco Belmar, was one of the lone children, all of them, a little gang of our own. Somehow

we educated ourselves. We learned how to read, to cook, to wash our own clothes, to tidy our houses up, to go to parents' meetings. Our parents were laborers, laundresses, and peasants, all the so-called menial jobs. Around seven o'clock, the parents arrived: you saw them crossing the train tracks and, at that moment, we scattered each to his own house, as if we had seen the devil.

Normally, by the time my mom arrived, we had already cleaned the house, swept the backyard, washed the clothes. We had a light dinner, tea with one spoonful of sugar, bread with tomato, or some homemade marmalade. Then we asked for permission to go outside since we had spent «all day home». We met the other kids in the corner and spent what was left of the day.

All things considered, our lives were simple, although with no future prospects. A lot of kids in some part of the world talked about infinity; we talked about what job was the most profitable: freighter at the market, supermarket delivery man, peasant or cattle thief. When we didn't have enough to eat, we asked to buy with credit at the grocery store across the street, which belonged to an uncle who had lands in the countryside. We bought sugar by the cup and oil in reused Coca-Cola bottles. Everything was purchased in pieces; no one went to the supermarket for a monthly grocery shopping. I mean, there was people who did that, but not us, the kids from the Francisco Belmar Street.

One of those days, we were in the street when someone, I don't remember who, screamed that a woman was being murdered in the mud football field located in the border. We ran there. The place was filled with people, snoopers, everyone looking from the railroad. In the middle of the quagmire, there was a man threatening a woman with a knife; she hit him and he hit her back. She was fully bloodied, he had a couple of bruises in his face.

Motherfucking whore, the man screamed, you fucking slut.

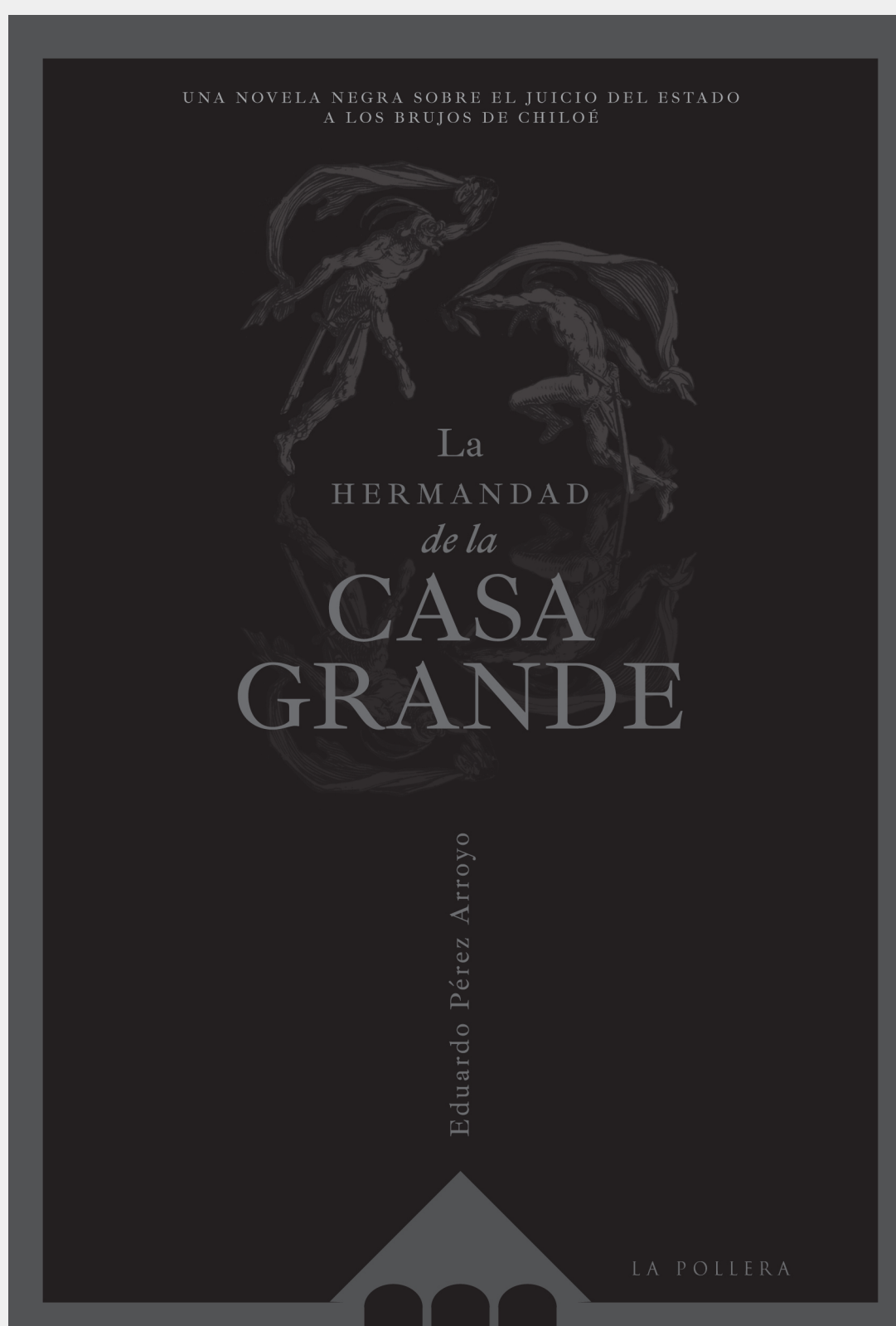
Come on, kill me, motherfucker, replied the woman, you can't even do that.

She hit him in the face. A couple of times, very hard, resounding punches. Some people laughed, others gossiped, we just watched. The man grabbed her and, with the knife held high, cut her face. She screamed and fell into the mud. «He killed her», someone said. And at that moment, the people who up to then just watched, jumped on the man, who ran away. He tried to cross the border through the canal to escape. Five or six men followed him. From the other side of the border, some people that was also snooping around, most of them workers of the rice paddies, finally stopped him. They beat him to a pulp, punches, kicks, one, two, three times, until they were exhausted. He looked like a punctured inflatable man. They threw him into the canal and left him for dead there.

Some ladies picked the woman up and took her away. Little by little, the place was emptied. Jano was one of the first to go, he looked sad. The rest of us stayed in the usual corner. No one, as far as I remember, talked about it again. Around nine o'clock everyone was back home. Very few houses had a TV so, in general, we went to sleep.

I liked to listen to a radio play that was broadcast on Portales Radio. It consisted of horror stories, many of which were then based on Doctor Mortis or Barnabas Collins. Since at that time my mom cooked the next day's lunch, we had dinner at the same time. Sometimes we didn't have gas, so dinner was made on the brazier. It took a long time, we had dinner around eleven and went to sleep past midnight. I don't remember ever falling asleep before twelve, except when we didn't have food so we went to bed early so the day could end sooner. For a long time, I believed that this only happened to us, but it actually happened in almost every house on the Francisco Belmar street.

A few days afterward, we were in our corner again, when we saw Jano's mom leaving the house. She said to him, in front of us: «Jano, my son, don't look for me» and she left. Jano started crying and followed her for a couple of blocks. She said: «Go home, go, it's for the best.» She crossed the railroad and Jano came back to where we were standing. He wouldn't stop crying. Then he told us that his dad used to beat up his mom and that she told him that she had to leave or he would kill her. And so she did. Jano had two brothers, one who was ten years old, like me, and the younger who was six. Jano was eight years old then. Some time later their dad also went away and the three of them were left alone. That day, before going to play football, we asked Jano if he'd join us, but he said: «I can't, guys, I am the father of this family now».



LA HERMANDAD
DE LA CASA GRANDE
(THE BROTHERHOOD
OF THE BIG HOUSE)

Author. Eduardo Pérez Arroyo

Genre. Fiction

550 pages

Year 2021

ISBN 978-956-6087-43-4

A ROUND OF THUNDEROUS APPLAUSE CROWNED the speech of The World's Biggest Liar.

- And that is what I saw, ladies and gentlemen – said with affectation, bowing towards the audience -. I saw it all, I lived it all. It's a lot. Generations have suffered the stigma of belonging to that witch-ridden land. They cannot leave that place. They cannot prosper there. They'll never be able to settle far away from there. They are the damned of the land, those who will never find happiness in this world, no matter what they do.

The audience, in awe, bursted into applause.

- The witches are responsible – concluded The World's Biggest Liar.

- Your stories highly impressed me – said to him Tomás Ferreyra later, during dinner -. Many years ago I was a journalist. I had the opportunity to visit some almost secret places, forgotten by governments and excluded from progress. I talked to many people and searched for explanations for various things. To be honest, I didn't achieve much. But – he comes closer so he can be heard – I realized that when there's incessant calamities, when there's poverty and illiteracy, people ditch religion for their own native beliefs. That explains the size of their pantheon and the strange syncretisms that sometimes result from that. And that uncontrolled, unfiltered belief encourages superstition.

Those near them approved.

The presentation was a resounding success. Every important person from Iquique was in attendance. And The World's Biggest Liar was up to the task. One by one he thanked the families that funded his presentation and secured the Club Iquique for it, and prepared a short enough exposition so as to not bore the audience, but long enough to avoid being criticized for the price of admission. His adventures were so incredible that nobody was scared away.

- That happens to the weaker minds – the bishop weighed in -. They are incapable, in general, of distinguishing between primitive beliefs and more elaborate fundamentals.

The guests remained silent.

After the presentation, many people mentioned that it has been years since such a novelty was seen in Iquique, or even in the entire Perú. The attendees bought the hand-drawn illustrated books, sent their congratulations to the speaker, got on their carriages and headed to the house of Tomás Ferreyra, the director of the República Incaica – uno of the most influential newspapers that served as the voice of the high class and the clergy -, who had offered his mansion for the after-show meeting. Even Acnin de Rouchel himself, known as The World's Biggest Liar, accepted the invitation. The other guests anxiously awaited him. Rodolfo Griffin used typical diplomatic tricks to be included in the guest list.

-What changes is the form, the content stays the same – a lawyer sitting at the same table says to the priest -. They have particular gods because they have particular questions. Catholics look for more grandiloquent answers because the Church, with its world domination schemes and global political influence, creates more grandiloquent questions. In the end, both are the same.

Some guests look at each other sideways and smile. Most stay serious. The bishop plays deaf and seems to be focused on a shrimp soup.

The guests were surprised when he arrived. They were expecting someone eccentric – his artistic name, The World's Biggest Liar, fueled that idea – with a messy mop of hair coexisting with an incipient baldness and paranoid eyes, mocking ointments made with dog piss and women who changed the ocean tide with a glance. Instead, from the rented carriage emerged a well-dressed gentleman, with perfect hair, shaved, discreet and transmitting an elegant security with his gestures.

The hall is packed. Rodolfo Griffin is seated on one of the tables closest to the guest of honor. Acnin de Rouchel is at the side of the host, his wife, the bishop and others. After arriving he gave thanks for the

deference towards him, scribbled his signature in books for those who asked, repeated the story of his arrival in Chiloé and claimed to have never met more superstitious people. Some guests objected to the magical thought that many get mixed up with true religion, asked the bishop for his opinion and declared his admiration for Rouchel to resist so many months in that place.

-The fertile imagination of those people is the most amazing thing to me – says Ferreyra to deter the chance of an argument between the bishop and the godless lawyer -. I'm not qualified to assert the pertinence of those beliefs, but I do realize when magical thought goes beyond the ordinary. The facts that you narrated – he said while addressing Acnin de Rouchel – although fictional, are high quality and interesting stories.

-I actually agree with that – says the lawyer.

Griffin pretends to follow a tray of French sandwiches to get closer and get a better listen.

-Going even further – adds Ferreyra – we could say it doesn't really matter if these stories are real or fictional. Chiloé's inhabitants live in those beliefs. For them, that imaginary world is the real world, so for all purposes those facts are real.

-You're right, mister Ferreyra – says Acnin de Rouchel -. Except for one thing: none of what I said in my presentation nor what is written in this book is fictitious. Everything is strictly real.

Everybody reacted skeptically. A few ladies raised their eyes in horror, while some of the men smiled. The bishop slurps his soup while sinking his nose in it, trying not to listen to that lunatic.

-So if those stories are real – asks Hipólito Brown, owner of the La Escondida mine -, what's the point of presenting them through the guise of a character named The World's Biggest Liar?

-You're right, the ethos is important – Acnin de Rouchel concedes -. But it's just a character. Whomever the narrator is, it doesn't change the content.

His words come naturally, without pretentiousness. The presentation is over so there's no reason to

reject the questions of those who have kindly invited him. He starts an explanation to reciprocate the courtesy.

-I'll be honest, sir – says to the owner of the La Escondida mine -. My true intention is for everyone to know what happens in that land. Many people suffer the daily abuse of those dominating them. If you really want to know, my goal is for the governments to deal with and stop some of the atrocities I witnessed. But I'm not that naïve, and I know that if I spoke about it seriously I'd be taken for a madman. That's why I use a character.

A circle is formed around him. Griffin stays near him, in the first row.

-There's something I don't understand – says someone -. If everything you say is true, why don't you go to the press? Why don't you get in touch with governors, politicians and priests, or even the army?

The rest talk in a murmur.

-You say abuses are being committed without anyone noticing – the same voice goes on -. Why trivialize all that with a presentation such as yours? I'm not criticizing you, sir: I just think that, following your logic, it would be better to try and help those poor souls instead of mocking them.

-Business are business, sir – Acnin de Rouchel answers matter-of-factly -. I'm not rich, I need to earn my sustenance and this is my job. Luckily for me, there's no shortage of rich Latin Americans willing to pay good money to listen to my stories.

The guests laugh, celebrating his quip. A few notice that his expression stays imperturbably serious.

-But you're wring about something – he adds -. I'm not mocking those poor souls, as you called them. If you analyze my presentation, you'll see that at no point did I laugh. I just expose what I saw. It's you, the audience, who laugh at these stories.

Many assay this and realize Acnin de Rouchel is telling the truth.

-The audience makes its own judgments – he adds -. If this makes you laugh, I can't do anything about it.

For the first time, Griffin notices some uneasiness among the crowd. Ferreyra tries to lighten the mood.

- It's just that we are still a little shocked – he cheerfully says -. For us city folk those stories, although fictional, are amazing.

The others agree.

-I understand, sir – says Acnin de Rouchel -. I know it must be weird for you to hear all this. But once again, I say it would be even weirder to know that nothing I said was fiction. Everything was strictly the truth.

As Griffin notices, this time the guests are not concealing their anxiety. Once again Ferreyra speaks, this time to ask what everyone wants to know.

-Are you saying all those things exist in that island? And you saw it all?

-Archipelago, sir. The Greater Island is just part of it.

-There are nervous laughs among the audience. Acnin de Rouchel stays serious.

-No offense, but I don't believe you, mister Rouchel – adds Ferreyra.

-None taken, sir – Acnin de Rouchel answers -. The distrust of things that escape logic and reason is part of human nature. Nevertheless, and at the risk of repeating myself, I must insist. No part of what I said is false.

Griffin sees that, faced with this stubbornness, the people's skepticism starts turning into sheer rejection.

-Are you saying that you saw witches flying from one hill to another wearing coats made with human skin? – somebody asks slowly, fully aware of the questions' ridiculousness -. Are you saying that you saw them rubbing themselves with human oil and using crystal balls? Did you see caves that are opened with magic words, and women who turn into dogs, birds or fish? Did you see some of those men fight against man-eating sea-hides, escape from women who turn those who look at them insane, and hunt snakes born from the egg of a roster?

-Exactly – said Acnin de Rouchel.

-Are you willing to defend your claims against a group of scientist and researchers, should they formally analyze what you are saying? – another voice asks.

-Exactly – said Acnin de Rouchel.

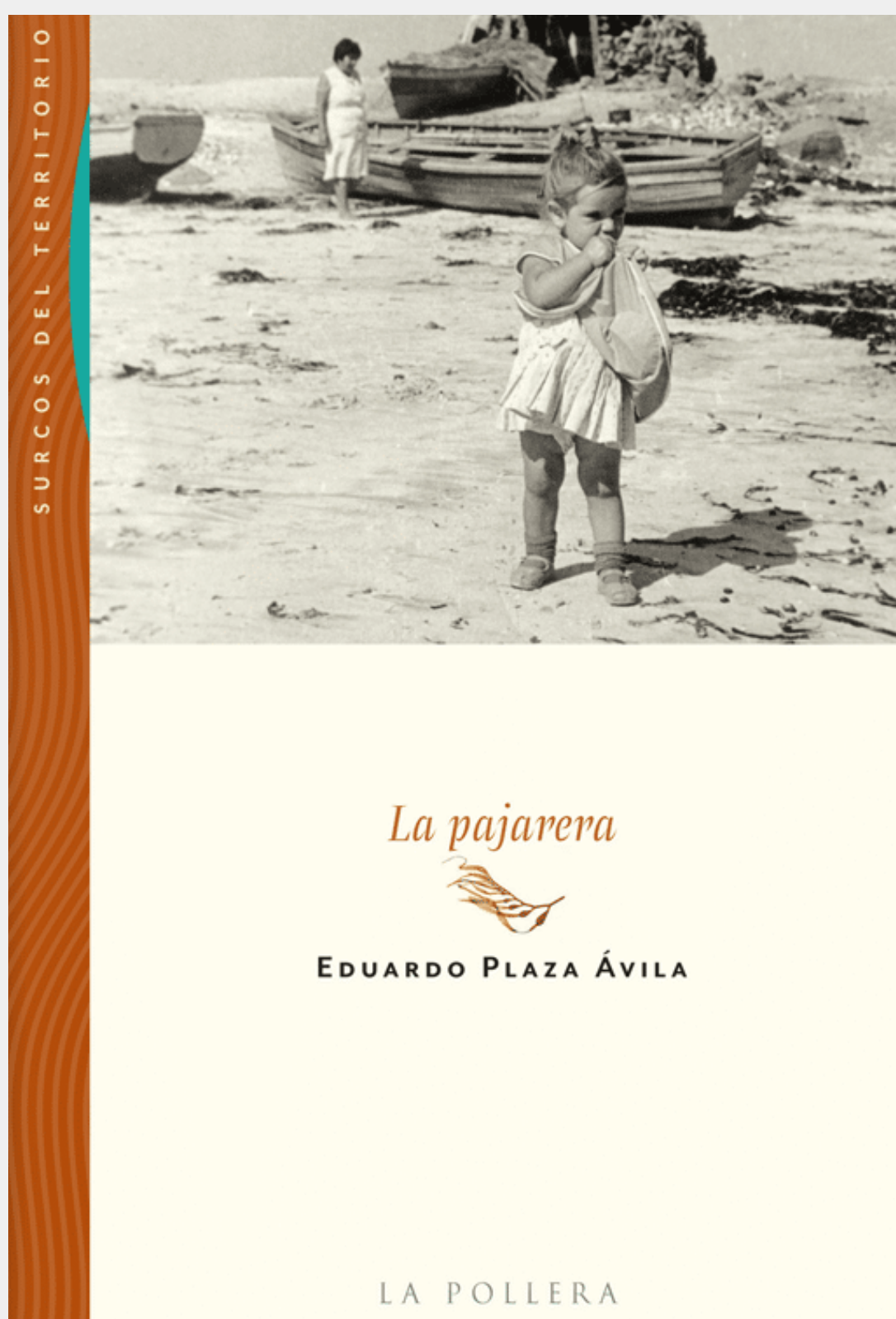
-Why haven't you contacted the authorities? – a woman covered in jewels insists.

Acnin de Rouchel grabs a grape, cuts it in half and contemplates it lovingly. Now he's the World's Biggest Liar again.

-I already did – he answers theatrically -. I'm the one who denounced them. I'm the man that was tortured and almost drove to insanity some years ago.

The guests let out a cry.

-I'm the one who escaped from that archipelago – he continued -, I'm the one who begged the authorities to investigate what was happening there. I'm the one who killed other men with my bare hands. I'm the one who ate human flesh, skinned corpses and unearthed dead babies to stay alive. Excuse my language – he adds with a reverence -: I'm the one who was forced to eat his own cock and testicles.



LA PAJARERA
(THE BIRDCAGE)

Author. Eduardo Plaza

Genre. Chronicle

105 pages

Year 2021

ISBN 978-956-6087-31-1

Trenes, una introducción (Trains, an introduction)

Let's talk about Coquimbo then.

I left Coquimbo some months ago. I began my trip at 5 p.m. I filled the tank and headed for Santiago. I put on a local radio to find out what route to follow. Roberto Dueñas, a former Chilean b-list celebrity turned into regional pundit, was insulting a judge and threatening a prosecutor because they were not tough enough. It was November 13th. A journalist said there were barricades in Coquimbo's south exit. Rather than stay on Route 5, which was blocked, I went through the road to la Cantera and took Route 43, that goes parallel with the former from Coquimbo to Ovalle, inland in the region. From La Cantera you could see the Millenium Cross on the El Vigía hill, one of the poorest areas of the city. Some people tried to set it on fire three weeks prior. They also robbed and burned down supermarkets, a medical center and part of the hospital. Not much else, apart from that. How can you burn that ninety-meter-high concrete behemoth, I wondered? I don't think their intention was to tear it down, just to see it burn like a lighthouse heralding war. Around Tongoy I took a road that goes from one highway to the other. I left the barricade behind and kept going down the Panamericana. It was empty. Later I would know why: there were more picket lines in Los Vilos and near Santiago. A couple of hours later I stopped at a gas station and looked at social media to get some news: if Piñera had made a statement, if he was planning to decree another state of exception, if the army was on stand-by, if a coup was coming. The FM signal was lost several kilometers ago. From then on, I decided to keep the toll booth tickets in case I needed to prove I was traveling. I was asked to dance in a

crossroads in Los Vilos, and I did. And the night found me in an endless traffic jam two hundred kilometers from the capital. I spent four hours there, I don't know, maybe five. A news channel was streaming online, and I sat there, with the windows rolled down, watching what was happening in Santiago in my cellphone screen. From time to time I left the car to smoke or to pee, staring at the brilliant caravan that became smaller and smaller until it looked like a firefly parade. We were a hundred guys smoking and sharing the highway's shoulder, and nobody cared since nothing was moving. The machines were resting, and we could hear the murmur of cigarettes being sucked and feet being dragged. A vast, dark and tense silence opened from the highway. A few houses with the lights off could be seen. At one side you could discern the mountains. At the other you could discern the sea. Vilos, and I did. And the night found me in an endless traffic jam two hundred kilometers from the capital. I spent four hours there, I don't know, maybe five. A news channel was streaming online, and I sat there, with the windows rolled down, watching what was happening in Santiago in my cellphone screen. From time to time I left the car to smoke or to pee, staring at the brilliant caravan that became smaller and smaller until it looked like a firefly parade. We were a hundred guys smoking and sharing the highway's shoulder, and nobody cared since nothing was moving. The machines were resting, and we could hear the murmur of cigarettes being sucked and feet being dragged. A vast, dark and tense silence opened from the highway. A few houses with the lights off could be seen. At one side you could discern the mountains. At the other you could discern the sea.

I considered going back. Return to the port. Call my mother. Ask if I could sleep at her house. I hadn't seen her in seven weeks, and we lived a couple of blocks apart.

I don't want to begin this book with the nostalgia trap. I don't want to begin with: «When we were kids, we

enjoyed going through Coquimbo following the train tracks». I don't want to say: «We put old coins on the rails and wait for the train to smash them». I don't want to say: «We had memorized the train schedule». Nor: «My grandmother gave me a bagful of old coins. I don't know why she did it. My grandmother despised me. And I smashed them in the rails». But if I don't explain the context, I can't write about Coquimbo. It's not a passenger train: as with most of the northern railways, it was designed and built as part of the mining operations. To extract, transport and ship. To plunder. At some point there was a passenger train, but it doesn't matter. That's not what I want to write about. The railroad track began at El Romeral, an iron mine twenty kilometers north of La Serena, and ended in Guayacán, the port in the north end of the La Herradura beach, in Coquimbo, thirty-five kilometers to the south. Before that, in the 19th century, there were already other connections covering the same route and ending in the Elqui Valley. And before those there were others. That is: a train on top of a train on top of a train. The reproduction. When we were kids, we enjoyed going through Coquimbo following the train tracks. And walking on them you could get a clear picture of the city: we started at Guayacán, where the CAP port was still located, sending iron shipments who knows where, I don't know, it wasn't useful information: when we were kids you made things up instead of figure them up. We left the beach and went through the Covico and the Fenaco, two neighborhoods born under the wing of the railway company itself, when workers and managers still had that kind of benefits. Walking east we reached El Olivar and Las Torres, then the city limits. Beyond that there was only dirt.

I write about my city. Before that, I'll briefly write about my mother.

In that land – that land, not this land: that land – the Housing and Urban Planning Service, SERVIU, built the neighborhood where Nora obtained her house through a basic subsidy. One time, when I was around

sixteen years old, I heard somebody in school call them «birdhouses» derisively. I guess that's what they called them. Me and my family lived most of the time in several places around El Llano in Coquimbo, a traditionally middle-class area fallen on hard times, where poor families and huge houses were just two blocks apart. I say «houses» because I never knew who lived in them. Who knows if it was families. Who knows if they got along. We walked to school, had a couple of friends and sometimes we went to church. Along these chronicles, sometimes I'll say: «Nora did this» or «Nora did that». In my daily life, I don't treat her like that. I've never called her by her name. I call her mother o mom. I don't want to reduce her to a role. I think that, if I have the courage to write her name, some day I'll have the courage to say it.

In the early nineties our compass was blown to shit. My father lost his job. And Nora's job was to look after the six of us, me and my five sisters. Soon we were homeless and had to go live as freeloaders, in a room in my paternal grandparents' house, also located in El Llano. They were already dead and the house was occupied by all the brothers and sisters, my uncles and aunts, from time to time, when the need arose. Them and their families. At one time there were twenty people living there. There were three concrete rooms and anything you could build with lightweight material. At least we still lived in the same neighborhood. It may sound crazy, but when you're a kid you get used to live in a crowded house, despite the pain and embarrassment. I still walked six blocks to get to school. My sisters also walked six blocks, all in different directions. Then my father left and Nora had to get a job. She carried us for ten years. She cleaned apartments, knitted wool gloves, was ripped off through pyramid schemes. She opened a house savings account. I think that's what they're called. Should I write it in capital letters? House Savings Account? And they took us where there was no city anymore but barren land. The SERVIU threw us out. No bus reached there. The sidewalks were not asphalted. It wasn't part of anything. How to explain that

Coquimbo left us before I decided to leave Coquimbo?

The State Railway Company's machine workshop was close to the birdhouse. That's where the trains went to die. But even that graveyard was closer to the city than our neighborhood. Then the train tracks headed back north through Covico, San Juan and finally the promenade. From there they went along the beach to La Serena and disappeared towards the mine.

Nora found a job in a supermarket in La Serena. The first hypermarket. That was in 99. She had slave shifts: sometimes she'd have a full work day and then she was asked to stay doing inventory. You could say no, but it was very frowned upon. And she could not afford that. Those days she left the house-birdhouse at seven thirty in the morning and returned at two or three in the morning. The sound of the door woke me up. And the sound of the stairs. And the sound of the bed. The entire house creaked. Creaks. We were still crowded: the seven of us in two rooms of two by three meters. The difference was that the government had given us a housing solution made of plasterboard. It took years for the bus to reach our neighborhood; my mom had to walk several blocks to reach a bus stop in front of the machine workshop. She went through almost the same route than the railway to reach the highway, that ran in parallel to the rails, that ran in parallel to the coast. She came and went, from one point to the other, like the trains. Loading and unloading in an endless routine. The bus on top of the bus on top of the bus. I shouldn't have used the past tense: my mom comes and goes, twenty-one years after. And so does the train.

I think about the city that Nora had to learn to look at from its fringes. The fringes of the fringes, because Coquimbo itself was at the outskirts of something else. A cove seen with indifference that until the late nineties was covered, once or twice a week, by the strong stench of rotten fish, due to the works in the



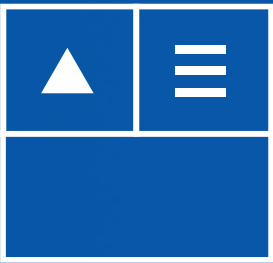
San Juan fishery, that was later renamed Coloso and even later Orizon, probably until there's another fusion between companies that alters the peace in the Angelini building, in El Golf. A bay populated by changos in the 16th century. An anchorage for pirates in the 18th century. A foundry and a path to extractivism in the 19th century.

People call us changos derisively. People from La Serena, especially. Chango from B-division, they added when Coquimbo Unido was relegated in the national football tournament. Then they were relegated, couldn't get promoted to the first division in more than a decade and were a goal short of ending in that bottom of the barrel deceptively called Professional Second Division. After that, they never said it again. Some time after taking us out of the city to live in the birdhouse, the SERVIU expanded the city limits once again, with new housing solutions made of bricks plasterboard, always to the east. That sandlot beyond the machine workshop, beyond dry gullies and unauthorized garbage dumps, behind my mother's birdhouse, was called Punta Mira.

What I didn't remember was that, in that new fringe, so far away from the El Llano where we grew up, near the birdhouse, the train tracks were also laid as proof of its origin. Nora told me last night, when we spoke on the phone. For years I thought that the rails didn't reach that far, that they went back to the sea much sooner, but I was wrong: there's an escape route, a detour that splits the track in two. I imagined the ballast path, meandering across the semi-desert, towards a small lost point who knows where, in the hills separating the valleys of the Norte Chico. I asked her if she knew the route that those tracks followed. Besides the mystery of Punta Mira, I didn't remember exactly where the rails crossed the highway coming from the beach and reappeared by the sea. She said she wasn't sure. My mother is not from Coquimbo but from La Serena. Her only real link to Coquimbo, besides her children, was my father.

Her brothers live in La Serena, as did my grandparents when they were alive, as did all their extended family. How much do you move around the city?, I asked. Not much anymore, she said. I'd rather stay at home. It was different back then. I walked to Guayacán because the JUNJI kindergarten one of my sisters attended was there. I walked to the downtown area because I sold my knitted gloves there. Her personal city extended to the borders of our necessities. As years went by, she only left the birdhouse to go to the supermarket.





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