

# An Island of Stories

An Anthology to Travel through Gran Canaria 



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Translated by Jennifer Cruise

AN ISLAND of stories is an island that is experienced, experienced by artists who live there and who depict it, who reside in the scars and amass in the clouds, who flirt with the seas and climb the ravines and slopes. It has always been understood that an island which tells its stories is alive, a potential utopia of thousands of potential islands.

This island of stories, which is ours and belongs to each of us, has been the object of our artists' painting, photography, dance, song, and celebration - from the southern uplands to those of the north, from Guayadeque to Guayedra, from Bañaderos to Mogán, from Escaleritas to Risco de San Nicolás.

This project was concocted in the silence of lockdown, woven patiently in the following months and, finally, sewn into the folds of this book through the eyes, body and voice of renowned artists from our island. They all have pushed the limits and boundaries of their own knowledge - of photography, music, illustration, dance, and writing - and have done so within this map of stories expressed through dance, of colours bringing images to life, and of music quietly keeping pace with the words.

Jules Verne went around the world in eighty days. Another writer, Julio Cortázar, proposed going around the day in eighty worlds. Our adventure is not just a trip around Gran Canaria in ten stories, with illustrations and photographs. That itself is a lot, but this adventure is more. It is a perfect example of my personal conviction, which I have attempted to convey at all times: culture forms the landscape and is the landscape; culture hides, gently omnipresent, in the least known corners of our island, in every one of its neighbourhoods and its streets; our culture does not only leave a footprint, it is also the foot walking along our paths.

I have always been certain that our island has much to tell and that all our artists have known to see and interpret it.

Life is always better in the company of a beautiful book that is able to tell us what our hearts need to hear and which, on this island of stories, invites us to imagine infinite islands with all our hope for a better world.

Guacimara Medina Pérez





# An Island of Stories

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Translated by Maria White

GRAN CANARIA is more than a tourist destination, a swimming pool, a white sandy beach. It is an island that expands inwards into its cliffs and ravines, that switches between fertile volcanic coasts and calm shady spots, hidden caves, cities that turn toward the light. And, alongside the physical territory is the territory of memory and metaphor, the products of a human way of seeing that transforms the geography into a landscape for observing what is beyond its outward appearance.

Therefore, this book is also the invitation to a journey, to travel around both territories and in good company.

Of course, you have travel comparison sites, social networks, geolocated maps, and wikipedias. You have a mobile phone and by moving a finger you can check the weather, calculate walking itineraries, know where you are at any moment, when the restaurant that you want to go to is open, or how many steps you have taken since this morning. But the itinerary that I am proposing to you in this book is not possible in any computer app. It is a personal and, at times, a shared journey. It has been drawn up by the voices of ten authors and envisioned by an illustrator and a photographer who know the island well. All of them; and they have decided to tell you about it from aspects of reality that defy computerised apps, as they are unable to suffer, enjoy, love and be loved, to engage in a feeling, in solid words or in an image to present it to the world.

These ten stories, ten photographs, ten illustrations are the spiritual map (or one of the possible spiritual maps) of this island.

You, who had already chosen it as your destination, have in this book a possibility to be something more than someone who passes through here to complete with your gaze the mosaic that it offers you. Its authors belong to different generations and aesthetic orientations, but all of them are exceptional guides to the places in which they set their stories and above all they are aware that, as Agustín Espinosa wrote, a land without a poetic ambience suffers the threat of fading away to nothing.

Take this book with you when you travel the innumerable paths of the labyrinth that is Gran Canaria. Let it take you to its most famous locations and to the landmarks of its history, but also to the experiences that its fine memory whispers of, to the parts that never appear in any tourist guide.

Alexis Ravelo



# Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

## From the harbour to Las Canteras









# A picnic at Los Nidillos

Carlos Álvarez

## Carlos Álvarez

Was born in Navaleno (Soria) in 1957 and grew up in León. He has been living in Gran Canaria since 1984. He is a journalist and editor and has also achieved recognition as a screenwriter for non-fiction productions as well as for feature films such as *Mararía* and *Ciudadano Negrín*, which he also co-directed.

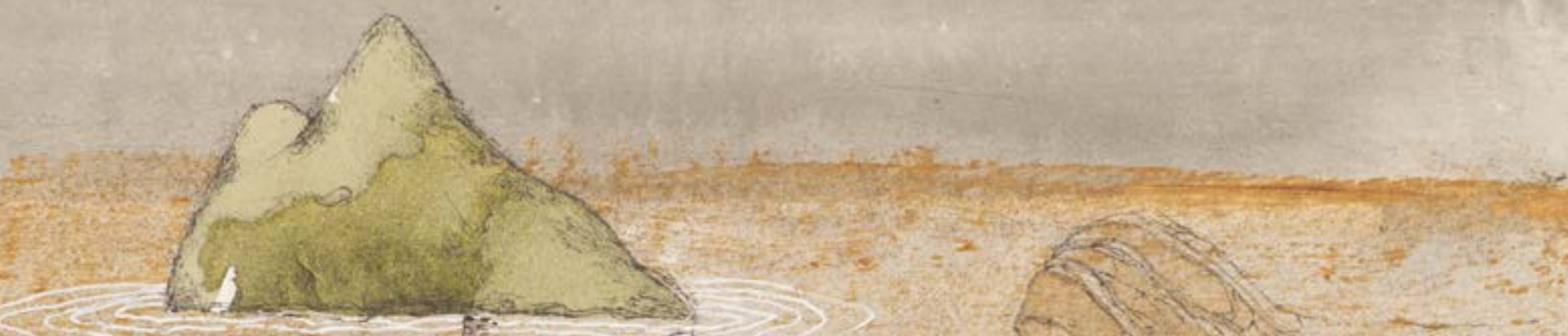
Álvarez's literary career has taken him from historical fiction to crime thrillers. He is famous for two cult historical titles, *La pluma del arcángel*, which was awarded the Benito Pérez Armas Prize in 1998, and *La Señora, Beatriz de Bobadilla, Señora de Gomera y Fierro*, and is a pioneer of the thriller genre on the Canary islands, being best known for his collection of short stories, *Negra hora menos*, winner of the Santa Cruz de Tenerife Prize for fiction. His latest thriller is entitled *Si le digo le engaño*.

The action of *A picnic at Los Nidillos* takes place in the Puerto-Canteras area. Los Nidillos is the name traditionally given to the isthmus that extends to La Isleta from the mouth of the Guanarteme valley and the Arenales district. This area went through a huge transformation when the port area was redeveloped in the twentieth century and is somewhat in the shade of the two popular beaches (Las Canteras and Alcaravaneras) and other lively working class and seafaring neighbourhoods on its borders. Álvarez's story takes us to some of the most emblematic locations around Los Nidillos in this strange tale about falling into and out of love in an era of prejudice and violence.

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Translated by Hebe Powell





**W**hen she received the letter from her fiancé Carmita felt like her life had ended. Some weeks later, on the 12<sup>th</sup> September 1938, the Harbour of Puerto de la Luz shone with light, honouring the meaning of its name. The early morning sun illuminated every shade of green in the Atlantic and highlighted the ochre outline of the island's naked peaks. Not a single cloud tainted the intense blue sky. Carmita, her full name, María del Carmen Pulido Almeida, was waiting anxiously for her fiancé at the port. She was sixteen years old, but everyone thought she was more like nineteen or twenty; she was very mature for her age, so people said. She had the effortless grace of the first flower of youth and a disturbing, exotic beauty with her mane of black curls, dark, slightly oriental complexion, voluptuous lips, and blue eyes. She knew he had been wounded but had no idea how serious it was, and this filled her with worry. She marked the time by pacing from one side to the other of the Muelle Grande quay – now named after the Generalísimo, like everything else – hiding her expectation among the horse cabs that awaited the imminent arrival of passengers.

Beside her, a diminished band – only cornets and drums – passed by in formation followed by some fifty youths, uniformed in blue shirts, marching in step. Behind them stood a hoard of people who'd come to greet the passengers, mostly soldiers on leave or who'd been discharged and the occasional intrepid traveller, perhaps compelled by money troubles. In among the crowd, she saw her fiancé's parents. Jesús Fuentes Febles, known

as Sito when he left, was coming home to his native island transformed into the worthy Don Jesús de Fuentes y Febles, a Mutilated Warrior for the Fatherland, entitled to be addressed as *Sir*, like a ranking officer. That was what it had said in yesterday's newspaper, giving notice of his homecoming. Several Falangist bigwigs, their blue shirts freshly ironed, with lustrous black belts and pistols at their waists, flanked the honoured parents. They were so serious; you might have thought they were being held prisoner.

Carmita trembled uncontrollably as the *Virgilio*, the Italian transatlantic liner that was returning her betrothed, appeared around the headland of Las Isletas. Her legs wouldn't obey her, and she struggled to breathe; she knew that if she didn't sit down immediately, she would fall. The sun on her face and the frenetic dance of light on the water in the bay dazzled her eyes and she had to use all her strength to take the few steps so as to rest against one of the horse cabs. She woke lying across the seat of one of the cabs, shaded by the hood she heard the harsh sound of the band with its cornets and drums and the chant of *for God, for the nation and the king* intoned by the blue-shirted youths. She opened her eyes and tried to get up.

"There's no hurry my girl, the ship's still docking." The kindly cab driver who'd taken her under his wing offered her a little tin cup. "Get this down you, my girl, just you see how it picks you up."

Carmita smiled at him, infinitely grateful, and having checked that nobody could see her, she took a sip of rum. A sudden blush illuminated her cheeks. She got down from the cab certain that no-one had noticed her dizzy turn and, standing slightly aloof she watched for the passengers to disembark whilst the band played on – one, two, one, two – the same predictable repertoire, now, *face to the sun with a new shirt*.

First to disembark was a group of Italian youths, also in uniform, like their islander companions, but their shirts were black. Then, blue shirts facing black, their arms aloft in a salute, the youths made a corridor of honour. Down this corridor, laid on a stretcher – also with his arm held high – came don Jesús de Fuentes y Febles, Mutilated Warrior for the Fatherland, entitled to be addressed as *Sir*, who had once been known as Sito, or Fefa's Sito. A cab adorned with the old Spanish flag was waiting for him and his guard of honour helped settle him comfortably next to his parents. The Falangist bigwigs took another cab – some were from the traditional arm of the organisation and others were from the JONS. Carmita, like most people, had no idea what JONS stood

for, only that they were in charge, and absolutely everyone knew that. Behind the two cabs, marching slowly, the band followed, its cornets and drums blaring; then came the youths, islanders, and the Italians, all in perfect formation, keeping pace and singing without a pause. They would accompany the entourage to the gates of the San José hospital overlooking Las Canteras beach.

Carmita hung back. She was calmer now; her nerves had gone, and she felt something like the relief that comes on waking out of a dreadful nightmare. Her Sito looked well, much thinner though. He had arms and under the sheet covering him she'd seen he also had two legs, although they might have been in plaster. She walked to the hospital ignoring the whistles, trying not to see the leers, or hear the obscenities, ashamed they were directed at her. She guessed her fiancé's parents would spend some time with their son and, knowing there was no hurry, she went towards La Puntilla. She would take the beach route to the hospital.

She was heading towards her old neighbourhood; her new home was at the other end of Las Canteras, in Guanarteme, beyond Cícer where the electricity plant was and where her father had been given work, finally, thanks to the influence of a cousin, a priest in Teror. She was curious to find out what was on at the Millares Brothers' Theatre.

One of the films she remembered seeing there was the *Scarlet Pimpernel*; it was the last film they'd seen together. They'd both loved it; it had made them laugh because the villain looked like Sito. It had been a clandestine outing; nobody knew they were courting. They'd met inside the auditorium, and he'd sat beside her only as the lights went down and the film began. After the film they'd snuck out to El Confital. Carmita was an only child, and her mother was dead. In those days she'd still been living in La Isleta, La Puntilla, near to the Millares Brothers' Theatre, and right behind that stinking Escobio fish factory from where they'd just fired her father. He'd been lucky just to lose his job, his other union colleagues had been taken prisoner and shipped off to Vigo on the *Dómine*, and there'd been no word of them since.

Sito also lived in La Isleta, but at the other end of La Carretera. His home was on Andamana street, near the Port, above the barter store cum tavern cum wine cellar run by his parents that supplied neighbours, merchants and even direct to some ships. Sito was the only one of his parents' children still living at home, his two older

brothers had gone to Venezuela several years ago and his sister, the youngest of the family, had married a man in Gáldar who owned an oil and vinegar shop. He was also a wine dealer, that's how they'd met. But Sito didn't work at the store, he was apprenticed to a pharmacist in Las Palmas, near to the Piedra Bridge and after the summer he'd be going to Tenerife, to La Laguna. His boss had found him a job in a pharmacy owned by a cousin there; he needed the work so he could study medicine. He'd already enrolled for the new term at the university.

The day after their trip to the cinema his call-up papers arrived. The following evening, they met at the cinema again even though they'd already seen the film and drew attention to themselves by their constant whispering. They left before the film had ended and went to the beach, then, although Carmita tried to stop him, Sito took her by the hand and accompanied her to the door of her home. The little house was one of a row reserved for fish factory workers: all one story, all the same, except for some tiny distinguishing detail to make it different from its neighbours. There, holding Carmita's hand in his, Jesús Fuentes Febles introduced himself:

"You can call me Sito."

And he asked Carmita's father, Carmelo, for permission to get engaged to his daughter. He explained how he was about to be sent to the front but that he already had a job lined up in La Laguna and was going to study medicine there as soon as it was all over and, when Carmita was sixteen, they would marry.

Carmelo was taken aback, he looked the young man up and down, then down and up. The boy seemed trustworthy, so Carmelo gave his consent and reaching out to shake him by the hand, he said: "Treat her well... and be good until after the wedding!"

Carmita hugged her father and planted a kiss on each of his cheeks. Before closing the door behind him, Carmelo looked at the couple and the smile hovering on his lips, like a betrayal, wiped away the sadness that hung heavily on his face.

"And you, don't get killed."

Josefa Febles, known as Fefa, had quite a different reaction and certainly didn't give her consent – not that anyone had asked for it.

"You and the daughter of a red? Do you want to get noticed?"

Of course, Carmita got to know about Fefa's opposition, first through gossip and later, Sito had no option but to write to her about it. At the start he sent her as many as three letters a week; later they came less often but were longer. In the last three months though, the only news she'd heard had been a message saying that he'd been wounded, that his life wasn't in danger, and that, although it broke his heart, he couldn't continue their engagement. *It's for your own good. I will love you until I die, your Sito.* That was how his letter had finished and now Carmita kept it, neatly folded, tucked into her brassiere, against her skin, as she waited to go into the hospital to see her fiancé, trying to evade his parents. To pass the time she studied the posters outside the Millares Brothers' Theatre. They were showing *Escape from Yesterday* starring Jean Gabin and Annabella: A film in honour of the Foreign Legion and dedicated to Generalísimo Franco – naturally, she thought to herself – A moving episode in the HEROIC LEGIONARIES' glorious history of self-denial and sacrifice. In addition to the main feature FOX NEWS will be showing, bringing you the latest news from across the world, read the flyer stuck beneath the poster.

When Carmita went into the ward, a male nurse was giving Sito an injection in the arm. As the nurse extracted the syringe carefully, the Mutilated Warrior for the Fatherland, entitled to be addressed as *Sir* saw Carmita right in front of him and was paralysed for a second. Then he covered his face with his hands and burst into tears.

The nurse, who Carmita recognised as one of the men she'd seen disembarking from the *Virgilio*, intervened. He stood between her and the Mutilated Warrior and so on for the Grace of Franco, entitled to be addressed as *Sir*, who had hidden his head underneath the sheets and was crying and whimpering quietly.

"He needs to rest now."

"Sito!" she protested, hardly able to speak because of the lump in her throat.

"Are you a relative?" She nodded her head.

"A cousin," she lied, almost in tears herself.

"Come back later... or better, tomorrow."

"Go, yes, just go! Don't come back."

Carmita heard the plea that came from beneath the sheets. It wasn't an order, it was a plea, that to her, seemed to be asking the opposite: come, come closer, I need you. Meanwhile, the nurse, syringe still in his hand,

indicated the door, and this was an order. She held back her tears and once in the corridor she started to run, not stopping until she reached the shoreline.

But she did come back. Carmita came back that same afternoon, her eyes red from so much crying. The door was open and Sito was sleeping. She felt a hand clamp onto her arm. She was startled by the vehemence of the nurse's anger – in fact, he seemed more like a guard than a nurse.

"What are you doing here? Why did you come back? Didn't you hear him? He was very clear; he doesn't want to see you."

But she came back again, later, after she saw the nurse leave the ward and head towards a bar in Santa Catalina park. Carmita stole up to the bed, feeling her heart thumping hard in her chest. Sito, in contrast, was calm, his breathing deep and slow. She tiptoed around to get a chair and silently placed it next to the head of the bed so she could sit and watch her fiancé's peaceful face. Nothing seemed to disturb his sleep. Hardly aware of what she was doing, Carmita stroked the hand resting on the sheets, then, she took it between hers and leaned over the bed until she almost touched his cheek. For a few moments she stayed there, feeling his warmth, and then she covered every one of his fingers with kisses. She sat with Sito's hand resting in her lap – it could have been for hours or only a few minutes – until curiosity overcame her and she couldn't resist lifting the sheet to look underneath.

Over his bandages the Mutilated Warrior etcetera with the right to be addressed as *Sir*, was strapped into an elaborate harness that fastened round his hips and attached to some kind of metal framework that surrounded his right leg all the way to his foot. Perhaps he's lost a finger, what of it? Carmita thought to herself, smiling. Sito was still in a deep sleep, unconsciously resting one hand in Carmita's lap, when the mother of the wounded soldier appeared at the doorway.

"Doña Josefa..." Carmita choked. Startled she let go her fiancé's hand and jumped to her feet. Fefa, also in shock, stood for a few seconds with her mouth open, unable to find the right words.

"Don't get up..."

Sito carried on sleeping peacefully while, having moved some way from the bed, the two women spoke in hushed voices and cried silently together.





"He doesn't want to see me."

"Do you love him?"

"Very much. But he doesn't want to see me..." Carmita nodded again and again as the tears streamed down her face. Fefa rummaged in her bag. She pulled out a well folded hankie and dried the younger woman's face.

"He'll see you... Come back tomorrow, sweetheart. I'll tell him you came and that he has to talk to you. He'll see you, he'll see you... don't cry anymore, sweetheart."

Carmita left the hospital, and even though she wasn't exactly happy, she was less anxious than she had been earlier. Instead of the adversary she'd expected, she'd found quite the opposite: an ally, and one who would quickly turn out to be very effective.

From that day, Carmita came to see her fiancé every afternoon. The two of them would sit in silence, or sometimes they'd be three, when Carmita's visits coincided with those of Doña Josefa, but always, under the watchful gaze of the wounded soldier's nurse-guard, Antón. Many days went by before Sito began to talk to her – when they were alone – just small things, asking about her father, what he was up to, asking after some neighbour or other. Occasionally, tears in his eyes, but with little real conviction, he'd ask her to forget him, telling her that he was just a burden, that he'd never be able to make her happy. When Fefa was there, they'd talk about the weather, remember the times before the war, and chat about family; the kind of thing people talk about when they don't want to say anything.

The months went by, the war ended and the mutilated warrior etcetera, addressed as *Sir*, came home with his parents. He needed the support of two crutches; his hips hadn't healed well, or that was what the doctor said, adding that he'd soon be able to walk with just the one crutch and perhaps, with a little help from a prosthesis in his shoe, he wouldn't need more than a walking stick. Some months further on he seemed far more Sito and less the mutilated warrior, addressed as *Sir*, even if he did still need his crutch. They started going to the cinema again and to Las Canteras where they would sit on the sand together, in silence, and watch the sunset.

"My father said we have a better view of Teide than those mackerel eating Tenerifers!"

"Screw them!"

They laughed at this old island rivalry, looking out to Tenerife and the majestic mount Teide. The sun setting behind the volcanic peak set the sky alight. Carmita often felt that they were being watched – not just on the beach but even in the cinema – and it was very strange that Antón, the taciturn nurse, often seemed to appear by chance wherever they were.

Every time Carmita tried to talk about their future together, or even just his, about his medical career in La Laguna, Sito went back to being the mutilated warrior, and so on, for the Fatherland.

“My God! For all the saints, please say something! Do something!”

But he said nothing. He was silent and misery engulfed them both.

In the end, it was down to Fefa to explain to Carmita why her son didn’t want to marry her – nor anyone else – she hastened to add, because sweetheart, you’re the one he loves. Doña Josefa told her about how a burst of machine gun fire had wounded Sito in the hip and bellow his belly, that’s why he was lame, but that wasn’t the worst of it... the worst of it was that, also... You see, sweetheart... The word emasculation meant nothing to Carmita, although it sounded obscene, or like a sin.

“Poor thing... That’s not important to me,” she asserted with absolute conviction once she understood what it really meant.

Fefa also explained about the pension he’d get as a wounded soldier, and that the limp and the stick might even make him more elegant, then the other thing, she said, at least it’ll bother you less. That day Carmita also discovered, as she had suspected, that she and Fefa shared a dislike of the nurse. He wasn’t even a nurse, she found out, but a captain in the medical corps and that, since Sito had left hospital, he’d been to visit on numerous occasions with the excuse of asking after Sito’s wellbeing or to give him injections for the pain. Another thing she learned was that Doña Fefa had heard them arguing several times although Fefa hadn’t been able to find out why, and Sito wouldn’t say. The one thing Fefa did know for sure, was that Antón had saved Sito’s life. Sito had told her, and this was everything Fefa needed to know, however unpleasant a character Antón seemed to be. This said, whenever she saw them together, or whenever Antón arrived out of the blue, she could see that something about him made her son uncomfortable.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 1939 don Jesús de Fuentes y Febles, previously known as Sito, or Fefa's Sito, in his sub-lieutenant's uniform, his medal for being a warrior and so on, *Sir*, and with his pistol at his waist, attended an open-air mass. The mass had been organized in San Telmo park by the Falangist bigwigs – both the traditional variety and the JONS, whatever that stood for. However, he declined the invitation to the lunch in the Doramas gardens that had been arranged afterwards. This invitation had been extended by the town council to all the island's mutilated warriors and so on, *Sirs* or not *Sirs*. Instead, Sito had asked Carmita to bring a picnic to the beach at El Confital. It was the same beach they used to escape to after the cinema. It was a hair-brained idea for a mutilated warrior and so on, but not for Sito, who said, and with some truth, that he knew the road – little more than a dirt track really – even better than he knew La Carretera. Anyway, Antón would be coming with them, so he'd be able to help if need be.

Jesús, as Antón liked to call him, was still dressed in his full uniform, medal, pistol, and all, but, in Carmita's opinion, that day he seemed far more like Sito than the mutilated warrior by the grace of Franco, of course, and so on. On the orders of her son, Fefa had added a few things to Carmita's picnic: two bottles of fine El Hierro wine, and two bottles of Aldea rum. Taking the path from La Puntilla to El Confital beach, just passed Los Nidillos, there is a hidden cove, and at the foot of the precipitous cliffs, there is a little beach of black sand, revealed only at low tide. Against Carmita's best judgement, Sito decided this would be a better place for their picnic. She was about to protest, but he silenced her with a look, and she understood that she had to keep quiet about the tides, that only the two of them could know about how they needed to leave before the sea came in, how otherwise they'd be trapped at the mercy of a none too gentle current. Carmita also kept quiet when Sito filled Antón's glass again and again while surreptitiously emptying his own onto the sand. And when they'd emptied three bottles, of which Antón had drunk far more than his fair share, the mutilated warrior and so on, *Sir*, stood and, supporting himself on his crutch, hurled an empty bottle into the breakers, pulled out his pistol and fired. The bottle jumped into the air, shattered into a thousand pieces, then disappeared beneath the water. Antón grabbed his own pistol, threw a second empty bottle, and emptied the clip. The bottle bobbed, untouched, on the waves and he started to laugh and shout, his maniac cackles sounding like blasphemies.

"Terrible aim, yup, terrible aim. I'm such a bad shot!"

Jesús de Fuentes y Febles, warrior and so on, and so on, took Antón's pistol and reloaded it as Antón himself carried on laughing and swigging Aldea rum straight from the bottle. Carmita couldn't see exactly what it was, but Sito had put something in that bottle. Antón laughed and laughed and still laughing he threw himself onto the sand; the three of them lay under the sun, and in less than five minutes Antón was snoring at full throttle. Sito helped Carmita gather up the scarce remnants of their picnic. Carmita looked at Sito, concerned.

"Let sleeping beauty be," he declared leaving no room for dissent and signalled with his eyes that they should go. They left the beach calmly; the tide was coming in slowly, starting to cut off the way out of the cove onto the path. When they reached the top of the cliff with the black sand beach at its foot, Sito settled himself on a rock from where he could watch the dreaming Antón.

"Go home."

"What are you going to do, Sito? If you don't warn him now, that idiot is going to drown."

Then Sito burst into speech. He told her every detail of how he'd lost his manhood. But before that, he told her about how he'd first got to know the captain of the medical corps, the one now sleeping below. He spoke about the war..., the things men do at war..., and how when men are at war..., well, its war, but its only because of that, because it's the war... There are things men do, yes, but only at war... And how, when he'd told him he was going to get married on his first leave, and he didn't think he'd see him again... Meanwhile the tide carried on rising and Antón carried on sleeping even though the water was starting to soak his legs.

"Don't you understand? He was the one who shot me here. He's the one who ruined me. HIM!"

Antón woke, they saw him get to his feet and stumble, looking around, dazed. Then he raised his gaze and saw them. He tried to shout out, but a wave knocked him over and the tide dragged him under. He tried to get his head above the water and flailed his arms trying to grab hold of something, but the next wave threw him against the rocks leaving him inert on the black sand. He lay there for a moment before another wave took his limp form out to sea.

"But why... why did he do it?"

"Jealousy. Out of jealousy. Don't you understand?"



# Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

## The Arenales district











# Saved from the tsunami

Emilio González Déniz

## Emilio González Déniz

Was born in Gran Canaria in 1951. He has turned his hand to many genres from journalism to children's literature, with forays into theatre and essay writing. However, he is most well known as a novelist.

A prolific author he has been awarded several literary prizes, such as, the Pérez Galdós and Ángel Guerra for some of his most outstanding work, which includes the novels *El llano amarillo*, *Sáhara*, *La mitad de un credo*, *El rey perdido*, *Bolero para una mujer*, *Hotel Madrid*, *Tríptico de fuego* and *Bastardos de Bardinia*. His most recent novel is *El reloj de Clío*, published in 2020. He was awarded the Can de Plata for the Arts in 2019 by the Cabildo of Gran Canaria in recognition of his life's work

In "Saved from the tsunami", González Déniz takes the author to the centre of the Las Palmas, to the Arenales district – well known as the setting for several of his novels, such as *El obelisco*. This district, situated between the old city walls and the port area, has a peculiar charm and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century it experienced significant growth and development. Today it is the site of many grand buildings housing important institutions as well as the "British colony" which established itself at the heart of Gran Canaria's growing tourism industry. Facing the sea, the Ciudad Alta (High City) behind it, this district would be one of the first to succumb if the worst were to happen and a tsunami hit the island.

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Translated by Hebe Powell







If I told you that granny Genoveva knew the day and the time she was going to die, you almost certainly wouldn't believe me. I can hardly believe it myself, but the thing is, coincidence, intuition, whatever you want to call it, the day she died – in robust health – she told me that she was tired of living and had decided to die.

Great grandpa, her father, came from Cuba bringing with him a considerable fortune and he used this wealth to buy up a plot of farmland in the centre of the island. A character straight out of García Márquez, great grandpa was one of the few returning migrants or *Indianos* who could have been considered rich. The farm was productive, he had hired labour, and even a horse to ride around its boundaries. Although, the farm wasn't so big he needed a horse, but the beast gave him a certain kudos as he rode across his lands, dressed in his traditional *guayabera*, and whenever there were loads to carry it was always handy to have a horse. Besides, it knew how to thresh.

Great grandma, his wife, was perfectly happy with their life – except for one thing: persons of wealth and stature needed to have a house in the city. It took her years to convince her husband that the only way to maintain their prestige was by having two houses, one in the capital and one in the country. Thus, they bought a large house in the *Fincas Unidas* area, in the middle of the *Arenales* district, and this was sufficient. Their city home was vast; great grandma had to bring a young girl from the countryside and teach her how to polish the silver and put

a shine on the woodwork. Great grandma was very given to stories, and who can say, even to flights of fantasy, and she used to tell of how the house was many centuries old, even that it had survived the tidal wave of 1755. Great grandma's truths were all debatable, since in the year of the tidal wave, there probably had not been a single house on what is now a sandbank (or perhaps it's always been a sandbank – with her fevered imagination nothing is certain). For sure, there had been a huge earthquake in Lisbon at that time. It destroyed a large part of the Portuguese capital and caused a tsunami that lashed great swathes of the Iberian coast from Huelva to Cádiz, then swept past Morocco and still had enough force to left over to reach the Canaries. People say that the Maspalomas dunes were made with the sand brought by this great wave, and when it arrived on the shore at Las Palmas it did most damage to the coastal plain, the area now known as Arenales, who knows, it probably brought those expanses of sand at the same time it formed the dunes.

When the great grandparents passed away, their lands were divided between their children, and the house in the city came to grandma Genoveva and her husband, some Julio Valdés who wasn't much interested in her. He was in the business of buying and selling cattle and while he always came home for a plate of food, he was little company since he was hardly ever there. They had several sons and daughters; among them my mother, and I had the privilege of being the first grandson and therefore the favourite. The years passed and my grandma lived on in the huge old house at Finca Unidas while her husband carried on with his business, taking his flocks of goats and sheep from fair to fair, even trading the occasional donkey if the market was right. Little by little, grandma was left more and more alone as her children married, set up their own homes, and, to amuse herself, Genoveva would read and make sweet treats for any grandchildren that might come by. She wasn't a great cook, but she had a real talent for patisserie.

When Genoveva heard that I was a novelist she asked to read all my manuscripts. While she was still alive, the first copy of every book I published was reserved for her. She was so full of praise, even comparing me to a certain Colombian who was about to win a Nobel Prize. Wow! Well, imagine her disappointment when that Colombian got the prize; he may have been a favourite author of hers, but he was my competition. The Colombian was not

her grandson, so he always lost out when compared to me, in fact, I began to notice that the better the Caribbean wrote the more disgruntled Genoveva became.

So, the literary hierarchy awarded the Nobel to my competitor. Had my grandma possessed a fighter-bomber she would have sent it to bomb Stockholm.

"How can those Swedes be so stupid! What's that so and so compared to you? We have to do something about this, this can't be allowed to happen!"

"We can't do anything, and he is a worthy winner – a great writer. You yourself have always been one of his biggest fans. Love has blinded you, granny."

As a result of this episode, I never again brought her any books written by the Colombian. For her the literary world contained only two authors and one of them had been given the prize her grandson deserved.

One day, many years later – it could have been a storyline straight from the pen of a certain Aracatacan – my grandma decided she was tired of living. She told me she had been on this earth too long already, that her children all had their own lives, and that, although Julio Valdés might need her, she wasn't indispensable. Nowadays she wasn't even interested in the classics I tried to tempt her with; she confessed that she hadn't even opened the copy of Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* I'd brought for her. That was a bad sign. It had to be for reasons that had nothing to do with the book itself; I always found her large-print editions and I'd even bought her a lectern so that she didn't get exhausted by the weight of the huge tomes she so loved.

"Young man, I think the time has come for me to die, I'm no use to anyone and nothing interests me anymore."

"Grandma, you'll find something you like..."

"No. I'm done with this world; I know all the stories there are to know and they're all the same. I've seen every film and read every book."

"You couldn't read every book or see every film even if you had a hundred lives!"

"Oh, son, it's just that everything has gotten so dull. So, I'm going to die."

"But grandma, tell me, do you feel unwell? Are you in any pain? Perhaps you're suffering from a little melancholy?"

"Don't give me any of that rubbish, I'm perfectly healthy. I sleep like a log and I'm not suffering from depression, or any other kind of nonsense psychologists have invented."

"Well then, I don't understand why you're saying all this; people don't just decide to die, except if they're thinking of suicide..."

"Suicide? Good God! I'd never think of doing that – it's a mortal sin! I'm not going to commit suicide; I'm simply going to die. That's my decision. As soon as I've seen my lawyer to change a few things in my will, I'm going to die. I just don't want to be here for the next tidal wave – I don't know why it's called a tsunami nowadays when all my life on God's earth it's been called a tidal wave..."

"It means the same thing – it's Japanese."

"Well then the Japanese can have their tsunamis and we'll keep our tidal waves!"

"Grandma, you're talking about something that most likely won't happen, at least not in the foreseeable future, but you're talking like it's going to happen next week!"

"It's going to happen, and soon, and I want to be dead before then."

I couldn't get her to see that you can't predict tsunamis, that they happen because of earthquakes and that science can only make approximate predictions about such massive seismic activity. She was obsessed with how the tidal wave of 1755 had come right up to where the front of her house now stood and how the next would be even worse.

"I don't want to be here when the sea comes to take my house."

I didn't dwell too much on her words, I thought it was just another of grandma Genoveva's stories and it was hard to take a conversation like that too seriously. When I was a child, she'd read me the life of San Martín de Porres and other miraculous saints and these holy people had always known the day they would die. Although





this was never because of any decision they'd made but because it had been revealed to them by God. What my grandma had was simply an old lady's fixation and that was all.

A week after we'd had this conversation, grandma Genoveva asked me to take her to see her lawyer. He was an old acquaintance and he'd always give her an appointment whenever she asked. I waited for her outside the office because I didn't want to impose on her privacy. When she emerged, she seemed very satisfied, she was smiling and almost festive.

"It's all done! I've changed my will."

I thought she might have made changes in favour of one of her sons, or added some details about the funeral arrangements, or the number of masses to be said for her, but no. I was struck dumb when she said:

"You're the only person who knows how to use it, so I've left the Naumann sewing machine to you. You must take it to your house because you live in the High City – I don't want the tidal wave to take it when it sweeps away the big house in Arenales."

"That's the reason you had to change your will?"

"Of course, it's important."

"Ok, grandma, if it's important to you, then it's important to me. Thank you."

"Don't thank me, you're not inheriting a gift, it's a responsibility. That sewing machine has been in the family for a hundred years. Great grandpa bought it in Germany."

I took grandma home and she invited me in to eat. Conversation over lunch, of course, was all about the legendary German sewing machine that was my inheritance and of which I had become custodian. And how it was my responsibility. Grandma Genoveva had shown me how to use it and I could do seams, very carefully, take up hems and other very easy tasks. However, I was far from having the expertise of grandma Genoveva. The machine was like new, resplendent, the hundred years it had spent in that house and the thousands of seams it had sewn with grandma's foot on its pedal were as nothing.

My grandpa, as always, was out, or late, or some such; whatever the case he was rarely there to sit and eat with my grandma. By the time I left her house it was mid-afternoon and before nightfall, I'd received a call to tell me she was dead. At first, I thought this had to be a practical joke on her part. But no, it was true, she had died not long after I'd left her. She had died alone, seated in her cane chair with her hands resting crossed in her lap, and so, the forensics officer certified that ultimately, and in common with much of humanity, she'd died simply because her heart had stopped – there was no medical explanation. I didn't tell him or anyone. Nobody would believe that my grandma had decided on the day and the time that her heart would stop. She'd always done everything with astonishing naturalness, and I have to confess that even I couldn't take seriously her endeavours to save herself and the sewing machine from the fury of a tidal wave. I tried to fulfil her last wish, and I take great pains to ensure the old Nauman sewing machine from Germany is safe from a new tsunami. A tsunami is very unlikely, you say? Perhaps, but then it was highly unlikely my grandma could have known the day and the hour of her passing. So, just in case, I keep the Naumann on high ground, far from Arenales and the sea.



# Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

## From Vegueta to Triana











# I was the happiest girl in the world

Paula I. Nogales Romero



## Paula I. Nogales Romero

Born in 1966 in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, is a philologist and secondary school teacher. As part of the so-called 'last generation of the millennium' in Canary poetry, she has developed a remarkable poetic career, with titles such as *Recintos*, *Saludos de Alicia* (*Venues, Greetings from Alicia*), *Manzanas son de Tántalo* (*Apples are from Tántalo*), *Esta falacia que se desangra impune* (*This fallacy that bleeds dry unpunished*), *Vicios ocultos* (*Hidden Vices*), and *De la traición como arte* (*Betrayal as art*). Nogales has also appeared in various national and international anthologies.

As a writer, she has published two short story collections, *Zapping. Cuentos* (*Zapping. Short Stories*) and *Sociedad anónima* (*Anonymous society*). *Zapping. Cuentos* was awarded second place on the City of Santa Cruz de Tenerife Prize (Premio Ciudad de Santa Cruz de Tenerife) and *Sociedad anónima* was awarded first place on the Ateneo de la Laguna Prize for Short Stories (Premio de Cuentos del Ateneo de La Laguna). Her most recent book is *Excusatio non petita. Poemas y otras pruebas inculpatorias* (*Excusatio non petita. Poems and other incriminating evidence*).

'I was the happiest girl in the world' takes place in the Vegueta district of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in which Nogales grew up, and is told through the voice of a young girl whose eyes are opened onto her surrounding world in this colonial neighbourhood. This district of the Columbus era is where the city's founding hill is situated, along with the buildings that housed its first civil and religious authorities. Here, between the beautiful squares scattered around the Santa Ana Cathedral and the charming alleys in which fear also dwells, the story unfolds.

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Translated by Alice Banks



For Vicky

**F**rom a young age, I was the happiest girl in the world, and the silliest. But I was the most fearful too. It could also be said that I possessed the great skill of offending my sisters – older than me and already brushing with, or plunging into puberty – who would watch me from afar with real contempt and embarrassment whilst I – blissfully unaware of such feelings – imitated Lola Flores, Dolores Vargas la Terremoto, any dishevelled folkloric singer in front of our visitors; then, already possessed, I would go on to act out the wildest animals. I would leap like a primate, crawl along the floor as I made guttural sounds or neighed (since before I could even walk, I had a huge affinity for horses, even though being a city girl, many years passed before I saw one in the flesh, and many more still before I got to stroke one of their fly-infested muzzles). All of this was met with the indifference of my father, and my mother's silly smile of approval (the visitors were polite, they said nothing about the show and attempted to follow the adult conversations as they sat in their pleather armchairs). This ability – as I call it – only grew over the years and saw me on the receiving end of jokes and small sisterly tricks, like the washing machine game,

where they would put me in a cardboard box and spin me around, sometimes for a short while, sometimes for a long while; or when they locked me in the wardrobe to see how long I could stay there without crying out in distress in the darkness; or when they denied me my very own *Tirma* chocolate bar that was in the enormous and antiquated kitchen cupboard which – for my weak means – I couldn't reach, and wouldn't get unless I promised to kiss the big toe belonging to one of my sisters (her speciality), which of course I refused disgustedly; or when they left me outside the house, locking the door with two turns of the key, promising me they would only open it after I had shouted out loud, 'I'm a cod,' just like in the Peter Pan film. (Because I did not know the meaning of the word, I imagined that being a cod was something terrible, monstrous, the worst thing in the world. I heard their laughter from beyond the door as I tried not to cry on the last step of that old, old, house in Vegueta, dilapidated, decadent, uncomfortable, built at the beginning of the twentieth century and bought almost one hundred years ago by my grandfather and one of my great-aunts – the one that did not marry and therefore did not have to forfeit any of her diminished inheritances to a man).

So, I was happy, improper, and very afraid. My irrational fears from those first years of childhood have nothing to do with those that plague me now I'm in my fifties. Essentially, I was scared of the dark, of monsters, of the terrible notion of Catholicism that was displayed through the list of young child martyrs who were subjected to atrocities, of women who were abused and dismembered to satisfy the absurd whims of powerful and frustrated men (who then offered their organs on trays – like terrible food – to a monstrous cannibal with a thousand heads. Things have not changed so much, although we're not talking about barbarian kings or Roman emperors now). I feared the gloomy piety of the yellowish Holy Child at whom I tried not to look each time my mother took us to mass at Santo Domingo church, or when we went to pray the *Salve Regina* on Saint Blaise's day after buying the *cordoncillo*, a piece of yarn that protected us from a winter cold and was burned without fail on Ash Wednesday. I feared the Holy Child because one of my sisters had told me, very quietly, that the carving was a real mummified boy who had been locked in a glass and gold urn, and that because he had misbehaved, they had nailed a cross to the nape of his neck so he suffered eternal pain. I was also afraid of the head of the wounded Christ with his

crown of thorns that left traces of blood-drops, painted with care by an unknown craftsman of the early nineteenth century; I feared his half open mouth that showed his small teeth and a little of his tongue which looked as if it were ready to speak. His head was also in a glass urn, balanced on a stand and topped with a cross in my Aunt Juanita's room, along with the piano that was brought back from Boston by 'Grandfather Pedro' at the end of the nineteenth century (back when all the ancestors from my extended family lived together near the San Nicolas hermitage). My Aunt Juanita's room was where my sisters studied music, despite the soliloquies and screams that came from that bedridden, ageless, and clueless woman; they studied in that room despite its permanent smell of urine, bishop red curtains, and religious paintings faded by time; despite the shame, and my aunt's rolling eyes, *sic transit gloria mundi, in ictu oculi*. Nor was I crazy about the Lying Christ's effigy that was paraded at night during Holy Week – also in a huge glass box so that all of his wide, open wounds could be admired. I feared its macabre realism, the smell of wax and dying candles and flowers, the varnish from the noble and gilded wooded sepulchre – the work of Manuel Ponce de León – with the sad baroque figures by Luján Pérez accompanying the burial, (There are four corners on my bed, there are four angels overhead, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, God bless this bed I lay on). Nor did I like the mummified bishop, displayed (yes, exactly: in another glass urn) in a shrine at the Santa Ana Cathedral, with his little feet and his leathery hands crossed on his lap, wearing his tremendous mitre and tattered clothes (will they dress him, will they change him, will he continue to shrink?) I was a fearful girl, yet I was not afraid of real events such as strangers or thieves entering the house through the roof, which was relatively easy and something I later learnt was an idea that mortified my older sisters. In fact, whilst we were at home, a petty thief snook in more than once to grab something through the window that led from the corridor to the stairs, and my father had to choose to permanently close the hallway door and make copies of the key for everyone, despite the fact that it took away some of his power. I also remember the great uproar about the thief who was jumping from house to house across the rooftops and how almost, or not almost, his escape was stopped by a guest who was staying with our neighbour opposite. I especially recall how my Great

Aunt Carmen – who was made for oral narration and faithfully reclaimed the Canarian tradition – told the tale (we used to pester her, ‘tell it again, tell it’, and she, very seriously, told us):

‘And then our neighbour M. saw that man there, imagine the fright, and she said she shouted out: “Hey, who are you and what are you doing in my house?” And the thief said, “No Ma’am, I’m actually running away...” to try to calm M. down, show he had good intentions and continue without being caught.’

The poor thief didn’t have much luck, however, because then M.’s aforementioned guest – who was a civil guard with a pistol – showed up. It was like an episode of *The Fugitive*, a Las Palmas version set in the 70s. (This was a million years ago, but bless you, Aunt Carmen.)

As I’ve said, I was selectively scared: I would caress and pet enormous feral dogs that still swarmed the streets of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, with not a care for their appearance, their hunger, their growls nor their stench, but I was scared of all kinds of ghostly manifestations, of the demon who appeared in mirrors if you looked into them after bathing in the sun (thank you, Aunt Carmen, for these horror stories you told us, so nurturing); of the witches that kidnapped boys and girls and of the faces that were suddenly disfigured with evil wells of pustules (I had to sleep with my mother after we had watched *The Picture of Dorian Gray* on the television, and spent the entire night watching her vigilantly to make sure she didn’t metamorphose into a monster herself.) I was afraid of the shrieks of pain and anguish that came from the San Roque Clinic close by (shrieks from real people that tore your soul apart). I was even scared of the stories that I did not see, but still heard (the television left on for the adults in the dining room on the other side of the hallway, me, being so small, already in my room, tucked into bed); there was only one TV and no remote control, and if the sound was loud, or suddenly the horrid soundtrack got louder, I would bury my head under the covers and pray, pray a lot – as if I were performing an exorcism – and my mind staged orgies of horror more frightening than any screenwriter could have possibly imagined.

Now, with retrospect, I think that a number of factors logically contributed to these irrational fears that only grew well into my teens (and even beyond): the nature of the house in which we lived (on loan, without my knowing it), unwelcoming, and full of little creatures and leaks; the age we were living in, a hint of maternal genetics, the shrieks of my great aunt, sick with schizophrenia and bedridden for years in the apartment below; the silences that

were enforced with the mere, frightening presence of my father, the 'just because's', the arguments; the bloody, unsweetened childhood tales whose versions we read in books from the early twentieth century; the catechism and the national Catholicism that spread like a dirty stain from all sides ('girl, girl, don't sing, it's Good Friday,' and the *Funeral March* playing on every radio). The streets of Vegueta and Triana also contributed, as well as my upbringing in a family with five daughters, two grandmothers, and no car, not even a camera, nor a bicycle, never. I was simply consecrated to doing chores, cleaning that kitschy mausoleum, and ironing the only man of the house's underwear – all in the midst of a rapidly changing Spain. That girl treasured the Sunday *pesetas* that were used to buy sour English fruit sweets – so pretty and colourful like crystals – from the sweet shop belonging to the two sisters, (the one who ran it was Pepita, the other one just worked there). It was a little shop that you had to enter by going down a step, that's how old the building was (sunk below the level of the asphalt, or the cobblestones, according to the whim of the mayor or district councillor on duty), it was very basic, and like the entire block, painted an ochre yellow. The sweet shop was on Calle los Reyes Católicos, the long street that crossed Vegueta and fizzled out at Árbol del Responso and the Las Palmas cemetery with its beautiful statues of death. Next to the sisters, where you paid using copper coins with a hole in the middle, a barber had his shop, though it's already been many years since he has soaked someone's beard. After centuries of humble resistance, the whole block is collapsing with no remedy, its bulging walls of primitive rubble, its scattered, irregular openings – including Gothic ogee arches that are old enough to date it back to the beginning of the sixteenth century – all subsiding into the sinkhole of apathy, all to the corner of the tobacco shop in front of the pharmacy (where my mother had an open account, and they kindly dispatched prescriptions even before we had shown the insurance documents). The pharmacy is decorated in an unspeakable style that is already out of date: sixties pop art (an explosion of gaudy colours and geometric lines, plastic, and pleather, completely contrasted by its mural by Felo Monzón – a painter of the indigenous movement – which is strangely enhanced with fluorescent lights). Here began the climb to Calle López Botas, rich in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century buildings; found behind the Seminary here were religious orders, several large houses of the Bishopríc, and a carpenter's place – an incredible space that was hundreds of years old, with tools and materials scattered everywhere – where my cousin and I used to buy

wood for our childhood projects. Next to the pop art pharmacy, and in front of the little sweet shop belonging to the two sisters and their sickly treats was – following a change in location after the eighteenth century – San Agustín School, famous for its liberal education, where male students of ‘good families’ in Gran Canaria studied until the age of sixteen – Galdós himself went there, Nicolás Massieu too. The school had a mysterious exit that led out onto the perpendicular Calle Juan E. Doreste, which was later the headquarters of the UDC (The Union of the Democratic Centre) in the first democratic elections.

Also, there was no doubt, something else that contributed to my fearful character was another one of my sister’s habits to lead me, in the dark, down the very long corridor in our house (there was only one sad lightbulb at the far end – not at all logical – and that stays with you: having to feel around in the dark until you find the switch, and when the light at the end was turned off, it was quite an experience). Here, she would abandon me to my fate, only to then be able to take on the role of rescuer and console me – this was all highly satisfying for her, but it gave me palpitations. Curiously she has completely erased this from her memory. Her desire was to protect me, and if there was no occasion to, she created one.

Calle López Botas led up to the colonial haven of Plaza de Santo Domingo, and at the other end of the sunken block was Calle Doctor Chil, narrow and full of architectural treasures (I never got tired of it). This street is a recurring protagonist in my dreams, dreams of the surreal, unsettling Vegueta which I really struggled to leave, and where I try to return to, without purpose or success. Like in a blind, ritualistic punishment, I am outcast and orphaned, simply retracing the steps that lead me by the hand to an origin, perhaps to a revelation.

On the oh so narrow Calle Doctor Chil – formerly known as ‘De la Inquisición,’ and paved with sparkling cobblestones – there was, long ago, the old, immense Canarian Seminary and the Inquisitorial Court. Then came Dr Verneau – a man with a totally different spirit – and it became nothing less than the Canarian Museum, a more modern building from the second half of the nineteenth century. With its one person pathways, its huge facades of colonial architecture, its panelled or sash windows, its short balconies, and doors framed by broken alfiz stonework (we leave the search for the typically enclosed Canarian balcony for other streets and latitudes),





it seemed incredible to me that real families lived on this street, people of flesh and bone. The same thought occurred to me in many other patches of the old neighbourhood, from San Marcos to Sor Brígida Castelló or García Tello, but, in particular, the ample street of Los Balcones, or the side street off Plaza Santa Ana. How many times I have peeked like a little voyeur beyond the bars, into the tiny doors within the entrances, or the hidden patios; and yes, it was true, just as in the times of Alonso Quesada's chronicles, yes there were humans living behind those wooden doors which have been the same since the Spanish Conquest arrived. Still today, I sometimes dream of those houses. In my dreams there are not only paved courtyards with wall panels made of Canarian pine supporting internal balconies, but also immense hidden gardens, like labyrinths in which one gets lost – somewhat wild – and even streams, rocks and wild fruits; there are stables that are home to magnificent horses with black manes promising wild rides of freedom; corridors that connect buildings above the rooftops and underground, reminiscent of the Jewish quarters – I've already said that where the church 'of the Jesuits' is found with its invasive façade, the path narrows and always forces one passer-by to give way to another. The source of these crazy dreams goes back to my memories of being a young girl of barely six or seven years old and following my sisters, *venis, nolis*, wherever they went, with their guitars of budding folk singers, their percussion sticks and ponchos, gimmicks from the second Vatican for naïve little girls who had been captured by the network of national Catholicism in its most benign form. The source also goes back to later years, when, as a teen, I was momentarily a student at the Jesuit school up until there was no money left. Here, I was privileged to be able to enter one of the buildings that flanked San Francisco de Borja, a kind of youth club of chastity and Eucharist exaltations. Everything, in the end, belonged to the priests and the Jesuits, owners of the church that, in those years, was incredibly neglected; those huge, hundred-year-old buildings were in ruins, a real danger for those of us who attended. It was here I had the pleasure of exploring like a little mouse, either in the 70s during the times of the ineffable JACE (the Spanish Youth Catholic Action, the only place my mother rested from us, suddenly and for free), or the 80s, and no, don't say it was a dream, Terenci, it was true: there was a whole network of buildings linked by passageways that ran between them. They were behind the church with the huge Baroque doorway

and Solomonian columns, on the right and left, passageways that teenagers and girls dangerously ran through, encouraged by priests in their sixties. These buildings are now not only closed to the public by the church, but have had their beautiful, studded doorway from the sixteenth to seventeenth century made an 'ecce homo de Borja.' It's dreadful, a door belonging to the aesthetic horror of the nouvelle riche or the Almudena Cathedral in Madrid. The houses across the street continue to sink and to be mired in mystery and Remax advertisements.

Doctor Chil, a narrow alleyway in which I always got lost, paved the way to the beginning of freedom. Like a suffocating bullpen, a gorge that suddenly spills out in a burst of light onto the Plaza de Santa Ana, it had the same effect as the books that my sisters borrowed from the public library (maybe more so than the ones my mother bought us); they were windows through which to flee from our reality, to live other lives and visit other places; we read them at home, my sisters taking turns – I always got one more, even though I was the smallest. Plaza Santa Ana: palm trees, geraniums, lion head medallions, a huge enclosed rectangle of stonework with its adorable bronze English dogs, which, according to my childish logic, had been manufactured and placed there solely for the delight of girls who could not own a dog themselves, (I never understood the local policeman that once scolded me for climbing up onto one of them; maybe I wasn't so young anymore, I don't remember, but I still didn't understand). I remember its thousands of pigeons, which I pledged to shepherd, so seriously, with a patience worthy of a better cause (but the whole animal kingdom, was, for me, pure wonder; up to the ladybirds that we even made houses with tin rooves for, and the snails that magically appeared after the rain, climbing up the snake plant leaves). Plaza Santa Ana was one with the bells of the cathedral, and in those years, for me, it was as joyful on the outside as it was abstruse and unintelligible on the inside, for its stains on the walls, its irregular tiles, its poor acoustics, its constant rumour of footsteps, echoes, and murmurs that lulled me to sleep on the pew next to my mother, until suddenly, the *ite, missa est* leapt out, along with the sudden power of the enormous thundering organ, like a soundtrack worthy of the powerful Christopher Lee. The escape continued: there was Obispo Codina, with its first real stores, and Calle Muro with its Valencian ice-cream shop and its ancient apothecary that was made entirely of wood that burned in the 80s – the smoke and the flames crossing

the Guiniguada ravine and reaching our rooftop. At the bottom of Calle Muro is the Literary Cabinet, gentle and bourgeois at the same time, trimmed with a blue sky, palm trees, a bust of Cairasco, and little tables with umbrellas from Hotel Madrid where people relax and drink aperitifs. And that's it, Triana on one side and Alameda on the other; I can touch it with my fingers, look: there's the stop for Line Two which takes us to Las Canteras, just in front of San Francisco Church and the old convent, and further down, the theatre, which I still don't know from the inside, and Bus One, on which you finally depart Vegueta, leaving behind that miniscule and dangerous alleyway that is Doctor Chil.

(Another memory I have of Calle Doctor Chil is returning home from school and seeing a woman sat in a window of one of those one-hundred-year-old houses. She was in a night dress with a lost look in her eyes, her legs slowly dangling out more and more, slipping away. There was not a soul to ask for help, a lonely Vegueta behind closed doors, and I, a small, ignorant girl, alone at noon with my school bag – which wasn't a rucksack but was still on my back – was watching the woman slip through the window. No, now she picks herself up, now she moves again, stretches her feet. I don't know if she is going to throw herself off: it's a first floor flat, but those flats are more than five metres off the ground, and the cobblestones of Doctor Chil are sparkling – have I already mentioned that they sparkle so much? The pavement is so narrow – that I've already said – and if she falls, her entire body won't fit on it, she'll break, maybe her head will smash against the curb, or her spine, I don't know. I look at her, I look around, I don't know whether to yell, I don't know if she sees me, I'm scared, very scared, but it's late, I have just about enough time to eat lunch and go back to school, and I must go home.)

Or you can go beyond the Espíritu Santo hermitage – only open for Holy Week celebrations – to the beautiful covered square and the fountain of the same name, (whose stone dove I believed really flew) heading towards the eighteenth and nineteenth century palaces of Calle Castillo and the San Martín Hospital which belonged to the state's charitable organisation, Beneficencia, (here, I collected my helpless great aunts' medicines. I had to go before eight, along with the rest of the needy from different parts of the island). The hospital is now a place of art (my great Aunt Juanita died there, not changing her habits, still shouting and moaning, her delirium turned into

a sore in an iron bed on a wooden floor in a room worthy of a Baroja novel: I struggle to see art in San Martín). If you continue you reach Árbol Bonito, and before you realise it, you are already free, you are out. Or else you slip out of Salsipuedes alleyway, heading for San Agustín church and La Audiencia – which José María Millares Sall sang of in his hymn ‘Campanas de Vegueta’ – and fearfully enter one of the even narrower and lonelier alleyways (making sure to look back if you hear footsteps because you never know, you never know). These alleyways open out onto Calle Plaza del Mercado, which at this time (the late 70s, early 80s) was called General Mola, today, once again Mendizábal. This street is occupied by drunk men in dirty pants, who, in their misery get brave with the girls, and the alleyways are stalked by young people hooked on heroin, it’s not pretty, it’s not safe, and it scares me (my mother walks fast, holding her purse tight, and, with my mind on other things, I follow her and pray, pray all the time). Or you head quickly down to the ancient Calle Herrería, (on the left is the San Antonio Abad hermitage, where it all started, or all ended with Juan Rejón) stumbling behind the cathedral (the Primatial Cathedral of Africa, forever unfinished) or down Calle Armas towards the Guiniguada ravine which is still being plugged with late-Franco cement, its stone and wooden bridges no longer preserved, but their memory, yes. (What’s more, my memory retains an impossible image, an innocent image which stays with me thanks to my passion for animals: the vision of a shepherd stood with his lambs or kids on one of the river banks, whilst the excavators were already advancing, an image that I can see whilst I stand on tiptoes – so small I am – on the railings of Plaza de las Ranas where the famous little berries fell from the big trees, perhaps Indian Laurels, and where the Hispano-American bank building once was – now the Insular Library.)

I am a happy girl, silly, I love animals, but I have a horrible fear that does not let me breathe at night: I pray each night that the darkness allows me to see one more day, so that the Angel of Death does not take me in my dreams like the matchstick girl in the Andersen tale. I know that little girls also die, they are extinguished and become no more; whenever God wants, people die and are reduced to bone (we are dust), and you must pray, pray a lot to be safe. I pray because I have learnt (my ignorance is tremendous) that bats, which I thought were an invention from old movies, also exist in reality (the tale of *Bluebeard* scares me a lot, and in my grandfather’s book, with its nineteenth century illustration of the chamber of corpses of murdered women, well-defined bats

appear with their bloody snouts and I look at them, fascinated, but I tell myself: 'this does not exist,' 'it's fantasy.' I'm even more afraid of the hairy creatures with wings than I am of the women covered in blood, hanging from hooks, explicitly killed by the sadist with the beard. Fears do not conform to logic; and my mother, who is always busy, who does not have a washing machine, who attends to her hemiplegic mother, tells me: 'Of course there are bats girl, what nonsense, in Gran Canaria there are bats up to here,') and I spend nights hoping that hordes of thirsty bats come and devour me. I am silly, and happy, and sometimes I annoy my fourth sister, but she still takes me to visit the Canarian Museum, heading up Calle Doctor Chil. At first, I am distracted, looking at the collections which at that time, were more or less just disgusting insects nailed with pins, some enormous marine animal remains, a little bit of this, that, and the other, and aboriginal ceramics. But then we climb to the top floor, and I observe, with horror and fascination in equal parts, all of the well organised skulls arranged in rows and rows right up to the very high ceiling. The skulls are in glass urns – there are also complete skeletons, many with skin and hair still attached, some missing teeth or their lower jaw –and they all seem to be looking at me or trying to tell me something in a horrible silence. There are also mummies, (mummies scare me less, I don't know why, I don't have them etched into my imagination and they are lying down so they seem too tired, too cold) but it's the skulls and skeletons that always, even in Disney's black and white drawings, have 'embodied' (how ironic) the macabre; those skulls, the torsos, the sternums, the ribs, like cages of demons waiting to attack me; the long legs of the dead coming to me, a poor, silly girl, scared and foolish, who of course does not tell anyone what she thinks, what she feels (because it would simply be: 'here you go again with your silly ideas.' I'm not going to annoy anyone, nor ruin the outing, and I also suspect that if I say something, there will be more teasing than consolation). With the neatly ordered femurs, the explanations of the burr holes, the infantile craniums, more mummies, more funerary objects, more naked bodies, an ossuary in perfect alignment, the horror in a museum, I begin to feel dizzy, everything so yellowish and real that I can't believe it, (but yes I live on an island where we are safe, there's no danger) death is made a spectacle to be visited. I begin to obsess that beneath my own skin, I have a skeleton. I myself am, and will end up in a showcase, observed, perhaps still with that annoying lock of



hair – the one that always gets tangled – still attached to my skull, and my crooked teeth that shame me exposed to the public, mortifying me for all eternity, whilst strangers make fun of my dreadfulness, of my misplaced jaw. Now subject-skeleton-object; strange ideas flood in: communion at seven years old, all the catechesis packed into just a few months; the worship of death, the funeral marches, the imposed silences – at home and in the state– , hell, purgatory, child martyrs, all the glass urns preserving their relics of pain and death for centuries, just as the vine is preserved from the cold so that it matures and gives good wine; *sic transit gloria mundi, ubi sunt, in ictu oculi*; the infantile confessions in order to receive communion, the shame, the guilt. My house is just a couple of streets from the Canarian Museum, any night they can come for me. I knew nothing, my imagination overflows, and that secret wears me down every night when darkness already reigns. Please, mamá, do not make me turn off the light, please, I'm scared, the darkness is a nest of monsters, please, see if grandmother is still alive, please, mamá, the light, see if they are all alive.





# Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

## Climbing the cliffs. Risco de San Nicolás









# Scar

Ángeles Jurado Quintana

## Ángeles Jurado Quintana

Born in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria in 1971, Ángeles Jurado Quintana is a journalist and novelist, primarily focused on the discipline of micro stories.

Although she has worked and collaborated in various media, she currently writes for *El País* on matters related to the African continent. Her columns are collected in volumes such as *Síndromes de Estocolmo* and *Salvapantallas*. She is also the author of several books of short stories and micro stories among which *Cambio de Rumbo y otras historias pigmeas* and *Breviario de lamentos, mordiscos y besos* stand out. In addition, she has been translated into Icelandic within an anthology of Spanish writers. Her most recent title is *Micropsias*.

An intimate story that revolves around a play on words, 'Scar' unfolds principally in San Nicolás, one of the popular neighbourhoods situated on the cliffs around the Guiniguada ravine. San Nicolás, San José, San Juan, and San Roque housed the working classes almost since the founding of the city, even before the development of the nineteenth-century port. Immortalised by the paintbrush of José Jorge Oramas, the multicolour mosaic of the modest cliff houses has become one of the symbols of the city.

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Translated by Maria White







**T**he word that has pursued me for the last three days is 'literally'.

I taste it by way of a good morning at the window that looks out over the colourful cloth of irregular houses in San Juan spilling down the hillside just in front of my house. At midday, I launch it like a missile at the queue outside Mercadona, the supermarket which marks the border with Primero de Mayo Avenue, joined to the health centre where the neighbourhood seems to sink its unexpected root. As evening falls, I spit it out over a man at the site filled with cement, traffic and asphalt that separates us from Vegueta, which I always turn my back on whenever I take the dry washing down from the trembling lines while I watch the clouds that show signs of a rain that never arrives. Close to nightfall, I bone it and chew it bit by bit, tumbling down the hill of Álamo street, almost rolling like scruffy gorse while waving goodbye to La Alameda, dragging Lorenzo along with me by the hand on the way.

'You are literally the most stubborn child on the cliff.' I admonish him then, the words 'big-headed' and 'little rascal' and 'idiot' screaming inside, fighting to explode out of my mouth, and I put on the brakes with lips and teeth, and an almost superhuman will.

Lorenzo always looks at me with those immense eyes full of stars and his mouth wide open, as if he were facing a divine apparition. 'Li-te-ral-ly,' he stammers, shaking his black curls. He resembles one of those tumbler dolls I played with as a child. And I know that he will repeat it in the nursery, between fearful and swollen with pride, leaving his companions speechless with surprise, lost in painful teething, ignorant of the complexities of the dictionary.

When we descend, slowing down half-heartedly, rushing off half-heartedly, along that impossible hill, Lorenzo shows a repeated tendency to cross accidentally in front of me. We always end up falling over each other and I hammer away at him with the same litany several times, now with the horizon criss-crossed with grey stone, Indian laurels and the lemon façade of the Hotel Madrid with its white windows all open, wide open, to the cooing of the turtledoves and the clink of glasses. Li-te-ral-ly, he sings with his soft voice, almost like a bird sighing, before we sit on a bench. His father always arrives late for the agreed visits. He leaves the Gabinete Literario with a spring in his step and, contrary to what logic dictates, he shrinks as he approaches, until he becomes so diminutive, with his barely audible voice and his canine appearance, unable to avoid the pitiful looks from his latest secret conquest usually hidden behind the Cairasco fountain. I am forever reproaching myself, as he once told me in his own good time: he does not believe in marriage for life, and he comes from a polygamous family. I have no right to complain, I chide myself, but each one of these meetings shatters the edges of my smile a little more.

Lorenzo has just reached his fourth year, but he already knows. When I discover a word, I do not leave it alone for a minute. It even inhabits my dreams. I am incapable of pronouncing two consecutive sentences without it sneaking in, proudly, between the full stops, commas and invisible parentheses. Literally. It is something that has happened to me since I was a child, and that I do not know how to erase from my tongue, nor from the hidden corners of habit. My mother used to reprimand me when I was Lorenzo's age and made my Nancy and Barbie collide viciously with each other while I howled words like 'dragonfly' or 'greasy' or 'snoop' or 'iron' with each bish and bash of the pale plastic extremities.

The same scene was always repeated when she hung the washing out on the rooftop: my mother stretching out the sheets perfumed with Marseille soap, and me by her side, massacring the dolls and muttering my words of the moment under my breath like a mantra. She shook her homely underwear and mumbled something about the wretched girl and smashing heads in while she hung it on the line; a bird in flight crossed the Guiniguada at supersonic speed; a 'flamboyant' that escaped me with more bravura, louder than the rest, broke the silence; a cap of clouds began to form behind San Roque and the home of the three peaks, colourful and mysterious, which seemed to blow a new word from afar. Rig, verbená, doric, metastasis. Passion took hold of me; I was trembling like a volcano on the point of venting and the cries left my mouth: 'lip, lock, moribund, weak, brawl!'

I must have been born, literally, in Triana. 'I always say: literally', I add unequivocally, these days, so that anyone who wants to hear me can. The addition of 'literally' has lived on my lips since I became infatuated with the word barely three days ago and I fastened it onto my welcoming tongue like a flower hooks over a well-formed ear. I always get it out after a pause full of emotion, like someone opening a long-expected letter of reconciliation. 'That business in San Nicolás was an accident', I state afterward. Literally again.

My mother gave birth in the shade of the whitewashed wall of the hermitage. It happened one morning in November; her waters broke in the middle of the street and, with her skirt soaked in my own personal sea, she squatted next to it while she supported the head that was appearing between her thighs with both hands. She waited in vain for the arrival of an ambulance, surrounded by a chorus of old women who became improvised midwives. The one who helped her to get me out in two pushes and placed me in her arms was called Mela. They baptized me Melania after her. My brothers had worse luck than me: my mother wanted to be more traditional with them, pulled out a book of saints' names and baptised them Egregorio, Nicanor and Hermenegildo.

The sun is commonly addressed as Lorenzo, and I gave my son the name of the sun who throws his golden arrows against the grey stone of the cathedral and gouges out iridescent sparks from the cliffs. I thought of Nicolás or Martín, with that love of mine for old buildings and even certain tragic places in the vicinity of my neighbourhood. Jorge also slipped out of my mouth; I still do not know why. Lorenzo won because his father

made me laugh when he pronounced it. *Loguensó*, he babbled in his half-stammer and with the same immense eyes as his son, always full of clouds. Being wicked, I wanted to take revenge for his first infidelities with a family tongue-twister.

My mother never liked him. The father, I mean, because I am sure that she would have loved Lorenzo with a passion in inverse proportion to the hatred that Jacques awoke in her. But it should be stated that she was a suspicious woman, locked within herself, like many women from the centre of an island that are born into who knows what kind of austerity and who are thrown into their own personal deep end from very young. Their eyes only shone when they spoke of summer evenings on the slopes of Tejeda, of the black skeletons of the almond trees, of feet dangling in my grandparents' reservoir. Her family exiled themselves to the capital in the second half of the twentieth century: they settled on another cliff, the one at San Juan, with their young goat, their cockerel and a jungle of leafy vegetables that spread over the confines of the rooftop terrace. My grandfather opened a little shop for oil and vinegar on the corner of the road that zigzags across the hill. It always looked like a snake to me, imprisoned by houses until it reached the top of the hillside, angry at so many twists and turns and junctions, and of so many houses crammed in that they cling to and suffocate it.

My mother ended up in San Nicolás out of pure nostalgia: she read Irrigation Ditch Alley, on a map and wanted to imagine donkeys going uphill loaded with poultry feed or potatoes or prickly pear. She dreamed again with her feet in the green water, frogs bamboozling dragonflies, goats grazing among the agave and euphorbias, the placid jingle of sheep grazing in the dry grass, bats dancing like puppets in a sky that slowly stains with ink after a fiery sunset. When she arrived, recently married, in Álamo street, the cliffs had already lost their agricultural look. She was the outraged witness to how it was slowly stripped of prickly pear and the languid shadows of the palm tree while concrete and aluminium engulfed what they lost in forest. She realised she had been left stranded in a fake countryside, too late to make her escape, and she became bitter, collapsing within herself again, always turning her back to the sea and longing for the slim tar snake that climbed the hill to San Juan.





As a teenager, I often visited my grandparents in San Juan, I walked over bridges and along the sides of roads to El Batán and San Roque where also more family put down roots as a result of the rural exodus to the city. With time, I discovered moringa trees behind the rector's office, streets that were closed to traffic and pedestrianised, hidden squares, bends carpeted in jacarandas, flame trees, eucalyptus and bougainvillea. Also unexpected orchards, bleating goats, rowdy chickens and dovecotes, fluttering like the pages of a book. I became used to the area and made myself even more comfortable in San Nicolás from where I could see everything and dream about everything, although I could not hear the burbling of the irrigation ditches. It allowed me to keep watch over the hermitage and a whitewashed and paved past, the height of charm for those who literally do not destroy their calf muscles ascending and descending hills every day, burdened with recalcitrant children, dogs worn out by hurry, or bags ready to be filled to bursting with shopping. My mother died and left me there. Lorenzo was born and nothing changed. Only the company of his father, provisional, like those who came before and after him. Literally, it lasted as long as the pregnancy. When I gave birth in the maternity hospital via caesarean, he escaped to find other hips that would take him in. Lorenzo was all that remained, all eyes, caramel skin and dimples all over his body.

I like to walk along Triana when Lorenzo is with his father. Everything seems organised, spotless, calm. Nothing like the cliff I climb with its shrinking alleyways, its irregular slopes, lilliputian houses of all possible shapes and colours tumbling one on top of the other in apparent disorder, coloured pots, tired old folk, stray cats. Four drug addicts remain in the area, punch-drunk from the blows of life and the narcotics, walking rapidly, recurring faces, thin, old, each bearing the weight of its misfortunes and its history.

As I walk along Triana, I do not see that living, aged humanity in pain. When I cross it, I like to think of the days when a tram swept along its centre and the posters that have disappeared with the passage of the years. Sometimes I think I perceive the pulse of the sea close by, under an immovable raft of steel, asphalt, bricks, tetrapods of stone and a lot of concrete, with which successive generations have continued covering it. If I stop to have a coffee by the Irish clock, I sip it slowly while I visualise surges of jellyfish, red crabs and even seagulls

rise up and capture the whole of Marítima Avenue, devouring all the inert materials, like the detritivores do with putrefaction. In silence and persistently.

On one of those evenings when I was killing time on Triana, armed with a book, a poster which announced a house for sale at the top end of Travieso Street surprised me. I made a note of the number on notes in my mobile. Literally breathless. People did not seem to get that sign, blinking in a dark window trapped in a wooden frame, which perhaps was destined for me alone. I visited the house and the only bank that was still open close to the neighbourhood and consulted a friend who was an assessor and the groomed and smiling guy from an estate agency. I thought that finally I was loosening the lines mooring me to the cliff and losing sight of my horizon of patchwork hills with coloured houses, climbing higher and toward the interior of the island.

Then I found a book containing the work of Oramas, an old catalogue from an exhibition in Madrid. I found it purely by accident in a second-hand book shop to one side of the cathedral and I bought it because, when we moved to this perfect universe that was Triana, I wanted Lorenzo to remember the cliff that we used to see from the roof-top painted in another century with its riot of lively colours, tall palm trees and its seas of banana plantations at the bottom.

I read somewhere how Oramas immortalised the landscapes he could look down on from his room in the San Martín hospital, where tuberculosis imprisoned him. That was the illness that ended the lives of his parents and would kill him at the age of twenty-three. Curiosity encouraged me and I found a photograph of him. They are strange but I ended up with one where I could see him with his squared, clean-shaven face, staring eyes, the lively mop of hair. I thought I was looking at Lorenzo in two decades time. A Lorenzo on the point of vocalising 'literally' and chewing a felt tip pen.

Since then, I have not had the courage to begin the move. The anxiety of the change has dispossessed me, literally. I have deleted the number for the house in Travieso Street, which then disappeared from the dark, cracked window. I did not reply to the calls of the assessor, the bank clerk and the standoffish estate agent.



I think that tomorrow perhaps I will sample a new word at the window that looks out over the coloured cloth of irregular houses in San Juan, scattering it down the hillside just in front of my house. Today, during a fleeting moment, I was interested in 'anthology', although I realise that it is an acquisition that is difficult to sneak into daily conversations. In the absence of places for it to thrive in public, I will have to water it and prune it myself. At midday, I would throw it in like an exotic projectile, a boomerang perhaps, at the supermarket queue.

In the evening, I would take in the dry washing from the lines as brown as the earth, watching the calina out of the corner of my eye colouring the horizon saffron and consuming it enthusiastically. Today I surprised myself without turning my back on the scar of the ravine that separates us from Triana, from San Juan, from Salto del Negro: perhaps because I recognised for a moment that now I am no longer a walking scar and because that asphalt seam which I understand now unites us, rather than separates us, does not frighten me. As night falls, I consider whether I could show Lorenzo my new word, like a treasure.

Now we go down the slope of Álamo street, arm in arm, each of us propping the other up, and la Alameda waits for us with its Indian laurels, and his father at the end of the descent with his secret lovers, who no longer hurt, and sit on the bench with Lorenzo, offering him a toffee apple that is still hot. 'Anthology', I mouth in goodbye before heading for Santa Ana with my book and a new lightness in my step. I think perhaps 'anthology' does not suit me. It could be that tomorrow I might move to 'euphoria', I resolve.





# Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

## Ciudad Alta and Escaleritas











# From the Heights

Eduvigis Hernández Cabrera

## Eduvigis Hernández Cabrera

Born in Treinta y Tres in Uruguay in 1961, Eduvigis Hernández Cabrera moved to Las Palmas in Gran Canaria as a child.

Well-connected in the world of art, she has written numerous texts on critique and creation for exhibition catalogues. However, in parallel, she has developed an interesting career as a short story writer.

Her stories have formed part of numerous anthologies (*Reincidencias*, *Generación XXI* *Ínsulas encantadas*, *Rojo sobre negro*) and has published books such as *Muerte natural y otros suicidios*, *Fantástica fábula*, *la lógica del rastro* and *Venerada Virginia*.

*From the Heights* tells a dark story of lives cut short that takes place in Escaleritas, one of the neighbourhoods in the area referred to as Ciudad Alta. Developed in the second half of the twentieth century, neighbourhoods like Escaleritas, Las Chumberas or Schamann grew on the ridges which were, up till then, the least inhabited of the ravines of La Ballena and housed the labourers of this period in council blocks that contrasted with areas of enormous apartment buildings and single family homes occupied by the middle classes. In one of them, Altavista, the story by Hernández Cabrera unfolds.

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Translated by Maria White





**D**own below, the bay glistens with a calm sheen; at this time of the afternoon when it seems that everything has stopped, sounds are muffled, and the air circulates freely. I believe I am breathing calmly, at least, arms leaning on the metal rail and gaze fixed on the silver sheet through which an enormous shimmering ship moves toward the horizon.

From the Paseo de La Cornisa, it is normal to experience this feeling of parenthesis, the conviction of living in a separate environment where you walk in isolation or in company - human or animal – or you sit on a bench to gather your thoughts. You gaze at a section of the city that gives rise to the impression – real or not – of organisation, of cleanliness.

I know that during the night, and even more so when the rising moon dominates the dark sky, an embrace or kiss opens the way between couples as a natural response to the surrounding panorama. Embracing, kissing, loving... Where, when, to whom, again? She is not here, perhaps she is a long way away. Where is she?

I walk a few steps, so does my shadow. The nursing home with the name of a prestigious ocean liner, without doubt a luxury one, for dying in peace, makes me think that hers will also be like that. Her father would permit no less.

He had to demonstrate the devotion he felt for her at every opportunity that presented itself so he gave her everything that he knew I could not offer her.

It was an unequal competition, but the joke lay in the fact that she valued my love more than his presents, so in the end he had no choice but to accept me.

Along the way, the perspective turns a few degrees, the horseshoe view shows me the smallest and most private bay, deceptively close. The other person, although he tries to do it craftily, shortens the distance and looks at me; he cannot avoid doing it. I would even say that I notice his breathing becoming increasingly agitated by the climb. I could not say whether he is fat or slim, tall or short, as I sense him more than see him. I know he is there, like the first time that I noticed he was following me, but I am unable to describe him.

The López Socas pitches and 'terrero' remain strangely empty, stretched out under the sun, their appearance unchanged, as if no one has used them for a long time. I think that is the deceptive appearance that places where there used to be a bustle of activity give off.

In the afternoons, we used to hear the shouts of children who were learning to play football. That commotion, which occasionally went on till nightfall, did not bother us; on the contrary, it inspired in us a curious feeling of joy, as if it suddenly made us feel more alive.

Watering the garden, having a coffee beneath the trees, feeding the cat... Daily chores whose importance lay in that we did them together, in the fact of sharing them. She used to smile while she stroked her belly. She almost always smiled.

The hill comes to an end and my follower crosses over to the park, I imagine it is to pretend that he is going to the market, as any of the neighbours in the area would on a Saturday.

The card players are also absent on this day which gives me the sensation of standing still, in that the sounds seem to be softened by a layer of cork. In those days, we often saw them as we went out for a walk, collected around the table, never silent, commenting on the play and other matters. We used to call them 'the old pigeon-fanciers' and this amused us.

Renaming places and the people who moved around them was another moment between us. So, I do not go along calle de Juan Ramón now but along the alley of lost balls, those trapped in the wire fences that mark out the limits of the court. The frustrations of frontenis, we used to say.

I know that today I will not reach the new lookout point, that I must not pay tribute once more to my cowardice in these last few months, avoiding the encounter with the house. I approach the critical stretch and I can already sense that my tracker has not missed any of my steps.

I am sure the old man has hired him, although I do not know exactly why. To keep an eye on me, intimidate me, hound me? For all that and perhaps more..., to not let me live in peace perhaps as a reminder or as punishment. Who knows what twisted ideas are brewing in his head. He is unaware that I have been in my own particular 'dark night of the soul' for some time, as St John of the Cross would say, although without a soul because if I ever had one it left with her.

The old man gave us the house, of course. Garden, two floors and a basement with a garage and cellar in the neo Canarian style, pleasing to the eye in white and wood, surrounded by mango and lime trees, protected by a wall of fencing that spanned two streets forming a corner. From the rooftop terrace, you can see the sea and we went up there frequently to sunbathe. It was very pleasant living in the heights of the city, in a quiet neighbourhood, airy and with an abundance of parks.

I admit that after going from one swift, forgettable relationship to another, I slammed on the brakes when I met her as, without looking for it, she inspired a need in me to settle down, to live in a space that I could truly consider a home.

It was a new, good life. We were going to be so happy... I only wanted her touch, her smell.

When he found out that she was pregnant, her father was the affable father-in-law and offered me a position in his company, the powerful F & M in construction and advertising that was – and is – accumulating land in the area of Alcaravaneras, Guanarteme and Las Canteras. I was appointed head of accounts. An affluent and safe occupation, in his words. I was in the post for barely three months. When the incident occurred, the privileges came to an end.

Everything came to an end for me, that much is true. Now I wait on job offers, live in the lower part of the Avenue in a two-bedroom flat that I inherited from my parents, and I am alone for the first time. I went from the poets' zone to the one for chroniclers, in a clear descent into nothingness.

The house remains closed and in silence. It is not for sale, at least, and so it feels like I have its permission to gaze at it for a long while.

This guy cannot be a detective because if that were so he would belong in the group for nonentities. He moves closer all the time, to the point that I can make him out in the corner of my eye, looking toward the side of the house as if he were interested in the shadows of the branches that are projected on the wall.

The balcony on the second floor belongs to our bedroom. From there, on some nights we watched cats going from garden to garden, won over by their curiosity and taking their lives in their hands crossing from one pavement to the next. Sometimes the cockroaches, kings of the darkness as she would say, served as a distraction to them on their journey. We remained silent. I never saw a full moon so large and pregnant with mystery as on those nights.

Not once in my previous life did I pay attention to those details; nor do I do so today.

Why would it occur to the old man to have a party here? With important people, of course. To celebrate that he was going to be a grandfather, apparently. To take pleasure in having closed some perfect deal, for sure.

She was radiant, but was becoming less so as the hours advanced, I did not know why. She went to the stairs to fetch a special wine from the cellar; I offered to go with her. That was when she said it.

She thought that I was paying too much attention to one of the female guests. She was wrong, she had made a mistake. Other women were nothing to me now, just shadows that moved around. I tried to convince her that it was not true, I was just acting as a host. She did not want to listen to me. She continued down the stairs. I touched her on the shoulder so that she would stop and listen to me. She shook me off brusquely, lost her balance and fell.

I was paralysed, looking downwards, almost without seeing her broken body lying between the garage door and the last step. A sense of shock came over me that still has not left me.







It was a stupid accident, that was what she said at the start, without acrimony or resentment toward me. She broke two ribs and was bruised down one arm, but that was the least of it.

As a result of the fall, she lost the child she was expecting and with it her sanity. In the hospital, she did not stop repeating, 'it was a girl', 'it was going to be a girl'. Those were the last words she said. Then came the silence, the lethargy, and the madness.

The only thing she did was rock to the right and left, first hugging her belly and then her breasts.

A curtain fell between us. Her father deliberately took charge of cutting off any access to her, treating me like an outcast.

My body begins to hurt, I do not know where exactly. It must be some muscle that bears the sorrow and pain of loss. She is not there; it is as if she did not exist.

I move on; it makes no sense to remain here any longer, standing in front of the fence. I go along Mr Blandy's street, weighed down by a ton of memories and the emptiness of my everyday frustration, and yet I walk quickly to distance myself as fast as possible from the scene of my supposed crime.

The cheap detective, or possibly a small-time thug, steps out from behind a car; it looks like he wants to speak to me. I keep going, ignoring his presence, indifferent to his voice which begins with some utterance that I cannot understand. I even notice his cologne that seems strangely similar to mine.

I do not want him to speak to me, for anyone to speak to me, just to escape from this place, to finish a journey that, perhaps, I should not have made.

I turn right and, so as not to retrace my steps, I go through quiet, sunny streets, passing by houses that pretend to be abandoned, in which some dog barks at me and someone shouts loudly.

The parasite is still close behind me; I can hear his footsteps a short distance away.

I leave La Casa de la Mujer behind me. I almost slide down the Avenue, as if an invisible force is pushing me to reach my door quickly in search of refuge. I do not know exactly what I am fleeing from, but my head and back hurt and I feel a dead weight on my shoulders, a swipe from a claw that torments me at the base of my neck.

He calls me, he is calling me by my name in a tone of voice that is familiar to me.

The queue for Cáritas is long, as usual. Three individuals are arguing angrily, pushing each other, insulting each other. One of them leaves the queue and barges into me. He apologises, confused.

My pursuer tries to tap me from behind. I turn angrily and now I see him clearly. He looks like a tramp, poorly dressed and unshaven, with my body and face as they would be in the next ten years, and an expression of perpetual exhaustion, of sadness. I stare at him in surprise, and he nods his head as if he understands everything.

He lets out a deep, hoarse sigh. He joins the end of the queue.

I stand next to him, watching him. I am unable to move.



# The Northeast

## From Bañaderos to La Aldea de San Nicolás









# Guayedra

## Santiago Gil

## Santiago Gil

Born in Guía, Gran Canaria in 1967, Santiago Gil is a journalist, poet, novelist and short story writer.

Since 2004, the year in which he debuted with his novel *Los años baldíos*, he has published around 30 titles among which *El parque*, *Las derrotas cotidianas*, *Yo debería estar muerto*, *Un hombre solo y sin sombra*, *La costa de los ausentes*, *Villa Melpómene* o *El gran amor de Galdós* stand out.

His work has merited awards such as the Esperanza Spínola prize for poetry and, more recently, the Benito Pérez Galdós International Prize for Fiction for *Mediodía eterno*.

Cities and towns of considerable charm are scattered from Bañaderos to the town of San Nicolás, along the rugged volcanic coast, in eternal battle with an indomitable sea, between ravines and vantage points. 'Guayedra', a story of otherworldly love, takes place in one of them.

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Translated by Maria White





**T**he poems are from the ocean. I only transcribe them. For 20 years, I have lived in Puerto de las Nieves in Agaete, in a house near the ravine looking out toward the Tamadaba pine grove and the Faneque cliff with the blue of the Atlantic always on the horizon of my gaze. I also hear the sea from my bed, so sometimes I do not know if the poems I write are dictated by the waves or dreams.

I had not written a single poem until I came here for the first time and since I settled in Gran Canaria I have published a book of poems every year. My books sell a lot and are translated into numerous languages. I almost always write about this landscape in the north of Gran Canaria, although we already know that in poems the themes make little difference. What the whole world highlights in my writing is its musicality, the unexpected metaphorical discoveries and an air of melancholy and decadence that, paradoxically, spurs on a desire for living, loving and believing in happiness as the only ideal to keep living by. Also, in beauty. Nothing would make sense if we did not observe beauty beyond everything we see and everything we hear when we go to the shore or into the streets.

I write in Spanish, but I am Australian. It is the same for me as it was for Conrad, Nabokov or Joseph Brodsky, but in my case, as I will tell you later, this change of language is due to something that I have not dared to tell

anyone until now. This story will be a confession that will probably bring my fame, my sanity and my literary reputation to an end. I have just reached 50 years of age and I have lived on this coast in the north of Gran Canaria since I was thirty. I arrived like someone pursuing a divine calling. I was a salesman for a well-known brand of Rioja wines in Australia and was in Madrid when I decided one night to get on a plane with a woman I had just met in an old and very filthy bar in Lavapiés. She was studying pharmacology and the entire time she told me that she missed this landscape around Agaete that I am now looking at while I write. She told me about the rocks and the black sand, of evenings looking at Mount Teide and the island of Tenerife on the edge of the horizon, and of a magic that made her hear the rumble of the waves on this coastline, which I think I know better than anyone, even in Madrid. After two or three glasses of wine, I suggested to her that we go to the airport and get on the first plane leaving for Gran Canaria. We left at midnight and arrived in Puerto de las Nieves at dawn after renting a car at the airport in Gran Canaria. On the plane, we kept drinking and smoking, and we started to kiss like two newly-weds. I did not realise it on the first day but my life, my thoughts and my way of feeling changed completely from the moment we arrived in a place called Bañaderos. I am writing all of this now because I know what happens to me from that place up to the tip of La Aldea, just where the contours of the cliffs form the shape of a dragon's tail beyond the beaches of Faneroque, El Risco and Las Arenas and, of course, beyond Guayedra, the beach on which we made love before dawn that morning 20 years ago. I never left this island again. I have not even left it to present books or collect the many prizes that have been awarded to me. Everyone talks of my humility and my disregard for literary glory, but I do not leave because I am afraid of not being able to write a single poem ever again.

That morning, when she was asleep on the shore, I wrote the first poem I had ever written in my life, and in Spanish too, in the sand on the beach. The woman returned to Madrid the following day because she had an important exam. She never came back again. The first few days, when I was giving details of her physical appearance and her name, everyone looked at me as if I were mad. No one knew her. Only a woman over 80

years old told me that she knew who she was. She recommended that I did not say her name again and that I forget her forever. The woman I had loved had committed suicide 50 years earlier on the same beach where I ran my hands over her body.

That incident left me very disturbed, and I changed my life completely. I stopped selling wines and I never returned to Australia. I rented this house which I found out later was the same one that summer visitor from Germany lived in, who slipped away one night to Guayedra to let herself drown in its waters, and I watch the days of an existence go by that I sometimes feel does not belong to me. The lady told me that the woman would have been 18 years old then and her parents, who had found a paradise here that they had searched for all over the world, left forever. She remembered her because she always went shopping in the little grocery store that she managed almost on the edge of the beach. Now the beach is hidden behind a horrendous sea wall that stole the horizon. I lived through all of this when I arrived, this monstrous work that they wanted to repeat with another, even bigger pier which, luckily, we residents managed to stop just a year ago. The rest of the landscape is the same as the one the Spanish conquistadors saw and as the ancient Canary islanders would have inhabited, a landscape of dreams, magic, that gets into your soul from the moment you first see it.

I went to Guayedra on many nights, following the trail of a ghost I had met in Lavapiés. She was the one who brought me to these shores and here is the only place where I know I will be able to write poems. Like the swimmer in a story by John Cheever, every day I swim out to sea, recognising the contours of this coastline from the same horizon I see constantly when I lean out of the window of my house; but I also get on the bus and go to other parts of this coast, walk into the ocean and swim among luminous fish, far from the rocks that break against the cliffs, or among the tuna and dolphins that disappear into the distance when I try to swim next to them.

In Bañaderos, I made friends with a man they used to call Sandokan, like Salgari's character. He knew the tides really well from the Sardina lighthouse to Las Canteras. He sketched out for me the contours of every wave that formed in the sea when it seemed to be calm and taught me to let myself be carried by the current, or in

which direction I had to swim when these currents changed suddenly or joined together forming whirlpools or large waves. I also learned a lot from the fishermen in the area of Roque Prieto, weather-beaten men who fished with large rods stretching out over the cliffs, or with the surfers at the El Agujero beach and, of course, with the fishermen in Agaete. All of them offered me a different view of this coastline, so enigmatic and so unknown because of the inaccessibility of many of its inlets and pools when the tide goes out. There are even natural swimming pools that turn into refuges for the soul when you float in them, listening to the incessant noise of the ocean behind the eroded stone walls or breathing in the sea iodine, that smell of algae, shellfish and deep sea that wakes you up when the wind touches your face or brushes against your skin when you are naked and about to leave the water.

I like to swim for hours and come out of the water on some of the many hidden beaches of black sand that form beneath the cliffs. I also pause a long while, finding shapes in the rocks when the tide goes out or following the track of crabs that have lived for more than a thousand years in the entrails of all that lava that one day made the sea red, as sunsets sometimes do. I do not think there is a place on the planet with sunsets like those I have been able to see all these years from the window of my house, or when I climb any of the mountains so that not a single detail of all that riot of colour adorning the sky every evening escapes me. I would live just to see the sunset on these coastlines every day but at the beginning of this story, I told you I was a poet and that I harboured a secret which I have not dared to confess anywhere, until today. Nor will anyone know about it until I die. I will keep this story in a safe in the bank and I will instruct a notary when I prepare my will that I will allow it to be made known then. So if you are reading it, it means that I am already dead. Everything I have, I have left to a woman and to care for the dogs that are with me when I die and, with the rest of the money, I want to sponsor creative grants so that poets from all over the world come to live on these northern coasts of Gran Canaria. Perhaps they will also continue to dictate the same poems to them. I only copy. I go down to the shore to listen to the sea at night and I transcribe the poems that the waves tell me. When I read other poets, who were also here years ago,







I feel that they did the same thing somehow, or that is what I sense when I read Tomás Morales, Alonso Quesada or Saulo Torón, but I do not think that they experienced what I have experienced.

I always believed the passion of that love which brought me to these shores had dictated that first poem to me, the one about a woman they said does not exist now and that I caressed from this corner of time. But it was not her. All the language I transcribe, the poetic discoveries, the metaphors and, also, the intensity they say they find in my poems, are dictated to me by that man who also lives in the depths of this ocean where all poets come. He told me about it one night during the first week that I walked along the beach without knowing why I had left my life in Australia behind, nor where all these poems that I began writing in the sand, and which are now read all over the planet, came from. He told me his story with that kind of Morse code which the seas use to communicate if you pay attention. *He* is the poet, the one who drowned one night in the area around Las Salinas, writing poems about an impossible love. His parents would not let him be with the beautiful foreigner he had fallen desperately in love with. He was 20 years old. Now I write down each one of his poems. Sometimes the writer is no more than a medium who transcribes the words of the dead. He has allowed me to write all these years but even in literature everything has a price. Now he wants me to go around the world in search of this daughter. Her grandparents took her away after her mother committed suicide on the beach at Guayedra because she could not bear the absence of the poet who had given me his poems. On that beach, the last king of the island took refuge. All of the north coast and its mountains and cliffs were places of devotion for the ancient Canary Islanders, the spaces where they knew that energy flowed in a different way. The priestesses, Harimaguadas, and that king called Tenesor Semidán never surrendered that part of the coast which goes from Agaete to la Aldea because that was where they buried their dead to connect with the other side of time. They also used to speak of the telluric force of the rocks and cliffs, and I am sure they heard poems like those I now sketch out in a language that no one taught me before I wrote them down.

I have not left the island to look for his daughter. He does not know of or understand anything about the internet or virtual searches. I traced everything I could because I knew the name of the grandparents who lived in

this same house in which I write, and also the name of that woman in Madrid who made love to me only so that her poet fiancé would not remain unpublished beneath the waters of the ocean. Like the drowned man, I also thought about her every day. I had not loved any other women from then on. I transcribe almost all the poems for her, but I think this whole thing would be impossible if I had not loved her as much as he loved her and if my body had not been inside her ghostly body. You will think that I went mad, but everything I am telling you is as real as the magnetism of this magical coast where beauty lies hidden. I also found out everything I could about his life. He was a second-year medical student when he died. His father was the doctor in Agaete, and on the day they found him dead I think I was about to be born on the other side of the planet. I think he never went away, and that he simply entered my body so that at some point he would come to these shores and write his unpublished poems and find out the fate of the child he had with the foreigner I met in a bar in Lavapiés many years after they had died.

She lies beside me. She is the same age as me and her eyes are just like her mother's. At night, we go to the beach at El Juncal or La Caleta and she sings songs without lyrics as if she were a mermaid beached accidentally on the land. She spent her childhood at sea, sailing in a boat with her grandparents. She never went to school. When they died on the same day and at the same time in a small port on a Greek island, she fulfilled her promise to deliver them into the sea without red tape or any trace of their presence on Earth. They wanted to go back to their dead daughter. She boarded a huge cruise ship that was at that small island and said she was a singer. During those last 20 years, she had not set foot on land. She sang every night with a large orchestra so that cruise passengers in love could dance on the dance floor to her improvised lyrics or to all those songs that are sung when night falls and those in love want to dream that they are sailing the oceans, eternal.

Covid stopped all the cruises and the ship on which she sailed remained anchored in the Rada Sur in Puerto de Luz, in between several oil platforms which, when they are lit up at night, look like buildings anchored on islands that sleep. She was always curious to find out about the origin of her name, but her grandparents never told

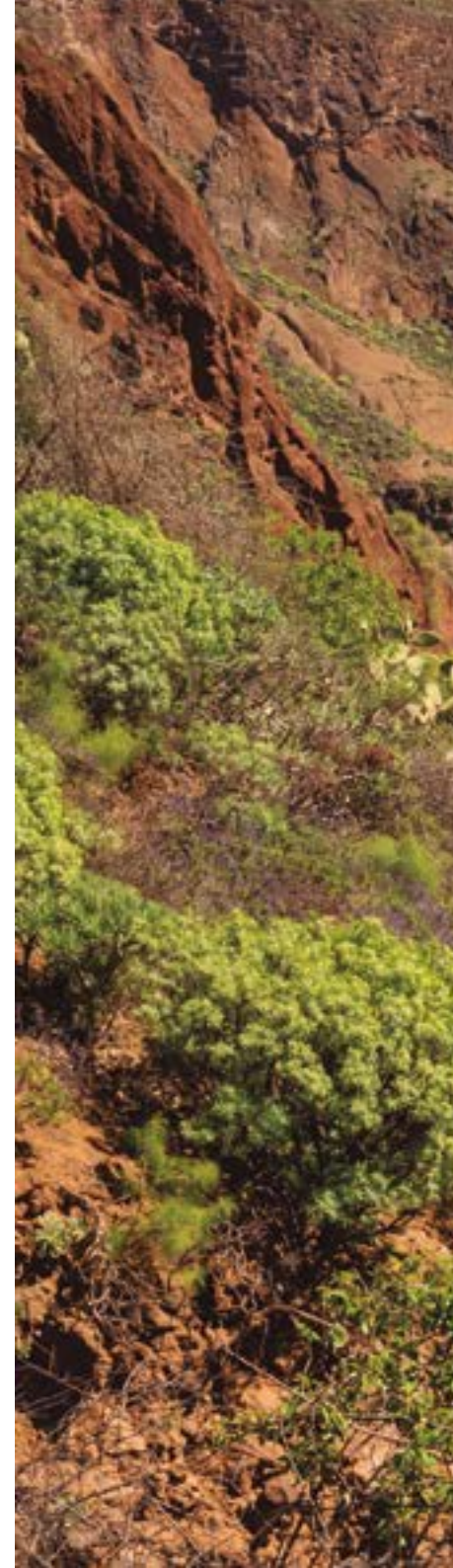
her the true story of her mother. I told it to her when I recognised her walking naked along the shore. Someone told her that her name was the same as that beach surrounded by rocks and a huge cliff that climbs down like a god made of rock leaning into the depths of his kingdom. Guayedra sings songs while I write the poems that her father dictates to me in the sound of the waves that break amongst the rocks on the coast. She recognises in my poems almost all the lyrics that she made up when she was singing on the cruise ships with her eyes closed.





# Southern uplands

## Between Agüimes and Ingenio









# The Legendary Guayadeque

Pepa Aurora



## Pepa Aurora

Was born in Agüimes, 1946 and is a teacher by profession. In her literary work she has focused principally on books for children and young adults; she is also an oral storyteller, short-story writer, and poet.

Among the numerous titles she has published, perhaps the most well-known are *Millo tierno*, *Papá Teide*, *Cuentos de misterio*, *brujas y miedos en un país sin luz*, *La isla de las ardillas* and *Los coquitos de mi Ingenio*.

In addition, she has published several essays including *El lenguaje creativo en la escuela: experiencia de una maestra* and *Literatura Infantil y Juvenil en Canarias. Apuntes para la historia*. She has won a number of awards for her work, for instance, the Alhóndiga, the Chamán and the Garzón Céspedes prizes. In 2020 the Cabildo of Gran Canaria awarded her the Can de Plata for the Arts in recognition of her life's work.

The Legendary Guayadeque draws the reader into not only the landscape but also the history of the Guayadeque valley. This valley is in the southeast of Gran Canaria, and it is where we find the towns of Agüimes and Ingenio. A place of unusual beauty this area has come through a surprising social and cultural transformation despite its longstanding deprivation.

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Translated by Hebe Powell





**F**or the people who live there, Guayadeque is not a ravine it is El Barranco, a unique identity and thus its inhabitants are 'barranqueros'. El Barranco is a peaceful channel that silences water and traps the sounds of the sea in the depths of its caves so that the tides cannot disturb the peace of its tombs.

An extraordinary torrent flows in Guayadeque; emerging silently from springs and flooding through underground galleries its water has, for centuries, brought life to the southeast of Gran Canaria. A melting pot of many peoples, faithful witness to numerous generations, the curious dwellings scaling its precipitous walls, clinging on at all angles, invite lush, nostalgic wanderings. The channel gushes with the colours of an eternal spring snowfall of white tajinastes, almond blossom and marguerites, shot through with the crimson of poppies and the young stems of the palm known locally as the "stick of blood".

El Barranco has the odour of a restless summer, of heady balo plants and evergreen, sweet scented tabaibas. At midday, the air circulates in eddies above the sea giving the impression that the whole flower-scented valley is dozing, while on its slopes, gentle shadows tremble and all sound ceases under an infinite lethargic blue. High up the slopes of El Barranco the fronds of palms spill out, bunched together at the mouths of its caves.

Many as yet undeciphered stories sleep in those caves. We still know very little about their first inhabitants who, even in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, had already begun to leave their tantalising traces as they slowly began to occupy the fertile lands on the slopes of El Barranco. For now, they are merely spectres that fill sleeping minds with fantasies. The first written references to these people date from 1414 when news reached the young king, the Guanarteme of Tamarant, Artemi Semidán, that great sailing ships were trying to land to the southeast on the beaches at Agüimes with the aim of invading the island.

“Let us unite, once again!” he cried and five-thousand armed canary islanders descended from the heights to muster on the banks of El Barranco.

Artemi led his warriors to a resounding victory – a second time – against the troops of Jean de Bethencourt. However, in the second battle, he was gravely wounded and died only a few days later. How the laments rose to fill the ravine!

Folk tales tell how Atindamana, the queen mother, accompanied by the other women, embalmed the bodies of their sons, and placed them in a funerary cave. Then, they sealed the cave entrance so that the warriors of El Barranco would rest in peace for all eternity.

After that last great victorious battle came a time of upheaval, fighting, courage overwhelmed, and clash of cultures. But, the conquest over, at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the southeast of the island re-emerged onto the historical landscape. The Spanish sovereigns, Isabel and Ferdinando bestowed a special status on the settlements of the southeast, in an area extending from Gando castle in Telde to Balos in Tirajana, including the abandoned lands of the coast that were dedicated to crops and cattle. At this time also, the diocese of Agüimes was created and given to Father Miguel López de la Serna, bishop of Gran Canaria and Rubicón.

Guayadeque then entered a harsh time as the great south-eastern source became the centre of squabbles, hatreds, hardships, and selfishness surrounding ownership of its waters. El Barranco contains no hidden treasures, only the silence of history in its vast walls of stone.

At the edges of history, tiny glimmers of light give life the opening it needs, and on the banks of El Barranco, the first rays of hope finally broke through. The first was the arrival of a child in 1666 in Ingenio, a parish of Agüimes. This child was born into the bosom of a family descended from conquistadors and the church; they named him Antonio.

Known affectionately to his family as Antón, and thanks to his fine upbringing, the child was always in good spirits and willing to help with everyday tasks. Yet, he soon discovered the cruelty of the world when, due to some incomprehensible law of blood tribute, his best friend was snatched away and obliged to travel with his family to the Indies. From then on, Antón had only one thought:

“I want to go to the New World!” which he repeated over and over again. He would not be swayed.

“You are a fortunate boy,” his grandmother told him. “You could choose to be priest or a soldier, but no, you’ve set your heart on becoming a missionary.”

And this is what he did. From that early age he began to spend a great deal of time at the town’s Dominican monastery, to acquire the learning he needed to become a man of the cloth. However, he didn’t abandon his sporting pastimes – especially the traditional art of garrote fighting. Once he had completed his initial preparation in Agüimes he went to the Santo Domingo seminary on the island of Madeira to train as a missionary priest. Some years later he set off for home to celebrate his first mass in Agüimes with his family.

On the journey back to Gran Canaria, the ship was attacked by Berber pirates and the passengers were sold into slavery at the market in Meknes.

For eight years, father Antón lived as a slave in Africa. However, thanks to his skills as a negotiator and his training, he made his way as a valiant prize garrote fighter, his masters granting him a share of the wagers placed on him until he had saved enough money to buy his freedom.

He came back home ten years after having left but finally, he was able to say mass in his native town, Agüimes, in the company of his family and friends.



"I want to set off for the Americas as soon as possible!" he petitioned his superiors in the order, but all his requests were denied.

So, he implored to be allowed to go to beg for alms in the New World in order to redeem the souls of certain family members held captive in Algiers and changed his habit for that of a Mercedarian friar.

Since there was no way to disprove his claims, permission was granted, and he travelled to the Indies.

His tortuous voyage through Panama, Guatemala, and Mexico was long and hard, although, once he reached the city of the Aztecs and began to collect alms, he amassed such a large fortune it terrified even him. It was then that he decided to return to his own lands so he could spend this wealth among his own people. However, he never managed to fulfil this desire as he died of a fever on the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1713 in Sinagua in the district of Guacana, Mexico.

After a very lengthy legal process his family claimed their inheritance and a third of father Antón's fortune was returned to his clan. This first sight of American wealth caused a huge stir and is most likely responsible for the unquenchable south-eastern dream of migration that developed over the years.

Another ray of hope emerged in 1718 when the inhabitants of Agüimes rejected the public auction of their coastal lands – lands they had tilled and sowed for centuries – which would have seen the deeds turned over to one sergeant Amoreto who already owned a stretch of land from Aldea Blanca to Arguineguín. The locals staged a mutiny in defence of their land and the slopes of the Guayadeque once again resounded with the clamour of battles waged between politicians and neighbours alike.

The Agüimes mutiny is a hugely important landmark in the defence of land-rights. The process was long and came to a head in a confrontation between the people and troops led by coronels from Telde, Las Palmas and La Laguna. Finally, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April 1733, all prisoners were released, and ownership of the land passed to the local population.

Warlike and much feared, the inhabitants of the south-east rebelled again in 1823 in response to an abusive tax regime that failed to conform to the terms of Telde's territorial constitution. Inhabitants from both banks of



Guayadeque, Ingenio and Carrizal, on one side and Agüimes on the other, once again endured a time of unrest which ended with many prisoners condemned to death.

A lethargic calm then descended over the two sides of Guayadeque. The people lived through epidemics of yellow fever, cholera, many droughts, hunger, and misery, but their dreams continued to grow with more force than ever. This was when the inhabitants on either side of El Barranco declared their wish to govern themselves independently.

Guayadeque once again became embroiled in legal battles, inheritance wars, and petty tribal squabbles over minimal power advantages. El Barranco was the dividing line, the frontier that separated the two municipalities. On one edge, Ingenio and Carrizal with their water and land rights, and on the other, Agüimes, proud of the exalted status it once had – still had – with its parishes and little coastal settlements.

In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ingenio began to establish itself as a free and independent municipality while Agüimes cultivated its image as a beautiful, ancient Episcopal seat. These two towns have never lost their wish to live in harmony and as soon as circumstances allowed, they formed an association together with the municipality of Santa Lucia de Tirajana which incorporates the coastal lands the barranqueros once tilled and sowed.

These two south-eastern towns continue to maintain their independent characters and are proud to have their roots in the legendary Guayadeque.

Visitors to El Barranco do not know its history; at most, they may have seen snippets of its prehistory in the Cave Museum. So, they will travel through peacefully, satisfied by, perhaps, enjoying a relaxing meal in the silence of its caves, a silence broken occasionally by other diners asking questions of the restaurant owner.

“Hey! Don Bartolo, do you see what I see, a giant face carved in the rock wall right there?”

“You see it? Huh? There are lots more. Some are likenesses of Tibicenas, the demons that still live in these caves. They say that the sculptures were made by the last giant that lived in Temisas – he died quite close to here. Well, to you, madam, I’m sure this just seems like a load of tall tales, but when you’ve heard all this as many times as I have... you start to believe.”

"Oh, no! Why wouldn't I believe it? My grandpa used to tell me the same stories. Go on, tell me more! Please!"

"Look, do you see, there high on up on the rocks, the thing that looks like a crow flapping from one place to the other? Well, that's old Ana Jesús with her black cape. She's been collecting the herbs that grow in El Barranco since the dawn of time. She's one of the few healers we still have. She's got a remedy for everything. Sometimes it takes her ages to get back here, but I always wait for her, even if it's just to tell her my troubles and hear some wise words. Yesterday I said to her, 'Anita! This damned pandemic!' And she gave me a herbal cure that made me feel much better. She also advised me to go sit by the sea because the fresh air off the water clears everything away and helps you sleep better."

"And how far is the sea from here, Don Bartolo? Do you know?"

"At least twenty kilometres; but she wasn't talking about the sea at the coast but the one you can feel, or imagine, inside the Whispering cave. Now, that's not far from here – although you can't go inside because its full of water."

"And can you hear the sea from this far off?"

"Can you hear it? Of course. And you can feel the breeze off the waves as they go up and down, and you can even feel the movement of the pebbles on the seabed."

"That's so fascinating! Almost poetic. Everything was perfect, my good man: the food, the location, the conversation. You've been so welcoming. Just out of curiosity, is this restaurant in Ingenio or Agüimes?"

"Madam! This is El Barranco and everyone who works here is, first of all, a barranquero."



# The South

## From the Villa de Mogán to its beach











# Kain with a C

Alicia Llarena

## Alicia Llarena

Born in Mogán in 1964, Alicia Llarena is a Doctor in Spanish Philology at ULPGC, (University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria) where she has been a professor of Hispano-American Literature since 2003. As a researcher and critic, her studies focus on Cuban poetry from the 80s, magical realism and prominent writers such as Pino Betancor and Mercedes Pinto. *Yo soy la novela (I am the novel)*, which studies the life and work of Mercedes Pinto, won the Canary-American Special Research Prize (Premio Especial de Investigación Canarias-América).

Also, since the early 1990s, Llarena has cultivated her literary creation in the fields of poetry and short story. As a poet, she has published *Vuelo libre (Free flight)*, *Fauna para el olvido (Fauna for the void)*, *El arte de las flores secas (The art of dry flowers)* and *El amor ciego (Blind Love)*. Although her prose work is not quite as extensive, she has participated in various collective volumes and is the author of *Impresiones de un arquero (Impressions of an archer)*, a notable book of short stories that was published in the early 1990s.

In 'Kain with a C', she tells the story of a millennial love affair, loyalty, and betrayal that moves between frivolous television sets and the tourist hotspots south of the island. The epitome of sun and beach tourism, in reality, the south of Gran Canaria offers much more than all-inclusive hotels and shopping centres. It being her district of origin, Llarena knows the south well, and in her fiction offers a trail for those who want to travel a little further than their tour operator allows.

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Translated by Alice Banks







**E**verything was going well until Tuesday. I met Kain on *First Dates*, that program for singles on Channel Four that livened up my afternoons of procrastination and laziness, and made me laugh out loud. You get to see just how many freaks there are in the world, and that always, like my grandmother used to say, there's someone out there for everyone. Until I began to watch it, I always thought I had quite a solid understanding of human nature, but no way, this gallery of colourful characters so moved by such different love interests would never have occurred to me. Some were as old fashioned as ancient trunks lost in time – characters that one thought no longer existed or were extinguished with the last tub of Brylcreem. There were men, women, and those who identified as non-binary; they were quirky, funny, forward thinking, submissive, young, cheeky, naïve, loose cannons, soft, mature, tough, smart arses, shy, self-assured, inexperienced, and they were all so well mixed by casting, so gracefully portrayed by whomever was doing the production.

I bet my friend Maca that it was all set-up, but she disagreed, said that people write into the program and what we see is real. So, bold as brass, I wrote them a WhatsApp, registered on the page, answered some questions, and after three months was buying Maca dinner and catching a plane to sit down in front of a British guy who'd

lived in Móstoles for a year and wanted to fall in love with a Spanish woman. A full-on blind date that I'd said yes to for a laugh – and to take advantage of the plane ticket to the mainland along with two free nights in a hotel.

Kain wanted to get away from his family and learn Spanish and had ended up serving drinks in a bar from Tuesday to Sunday and sharing a flat with a North African, a Korean, and a young bull-fighter's apprentice who had recently arrived from Ecuador. It was going well for him until he began to feel lonelier and lonelier, and one Monday, tired as a dog, he threw himself down onto the sofa for the entire afternoon and just so happened to put on Channel Four at the same time I was watching and betting Maca a dinner at the best Japanese in town. He searched Google until he came across the sign-up page, and three months later he was matched with me on *First Dates*. The boy didn't displease me, he was a good listener, and though he spoke slightly broken Spanish, he was so funny that the camera didn't take its focus off us. I made myself interesting, played the game and laughed along with him, and him with me, because I told him I was from the Canary Islands and he had always wanted to see them. One thing led to another, and when they asked us if we wanted a second date, we said yes, and went on to Puerta del Sol to carry on chatting and getting to know each other.

But how can you be called Cain and be so hot? That's the question I remember asking him the most that night; I almost never drank but was feeling bold having sunk back beer followed by wine. It made me very sloppy, and I was on the verge of ruining everything until he told me, it's Kain, Kain with a K, and taught me how to spell it correctly. Finally, I understood. I like you, Cain with a K, I like you a lot I told him. Of course, as you know, I only signed up to *First Dates* to mess about a bit and because I'd made a bet with my friend – to tell you the truth I had no intention of finding a partner. But then Kain touched his lips to mine and we kissed – wow what a kiss it was – and the next morning, whilst he was still sleeping and I was asking myself how I'd got there, how I'd ended up getting into a stranger's bed on the first night, I sent a WhatsApp to Maca. First of all, I asked her not to make fun of me, then I told her that as unbelievable as it was, the guy on *First Dates* turned out to be a very handsome Brit called Cain – spelt with a K – and I liked him. We went out for wine and now I'm at the hotel and he's about to wake up, and I don't know whether to stay a few days in Madrid or bring him to the island. What would you do

if you were me Maca? What would you do? Maca, who knows me better than my mother and has a certain poise that I lack, asked me so calmly to bring back one of those bottles of wine that turns toads into princes and told me that I should go back to sleep, it was really early, and did I not give a shit that back there in Gran Canaria she was an hour behind?

For the next two weeks I swept all the bars and restaurants in the south of Gran Canaria, from Arguineguín to Veneguera, looking for a job for Kain. He told me over the phone that he didn't care whether he served drinks here or there and that learning Spanish on the mainland or the island was exactly the same. In fact, he would prefer to learn it in Las Palmas because it was more like the Spanish he spoke with the bullfighter's apprentice from Ecuador, and the Ecuadorian had told him that with that accent he'd be able to understand Latin Americans better, and after all they make up the biggest majority of Spanish speakers. I didn't care for this linguistic debate, all I wanted was to be with Kain and take advantage of his enthusiasm about coming to the island. I wanted to help him find his feet here and anchor him to a bar where he could serve drinks and earn a living along with some decent tips that we could survive on until I'd finished my degree. The arguments that all of this caused between myself, my parents and Maca – who did nothing to hide her disbelief as she accompanied me day after day to bars, pubs, hotels, night clubs, cafeterias, and restaurants – were completely forgotten when Kain arrived at the airport and began working at the Puerto Rico Shopping Centre within a few hours. In short, a cousin of a cousin of a cousin did me a favour and got him serving at the Shamrock Bar there, where every night tourists would listen to live music whilst drinking cocktails and beers until they lost consciousness. Kain was fascinated, it was like being at home he said, surrounded by Brits and drinking Guinness to cool off from the heat. Maca let us stay at hers until we found our feet, and a few weeks later the same cousin of the cousin of the cousin rented us a studio in Mogán town, and that's where the good stuff began.

Independent, though scarce in resources, Kain and I managed to amuse ourselves as our relationship and experience progressed. To begin with, I had to teach him the difference between Las Palmas and Gran Canaria, one of them is the capital, and the other the island. Yes, Kain, it's called Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, but that's just



the city. And there's a difference between Mogán town and Mogán beach. Yes, Kain, it's the same town, but we distinguish between those who live up here and those that live on the coast. I had to teach him how to pronounce Arguineguín; no, Kain, it's not Argwinegwin, can't you see there's no 'w'? Just when I was laughing out loud, explaining these basic survival codes, I got a call from *First Dates* to find out how we were doing, to see if we were still together and if we gave them permission to make the success of our blind date public on their website.

Curiously, it soon became clear that Kain wasn't the only foreigner on the island, as next to him, I also felt like an outsider. At his side, I learnt to travel and look at my homeland in a different way. As he began his shift at the Shamrock Bar, I walked through the shopping centre and felt a kind of nostalgia for what, until a few decades ago, had been a very lively place. There were once first-rate leisure activities on the first level where the youth of the south could rub shoulders with the rest of Europe, but today it needs a comprehensive facelift. The almost heroic resistance of some of its stores is clear, and I can't imagine how they're still standing. The contrast between the Shamrock Bar and the Mamá Pino restaurant occasionally made me smile and even gave me the idea for a future investigation of this curious coexistence of cosmopolitan and traditional places; the Steak House and the town taberna, the English breakfast and the Pinito Bar. They say they're going to build a new shopping centre next to this one and call it Mogán Mall, which sounds a bit more up to date and has that American glamour. I feel as if they're going to bury the memory of my generation in its new foundations, or that they'll simply let it die, just like La Bolera where we had spent so many happy and memorable nights.

When Kain is free, two days a week, the island turns into a party. He loves to go out and meet people, the pupils of his eyes become drenched in exoticism and he finds everything wonderful. I jump on this bandwagon of excitement and it takes me straight back to childhood – I rediscover this forgotten land. That's something he doesn't understand, that when we live in Las Palmas the south is like another galaxy that is visited in the summer, and that when we live in the south, Las Palmas is the city we visit to buy the presents for the Three Kings celebration and get papers in order. You'll soon understand, I tell him. Until we started touring the island, we'd only been in Vecindario, which is where Maca has the apartment that she carried on living in after her and



her Cuban broke up. We'd also been to the capital a couple of times to see my parents, that is until I got tired of their slaps on the wrist after I dropped out of law school and started studying anthropology online so I could move from club to club with Kain. But boy I don't regret it, not one thing or the other, what's more, the heart of the island has opened up to me like a ripe fruit inviting me to explore its character from this new academic perspective. There's so much to analyse that I no longer get bored, and in everything I see an opportunity and an incredible source of knowledge.

Our first excursion was exploring the town we lived in, a novelty for him, and a return to the womb for me. My great-grandparents, my grandparents and my parents were born here. And I was born here too. Never in my dreams did I imagine living in Mogán again after becoming a city girl, my parents uprooting me to move to Las Palmas when I was just a few months old. And look at me now, just one more neighbour who potters around like a little old lady, explaining to Kain that where you see this thing today, when I was a girl it was something else, that before, the ravine ran to the beach, that it was like this and like that, and that the church and the kiosk in the square are almost still the same, that the town still retains a certain beauty, that the ravine – crossed by the road that runs from the first neighbourhoods of the town to the Veneguera canyon – is beautiful thanks to its primitive and remote landscape. I explain that when you ask in supermarkets across the islands, 'where are these mangoes from?' and 'where are these avocados from?' they always deceive you by saying they're from Mogán, and I laugh openly and ask them if there's really such a prodigious land that produces more than it sows? Kain still cannot distinguish the taste of real avocados or tell the difference between a mango and a manga, but I can, I know that there are none quite like the ones you can find here, which is why they're so famous and desired by everyone. When I told Kain that until recently Mogán was the end of the world, he looked at me as if thinking 'what an exaggeration.' But it's true, I told him, there were people that were starting to arrive when they'd only just inaugurated the last section of the highway, and then, yes, an avalanche of people with a good nose for business suddenly landed in Puerto de Mogán, so pretty. But hey, at least they built it with care and didn't haphazardly throw it up like other tourist areas that are painful to look at. Given the choice, I would have preferred they left

my childhood beach as it was, which is to say that I wish they didn't touch a single pebble. I was distraught when I learnt that it was going to be buried by tons of blonde sand, such mania there is now for building artificial paradises and Caribbean scenes on every corner – turquoise waters and all – just like Playa de Amadores.

Did you know, Kain, that Mogán was one of the poorest towns in the south of this island and now it's the one with the golden mile? And he stares as if I were pulling his leg or as if he were in front of a Replicant from *Blade Runner*. Of course, it's true that the past only matters to those who experienced it, and what difference does it make what the old south was like before this south, if now all that matters is enjoying a beer in front of Arguineguín beach; or some *papas con mojo* and a plate of calamari in en El Boya; or listening to the sound of the water against the pebbles of El Pajar beach as you glance at the cement factory that looks like a space station planted in the middle of Santa Águeda Bay; or the memorable sunsets in Amadores, the open waves churning on the black sand of Taurito; or the bougainvillea that climb the white walls of Little Venice, whose tiny corners Kain loves. He arrived on the island looking for paradise and he found it right in front of him, toasted by the sunshine that mercilessly beats down onto the mass of hotels and tourist developments. His eyes, eager for exoticism, see joy where I saw a loss and well-being and placidity where I see only greed. I don't know it if was love, but life with Kain made me realise all of my little privileges: you don't know what it's like to bathe in the sea all year round, have it right there at your fingertips; you don't know what it's like to get up with this sun every day, slip into the water and forget everything, bask in this beautiful nature, change scenery in half an hour, go from the ocean to the summit in the time it takes to make a stew. Forget about cement, woman, and focus on what's important.

I did, and I'll continue to do so until I die. I'll never be able to thank him enough for that, and perhaps that's why, even though I'm dying of rage, I'm helping him pack his suitcase and am even going to accompany him to the airport. Piece of shit! We were so good, I tell him as I shove his boxers into the bottom of the suitcase and tightly curl his socks inside his shoes. Look at you, hooking up with the first German woman to hit on you at the Shamrock Bar, what did you think? That I wasn't going to find out? I ask him as I pass him his folded shirts. And she's not the first, is she, Kain? Say something. Since Tuesday the island has soured and the sun falling on my

head is as heavy as lead. My tongue has become coarse and I accompany my breakfast sandwich with every single swear word that comes to mind, he doesn't understand most of them, but I don't care, he can go and learn Spanish somewhere else. I glare at him with distrust and resentment and shove my anger into the toilet bag that he'll take back to Móstoles where the Ecuadorian bullfighter's apprentice is waiting for him. And don't get your hopes up, Kain with a C, I don't want you back, this is the *Last Date*.

Maca drives slower than usual and I can't wait to get to the check-in desk and say goodbye to him as soon as possible. I don't know why the hell she's taken the old road and is prolonging this agony instead of getting on straight on the highway. Kain with a C doesn't say anything, he's immersed in his own silence, simply looking out of the window and reviewing every inch of sea and landscape, his pupils charged with exoticism and his heart beating melancholically. I can't remember the last time I came this way either. Such a pretty road, I tell myself, carved out of a primitive, centuries-old cliff face on the very edge of the ocean. A beauty.







# Northern uplands

## From Teror to Valleseco







# Way out beyond

Ángel Sánchez



## Ángel Sánchez

A writer, poet, visual poet, anthropologist, translator and essayist, was born in Gáldar in 1943. He studied at the universities of La Laguna, Salamanca, Grenoble and Göttingen, was a lecturer in Spanish at the University of Vincennes and took a doctorate in Literature and Humanities at the Sorbonne.

His work reflects an enormous diversity of interests and knowledge. He has translated Trackl, Günther, Enzensberger and Jenofonte and edited work by Cairasco de Figueroa and Domingo López Torres.

He is the author of eight books of poetry and his poems have also been published in two collected volumes. He is also a leading exponent of visual poetry, having authored fourteen works in that discipline. He has published seven narrative works, notably including *La mar se mueve* (Rough Sea), *Un beso en la nuca* (A Kiss on the Neck) *Calibán and Cuchillo criollo* (Creole Knife). In 2018 the Canary Islands regional government awarded him the Canaries Literature Prize in recognition of work done throughout his career.

*Way Out Beyond*, at first sight an innocent *Bildungsroman*, transports the reader to the interior of the north of the island of Gran Canaria, where the visitor is stunned by the remains of the Doramas forest. An account of this rural world extends into a tale of the adventures undertaken by members of the community whose descendants still live on Delacroix Island in St. Bernard Parish, Louisiana - the descendants of emigrants from the Canary Islands who still retain the language and culture of their islander ancestors

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Translated by R.L.Parry





Our story begins in the heart of Gran Canaria, in a place called Villa de Moya. The village lies in a leafy and overgrown area that people once named the Jungle of Doramas, after a local leader who they were sure had once lived there. He was a brave man, a native of the area, and he fought the Spanish conquerors when they invaded the islands in the 15th century and died fighting for the freedom of his village, so the chronicles say.

Not far from the old centre of the village there lived, in the mid-20th century, a farmer, Eusebio Valerón, with his wife Águeda Marrero and their family. They were respectable and hardworking folk, devoted to working their land. They grew corn, potatoes, yams, fruit and vegetables, and what they did not eat themselves they sold at the village market. On this, as well as on the milk of their three cows and four goats and on the cheese that they made from it, and from the eggs that their hens laid, they lived quite decently; they got on well with their neighbours and behaved in every way as good Christians do, just like their parents before them.

The couple had met at the dance, the *baile de taifas*, which is held every year, in the nearby village of Firgas. They danced the polka and fell for each other straight away. They started going out together, arranging to meet at weekends to stroll on the village square or go to the pictures, or to dances or on outings with the neighbours. They gave each other gifts and soon - with the blessing of their parents, who were very pleased with the relationship - they became engaged.

Eusebio was an honest man, serious-minded and hardworking, and Águeda was a vigorous and houseproud young woman. They made a good couple. After a six-year courtship they gave each other gifts of fine clothing and the banns were published. They married in Firgas parish church, and their witnesses were the groom's mother Remedios and the bride's father, a well-known local bonesetter. He could cure sprains, pop shoulders back in their sockets and set dislocated bones. He was one of the local people who were known as *Indianos*, for they had travelled to America - he himself had been to Cuba, and had come back rich, and bought some farmland near his home.

Once the young couple were married and a feast had been had, off they went to live in the town of Arucas, in a house that Eusebio had inherited from his parents: a fine house made from grey-blue Arucas stone with pine wood doors and window frames, a thick thatched roof, a brick chimney crowned with a weather vane, and a loft with an attic where they could keep all the old junk and bric-a-brac that they no longer used.

They had three children: a boy named Julián, and two girls, Hermina and her younger sister Margarita. They were brought up to be well-groomed, tidy, polite and well-spoken; to make their own beds and help as much as they could with the housework, in the fields and in tending to the animals. They had to make themselves useful and help their parents, for farmers' lives are full of work. Naturally they started taking communion and went to mass on Sundays. They got weekly pocket money. They went to the village school, for their parents did not want them to grow up stupid, but ready to work to get ahead, so they could have a better life than their parents. All parents want the best for their children and Eusebio and Águeda were to be no exception.

On their birthdays the children received gifts of clothes, story books and models to cut out. At the feast of Epiphany, the Three Wise Men would come with presents. They would always try to give the Valerón children what they asked for, and would always bring them some clothes, but never the kind of things that they gave to the rich kids in the village, like scooters, roller skates or bicycles. Little by little, the children started to realise who the Three Wise Men really were.

They also started to learn some basic things about sex, even though their parents did not see fit to teach them about it, except when the girls had their first periods, or when Eusebio warned Julián not to play with himself. He

caught him at it once. He told him it was a natural thing for a young man to do; still, he must go to confession, for it was a sin, and, what was more, it weakened the body.

And so the family went on with their lives. They had good manners and were always sure to help their relatives and neighbours when they gathered to pick the potatoes or corn, or to build a wall or to swap their produce. They helped the beggars who sometimes passed on the road with their packs on their back, asking for charity. There were people whom fortune had abandoned, who had no livelihood whatsoever and so went begging from one village to the next. Most were old men; some would carry baskets of herbal remedies which they would try to sell to eke out a living, barefoot and callused as they were. For frequent ailments such as colic, bunged-up noses, tummy aches or diarrhoea, these natural remedies were the miracle cure: pennyroyal, lemon verbena, horsetail, black-jack, water mint and chamomile. Their parents would sometimes take pity on those poor men, putting in their bag a handful of potatoes, a slice of cheese, a pair of old shoes or an old coat. Compassion was an instinctive virtue; charity for the poor would be rewarded in the Kingdom of Heaven, as the local priest, Don Miguel Hernández, used to preach to them in the pulpit. Do to others as you would have them do to you, he would say. And there was sense in what he said, for the one who shares what he has shows that he is a good person. Only the mean would deny help to the beggars, quarrelling with them, telling them it was their own fault, even though the people who said that knew nothing of the poor person's story.

But it is time for us to turn to the heroine of this tale, Margarita. She is thirteen years of age when our story begins. She was a very particular kind of girl, as her parents used to say: uninhibited and utterly curious, she asked an awful lot of questions, to the point where she could be rather indiscreet with guests. This annoyed her parents, who would tell her to be quiet, that it was impolite to ask questions about things that were none of her business. God, they said, severely punished girls who were nosey. Margarita felt awful after these tellings-off. She would run crying to her room to tell her doll Pelusilla of how she was suffering for having overstepped the line yet again.

But then her mother would come to cheer her up, kissing her and telling her she was forgiven.

"Come on, Maíta, don't be like that," her mother said, on one of these occasions. "All you have to do is come and say sorry."

The girl stood up as her mother took her hand and led her to the sitting room. There Margarita addressed one Mrs. Lola Henríquez, saying she was sorry for asking why her son dribbled all the time and why one could hardly understand what he was saying.

Mrs. Henríquez was very understanding.

"You see, my girl: children are a gift to us from God. We have to accept what he gives us just the way it is," she said. "We aren't all lucky enough to have healthy, gorgeous children like you and your brother and sister. My Quique is a good boy. He is sweet and likes to play. If you knew him better you would realise that appearances count for very little. He is a human being, and as such he needs understanding and respect. You are forgiven, of course. But you will do your best, won't you, to be more understanding towards others?"

"Yes, ma'am, I will," replied Margarita, who had quite calmed down. "And please give him my best wishes."

"Rest assured, I will," said Mrs. Henríquez. "And don't you worry any more about what has just been said. Simply be more understanding and don't get yourself in trouble."

Margarita said goodbye to the lady and her parents said no more about it, although they still could not understand how she could put her foot in it like that. Never had they heard her ask such a question.

In spite of the lesson she had learned from this incident, Margarita's innate curiosity did not let up. So it was that one afternoon, when her parents had gone out to buy things and her brother and sister were visiting their friends, she made a discovery that would mark her for life.

The attic was strictly out of bounds. Some of the wooden steps leading up to it were worm-eaten and might collapse. The loft was damp and there were mice. Her parents had warned her not to think of going up there.

Yet since, as we have seen, she was an extremely curious and bold girl - as philosophers will tell you, these qualities are a sure route to deep knowledge - Margarita took the opportunity of being alone to go on an adventure, for this was the only part of the house that she had never visited.

When she got up to the door of the attic, she saw that it had no padlock, bolt or fastening: it opened with a simple push. It made a rusty creak that gave her a fright, as if it were a sign of danger, as though, inside, there was something to be scared of.

Instead she found damp, spiders' webs, piles of old sacks, mould, rusty machinery - she could not imagine what it was used for - cans of paint and tatty old furniture that must have belonged to her grandparents. Mice had made a nest in an old mattress. Overhead stretched the great pine beam that held up the ceiling.

But then something else caught her attention: a kind of box or chest, covered in dust. It had no lock. Hoping to find something interesting inside, she wiped it clean with a sleeve of her pullover and opened it.

Some old clothes, old-fashioned hats, a beautiful but threadbare Manila shawl, bobbin lace, a white dress - it must have been the one her mother wore for her wedding - some prayer books... and a metal box with an illustration of a maritime scene on the lid. 'This looks like treasure,' she thought to herself.

When she opened it, she found inside a wad of letters held together with blue ribbon and another box. This one was made of wood. It contained photographs.

Some of the letters dated to the time of her parents' engagement. But there were others with foreign stamps. They had been sent from Cuba. Her grandparents! There were others still... these ones caught her eye most of all. They had stamps marked "US Air Mail". They bore the senders' addresses: St. Bernard, Louisiana. That was a place she had never heard the slightest thing about. No one had ever said her family had relatives or knew people there. Yet when she read some of the letters, Margarita thought she recognised some of the names that were mentioned. The senders wrote of working on farms and fishing in the Mississippi river, trapping animals and selling furs in New Orleans. They asked after their relatives back home. They sent them messages and fond regards.

The photographs in the box went back a very long time. They showed her grandparents and great-grandparents; her own mother and father's courtship and wedding; herself and her brother and sister when they were little children.

'These photos should be stuck in an album,' she thought. She had seen that done in some of her friends' houses. She didn't understand why her own parents didn't look after their photos that way. Most families had an album in full view so they could show it and tell you who the people in the pictures were.



There was a very pretty colour picture of Margarita in her communion robe. She imagined how it would look in a frame standing on the sideboard. But in her house there was too much work to do. Her parents never thought of putting a photo album on display.

Seeing all those memories made the girl feel all stirred up inside. The discovery she had made would set off the whole chain of events that our story is going to tell.

She closed the boxes and the trunk and went slowly down from the attic, afraid that her parents and brother and sister would come home and catch her doing something that would get her into big trouble. She felt like she had taken hold of the thread of a kite; now it was up to her to make it fly. She must investigate all that she had found in the box of memories: the memories of her parents and especially of her grandparents, for they were the ones who had left and gone to Cuba when they were young. They could tell her what it was like there.

Luckily Margarita's parents did not find out about her visit to the forbidden room. She said not a word about it. But as her curiosity was unstoppable, she soon suffered another embarrassment.

One evening, Margarita put aside her homework and went into the yard. Her mother was out there washing clothes in the basin, holding a brick of Lagarto soap in her hand and raking it roughly over the garments. She mixed in powder to make the whites even whiter. Afterwards she would hang them on the line.

Margarita drew near, a little nervous in case her mother shouted at her for being a nuisance. But there was something she just had to know, and the sooner the better. She sat down on one of the stone steps between the basin and a leafy aloe vera plant.

"Mum? When I meet a boy, how will I know if I like him?" she said. "What does it feel like?"

Her mother stopped scrubbing. Her eyes opened wide.

"Kid, what... What's all this about now? You're just a little girl. You're too young for that stuff. Forget about that till your time comes. Go and do your homework. Ask me this nonsense again and I'll tell your father. Then you'll have something to worry about... A little kid, thinking about boys! Come on, get out of here. I've got work to do!"

Margarita's face dropped. She was upset, but she was determined to know, so she pressed on, flustered.

"I'm sorry, mum. Please, don't get angry. Don't tell Dad," she said. "It's just that when I had my first period you said I was a young woman now, and you told me the facts of life, so I wanted to know more about it," she said. "I won't talk about it any more. I'm sorry for asking so many questions. I just keep putting my foot in it. Am I a bad girl?"

Her mother tried to calm her down.

"Of course you're not, Maíta. It's just that you stick your nose in grown-up things," she said. "Don't worry. I won't tell your father. But what you have to do is get back to your homework. Let me finish up here. I've got dinner cooking and a bunch of other things to do."

Margarita was almost crying. She gave her mother a kiss to thank her and went back to her desk to revise the lesson on metals and metalloids for school the next day. That way, when the chemistry teacher called out her name to ask her a question, she would give the right answer.

We have not yet talked about Margarita's schooling at the college run by Dominican nuns in Arucas. She was not a boarder, though it was a boarding school: there were girls who had gone there from orphanages, or whose parents had separated or who lived very far away. There were also those who could not afford to pay the 25 pesetas a month that the nuns charged the non-boarding pupils.

Margarita would rise at seven o'clock in the morning, wash in the bathroom and put on her uniform: a chequered skirt, a white blouse with a blue ribbon round the neck and a matching cardigan, black shoes and a cap with a purple band bearing the name of the college. Then she would eat breakfast: milk and a *gofio* flour, with some extra breadcrumbs and cured cheese. She would brush her teeth and after that her mother would give her a little bag containing a sandwich of quince and soft cheese for her to eat in the playground at lunchtime. Three days a week, when she had class in the afternoon, she would eat in the college canteen. On Tuesdays and Thursdays she would come home at midday on the bus with her satchel, carrying in it her text books, notebooks, pencil case and a few pennies her mother gave her in case she wanted to buy a *rapadura* - a cone-shaped candy - sweets, raisins or white lupin beans from the stall opposite the school gate.

The nuns were good teachers and real characters. Some were friendly, caring and understanding. Others had tempers; they would get annoyed with the girls when they made mistakes and kept them in at break time to study as a punishment.

Margarita's favourite subjects were Spanish language and literature, geography and history, French and natural science. She struggled with maths, physics and chemistry; those were the ones she spent most time on because she did not want to fail in any of them. She knew what a sacrifice her parents had made to pay the monthly fees and how much the bus fare, uniform, school books and everything cost them.

She had some good friends at school, such as Benedicta Pulido, Rosa María Vega and Loli Hernández. Loli was an orphan and boarded at the school. Margarita was particularly kind to her, for she knew that she needed love.

The pupils learned sewing, embroidery and cookery, and received a strict Christian education. The boarders who did not go on to further study tended to be hired as maid servants in the houses of powerful families, or as sales girls in shops, packing tomatoes and bananas in export warehouses. Otherwise they might find a husband who worked and could support them. Of Margarita's friends, some came from rich Arucas families with French surnames. The Marquis of Arucas and other noble local families generally sent their daughters to the nuns' college in the capital on the mistaken assumption that there, as well as receiving a superior education, they would get to meet and forge relations with the cream of Canarian society. They had nothing against the education offered by the local college in itself. But they feared their daughters would never improve their prospects if they only mixed with poor girls, orphans and country children without ever seeing the capital. And sending them to board with the nuns had the added advantage of taking the girls off their hands to somewhere where they would not witness their parents' quarrels and family problems, as well as the frequent adulterous affairs of one or other of their parents. The girls would come home only for the holidays, or at most the occasional weekend.

Religious instruction was fundamental to life in the Dominican college. The girls went every day to hear the chaplain say mass. They recited it in Latin, received their other lessons in Latin and studied Latin as a subject in itself. They learned by heart the *Our Father*, the *Hail Mary*, the *Salve Regina*, *Tantum Ergo*, *Veni Creator* and the other canticles for each feast day. They recited the rosary in religious studies class and read books about the saints - most of all, those ones who set an example for purity, such as Saint María Goretti or Saint Domingo Savio. The nuns were determined to make their pupils good Christians. That was the path, they said, not only to seeing the blessed God in heaven, but also to being respected, loved and happy.

There was more to their lives than studying and playing in the street, however. Margarita and her sister were great fans of listening to the radio. It sat on top of a chest of drawers: a Philips made of varnished wood, with a curved top. It could only be tuned to two stations: EAJ-50 Radio Las Palmas and Radio Club Tenerife. Their parents let them listen, because the girls loved to sing and music was very instructive, for culture and recreation. They especially liked the daily slot on the radio where the presenter would play requests: someone would dedicate a song to a girl he liked or to a friend or relative, to congratulate them on their name day, or their birthday, or their wedding. Conchita Piquer, Juanita Reina, Marifé de Triana and Carmen Sevilla were popular singers at the time. So were Jorge Sepúlveda, Lucho Gatica, Lorenzo González, Carlos Gardel, Jorge Negrete, Javier Solís, Armando Manzanero, el Dúo Dinámico, Antonio Machín, los Tres Sudamericanos, Conchita Bautista, Pedro Infante, Pedro Vargas, Lola Flores and Nati Mistral.

Then there were native Canarian stars: Mary Sánchez and the Bandamas, María Mérida and Alfredo Kraus.

The girls knew lots of the songs by heart because they were played on the radio so often: *Camino verde*, *Mirando al mar*, *La niña de Puerto Rico*, *El manisero*, *Ojos verdes*, *Quince años tiene mi amor*, *Capote de grana y oro*, to name just a few. Margarita noted down the words to them with a pencil in her notebook that she kept hidden in a nook underneath the radio. They also got to know classical music, for the radio would often broadcast concerts of Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Bach, Chopin, Falla and Joaquín Rodrigo. The children liked that dramatic, refined music. No one had ever explained it to them, but they could tell intuitively that it was important to listen to if you wanted to be deeply cultured. Whenever they went to concerts at the Pérez Galdós theatre, they found they were already familiar with the music.

They listened to plays by Guillermo Sautier Casaseca and Luisa Alberca which drew large radio audiences every day, performed by actors from Radio Madrid. Margarita's mother too would listen to those when she did not have housework to do. She and Margarita's father would listen to the nine o'clock broadcast. On Saturday evenings there was Bobby Deglané Cabalgata's popular weekend programme, with famous actors such as Pepe Iglesias, or *El Zorro* - a funny Argentinian who played many different characters and made up songs that soon

became popular. By the time those programmes came on air, Margarita and her sister would be in bed, but later in life, when they had grown up a bit, they were allowed to stay up to listen.

While the sisters were enjoying that entertainment, their brother was out with friends playing table football and drinking in the village bars. The only things on the radio that interested him were the football matches and the pools results; that was when he wasn't out fooling around, flirting with the girls in the village, sometimes quite vulgarly, and trying to lift up their skirts.

As the days went by like this, Margarita was working on her plan to delve further into the discovery she had made in the attic. To make herself look convincing, she decided to pretend that she had to write a school essay about emigration. That would enable her to gather the information she needed to pursue her investigation.

So it was that one afternoon, she went up to talk to her father as he was sharpening a hoe.

"Dad. Do you know if we have relatives in Cuba?" she said. "Or in Louisiana? ... It's for history class. Mother Consuelo is teaching us about emigration. She asked us to write an essay about whether there are any emigrants in our family."

"Cuba? Well now," her father said. "I know that both your grandparents spent a few years there. They could tell you what they know. They sometimes talk to us about those times." For once, Margarita's father seemed pleased to be talking to her, for her question made sense and wasn't embarrassing. "But Louisiana?" he added. "Where is that?"

"I was looking in the... in the atlas," Margarita said. "It's one of the United States, in the south, between Texas and Florida. It's next to the Mississippi river. It looks like emigrants went there too, hundreds of years ago."

"Well that's the first I've heard of it. You know I hardly went to school. I had to start working in the fields when I was just about the age you are now," he said. "When we visit your grandparents, you can ask them. You'll have to wait till then."

"I can wait," she said. "I'm really keen to do a good job."

"That's good, love. I'm glad you're getting interested in something useful. But let me work now. I've got to hoe up these furrows and plant peas."

"I'll leave you to it, Dad. Thanks."

"Not at all. You know I'm always happy to help, if I can."

The girl went back to the house. She was happy about what her father had said. Eusebio carried on working, bashing the iron of the hoe with a hammer to knock it into shape. He was pleased that his daughter had shown an interest in something other than her usual tittle-tattle: something that would be useful for her studies. He and his wife had both noticed how studious she was in doing her homework each day, and the good marks she was bringing home each weekend in her grade book. They considered it well spent, the money they were paying to the nuns in Arucas to educate her. They could turn her into a girl who could get ahead, as long as she carried on like that and didn't fall in with a bad crowd, or worse, with a boyfriend. He knew Margarita had shown an early interest in boys and had asked her mother some cheeky questions about it while she was washing. His wife had told him.

Margarita got her chance one Sunday in May. After mass, the five of them rode on the bus with all their gear to visit her grandfather Matías and her grandmother Rosarito, who had a house in Zumacal, a neighbourhood of Valleseco. They had a nice farmhouse with land all around it, a shed full of cows, a barn for the fodder and the harvest, some hens and a black guard dog that slept tethered in an old drum that had once contained olives from the mainland. There was a vine pergola that yielded a yearly vintage of delicious muscatel grapes. On the land they had planted maize, potatoes, green beans, courgettes, plums, apples, oranges and lemons as well as a leafy walnut tree that provided them with nuts. They got everything they needed to eat from the fields and what was left they sold, and on that they made their living. With them lived Margarita's uncle Juan Luís, a lad in his twenties who helped them with the farm work now - the grandfather was 78 years old and was worn out from handling single-handed however much produce there was on the ranch.

The family got off the bus at the stop nearest to the house and walked down a little dirt path lined with cactus, agaves, wild roses and brambles - you have to keep cutting those weeds back or they take over in such a damp climate. There were chestnut trees, laurels and eucalyptuses that formed little thickets wherever the land was not planted. It was a beautiful landscape, dotted with farmhouses hung with baskets of geraniums, pretty rose



bushes and stone walls covered in moss and daisies, ivy and honeysuckle. The visitors passed the main store of the village; Margarita's parents stopped to say hello to the few locals who were gathered around the doorway. The people knew them and asked how they were doing, their health and their business. After a short chat, the family carried on walking - they could not linger, for the grandparents had received a letter warning them to expect their guests at midday.

When they reached the house, they all went in - all of them except Margarita. She got distracted following a yellow butterfly and ended up at the cowshed to discover that it was milking time. There was her grandfather, seated on a stool, squeezing the enormous udders of Poppy, a light brown cow. She had given birth not long ago to a lovely calf that stood in a stall nearby.

Margarita came into the cowshed carrying the packet of tobacco that she had brought as a gift for her grandfather. She drew near and greeted him.

"Hello, Grandpa! How are you doing? I've brought you your favourite tobacco."

Her grandfather paused in his milking and turned to greet her. He smiled as she kissed his cheeks. Then he kissed her back and replied.

"What can I tell you, Maíta?" he said. "Still working, until God decides otherwise. And you're looking taller and prettier than ever. Thanks for the tobacco. It's my favourite brand. I suppose you came with your parents and your brother and sister?"

"Of course. They're in the house. But I wanted to come and see you first, Grandpa, because I love you so."

"And I love you, gorgeous. Hey, shall I show you how to milk? It's easy, You just tug gently on the teats with your fingers and out it comes. Come on, give it a try!"

"No, grandpa. If I get my Sunday shoes covered in dung, my mother will give me a hard time. Better leave it for when I come on holiday and wear my rope-sole shoes."

"Quite right, kid. It's risky when you're all smartly dressed. We'll leave it for another day. And how is school going?"

"Very well, Grandpa. I enjoy learning and the mothers are good to us. I am getting good marks and my mum and dad are happy. They gave me a kaleidoscope for my birthday. It's a cardboard tube and you look in it and you see shapes of all different colours, and when you twist it the colours change and make beautiful patterns. Hey, by the way, I've got a really hard homework assignment. I have to write an essay about people who emigrated to Cuba and New Orleans. My dad said you could tell me what it's like there."

Margarita's grandfather found it strange that the young girl should bring that up, but he decided to humour her. He asked her to come and sit down on the stone bench next to the door of the shed. He opened a packet of tobacco and filled his pipe, then took a lighter from his waistcoat pocket and held it to the bowl. He began to talk.

"Alright then, listen up. Let's see how much of this stays in that curious head of yours, because there's a lot to tell. There was me, your uncle Nicolás, his cousin Severo and a few other of our contemporaries. We knew that if we stayed here we'd always be poor. So we got a few pennies together for our fare and in October 1928 we sailed for Havana on the *Victoria*. When we got there, we stayed a few weeks with Aguedito - he was a close relative of ours who had already set himself up there as a dairy farmer. We helped him with his deliveries, to earn our bed and board. But we could tell we were a burden all the same, as he had a wife and four children. So we decided to head off each of us to wherever we could find work cutting sugar cane. One member of our band went to Matanzas, another to Santiago. I went to Camagüey and there I found work on a cattle ranch. The owner was a Basque named Luis Echarri. He was good to me, because I did everything he asked me to do and I did it well. To tell you the truth, it took me a while to get used to the Cuban food. There was *congri* rice and black beans to eat every day - I had never seen beans like that before. But what most upset me was seeing how the black people were treated. They were lashed with whips if they stepped out of line. They lived miserably in little huts and shacks. They weren't slaves - slavery had been abolished some time before. But they were treated as though they still were. They were Christians but they also still practised the rituals of their African saints, singing and dancing. They were good people; I got on well with them. I felt a sense of Christian charity towards them. As

for those ones you asked about who sailed for New Orleans, I knew one family called Arencibia. They had lived for some years in a village called San Bernardo, by the Mississippi river. They came back to Cuba, complaining that life there had been very tough. There were awful mosquitoes and sometimes the river flooded and ruined their crops. And there was always the threat of being attacked by British soldiers. And that's about all I can tell you. I had very little contact with the man Arencibia. What I've told you is about all that he told me. Is that enough for you?"

Margarita had been listening closely to her grandfather's story. "Yes, Grandpa," she replied. "That's plenty. It will do nicely for my essay. Thank you very much!"

Each of them lifted a bucket of milk and they walked back to the house, where Margarita's mother and grandmother had prepared a delicious *sancocho* stew for everyone.

"That's a clever daughter you've got there," her grandfather said. "Maíta may be small but there's something grown up about her. She's interested in learning about the Americas. Well. I told her everything I knew."

Margarita's father frowned. "She's turned out clever all right, and she asks a lot of questions. I hope she didn't bother you. She's always coming out with strange nonsense."

"Nothing of the sort. Better smart than stupid," the grandfather said, visibly pleased to have a granddaughter with capacities that to other people seemed a cause for concern. "If I were you, I wouldn't worry about her being curious. It's a good sign. My goodness, rather than worrying about her, you should be proud that she's so clever. I was pleased to help her. It was for her studies. What's more, I even showed her how to milk the cow. So there you go."

Margarita's father appeared satisfied with this argument. After the meal they drank coffee. The grandfather made a break from his usual routine and skipped his afternoon nap to join them on a walk around his land. He showed them what was new since their last visit and gave them things to take home: a bunch of radishes, some green beans, carrots, chard, thyme, oregano and even a handful of fresh new potatoes. They couldn't take much more with them on the bus. By mid-afternoon it was time for them to get a move on so they could catch the bus

that went by at quarter past six. Their relatives went along with them to help carry the bundles of food up the hill. A mist was rising up from the Las Madres ravine, with a touch of drizzle in the air - a sign that it would likely rain that night. All the people thereabouts were hoping it would. Water from heaven was good for the crops from which they all made their living.

Satisfied with what she had learned from her grandfather, Margarita stayed quiet all the way back to Moya. She did not want to ask anything that might make her father lose his temper. He was already touchy enough about her asking too many questions. She was very wise for her age, and that was a good thing in a way; but it had its drawbacks. He did not want her to turn into a know-it-all, a sceptic, or to rebel against them when they told her what to do. She was still too young to be messing around. They would just have to keep an eye on her, her father told himself; to make sure that she kept on the straight and narrow, and didn't go off the rails - especially with all the good pennies they were spending to have her taught by the nuns.

Twice a year those nuns organized outings for the girls, hiring a bus to take them to discover the rest of the island. There were some very pleasant destinations, such as Fontanales, a beautiful part of Moya that was very close by. Then there was the lake by Mount Osorio in Valleseco and elsewhere the much-visited Virgin of the Pine, virgen del Pino, in her church in a place called Teror. On these outings each girl, if she hadn't brought her lunch with her, would receive a packet with a sandwich of soft cheese and guava jam, a boiled egg, a handful of peanuts and fresh fruit.

This year, the outing was to a place not far away called Los Tilos, a very pretty little wood in Villa de Moya, with species of flower native to the island for the girls to discover. They would gather leaves from the plants and make a collection for their natural science class.

The school had to hire two buses, for with all the classes of girls plus six of the nuns to accompany them, there were seventy-four people on the trip altogether. It had been decided that the girls needed to get some fresh air and have fun playing outside. They deserved these outings, trips into the countryside to places that they had not been to before; a chance to get some exercise and see all kinds of birds, flowers, snails, worms and other creatures - for real for once, and not just in books.

The nuns told the girls to take sketchbooks with them in their bags in case they saw something in the countryside that they would like to draw. The girls had a marvellous time, chasing about those hills fragrant with plants that they had never seen before, although they were native to the island, spying birds' nests up in the branches of trees, startling the doves and wood pigeons and picking bunches of woodland flowers. They also picked leaves from various trees and took them back to the nuns to be identified. Most of them were named and labelled to be kept in the flower collection. Margarita saw a beautiful yellow butterfly perched on a flower, but she refrained from trying to grab it. She had learned in class that when you take a butterfly between your fingers, it leaves on them a kind of dust which the butterfly needs in order to live; after that, even if you let it go again you will have hurt it. So she was content just to admire the creature, along with her friends Brígida y Noelia, her inseparable companions with whom she played on the skipping rope at breaktime. When it was time to eat, the nuns gathered the girls in a clearing and said grace, "to bless this food that we receive from Your divine bounty", and then each girl got stuck into whatever she had brought with her. They ate with a good appetite as though running around in that gorgeous place had awakened their senses.

After eating, they rested to digest, stretched out on the fallen leaves under the shade of the trees. The setting made them so alive that the girls felt in a state of rapture: the smells of the wood, the colours of the leaves and flowers, the animals and the warm air stirred their senses into a whole new form of happiness. They felt at one with Nature; it was like a gift and a memory that they would never forget. Mother Soledad had brought a camera to take portraits of them; she took them in groups as well as each girl by herself. Later she would give the pictures to the girls for free to keep in their family albums.

In the mid-afternoon it was time to go home. The bus drivers had been told to pick them up at five o'clock, so the girls reluctantly left the woods, taking with them branches of heather, white eucalyptus, laurels, sage and woodland flowers. Some of them held creatures they had captured, in cans that they had brought for the purpose: ladybirds, snails, desert locusts, crickets, praying mantises and beetles. They returned worn out but happy, and all except for the boarding pupils went back home to tell their families what fun they had had.





Another favourite outing came two months later, to Villa del Teror. Again they went on buses chartered for the day. They stopped in front of the church of the Virgin of the Pine. When the drivers honked their horns to signal their arrival, they saw the priest, Monsignor Socorro Lantigua, come out of there in his black soutain, accompanied by two altar boys. One held a cross and censer and the other a bowl of holy water with a hyssop twig that he used to sprinkle it on the girls as a blessing. The nuns and the girls alike approached the old priest - his face was solemn but kindly - and after they had kissed his hand and asked his blessing, he put his other palm on their heads and said in a warm voice: "Welcome, girls, to the house of our Mother. Come and take a closer look and see how beautiful she is with the holy child in her arms! Go ahead, and God bless you all, in the name of the Virgin your Mother, and her son who is God incarnate."

The nuns gave him a coin for the church funds, and some delicious sweetmeats. They were expert pastry makers and always took gifts like that wherever they went, knowing that they would be well received, for the islanders like their tasty treats and there is a saying that a good sweet leaves nobody feeling bitter.

Inside they walked down the nave, kneeled and sang the *Salve Regina* in chorus with tuneful voices, as the nuns had taught them. Then they went in an orderly line through a side-door of the main altar and into the back of the church. They climbed a staircase to the chamber where the statue was kept and where it was the custom for visitors to go and kiss her purple mantle. The girls marvelled at all the treasures on the Virgin's gown - they must have been worth a fortune. The gown seemed to gleam like the window of a jeweller's store. The Monsignor explained that those were offerings left by worshippers who had promised them as payment in thanks for some favour she had performed for them, by interceding before her Holy Son. As long as the person seeking the favour was a good Christian, it would never be refused if the Virgin asked for it on their behalf, for seeking favours was above all the role of women. Some women pledged to walk all the way to her basilica from wherever they lived and enter it on their knees, though they would wear thick cloth knee-pads so as not to hurt themselves on the paving, and not to suffer sores or bleeding. The last thing the Monsignor wanted was to see the Holy Mother's worshippers suffer. He got annoyed if he saw pilgrims arriving with blood on their knees.

The Monsignor was surprised not to see the chaplain of the convent, Serafín Sarmiento, among the visitors - he usually came along on this yearly visit too. Mother Elena told him that the chaplain was in hospital, having an operation for a swelling in his leg. Another Dominican father was taking his place at daily mass and hearing the girls' confessions. So the Monsignor went to the sacristy and fetched a rosary with a medallion bearing a picture of the Virgin. He asked her to give it to Father Sarmiento and to tell him that he would pray for his swift recovery.

All the girls then went out of the church to have a stroll around the town. They visited the stately home of the Manrique de Lara family, which was the bishop's summer residence. The nuns bought them sandwiches made with tasty rustic bread - a full half-loaf for every girl - and local sausages from Teror. They gobbled it down hungrily, for again the country air had awoken their appetites, and washed it down with bottles of Clipper fruit soda.

At midday the Monsignor said goodbye to them as they got back into the buses. He handed each of them a coloured card with a picture of the Virgin and a prayer for her printed inside. He urged the girls to put them on their bedside tables and look at them every day when they prayed. He sent his blessing to their families. The Virgin of the Pine would watch over them, he said, and told them to come back whenever they liked.

As it happened, the nuns meant to kill two birds with one stone, as they say, so on the way back to Arucas they stopped off at Lake Osorio. This was a volcanic crater at the foot of a peak of the same name, near the town of Valleseco. It was a magical place, one the girls just had to see, and it lay right on their way home. There was a fine chestnut tree and a lake that was kept full year after year by the frequent rain. Ducks with spectacular plumage migrated from Africa and made their nests there. The girls drew near to look at them. Some of the birds had ducklings that had hatched right there. The girls threw them crumbs left over from their sandwiches. In the chestnut tree, the conkers were still in their spikey green shells, which had not opened. Once they were ripe they would reveal delicious chestnuts; people would come and gather them, take them home and roast them in clay pots with holes in them. They would be eaten on All Souls' Day, and *El Mono anis* would be drunk, as was the way in those parts.

The spot was utterly unspoiled. It was full of native flowers and plants: laurels, *viñatigo*, pennyroyal, beech, dog roses, bracken, *escobones* or Lucerne shrubs and *codeso*, as well as kinds of eucalyptus that had been brought in from abroad. They lined the roads, which in the end they ruined, their roots pushing up under the tarmac to make dangerous furrows. The girls were amazed at the sight. They kept the memory of it in the photographs that the nun with the camera took of them.

In the end they got back on the buses and rode back to Arucas, happy and singing all kinds of songs that were popular at the time, with two of the older girls playing along on guitars. "I've got a cow / Not just any old cow / It makes milkshakes, wow! / What a clever old cow! / Ba-bam! Ba-bam! / Ba-bam! Ba-bam!"

They got back to school worn out and spent the rest of the afternoon resting and talking about all that they had seen and learned on the trip.

Margarita went home on the regular school bus at six-thirty. She walked up the lane with the bunch of flowers she had picked, her school bag over her shoulder, feeling happy after such marvellous fun. She told her parents all about it when she got home. She had a special gift, on top of the ones we have already mentioned: she could relate everything she had seen and done in detail. She handed the wild flowers to her mother, who put them in a vase on the sideboard. Her mother looked at the saint card the monsignor had given to Margarita.

"Our Lady of the Pine," she said. "Bless us and send us to heaven!"

"Amen," they all replied. The girl's family envied her, for none of them had ever done the things she had described. They had not been raised to be so creative.

Her parents were proud, though, to see how bright she was, and how she soaked up all her new experiences. It had been worth the trouble to send her to the nuns, if as well as giving her classes they took her to visit all the island's beauty spots. And they were amazed when their daughter was able to name all the jewels she had seen the Virgin wearing: gold, silver, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, opals, tourmaline. What a gift of memory!

Meanwhile Margarita continued with her project, and there was still one thing she needed to do: she wanted to ask her other grandfather what he remembered of his own time in Cuba. So the next time the family went to

visit him at his farmhouse in Visvique, where he lived with Margarita's grandmother, she asked him. As usual, they brought him gifts: coffee, a black hat for Sundays, and of course a packet of tobacco, for this grandfather too was a smoker - though in his case, lacking cigarette papers, he often used dried maize husks instead. As these were curved he found he could roll them together into a cigar shape and stick them together with spittle. Grandfather Quitierio was quite old now, and due to his ailments he had to walk with a cane when he went around the land that he farmed with his sons Manuel and Hermelindo. They lived nearby and helped him as much as they could, for the old man could not cope as well as he used to in looking after three cows, five goats and the donkey, which carried the firewood on its back and also old Quiterio himself when he went to the village store.

Margarita found her grandfather next to the irrigation dam. He was turning the key to open it, for that day he had to water the potatoes. He had planted twelve sacks of them and they were now looking rather promising; it would be a good crop. His family made a living from selling them and the cheese that Grandmother Agustina made.

Margarita went up to him with the packet of tobacco in her hand. She kissed him and asked for his blessing. She enquired about his health. And once the required greeting was done, she told him of the pressing matter that was occupying her mind.

"Cuba? Well now, Maíta," her grandfather replied. "I had quite a lot to do with our fellow countrymen there. Most of all, with a dairy farmer called Nicolás Arencibia. He had a brother who went to Louisiana with his four sons and three daughters. He told me that the brother, who could not read or write, used to get a scribe to write down the letters he would send him. In this way he learned that his brother lived in the parish of San Bernardo. He had a nice farm with oxen to plough the land and he planted maize, watermelons, cabbages and onions and his children would take the goods every week in a cart to the market in New Orleans. That was the capital of the colony. They were also trappers: they hunted in the big wood by the Mississippi river, and there you could also go out in a boat and catch shrimps, crabs and fish, and they also served as soldiers, defending the territory from the British. Apart from that, life there was not easy, for they did not understand the French that the local inhabitants

spoke, and they were not looked upon kindly as foreigners. People called them ignorant gypsies. They kept to themselves, a community of islanders who got along together and helped each other to build their wooden houses, following our native customs in food, celebrations, our Christian religion and our songs and dances - and very happy they were doing so. The greatest danger was always that the river might burst its banks when it was very high. When it did, it flooded their land and ruined their crops, and storms and awful mosquitoes made their lives wretched. So some of them, when they could stand no more, went back to Cuba. I came across one Aurelio González, who told me of those people's joys and miseries. And I hope this is of some use to you, for it is all I know about the subject."

"After what you have told me, I now know plenty, grandfather," Margarita said. "Thank you so much for everything. And now I must go home, for my parents scold me when I ask too many questions."

"Well, they shouldn't do that," said her grandfather. "For curiosity is the mother of knowledge, as the saying goes." He put down the work he was busy with and got ready to try the new tobacco. He took out a wad and to soften it he wrapped it in a fresh fig leaf which he put in the pocket of his sheepskin waistcoat.

They went to the house to join the others, for it was nearly time for lunch. They ate a stew that the women had carefully prepared, and spent the meal and some time after it talking about family matters, and who had inherited what, and all the paperwork there was to do at the notary's office, and then how the harvest was going. In the end it was time to get a move on, so they picked up all the gifts they had been given - cheese, nuts, blood sausages and dried figs - and said goodbye before getting on the bus. They hugged and kissed and wished each other well before saying goodbye. Margarita felt over the moon, for she already had enough material for her essay. It would include everything her grandfather had told her. She decided to write it up that afternoon.

Margarita set to work to decide how to tell her story. She would have to start it with her discovery of the trunk in the attic which contained all the family's memories. Then she would mention how she discovered the links between them and the letters with US postage stamps. She would end by adding everything she remembered of what her grandfathers had told her, for that was the most lively part and the bit of the account that came directly

from the source. First of all, she would have to write a draft of it in an old notebook. Then she would spend some time polishing the writing and looking up words that were hard to spell in the dictionary. She did not want the nun who would read the story to find any terrible mistakes, for Margarita was well regarded and nearly always got top marks. Of course, she did not expect that to happen this time, as she had just composed this story in her usual carefree way. But she had got it into her head that she simply had to tell this story and she was very keen to make a good and thorough job of it. She had been dreaming about the things her grandparents had told her, and those visions from her subconscious seeped into what she wrote. She bought a new notebook in a bookshop in town and started trying to think of a title for the tale. Eventually she had an idea: since the story took place across the ocean and in another age, she decided she could use an expression that she was used to hearing whenever people talked about this kind of thing. On the cover of her notebook she wrote the words: "Way out beyond." For the things she was writing about took place in a bygone time and in a far-off place where there had been people from the Canary Islands all the same.

She took two weeks to write the story from start to finish, in her best handwriting with a fountain pen. When at last she handed it to the teacher, the nun asked: "My child, where do you get this idea?"

Margarita could tell from the nun's face that she was puzzled. This story was not one she had been expecting.

"You will see when you read it," she replied timidly, "for this story was told to me by people who emigrated to America - people in my own family."

"That was very clever of you to come up with such an idea," the nun replied. "You may be a writer some day, like Saint Teresa. I'll see if I can find you one of her books."

"Thank you very much, Mother! I look forward to hearing whether you like my story."

"Very well, I will read it this evening and let you know."

Margarita smiled and went back to the desk that she shared with Loli García, her friend who boarded at the school. Loli's parents had abandoned her in Montaña Cardones. The nuns were her guardians, so she did not have to go to one of the homes in the capital - the Beneficiencia or the Casa del Niño - where she might have



turned out a common girl, without a Christian education and good manners. This way she could face life with courage and overcome the trauma of her abandonment and above all the loss of her mother whom she loved. Loli wore a cross on a chain around her neck, the only thing she had to remember her mother by. Margarita had a lot of affection for Loli. They would play together in the schoolyard. Margarita would give her lollipops and help her as much as she could with the homework. She never asked Loli about her past, for she did not want to make her sad. Margarita was sad to think that things like that happened to girls. She wondered what would happen to Loli when she finished her schooling. But the nuns were busy taking care of the girls' futures, teaching them to sew, embroider, cook and make their beds. They gave them all the love and attention they needed. Usually a girl in Loli's situation would be offered for adoption to a good couple who did not have children of their own - to be treated not as some kind of Cinderella but as a real daughter. A girl who had suffered as much as she had deserved to be treated decently at last, so that she could grow up to womanhood as a full member of the family. They would have to receive her like a human being who needed to live a more or less normal life.

Margarita waited to hear the teacher's verdict on her story. She was so nervous that she gnawed her nails, which was something her mother kept telling her off for. She threatened to put hot chili peppers on them. It was a dirty habit, she told the girl, like picking your nose or swearing. And when her parents saw how clever Margarita had turned out to be, they started to have high expectations of her. They saw for her a future spent studying, behaving herself and making good friends. They expected her to help around the house and not get into trouble with anyone. They were happy with her and hoped she would keep them happy, for now they were convinced that her natural curiosity and forwardness, and those stories she wrote, were leading her in the right direction.

The next day, Margarita's language and literature teacher came into the classroom and beckoned to her. "Margarita, let us talk at break time about the story you wrote," she said. "I have good news for you."

"Thank you, Mother," said the girl, excited by the encouraging thing the nun had said. "I will see you at break time." And she went to her desk to listen to the lesson. That day it was about poetry; they learned about different kinds of verses, rhythms like triplet, quatrain, sonnet, romance, couplet and all about assonance and consonance

rhymes. To Margarita's amazement, the teacher recited, apparently in her honour, a poem by Rubén Darío: "Margarita, the sea is beautiful," it went; "And the wind brings a light fragrance of orange blossom. In my breast I feel a lark sing in your voice..." Although the nun did not look directly at Margarita, she understood perfectly that this meant something; that the poem was something to do with her. She blushed and nearly cried, but managed to stop herself. She vowed to herself to look up the beautiful poem in a book and to learn it by heart.

The teacher explained to the class how the verses rhymed and told them it was written by a poet from Nicaragua, a modernist - one of the glories of Spanish poetry. She told them they would find his books in the school library. She urged them to read poetry; it was crucial, she said, for expanding the soul, and reciting poetry always gave delight to those who listened to it. They might even write their own poems if they wanted to.

At breaktime, Margarita was playing with Loli and Carmensa when she saw the teacher approaching. The teacher called her aside to speak to her privately.

"Margarita, I found your story marvellous. You really brought the tale to life, and you have a good style of writing. If you don't mind, we would like to publish it in the school magazine, so that everyone can read about your quest."

The girl put her hands to her cheeks in surprise. "How wonderful, Mother!" she said. "Now I see that all that hard work was worth it. Yes, publish it if you wish. I don't think my family will mind people talking about our story."

The teacher smiled widely. "No, I do not think they will either," she said. "On the contrary, they will be proud of you. They will not be expecting this from such a young girl."

Margarita went back to the playground and told her friends about it. They knew nothing about their companion's literary adventures, for she had kept it to herself; she had not shown the finished story even to her parents, although sooner or later she would surely have to. It was a big step she had taken, though she had yet to see how far it would lead her. For the time being she was just happy that she had done a good job of writing an account and that the teacher had liked it enough to want to publish it.

"You kept that very quiet, cheeky," said Loli. "You might at least have told your friends about it."

"But you see, I never thought of that," Margarita said. "I wasn't sure how it was going to turn out. But you are the first ones to know about it, for goodness' sake."

They carried on playing with the skipping rope until the bell rang to call them back to class. The next lesson was natural science, with Mother Lucia, who was very strict and not very well liked. She was rather bad-tempered and would get cross when she caught the girls passing notes or drawings to one another in class. If the note or the drawing was about her, she would keep them back in detention for an hour in the study room.

That day they were to learn about different kinds of plants: phanerogams and cryptogams. They had already started learning about botany, and it was a subject that Margarita liked, for being from the countryside she was very familiar with the plants; at her home she even had baskets with lovely carnations and fragrant peas. She was a very sensitive child and was thrilled by the colours, aromas and shapes of the flowers. This was to prove very useful, for by observing them closely she could describe in detail the sensations that the plant world awakened in her. She also had a natural gift for making out the noises animals made, especially the trilling of the birds: the way a little sparrow sang, or a wild canary, a blackcap, blackbird, crow or raven; the choir of crickets on summer nights and the braying of a mule in heat. Her father had taught her all about them, answering her constant questions while they listened to the creatures.

Her finely tuned senses would serve her well later on. They would help her describe faithfully the small details that she perceived in the world around her as she wrote about it. She had the great good fortune to have awoken at a young age to sensations that one cannot relate unless one has lived them - for their roots go deep into the land on which she was born.

Her future, then, was set: she would be a writer. To do that, she would have to read a lot - and not only what the nuns gave her to read; she would buy books whenever she could or borrow them from public libraries.

She was thrilled to read *Corazón* by Edmundo de Amicis, *The Thousand and One Nights*, *The Little Prince*, *Little Women*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Pinnocchio* and other such books. As a native of Moya, she had of

course to read *The Roses of Hercules* by Tomás Morales, a poet from the town. It charmed her so much that she learned some of the poems by heart.

When there were words she did not know - and there were lots - she looked them up in the dictionary. She paid special attention to the accents on words, which were something she always had trouble with. She spent so much time reading that she started seeing less of her friends. They called her a bookworm, for none of them read so much and they could not understand why she wouldn't come out on walks, or to the cinema or to talk to the boys who had started to hang around with them. She was devoted to reading; it had become her passion, an almost incurable vice. Even so, her friends did not fall out with her, for they understood that, after the success of her essay, she had got lost down a rabbit hole of books.

Our story is nearing its end. We will sum up what happened next. Margarita got such brilliant marks in her school leaver's exam that her class tutor wrote a letter for her to give to her parents. In it she wrote that they should try, if at all economically possible, to send her to study for the higher exams in literature at Las Palmas Intermediate College. It was in Canalejas Street, near to where the bus station is nowadays. This girl, the teacher wrote, was a treasure that had fallen from heaven; she must be given the chance to live up to her potential. Margarita's parents read the letter carefully and discussed it; they had not planned for such an expense. In the end they went to Arucas to talk it through with the nuns.

The Mother Superior received them in her office. She told them that it would be a shame to let such a promising intellect, so curious and now so well-read, go to waste. She ended up convincing them that, if they wanted the best for Margarita, they should not hesitate to send her to college. Her parents realised that it was something they should do. They thanked the Mother Superior for their girl's education, which would take her so far.

So from then on, Margarita went by bus to the capital, where she attended classes with much interest and got a lot out of them. She made new friends. She would eat lunch at an inn in the Camino Nuevo before returning for the afternoon classes. She would take the bus home at six o'clock, carrying the new school satchel that her parents had got her, for the many books and notepads that they were buying her.

The time came at last for the higher exam. Margarita passed it with top marks and went on to take the university entrance exam. She sat it at the University of La Laguna. It was the first time she had travelled on a boat: a steam ferry called the *León y Castillo*. As for the exam, she passed that with top marks too, for she did rather well on her translations from Latin and Greek.

Her parents held a party for her when she got home. Her father surprised her by buying her a present that she had always wanted: an Orbea bicycle, second-hand.

By this time Margarita was going out with boys. There was one in particular: a slim blond lad named Hilario Mendoza. In fact, he had been keen on Margarita for years. He was a nice boy and good-looking. She kissed him, but no more than that; the moral code on which she had been raised had left its mark. They petted and smooched. They danced close together at the local youth club. They went on outings to the pictures, bicycle rides, picnics in the country. And finally, when Margarita, thanks to her extraordinary college report, got a scholarship from the education ministry to study her favourite subject, geography and history, at the University of Madrid, she and Hilario promised to keep writing to each other.

Off she went, on a Transmediterranean ferry to Cádiz, followed by an intercity train to Madrid, with an Olivetti typewriter in her suitcase. She had needed to buy it to write her coursework on - the tutors at the humanities faculty would not accept handwritten papers.

The scholarship covered the cost of travel, books, lodging in a women's college within the university campus, and money to buy warm clothes and the occasional outing: to the theatre or cinema, or to nearby towns. She could even afford the odd gift to take home to her parents, brother and sister when she went back to the islands for the holidays at Christmas and New Year and for two months over the summer.

The cold of Castile, the snow and frozen winters, were new to her; but Margarita was extremely happy with all that she was learning and experiencing there. Her tutors were very competent and she made some good friends. She visited the Prado Museum and the Teatro Español, where she discovered the classic Golden Age dramas. Best of all, she forged a friendship with a boy from Tenerife, Pepe Luis Ascanio from La Orotava. They liked each

other the moment they met and started a serious relationship. Things went so smoothly that they would marry as soon as Margarita passed her degree (with honours).

Needless to say, Margarita's family was very proud of her: proud that this nosy little girl had come so far, when no one else in her family had been to university.

After her degree, Margarita had to decide what the next step would be. Would she qualify to be a teacher, or prepare a doctoral thesis? There was a tutor specialising in the history of the Americas, a Dr. Ballesteros Gaibrois, who had read some work that Margarita had written on emigration from the Canaries to the Caribbean, by which she had distinguished herself. He advised her to apply to the ministry for a visiting lectureship in the United States. He took it on himself to supervise her, for he had influential friends who could make it happen. This was very lucky for Margarita, for her request was granted. She would go for a year to the University of New Orleans as a lecturer in Spanish history. Her husband went with her; he got work teaching Spanish to American students and worked on his own doctoral thesis about the anthropologist Franz Boas. They both spoke English passably well, though they struggled a bit with the Americans' nasal accent and their unfamiliar vocabulary.

Margarita got on comfortably at work, but whenever she and Pepe had a day off, in the holidays or at weekends, they would travel to St. Bernard to find out about the descendants from their native islands who had moved there from the Canaries in the 18th century as emigrants and infantrymen, to inhabit the land and defend it from the British. She talked to those people's descendants and found they still spoke an obscure and rustic Canarian dialect, peppered with French words that they had made their own. It reminded Margarita and Pepe of the dialect that was still spoken in the countryside on the islands: the language of the *champurrios* or *maúros*, as the rough country folk were snobbishly called by the people in the capital.

The couple were very well received in St. Bernard by their fellow Canarians, who were delighted that someone should take an interest in them, for many of them hardly knew of their ancestors' origins: it was Margarita and Pepe who told them.



The inhabitants of St. Bernard were good people, simple and noble, busy farming the land, fishing in the Mississippi and trapping animals in the woods. They still cooked in the old Canaries way, with a few curious and tasty Creole additions.

Margarita discovered that recordings had been made years before of that archaic language: *décima* poems, heroic tales and songs that the Canarians themselves had composed to tell of their achievements. She always carried her dictaphone with her to keep a record of everything they told her: the disasters they had suffered, the hurricanes and the high water that made the river break its banks, flooding their fields and houses. And how some of them had returned at one time to Cuba, just as Margarita's grandfathers had told her when she was a girl.

She and her husband felt happy among those people. They were amazed to see how the culture of their islands had persisted in that isolated place, how they still held together as a group and still called themselves "islanders".

And so Margarita started to write her thesis, drawing as much on what she had witnessed as on the books she found about it in the library. She phoned to tell Dr. Ballesteros Gaibrois, who was to supervise it, then posted an outline to him, earning congratulations from the great professor and researcher, who was an authority on the subject.

It took Margarita eight long months of hard work to finish her thesis, which she titled *The Islanders of Saint Bernard*. She made a copy and posted it to Madrid by registered mail, for the specialist to edit and suggest corrections and additions. It came back two weeks later: her supervisor had suggested various changes and attached a letter of praise in which he said how much he appreciated the piercing clarity of Margarita's reasoning.

When their stay in the United States came to an end, Margarita and Pepe took the plane back to Madrid, their personal luggage augmented by two suitcases bursting with books, periodicals and vinyl records, plus many photographs of St. Bernard, as well as recordings and authentic handicrafts produced by the local Comanche indigenous folk, which they had brought at a decent price from an antiquarian there who had been recommended as trustworthy.

They met with Dr. Ballesteros at his house in the mountains. It was a pleasant stay and rewarding for Margarita, for she had worked hard to produce a worthy and useful record of the "islander" community in Florida. Dr. Ballesteros had them stay for lunch and they talked at length about Margarita's adventure. She recounted how it had all started with an essay she wrote when she was thirteen years old at the school run by the nuns in Arucas. She told him she had titled that account *Way out Beyond*.

The learned professor smiled. "I can see that you yourself have gone far beyond," he said, "to bring this story back to us from your own life experience. That is why it has turned out so splendidly for you. I will make sure it is published. This story of migration is truly unusual, and people in your Canary Islands will be very interested to read it."

Margarita thanked him for his words of praise. After coffee, she and her husband returned to Madrid.

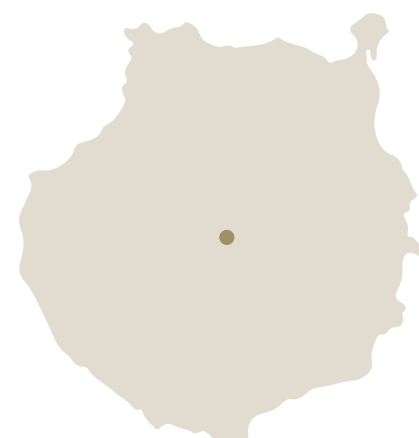
Her thesis was submitted a few months later and was rewarded with honours *cum laude*. She fielded questions from the doctoral board and her own fellow researchers. Our heroine from Moya was overjoyed - even more so when, the following year, it was brought out in print by a prestigious Barcelona publishing house. Some time later, the University of New Orleans published an English translation of it. Both versions received excellent reviews.

Margarita went on to be a full professor at various Spanish universities and joined in conferences at various others around Europe and the Americas. She wrote articles about the people who emigrated from the Canary Islands to the Caribbean. She had a daughter and two sons. And you might not be surprised to learn that one of her sons she named Bernardo, so that they would never forget the happy days she had spent in the place of that name, and how close in spirit she had felt to her fellow islanders.



# Mountain peaks

## From San Mateo to Roque Nublo









# A Pretty Sea of Clouds

Antolín Dávila

## Antolín Dávila

Born in Vega de San Mateo in 1952, has worked in jobs that have little or nothing to do with literature (he graduated in HR Management and, until he retired, worked as a treasurer and HR specialist in local government), but still managed to become a true literary craftsman.

His first novel, *Una orla para todos*, was published in 1988. Since then, slowly but surely, he has produced another dozen titles, including *La calle de la Concordia*, *El cernícalo*, *Alguien cabalga sobre su seno*, the short story collection *La feria de los lindos sueños* and the memorable *Una rosa en la penumbra*, his latest novel to date. All while writing (sometimes weekly) short stories and serialised novels for the local press.

*Un coqueto mar de nubes* is the tender, good-humoured, and at times wistful, story of one man and his dog making their way to the summit of the island, the 'petrified storm' that so enchanted Miguel de Unamuno.

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Translated by Ruth Clarke





For Margarita

And for Eduardo Dávila, my son, Lucia, and Maxwell and Felix, my grandchildren

**S**itting in his bed, peering into the darkness, as if he'd received a tiny electric shock to his toes, the man called Ambrosio woke up. He opened and closed his eyes, racking his brain in the early morning. He smiled. Ran his hands over his beard and told himself he didn't need a shave, no, not today. He coughed, coughed again, and remembered his perennial promise to give up smoking. He smiled, stirring memories of childhood and adolescence, all the out-of-the-way places he'd got to, discovering the beauty of the landscape that had seen him born, grow, and reach the point where he was almost getting old. Maybe this could be a great day. He should look back over his life, call to mind all the adventures in places that, one way or another, had shaped his personality, sometimes because they were so big, and sometimes because of what they meant to him and his friends.

It was already dawn, a dim light was seeping through the cracks in his old door. Perfect for walking his dog, Capullo II. He felt blindly for some underpants and put them on, gave a funny sort of grin and said to himself, out loud, that it would do him good to revisit his childhood, his youth alongside the lovely Capullo I, his first partner in crime, always on some adventure or other, stealing loquats or quinces, and receiving more than one punishment.

He opened the window and a ray of sunlight briefly landed at the head of his messy bed. He ate breakfast, sharing a cheese sandwich with his companion, and took his time to pack a bag. Whistling to himself, he brought the car out of the garage and, being sure to take the appropriate safety measures, settled his happy dog in the back seat.

Whistling, with a delight he didn't recognise, he thought it would be best to hunt for memories in the mountains right in the middle of the island, ending up at Roque Nublo, after all, these were the images of Gran Canaria that had been with him since childhood..

"Woof! Woof!" Capullo II barked when he spotted a cat crossing the road.

"Easy, Capullo. We're going to Cueva del Sol. We'll sit there for a while and think, okay? Look, look closely, see the level the sun reaches on the hillside: now that tells us it's about nine thirty. We've got enough time to do a nice long walk. Let's see if you can find a girlfriend today, Christ, you're turning into an old bachelor like me."

They came to Vega de San Mateo and got out of the car, just in front of the gofio mill. The handsome Capullo II was suddenly wagging his tail in delight, perhaps it was all the wonderful smells about the place. Ambrosio didn't want to miss the chance to buy a couple of kilos of freshly milled gofio (which he would share in good brotherly fashion), which he did immediately, and as soon as he left the mill, he headed straight to the nearest shop to buy two quince jelly sandwiches, much to the delight of the dog, who couldn't contain his joy at being presented with such a feast, licking one of his paws.

Ambrosio left the gofio and the sandwiches in the boot of the car, and asked Capullo II to walk with him. They took a path through the outskirts of the town, taking everything in, checking the time by where the sun landed on the hillside at the foot of Cueva del Sol, Ambrosio pointing out to his dog that Montaña Cabreja was keeping watch on the other side.

A fresh breeze was blowing, despite how sunny it was. It would be nice for them both to sit down for a little while in Alameda de Santa Ana. And wow, by a stroke of luck, for keeping Capullo II happy, they were suddenly joined by a pretty little bitch, wiggling her tail suggestively.

The bells rang to announce ten o'clock. As he sat down on a stone bench, Ambrosio thought that he mustn't forget to make a stop at El Sao fountain where they could both get a drink of water, because it was going to be a long time before they set foot on the majestic Roque Nublo.

The dogs didn't tire of playing their lovers' games in the middle of the square, stirring people's curiosity as they came out of the municipal offices. Two distinguished neighbours, Leopoldo and Nicanor, gave an elegant wave from the next street, which was gratefully and happily reciprocated by Ambrosio.

So, the time had come to leave. That was if anyone could persuade Capullo II to part from his new love! A man passed by, greeted Ambrosio politely, and at almost the same time, two local policemen, following the rules, exchanged the same routine with a man who was none other than the mayor. Luckily for Ambrosio, but not for Capullo II, the other dog disappeared through the legs of the two policemen, fleeing into the municipal offices like a rocket.

Soon, the motley pair of dog and master were back on the road to Cueva del Sol. After barely ten minutes, they got out of the car with the intention of drinking fresh water from the El Sao fountain. Ambrosio had countless memories of this place from his childhood, like the day he found two baby blackbirds in a small bush, just above the hidden water source, so tiny they still didn't know how to eat or drink; his joy as he entered the house, making a nest with his hands to protect the little birds that never stopped opening their beaks asking for sustenance; the way he immediately prepared a cardboard box, a cup of milk mixed with gofio, and a piece of cane to use as a spoon; he kept thinking, with such pride, that now he had something of his own in life, besides his first dog Capullo I.

Ambrosio and Capullo II drank water from the source, filled a bottle for the journey, and took in the panorama that was visible down below from the side of the road. Eventually, they set off in the direction of the much-anticipated Cueva del Sol.

Capullo II paid every possible attention to the itinerary of what lay ahead. His master's words rang around the car as they drove up a dirt road. From there, they could see the towns of Vega de San Mateo and Valsequillo. They soon set off on foot.

Ahead, Cruz de La Higuera, much further away than Cueva del Sol, where these unusual tourists were heading as they made their way down the slope. Ambrosio heard, or imagined, the bells of the village church chime eleven, and checked the level of the sun on the hillside, which confirmed his hunch. Eager to arrive, he still thought this would be the perfect place to sit down with his canine soulmate and have a chat, because he was worrying about hurtling towards old age, and the last thing he wanted was for the poor, defenceless creature to end up a homeless orphan.

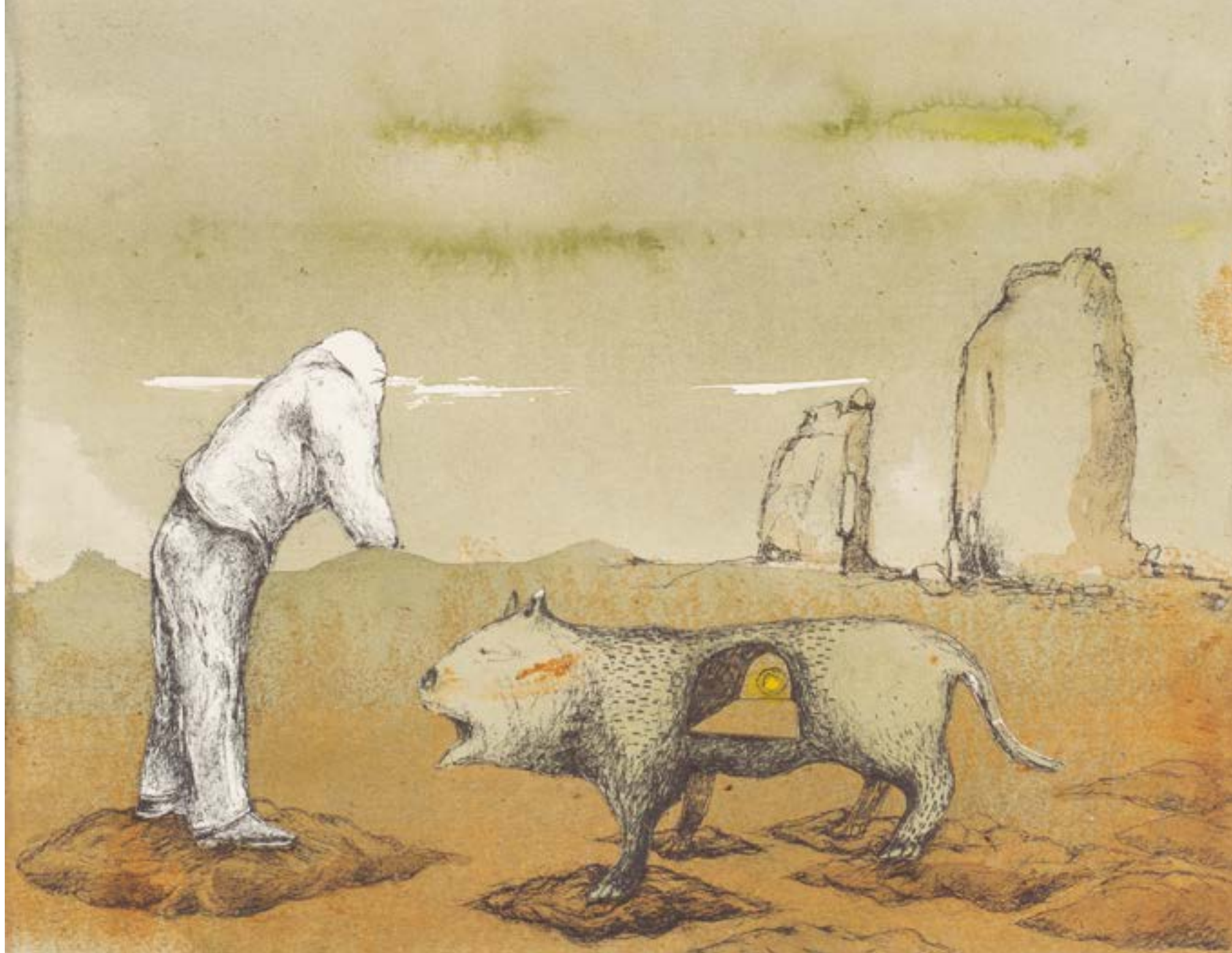
There they were. Ambrosio sat on a rock and Capullo II lay down in some very dry grass. Everywhere was sunny, which made the man glad he'd chosen that day to enjoy the view and something of his past. After a few minutes of pondering and taking deep breaths, he felt a pressing need to say something, and he didn't think twice about talking to the most blessed and devoted friend that fate had brought him.

"You know what, Capullo? I'm happy. Yes, in spite of the loneliness – which you help to ease. Life is wonderful and Gran Canaria is beautiful. Look, over there is the summit we'll visit later, and down below: the vast sea. Listen, when I was young, I used to wander up all these paths all by myself; I've always sat on this rock; and over there, under those gorgeous trees, I would fill my trouser pockets with chestnuts I'd collected, eating them later to take the edge off the hunger. I was happy, but I needed a love that I never managed to find. It's a shame you can only communicate through a few gestures, or some basic deduction on my part, my friend, because if you could talk, I'd beg you to call out to the four winds how much I love the blessed land where I was born. Can you imagine, every Friday, running around the neighbourhood proclaiming the excellence of the island we live on? Can you imagine the neighbours, hearing your drum and watching you go by, standing in their doorways, giving you a round of applause, blowing you kisses? It would be glorious! Just thinking about it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. Ah, my soulmate, let me tell you something, or should I say give you some advice: you need to find a girl, that way you won't end up alone when I'm gone. Come on, boy, let's see if we can find this unrivalled scenery on the way to Roque Nublo."

Subdued, Ambrosio glanced at the white paint in the cave, above, and at the level that the sun had reached, below, and realised it must be almost midday, which meant they would need to keep walking. They walked as far as Lomo la Vega, got back in the car and took the main road towards Vega de San Mateo, where they started their walk to Gran Canaria's highest peak. But at the La Lechucilla bridge, they had to stop, because a donkey race was being held, to the delight of the many locals who, crowded at the finish line, never tired of throwing firecrackers and placing bets, with some putting their money on Antonio's donkey, and others cheering for Mariano's.

Eventually, all the animals were across the line and the travellers could get back on their way. Ambrosio felt like singing a folia, which surprised Capullo II, who actually took fright, although it would have been worse if he'd been singing a lullaby, because that would have meant his master was treating him like an idiot at his age. They left the town of Vega







de San Mateo, taking the Tejeda route at the foot of Montaña Cabreja instead of going via Teror. The road got steeper. Capullo II let out a sudden bark when he spotted a linnet flying past. They left La Lechuza behind, with a smell of freshly baked bread that gave both travellers a pang of hunger. Ambrosio kept the thought to himself but poor Capullo II barked three times out of concern, or gluttony.

It wouldn't take them long to reach Las Lagunetas and beyond it the ravine of La Mina. There, they would tuck in to the quince jelly sandwiches, even though it was really too early, but both of them were already hungry, without knowing why, or perhaps it was from sharing a perfect moment between man and wise creature, which they were enjoying far too much to be able to hide their contentment.

Ambrosio parked the car right on a tiny embankment, formed on the edges of one of the many bends in the road. From there, they could see the clear water running down the ravine below, and they could even hear it. A cautious grey wagtail, constantly bobbing, with the elegance of a beautiful grande dame or a pretty ballerina, tried to use a tiny waterfall to take a bath. A sharp-eyed kestrel hovered expectantly, without moving an inch, above the heads of the diners. On the stone they had made their seat, lay the two quince jelly sandwiches, a bottle of water, and the usual tin pot that Capullo II would drink from. The silence, broken only by the trickle of water through the ravine below, was a delight.

"Do you know what I mean, boy?"

Ambrosio looked sad as he addressed the watchful dog.

"When I die, find yourself a little lady so you're not alone, because it's a sad thing going through life alone. Thankfully I have you, my soulmate."

The dog, as if he understood his master's words, gave a stylish wag of the tail, perhaps as a show of gratitude for the advice, and went back to his quince jelly sandwich, licking his nose after every bite, maybe looking for the perennial sweetness of life.

"Oh, I've got the greediest friend!" Ambrosio said.

"Woof!" replied the dog, and perhaps he meant it.

They took a nap under a beautiful chestnut tree. The sound of the water soothing them like a lullaby. The dog and his master slept like babies, despite two rowdy blackbirds pecking at each other over an imaginary mate. A rabbit popped

out of its burrow, took a look at the view, and went straight back into hiding; and all the while two canaries engaged in a beautiful singing competition at the top of a walnut tree.

Then it was time to wake up and hit the road, to avoid getting caught by nightfall. Although Capullo II seemed wide awake, Ambrosio almost stealthily ran a hand along the dog's back, in an effort to make him stretch out and get moving. Suddenly, an image from many years ago came into the man's mind, and it was none other than the beautiful Adelaida, a girl he met in the place they're heading to now. That was where he had taken the chance to kiss her in the shade of a cross, and then, as if she were under some kind of spell, she had disappeared forever, down an intricate trail, without leaving any trace of a path to the beautiful white town below.

They soon came to Cruz de Tejeda and got out of the car for a sniff around. One group of young tourists passed by on donkeys, through the midst of hubbub from the locals, and another was crowded in front of a booth selling countless trinkets. A villager, wearing a straw hat, was hawking freshly roasted chestnuts from a stall, and Ambrosio went over to buy a cone, because it had been years since he'd eaten any.

A blue sky, beautiful all by itself, made Tejeda look even more stunning, leaving the town uncovered for everyone to admire its white beauty, down there in the depths, stately and unique. Out of the blue, a little foreign girl made friends with Capullo II and they started to play, which her parents were grateful for, and which pleased Ambrosio, of course, although it left him with the silly concern that, from then on, his soulmate was going to bark at him in English.

They headed for Pico de Las Nieves, with Capullo II now a bit gloomy because he missed the little girl who had shown him so much affection in such a short time. The afternoon helped, as the sky was perfectly clear. The views were like something out of a dream. There, Roque Nublo marked its territory, and Roque Bentayga, its understated more humble neighbour, could almost have been saying 'here I am, don't forget about me!' Spellbound, Ambrosio and Capullo II took in the landscape that the island of Tenerife presented them, with its omnipresent Pico Teide, so close and so far at the same time according to popular wisdom among the islanders.

"If you'd been a descendent of mine, I could have taught you to read and write, boy. My friend, the ladder of my life has had a lot of missing rungs: choosing a partner to share life's sorrows and joys, getting married, having children and

raising them so they could bring my grandchildren into the world. A hard task for a dreary man like me", Ambrosio said in a very low and cautious voice. "

"Come on, soulmate! Let's take a deep breath and bid farewell to the illustrious Pico Teide"

To complete their journey, the strange pair got back in the car, this time with Capullo II in the front as co-pilot. In some way, whether in sun or shade, the two complemented each other so well that no one would dare to venture a definition of such a relationship, because they exuded an infinite camaraderie.

At last they set out from their final point of departure. Above, Roque Nublo seemed to be expecting them. It would be nice to be at its base: a suggestion that Ambrosio made to Capullo II and which was, of course, given a positive reception by his travelling companion, wagging his tail in the affirmative. The two walked up the track, taking everything in, for now they could see the shape of el Fraile, 'the friar', to their left, and Pico de Las Nieves in the distance.

The unusual tourists reached their destination. A man and his best friend. To ease the tiredness, they exchanged a long look and each proudly offered their own heartfelt gesture of affection. In that moment, they noticed the humble presence of La Rana, 'the frog', Roque Nublo's own inseparable companion, just as a pretty sea of clouds intensified the atmosphere.





# An Island of Stories in the Cloud

Scan here and discover an island of stories

<https://bibliotecainsular.grancanaria.com/una-isla-contada-antologia-para-recorrer-gran-canaria>



Adapted versions of this book will be available  
in order to make it more accessible.





# An Island of Stories

## (audiobook)

### **Narration**

Luifer Rodríguez

Mari Carmen Sánchez

### **Incidental voices**

Students of speech, drama and, dubbing at the  
Instituto del Cine Canarias

### **Original music**

Jonay Armas

### **Song**

"Isla contada" (music: Jonay Armas / lyrics:  
Luifer Rodríguez)

### **Sound (recording and post-production)**

Moisés Sánchez

### **Recording**

Instituto del Cine Canarias

### **Production**

Biblioteca Insular de Gran Canaria / Cabildo de Gran Canaria

### **Executive production**

Lamalavidaproducciones

### **Director**

Luifer Rodríguez

## Island of Stories

The first day I left you, all I longed for  
Was to set off and find you again,  
To come back to you.  
I think of your shores, wrapped around me  
Like loving arms holding me to your blue bosom;  
Of your sun's warmth caressing me,  
The golden trace of your light.  
I breathe in the delights of your meadows,  
Gaze in ecstasy through your orchard;  
The afternoon dies away into the valley  
And the mist sings a song of Eden.  
And I,  
Browsing along your pathways,  
I will come back  
Always to where I started.  
I will journey  
To you.

In my cupped hands your garden will grow.  
My eyes will seek you out where you lie naked.  
I will come back,  
Wander again along your village sidewalks  
And, lost in all your stories, I will tell  
Of that extraordinary journey  
Back to you.  
A continent in time, a miniature volcano  
At the shore of my stories lies that closest island;  
It flowers along the path of all those people  
Who hold tight to its aphoristic language,  
Its mix of races  
Two steps from the desert,  
Where the sea is born.  
I will come back;  
I will journey  
Home to my isle of stories.

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Translated by R. L. Parry



## Luifer Rodríguez

Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1967

Luifer Rodríguez has been an actor, director, producer, singer and script writer since 1990 in the Canary Islands and Madrid.

His main film roles include: *Rendir los machos*, directed by David Pantaleón; *Charter*, directed by Amand Kernell; *Como un relámpago*, directed by Miguel Hermoso; *Del lado del Verano*, directed by Antonia Sanjuán; *1121- El Barrio de las avenidas que se bifurcan*, directed by Zacarías de la Rosa or *La isla interior*, directed by Félix Sabroso Dunia Ayaso.

He has appeared in Spanish and international television series such as: *Hierro I y II* (Movistar+), *Grasa I y II* ( Playz), *Cuéntame qué te pasó* (TVE), *Kill Skill 2* (Canal+/ Francia), *Maddogs II* (SkyTv), *Aida* (Telecinco), *Malviviendo* (Different Entertainment). Rodríguez is frequently on stage, in theatrical productions such as: *Siempre Alice*, by Lisa Génova; *Electra* by Benito Pérez Galdós; *Hamelin* by Juan Mayorga; *Don Juan Tenorio* by Zorrilla; *¡Ay, Carmela!* by Sanchís Sinisterra, and has worked with directors like Tarnzin Townsend, Ferrán Madico, Natalia Menéndez, Antonia Sanjuán or Nacho Cabrera, among others.



# An Island of Dance

Dancer: Natalia Medina Santana  
Director: Álvaro Carrero Puig  
Assistant director: Ángeles Padilla Peña

**A picnic at Los Nidillos**  
Carlos Álvarez

Music: C418, *Soft*

**I was the happiest girl in the world**  
Paula I. Nogales Romero

Music: Karin Borg, *Norrskén*

## Scar

Ángeles Jurado Quintana

Music: Mike Block, *Carol of the bells*

## Way out beyond

Ángel Sánchez

Music: Beethoven, *Moonlight*

## Guayedra

Santiago Gil

Music: 2814, *Here's a song for you*





## Natalia Medina Santana

San Bartolomé de Tirajana, 1966

Is a Physical Education degree from the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and a Masters in Performing Arts from Rey Juan Carlos University in Madrid. Her work focuses on cultural management and dance. As a dancer and choreographer, she has presented her work in Spain, Europe, Asia and Latin America. She currently runs the Qué Tal Estás Producciones company, where they develop educational projects dealing with dance production and performance. She is the director of the Las Palmas de Gran Canaria ACROSS HIP HOP project, a dance project aimed at the young people of this city involved with the *distrito cultura* programme, which has social, educational and cultural objectives. She is also the director of MASDANZA, the Canary Islands International Contemporary Dance Festival, which this year is in its 26<sup>th</sup> edition.





# Photography and Illustration



## Nacho González Oramas

Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1965

Is a photographer, landscaper and graphic journalist. He studied in Madrid at the Centro de Estudios de la Imagen, CEV and soon began a professional career working with the biggest newspapers in Gran Canaria (*La Provincia*, *Canarias 7*, *La Gaceta de Canarias*). He has been an official photographer for El Museo Canario, Centro Insular de Cultura, Orquesta Filarmónica de Gran Canaria, Teatro Cuyás, Consejería de Turismo del Gobierno de Canarias, trade fairs including FITUR (Madrid), ITB (Berlin) and World Travel Market (London), Festival Internacional de Jazz de Canarias, Festival Atlántica, Festival Internacional de Guitarra, and Memorial Díaz Cutillas. He currently works as a photographer at the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, Auditorio Alfredo Kraus, Teatro Pérez Galdós, and the Festival Internacional de Ópera de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

His photographs have illustrated countless guides, magazines, posters, brochures, catalogues, books, records, websites and CDs; been published in *El Mundo*, *El País*, *ABC*, *Cinco Días*, *Der Spiegel*, *NY Times*; and selected for a dozen shows and over a dozen prizes.



## Augusto Vives

Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1963

Is an artist and illustrator. Following a Fine Art degree and a scholarship to the École des Beaux Arts et des Arts Appliqués in Toulouse, he now works with the newspaper *La Gaceta*.

In recent years, he has exhibited work in individual and collective shows at some of the most prestigious foundations, galleries and cultural centres, including Fundación La Caja de Canarias, Fundación Mapfre Guanarteme, Galería Magda Lázaro, Galería Manuel Ojeda, CICCAs, Centro Cultural Guía de Isora, Casa Mané (Fuerteventura) and Centro Cultural San Martín.

His pieces feature in the collections of the CAAM, Gobierno de Canarias, Ayuntamiento de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and Cabildo de Gran Canaria.

His work has been shown in Las Palmas, Tenerife, Porto, Granada, Teruel, Toulouse, Argentina, Mexico and Cuba, and has won multiple prizes: VII Bienal Regional de Arte Villa de Teror, IV Certamen Ciudad de Las Palmas, I Certamen Universidad de Las Palmas, VII Certamen de Pintura Antonio Padrón.



Take this book with you when you travel the innumerable paths of the labyrinth that is Gran Canaria. Let it take you to its most famous locations and to the landmarks of its history, but also to the experiences that its fine memory whispers of, to the parts that never appear in any tourist guide.

Alexis Ravelo

