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## *from* Baroni: A Journey

*Translated from Spanish by Margaret Carson*

FOR INSTANCE, one thing the photos fail to show, but that I recapture each time I see them, is the incredible quantity of fallen mangoes on the grounds of Baroni's house when I visited her. There were at least two or three trees, you could see the half-rotten and half-buried mangoes, and also the stones, as they call the pits or seeds, strewn all over and no doubt lodged in that sea of earth since the previous season. On walking through the large front garden, you felt intoxicated by the strong aroma of rotting mangoes. It was of course a well-known scent, the places in Venezuela where you don't find these trees are relatively few. Still, I had never encountered such a high concentration. Perhaps in the remote corner of some park, or on a lightly traveled mountain path, you would at times begin to detect the sweetened, slightly alcoholic fragrance, a nonanimal putrefaction, and alerted to this presence you would seek out the sources of the aroma, later to find the squashed mangoes scattered over the damp ground.

By means of those feeble signs, feeble since they depended on the presence of a breeze, on the temperature, or on the time of day, you'd at first be bewildered, and then moments later able to establish, let's say, a chain—to investigate the source, assign a causality, and infer the steps by which the mangoes had arrived at this stage of advanced decay; at last you'd spot them, down there, one probably under your own foot, yellow lumps that were revealing their whitish heart, or hearts already liberated, to varying degrees, from their casing, some with a crown of filaments and others picked nearly clean. Nonetheless, I'd never before had the experience of being surrounded by that pure smell; it was like being immersed in a self-contained atmosphere, though with no visible boundaries. I'm not exaggerating when I say that that section of the property was studded with mango stones; or more, that the hardest part was finding a space free of them. To one side you could see a small brick structure, with a tin roof, that would by no means shelter a person. It might have been the dog's house, I don't know, it doesn't seem so to me; or a place for housing

something, like an electric meter or a water pump, etc. In the other area where the mangoes ended was a large birdhouse with several parrots and macaws inside it, which were definitely quiet the whole time, no doubt crushed by the heat and the density of the atmosphere. The recurrent song of the cicadas and its stridency added of course to the aura of suspended time, I don't know how it can be better described, of passing through an indefinite interval of that which is called eternity and which one supposes will never end. And that lethargy permeated all of it.

The rest of the plants appeared to have succumbed to the violence of the mangoes, their leaves drooping and their flowers dulled, the foliage and the silhouettes of the trees took on a somber, threatening tone despite the strong daylight; and even Baroni's little dog, whose name I don't recall, behaved as if he had lost his mind, trying to sleep on his feet while resting his flank against a large painted stone, not deigning to throw himself to the ground. On seeing such signs I became uneasy, imagining the consequences that this self-contained atmosphere, as I said, could have on me; still more because the things so arranged were shaping up to be a literary or theatrical parody, those moments that can't be read and yet are read, although the scene wasn't like that at all, which itself, without a doubt, was an effect of the situation. I should say that in spite of his apparently insoluble problem, Baroni's dog—on nodding off and falling over, and on waking with a start and getting up at once—was the only individual that displayed a visible activity, and in this way he helped, I think, to rescue these moments from large-scale collapse, general self-oblivion, and total standstill. But for reasons I'm unaware of, the animal had succumbed to the inertia and kept doing the same thing over again, which though it aroused a bit of compassion and was somewhat comic, in any event imposed upon the scene a hallmark of desolation, of suffering and innate wretchedness. In all likelihood the dog, because of his diminutive size, was seriously intoxicated by the mangoes. As I said, the macaws were standing around as if they didn't exist, completely spaced-out, and the afternoon threatened to go on endlessly without actions or changes, abandoned to the dictates of some mysterious local or outside entity.

But it always happens, and at a certain point the torpor broke up as if the whole garden had completely awakened at the same moment; I believe it coincided with the appearance of Baroni. The oppressive fragrance turned into the air's perfume, the trees and plants regained their habitual splendor, and even the dog felt the beneficent effects of the change as he gave up on sleep and headed over to his mistress. As he did I recalled scenes observed

so often in Caracas, men underneath mango trees who would maneuver long wooden poles or hurl fallen mangoes upward so as to knock down others; the ones throwing were generally students from nearby schools, or could also be the indigent, and the ones who had the poles were from the neighborhood. The prodigal tree denied itself to no one. It was actually not unheard-of to be walking along the street and get hit by a ripe mango, something that happened to cars as well, and they would often be dented if the mango fell from a considerable height.

Baroni's dog was small, nearly white, restless and silent. I regret not remembering his name, because I think it would be somewhat revealing. At first I was tempted to call Baroni to ask her about it, but I hesitated for a long time and then lost interest in finding out. When we went walking through the vast garden and while Baroni stopped to explain the details of a plant, of a new path, the future expansion to create a new thematic space—something that would claim several months or an entire year of her time—while she stood motionless in the hot sun and explained these things in great detail, the little dog took advantage of the pause to disappear into the nearest thicket, surely in search of something, or investigating the novelties of the place. He would be gone for varying amounts of time, but what struck me from the first was that it was the dog, and nobody else, who seemed to dictate the tempo of the stops, because as soon as he returned, Baroni would wind up her explanation or commentary and we would set off again. It occurred once, twice, and then it happened again. And it ended up seeming to me, too, that Baroni's pauses obeyed those of her pet, which always preceded hers, since he generally walked a few steps ahead of his mistress, as if blazing a trail (or it could have been that the dog was already familiar with the places where she would pause). In this way, we were a group with independent but coinciding digressions. Perhaps because of the dangers he faced in that almost wild terrain, the dog had opted to penetrate the depths of the garden only when he could count on company; it was understandable, given his size. On the other hand, the garden was where Baroni spent almost all her time, with her chores and plans for topographical innovations.

From one of the passable quarters of the property you could see in the distance a high plateau. In front of it you could make out some elevated hills, at whose foot you could barely discern broad and slightly flattened valleys, dotted with fairly sporadic rounded hillocks. As I may already have mentioned, in Trujillo state it's rare to see the rugged landscape of high mountain ranges, as in the Andes. One sees another kind of ruggedness.

In fact, what impresses because of its captivating beauty, as it were, is the simultaneity of rock formations and abrupt folds—one might call them disorderly or even crazed—that blocked up and crashed into one another at the moment of their elevation, I suppose, along with the constant tempering of the relief, the result, on the one hand, of the time gone by since those movements, and of the green covering that wraps nearly the whole territory, itself a product of the hot, wet climate of the lowland and midland areas. The gentle, endlessly overlapping forms, which vary in steepness, direction, and projection, producing an effect of perpetually moving planes, nevertheless do not produce a dramatic effect, nor do they have monumental bearing; rather, they're scenic contours, theatrical I'd say, since the depth of any place at all you look out at will never become excessively vast. And when it ought to be vast—because of the morphology of some formation or some terrain in particular—the clouds and the misty areas are there to neutralize any possible abyssal perspective. Accordingly you see diverse shades of green, ranging from yellow-green to black-green, and a rather wide spectrum of white, from the most absolute brightness to the darkest gray, both colors—green and white—with different gradations of density.

Just as we arrived at that end of the garden, I stopped beside Baroni to listen as she explained her projects for the near future. The flowering path will continue through here, a rock garden, arches with climbing vines, the garden of smiles, etc., she began telling me, nearly voicelessly. The little dog took advantage of the moment to venture into the densest thicket of all, the least explored and the largest. We watched him disappear into the bushes and were left there, looking straight ahead. You could see, as I said, a plateau kilometers away, one of those formations at times called tablelands, which seemed the flat platform of a mountain that rose behind it. There were slender clouds in the shape of strands or filaments that encircled the plateau several dozen meters down, thinning out or breaking up, you couldn't say, which at any rate melded with its verdant slope. From behind, the sun lit up the plain opposite the plateau, the plain dappled in turn with its own combination of greens and whites, which produced a quite singular contrasting effect because it seemed controlled, as if we were present as the stage lights came on, with their fine-tuning of climate and intensity. We stayed for a long time contemplating the view. I cannot say that this shared contemplation brought about some kind of fellow feeling, but at one moment when the light dimmed slightly I perceived the sunset, though that was still several hours away, and this made

me think of the daily repeated sunsets, and it seemed to me it would be difficult to find a natural beauty that would make up for that repetition, in truth a punishment. As you see, somber thoughts were knocking at my door. The garden kept producing the afternoon's habitual sounds, etc. The little dog very soon emerged from the thicket and with hardly a pause passed Baroni and took to the path again; she followed right behind him (and I along with her).

We continued our walk, were already at the midpoint of the circuit, and we began to make our way back on the other side. It was odd that what couldn't now be seen, because of our new location, was there nonetheless. I'm referring to the wide-open view of the mountains, but also to the swarming greenery of the surrounding wilderness. I say odd but there's another word; in reality it's what happens with surroundings, at once present and invisible, when they're transformed into atmosphere. That part of the garden proved fairly similar to the earlier one, the only obvious difference lying in the wilder state of plants and botanical combinations, as if it were a matter of an advanced condition, the future moment toward which the entire place, as Baroni's personal enterprise, was pointed: the day when it would look most like the local natural world, whose closest convergence with the model, however, would be the basic premise of artifice. Some corners looked entirely well tended, others just the opposite; not abandoned but ancient. According to what Baroni told me, it was the oldest section. Thus it made sense that the shrubbery and bushes had on the whole pervaded one another and their surroundings more, to the point of initiating a struggle in which Baroni hoped to intercede as little as possible. Logically, this area colonized some time back aroused less interest in Baroni's dog. He hardly sniffed around, and the few signs that at times seemed to excite him came from the other part, the one we'd left behind, toward which he directed his watchfulness again and again.

Baroni's conversation turned exclusively on the garden; a subject I couldn't follow as I should have because of my lack of knowledge, perhaps my lack of interest as well, but also because, as I said before, I was hardly in a position to understand what she was saying. Most difficult were the details, the names of plants or her horticultural routines, technical decisions, natural priorities, etc. But far from setting forth a description of minutiae, of a specialized nature, Baroni sought to transmit her emphatic enthusiasm: she wanted a realm organized around general principles, in such a way that the result would be a more or less controlled verdant hierarchy; those principles could mask a metaphorical intention, like that

same path of smiles, or they could be thematic in a horticultural sense: for instance one single type of plant in one section, that sort of thing. Unquestionably, the garden was a sentimental and playful externalization as well. Perhaps infected by the little dog's mood, I too lost a bit of curiosity. The dog and I, unexpectedly united by a thought. And yet again, I found myself once more in a situation of the sort that happens to me repeatedly, relating to different universes of things, the moment when an initially slight disinterest announces the impending occupation of my senses and I realize it's no longer possible to do anything to save myself, until I end up succumbing to confusion, in reality a disintegration of my senses.

The more or less recurrent bushes, the flowers alike but in different colors, and the decorated stones that marked off, at times unnecessarily, the edge of the path, as I said they plunged me into a kind of torpor. I don't know if the temperature, at that moment at its high for the day, had an influence as well; whatever the case, I felt immobilized and abstracted, suspended in time, incapable of reacting, hardly able to reason. I kept forging ahead at Baroni's side, I could move, I understood whatever words happened to reach me, but I felt that I'd remained stuck a few meters back, when this sensation of absence or of emptiness, I don't know what to call it, had revealed itself. And furthermore, the thought occurred to me that despite my semblance of normal life or abnormal life, like that of any other person, I had at no moment ceased to be this way, in a state of silent stupor, immobilized by circumstances and not knowing how to behave or to think, and without caring too much about it at that; I conceived of it as part of nature, I thought that everyone shoulders his own insensitivity or sorrow that shackles him to the floor, etc. I was incapable of blaming Baroni for my state, I knew that neither that house nor that region bore any responsibility. Besides, it was clear that if the mangoes hadn't been able to affect me before, even less could that wild garden do so now. My situation came from some other place, it was ancient and deep, or superficial and recent, who knows? I saw now that the times before when it had revealed itself I hadn't perceived it with this intensity; and afterward it had stopped revealing itself simply because my entire person was already subject to its control, and I found myself sunk in the most complete indifference. The cell of indifference everyone is born with, much like the cell of identity that each person has, in my case had grown by one of the possible methods, that is, turning itself against me.

That's how we were, walking slowly through the garden. I knew the visit was about to end, or rather that sooner or later at some moment of

that afternoon it was going to end, and it was the same to me whether it happened that instant or in the subsequent hours. It was my will in submission to its own insensitivity, lulled to sleep especially by Baroni's inscrutable words. At one point it occurred to me to think that she was in reality crying out for help, and that the cause of that weakened voice lay in the practically infinite time she had gone unheard since she'd begun her outcry. As they say, years of bitterness and incomprehension. Much like those crushed beings who only need someone to save them, but most likely find no one, so that their time and their voices begin running out. According to this conceit, I was one of Baroni's last chances, by now there was hardly anyone left for her to meet because she lived secluded, in one of those dwellings hidden away in the ravines, invisible from the highway, along which very few people traveled in any case. The effort to articulate some audible sentence was beyond her capabilities, exposing her to a definitive prostration, to a life condemned to pass with neither rescue nor salvation. I thus beheld stupefied how she stood on tiptoe to speak to me, and how she craned her neck in an extraordinary fashion to draw closer to my ear, and that wasn't any use either. I felt to blame for being so deaf and for being unable to help. I had, however, my own problems in tow, the numbness I mentioned was proof of them, and that's why I couldn't be sure if my difficulty in understanding was due to her condition or to my state, when nevertheless it turned out to be clear that no great mystery existed: what she was demanding went well beyond whatever her words might say, and that's why my comprehension didn't necessarily depend on them.

In other words, we were facing a problem. I recalled the rescue in which Baroni had played a leading role, when she saved a man drowning in the waters of the ravine, as I will certainly explain later on. She hadn't asked herself too many questions in the face of the danger, she'd decided to act on the orders of her nature, or her practical conscience or whatever. And in contrast, I was thinking of the signals and the steps to take according to some protocols that were way too slow and, especially, useless. It's true that her experience had been a dream; nevertheless, it was as if it had been a real dilemma. That was our great difference, and perhaps the ultimate reason I couldn't help her. For Baroni there wasn't always a true distance between reality and fantasy; and I devoted my time, every day, to distinguishing what was true from what was false, with the additional problem of always keeping myself on the side of the unresolved. Nothing had sufficient weight to be truthful; even what was crudest and

most material, most definitive, presented itself as provisional, or at any rate circumstantial, or, more complicated still, feeble and formless: it could happen that reality was irreconcilable with fantasy, but even so, one would end up yielding to the flow, and along with it, to oblivion, which is a form of illusion. What's the use of the truth if it doesn't last? This was a question that, given how I felt at that moment, I could apply to all that was known, both general and personal, both what was right at hand and what was furthest away. I was finding the truth to be not only feeble, but also malleable, abject and fragile: at this point it translated as fantasy. One portion of the details of any given thing ceased to be certain, or were redundant or insufficient, and instantly the equivalent, the translation, occurred, and with that the truth was watered down.

And so we walked the final stretch of the path without saying a thing. The dog ambled on a few meters ahead introspectively, or at any rate fatigued, as if he were returning from a grueling adventure, or maybe he guessed my thoughts and even he felt ashamed of them. Every so often he turned his head, and I saw that instead of seeking out Baroni's eyes he was looking at me, no doubt wishing to verify something. We were approaching a bend, where the path turned into a verdant passageway. We were going fairly slowly, and so the shady tunnel awaiting us presented itself as a ready-made high point, something like a crowning glory. And indeed, once we had rounded the bend Baroni's house appeared, seen from behind. We were at the end of the road; and the two of us also must have seemed to be returning from a long march. I don't know why, at the sight of the house, my bad thoughts were somewhat watered down; I stopped thinking of myself, if only momentarily, as a hopeless person, and I fashioned for myself an illusion of normal life, if it can be called that, surely a life hard to define. To one side of the property, behind the house, were piled some stones, junk and tools. The aroma of the mangoes returned, and now and then you could hear through a window the voice of Rogelio, who seemed to be talking on the telephone. This, too, had some effect on my change of mood; I was pleased to think that I, too, was under the influence of the house, understood as a workshop of illusions, of beings created out of will and spirit, and that the general process of bestowing life to which that place was subject included me, I was a temporary cog in that gearbox.