

EMILIO JURADO NAÓN
FROM AGUSTINA PAZ

Translated from Spanish by Kelsi Vanada

THE CONVICT'S FACE woke me. Parched, I lay in the dark, opening my eyes one minute before day broke, wreathed in the cock's crow; parched, I watched the ceiling shift from pearly gray to blue, blue to pink, pink to white. The light of a cloudless sky ablaze in the tropics. I ran my eyes over the room, feeling a grittiness on my tongue that came not from the previous evening's dinner—this was not the typical thirst that wakes one in the early morning but rather a sensation bonded with, like unto, nearly emanating from, produced by: the convict's face. It had stolen me from sleep—I saw it emblazoned on the flat sky, in the wavy light at the edges of the mirror, even imprinted on my closed eyelids. I went back to casting my eyes around the bedroom: sheets, eiderdown, empty glass reeking of swill by the lantern. The shadow of the jasmine plant just coming into focus in this unbearably monastic room. But the only way to avoid one type of suffering is to give oneself over to another. So one must choose, one must be sure, when choosing, to choose the smoothest road to calvary. No sooner had I rested my eyelids than he appeared: white face like the whitewash that had covered the walls of my family's home ever since I was a little girl.

I knotted myself into the bedclothes in an effort to stretch the dream out for a few more minutes. But my tongue was pasty; my throat burned when I swallowed. I squeezed my eyelids shut—I wanted to return to the scene I had been dreaming about before the cock's crow, my thirsty mouth, and the gradual lengthening of the shadows woke me. Where was I? It was as if we were leaving mass on a Sunday: the familiar music of the bells, my hand gripped in Mama's, sticky with sweat. Three boys of the same age were pushing each other by the steps. One of them was brutish, another sickly. The laughter of the third rang out crystal clear. Tightening the knot of the sheets once more, I tried to call to mind that sound, just as I had heard it in the dream. But the clucking beneath my window, the beating wings, the thirst opening out from the center of my abdomen broke my concentration. His skin looked soft, especially above his mouth, where a blond, nearly translucent fuzz covered his lip, perceptible only thanks to the angle of the sun setting behind the peach

trees. Baby skin on the face of an adult. All at once, there were no more crystal laughs nor peach skin—the bells were eclipsed by the boom of a gunshot. Gunsmoke covered the sky. The bang resounded through the valley. End of dream. Eyes open. Thirst: rough taste buds, dried saliva at the corners of my lips, a stinging along the length of my esophagus.

Again the convict's face etched indelibly on the ceiling. I set myself to reconstructing the features I had seen speed by me in the town plaza the morning before. One more pale face in the jumbled group of prisoners being transported in the government cart. It stampeded through the plaza, heading for the garrison on the outskirts of the other side of the city, dashing the hopes of the throng that had congregated when the people learned that a gang of filthy invaders had been captured in the stream. But any hope of an admonitory firing squad in the public square was soon abandoned; the crowd returned to their affairs, though there was much talk of a possible march to the garrison that evening to demand the public execution the authorities—to the people's minds—owed them. We all wanted to see it, yes. Myself included: Like everyone else, I wanted to witness the men learning their lesson, of course—but even more so I lamented my desire to see again, more clearly, the face of the man condemned to death, whom I believed I recognized among the gray tumult of prisoners, their features blurring together in the dusty cloud the cart left in its wake.

With my legs hanging off the edge of the bed and no desire to rise, I made an imaginary sketch. Long eyelashes like a doll's, lowered. Lowered like curtains. His eyes hidden like newly polished fingernails. His irises coppery, coppery like . . . but enough with the comparisons. They unnerved me. To compare is a mark of laziness, in addition to being a habit that obstructs perception of the things of this world. A pernicious practice, sometimes inadvertent, it is worth the effort to wipe it out precisely because it is automatic. Comparisons deceive the imagination, though they claim to assist it—the richer, the more original the comparison, the further from the understanding of the matter. Thus it is best to aim for pure description: the walls of the kitchen in my family's house are white; a collection of newspaper clippings is nailed to them; portrayed in the clippings, aging men pull faces.

Still lying down, wrapped in the eiderdown, the tips of my toes brushing the floor, I tried to reconstruct the convict's features without resorting to comparisons. The city's birds had woken, too, in growing numbers. At first they accompanied the cock's crow, then they over-

lapped its solitary chattering, interrupted it, drowned it out for a while, gainsaid it, began to surpass it, even to flatten it; in the end, the comingling of disparate trills—harmonious in their way, in their discomposure—imposed itself over the monologue that had known to reach its peak in the early morning.

The face of the condemned man . . . his eyelashes almost fully resting on his cheeks, behind which barely showed the thin wedges, the curves, of his eyes. Every so often, the serene glow of a coppery gaze. Glow: his gaze as much an animating fire as an illuminating flame. Coppery: resembling copper. I abhorred adjectivization as much as the metaphors parasitizing nearly every word of the language. But what is being spoken of must be stated if it is to be described. One must grab hold of some scrap of language if she wishes to narrate, to narrate to herself, to thwart insomnia—in short, to stave off boredom.

Because ultimately, if I trusted figurative language, it would not have been difficult for me to see, encoded in the condemned man's countenance, the glory of the Confederation. Moreover, if I had been adept at bad taste, black humor, irreverence, I would have interpreted in the coming execution of the louse, in the explosion of gunpowder that would precede the projectile's flight, fireworks of similar colors to those set off during the national holidays for the consolation of our fellow countrymen. I would have even been pleased by it. Pleased to translate the solemn face of the man condemned to death into a joyful symbol of the end of our civil wars. But we did not consider ourselves devotees of such savageries (metaphor is savagery)—not in Tucumán at least, not in my family, where everything (as Papa used to whisper to me during his friends' politicking outbursts), everything, at the end of the day, stayed in the family and was resolved in family. Because the condemned man was, in a certain sense, also family. It was not so, of course, in other provinces: One had only to remember Ibarra's castigations to correct such a perception.

Ibarra's castigations were the violent exercise of literalism, the opposite of metaphor. The figurative sense was for intellectuals, beasts: "Let them throw themselves into the thistles," as the caudillo of Santiago del Estero used to say. He meant it literally. Thistles abound in Santiago del Estero, with spines of great variety. But it was one thing to beat a cunning laborer with a whip among the thistles for a lark (he used to tell this story at home, biting his lip) and a very different thing indeed to do what Ibarra did with the pig he laid claim to after the failed skirmish in the Famaillá stream.

I threw off the bedclothes, put both feet on the floor at once. The presence of the day was undisputed; my thirst, moreover, seemed to have expanded past my tongue: it had spread through my throat into all the interior recesses of my body. Even the tips of my fingers cracked with dryness. I recalled that the night before, Papa had told me, with pedagogical designs, of the torture Ibarra had administered to the pig captured at Famaillá.

Whereas he used to conceal from me word of his compatriot's unusual punishments, when he found out about this most recent episode, Papa summoned me to the parlor immediately. Thus, I learned what the "new leather" torture consisted of, which the caudillo knew to use only in the neighboring territories. Through clouds of smoke and punctuated by sips of sweet wine, Papa spoke for an hour of Ibarra's economical style: to take the hide of a freshly slaughtered cow, stitch up the leg holes, wrap the vile man in question in it, sew the sack closed, and leave it in the sun during the Santiago heatwave.

After this account, Papa pensively launched a few smoke rings, which dissipated against the spines of the books in the library. I noticed how he watched my reaction out of the corner of his eye (hence why I suspected an indoctrinating edge to the tale he told me before I went to bed). He went on telling me that, in Ibarra's style, the fresh leather soon begins to contract around the body, little by little, as the offender runs out of air, as the condensation of the hide increases with the heat; it deforms, thirst stabs his throat, the filthy savage screams, grows hoarse, tries to wriggle out, his wrists and ankles bleeding from the rubbing of the shackles, the sweat pouring out but quickly evaporating; he keeps thrashing about inside the bag, one skin clings to the other, the "new leather" compresses, clings to him, is tailor-made for him.

Outside, a breeze rifles the bundle's bovine hair, which looks ovate but with some sharp angles: an elbow, a knee, the head. The chimangos have been circling overhead for hours.

It was from the failed skirmish in the Famaillá stream that they—the three Tucumános condemned to death, whom Heredia, our governor, was to be tasked with—had come, along with the rebel from Santiago del Estero whom Ibarra had selected, that he might tailor his suit back in his own province. Mine was among the three Tucumános condemned to death. My condemned man. The walls of the kitchen where I ended up a few minutes after I arose, half sleepwalking, deafened by the trilling of the birds in the garden, were covered with whitewash.

PALE, SILHOUETTED in my thoughts. Black, gray, and of a yellowish pallor—the colors of the caricatures Porcia liked to cut out of the gazette *The Mosquito*; she tacked them up with long nails, one on top of the other (every week a new one joined the disarray of papers) on the whitewashed walls of the kitchen (her bastion, Porcia's bastion) in my family's house. Papa never took offense at this syncretic altar, nor did it matter to him that the *The Mosquito's* taunts often targeted his allies. They were just there: clippings of men satirized with a sharp pen. They were nothing more than that to him: banal expressions of a sharp pen, created thousands of kilometers away in a cosmopolitan port city and allowed to collect in a remote corner of the house without bothering anyone.

I sat at the kitchen table while Porcia, after serving me a large glass of water, returned her whole body to the day's tasks: her active arms employing utensils, shooting glances, attentive to the time that had already elapsed that morning, attentive to the time remaining before the mid-day meal, attentive but absent. The breath required to scrub or strain or stir made her nostrils grow in circumference: more air, more oxygen, more air. I, on the other hand, languished, parasitizing. I looked at the collection of clippings from *The Mosquito* on the wall. Caricatures of renowned courtiers dueling, riding tricycles through the middle of a gala dinner, blowing their noses into the ruffle of the skirt of some eminent lady, riding wild boars at a lakeside picnic, cross-dressing backstage before a show, or thronging the corridors of the government palace in the disproportionate bodies of zoo animals; in the speech bubbles sprouting from their lips they were always made authors of some nonsense that, through the cartoonist's quips, showed them to be—if not stupider than they really were—at least a great deal wittier. In those strokes of ink which, depending on the age of the clipping, were losing their definition, I sometimes seemed to recognize the nebulous features of my condemned man, with the same vagueness with which they had appeared to me in the drowsiness of morning. Under *The Mosquito's* pen, all politicians resembled each other, yes—but what I had not noticed until now, as the last drop of the glass of water Porcia had handed me splashed onto my face, was that they also looked very much like my condemned man.

These were days of catastrophic boredom: boredom was the sun at its peak, an eternal summer noon; boredom was the middle of the week, Wednesday, the dry equidistance between Sundays when an unexpected

visitor might drop by or we went on excursions to the hill; on all the other days, boredom kept pace with the wooden mallet Porcia used to make an unending succession of pieces of meat thunder on the worktop, with the crunching of kernels of maize in the mortar, the constant clucking, in the background, the everlasting clucking.

Suddenly, around midday, the sky peeked through a hole in the clouds, the light skirted around the heavy leaves of the fig trees in the garden, came in through the window, caressed the surface of the produce, made the shiny-skinned pieces of chicken gleam, ready to be submerged in the boiling water bubbling out of a large iron cauldron, wrapped itself playfully around the sacks of maize open on the worktable, breathed color into the kernels, tinted them a decisive orange, dried out the skin on our hands and Porcia's frizzy hair, and was about to shine onto the clippings, nailed into the wall of whitewashed bricks, which I—out of boredom or hypnosis—had not left off examining. Aged men, age-old project of men: tacked-up paper clippings.

Porcia's back: a mass of starchy roundness backlit against the windows. She moved her head to the sound of a lullaby as she stirred the mazamorra, scraping the bottom of the pot with a wooden spoon. Every so often she touched the net holding back her curls, making sure not a hair fell into the food—although more than anything it was, as she always said, to prevent the kitchen fumes from ruining her hair.

Armed with a piece of charcoal, I drew on the table what I had reconstructed in my mind of the condemned man (I tried to work out the features of his face, but my amateur representation resisted me: it came out looking like an eyesore). No longer worn out, as I had seen him, rattling along covered in dust with that bunch of invading pigs, but rather erect before the firing squad. The end of the charcoal broke just as I was finishing the tip of the musket. The scratching of my improvised graphite was discreet but loud enough that Porcia, possessed of great auditory acuity, detected it. She immediately dropped what she was doing, turned around, saw the charcoal, the scribbles on the wood, my dirty fingers. As she approached, I felt the heat radiating from her skin. Her eyes were perfectly round: their white surfaces stood out noticeably, covered in burst blood vessels that were not entirely red—more like ocher, almost yellow—without stealing center stage from the dark interior, in which irises and pupils merged, two black discs in which I never saw anything reflected. With a heavy expression of rebuke on her mulatto lips, and without breaking her gaze, she fumbled around for

a flat utensil she could use to anchor in my flesh the only—the laughable—punishment her employer, my Papa, allowed her to inflict. But she stopped abruptly. Holding her breath. With the spatula held high. The sun projected prisonlike stripes onto the whitewashed bricks of my family's kitchen wall, putting *The Mosquito* caricatures behind bars for the first time.

Porcia? Frozen: The steam lifting from her shoulders a few seconds ago had suddenly subsided. Gasping for breath, her face turning purple, she choked out the thought that the man I had scribbled in kitchen charcoal on my family's table was none other than the child Ángel López himself. "The Boy," she always called him, and would call every male she had known since his youth, until the day she roared her sorrows meters underground; though Ángel López had already grown facial hair, become a doctor, and fired the Bolivian Santa Cruz's weapons against our side, he would never cease to be, for Porcia, "The Boy"—the boy with whom she used to stack bags of manure in the stable while the totalitarian torpor of the Sabbath siesta weighed down on the López family house, where she also knew how to serve.

Where had she gotten that idea? She had interpreted it from my faint scribbles made on the fly, as I spontaneously intuited random lines. How could it be that without knowing who the convict was, without fully remembering the face I had glimpsed as the cart sped by, without knowing how to draw anything but basic shapes, without having given a single thought to the Ángel boy in at least four years, I had nevertheless come up with something in charcoal near enough to his profile that Porcia recognized him—even upside down, even half-blinded by the drops of perspiration falling morbidly from her eyebrows onto her eyelids? With her fingertips, she rubbed the figure (which I had depicted in great detail: the rope around his wrists, a blindfold covering his eyes, his expression between contrite and indifferent, the muskets aimed at him from many angles at once) as she swore on the jury that what I had drawn was none other than Ángel López himself, the boy Ángel López, nephew of the governor poet. "Former governor," I corrected her. But Porcia was stubborn: She did not want to hear of any changes; she adored the old "poet," the old governor Francisco Javier López, the pig. She only spoke like this, nonchalant, with me. If my Uncle Heredia had been there to hear her, she would not have said what she said with such levity; the blood would have curdled in her veins.

"Poor, beautiful, wretched Ángel López," breathed Porcia, who had

no aversion to adjectivization, as the spatula she had raised with the intention to correct me—but whose trajectory she had cut short—became covered in perspiration. She crossed herself with her free hand. I remembered Ángel's beauty from the social gatherings I went to as a girl; later, his penury, his defeat at the hands of Quiroga, his escape across the northern border, his temptation at the hands of the dictator Santa Cruz. Suddenly I remembered him as I used to see him in mass—like in a dream but different. The skin above his lips was chapped, likely from shaving his moustache prematurely. Had he used a kitchen knife? Like the ones dangling over Porcia's head, shining in the sun, dazzling my eyes with their silver plating? Ángel shaving at dawn on a Sunday before prayer, with the edge of a blade, water boiling, shaving foam coaxed from bar soap, regarding his reflection in a well-polished silver ladle, near a window—or, better yet, outside, by the henhouse. Would the López family have had a henhouse? Surely, but not so close to the house—more likely it was over on the servants' plot, where the stench of guano, the disarray of feathers, the insistent clucking would not reach them. Taking care not to cut his lip, with its delicate skin; attempting to steady his flailing pulse, his constricted breath nevertheless fogging up the blade of his long knife; longing to even out the parts of a face that was his face but which looked so beautiful it seemed to belong to another. It was a lovely face, despite the concave disfigurement silverware inflicts on every visage. The ladle admired him, the long knife trembled when he touched it to his soapy fuzz . . . even “rosy-fingered Dawn” (now that personification had parasitized me) forced herself above the horizon so as to caress him a while. But Ángel must have taken off like a shot, that time five years ago—he had to drop his shaving implements upon hearing steps approaching on the farm, fearing that if they saw him, his elders would never leave off teasing the smooth-faced young man who had shaved the three hairs of his beard in secret. He arrived, awkward, at mass, with ruddy lips. On his knees among the dim tapers, his fingers threaded together, eyes on the host, his jaw slightly open. His chin. His fine upper lip chapped. Was this what I had seen in my dreams, that same morning? A warmth stirred in my body, precisely below my ribs, above my navel.

Papa was an apologist of precision: He used to say, “You either hit the nail on the head or you crush a finger.” Precisely: I had associated Ángel (him, the image in my memory) from then on with a region of my body, a certain temperature, a color (the golden sheen of the tapers).

Everything having to do with our innards is easier to describe when comparisons are left aside. Perhaps because comparison always leads elsewhere—the body, on the other hand, is right here. Nearby, not far off, nor off to the side. “Right here with us,” Porcia reinvoked him, “a holy icon card.” His eyes were covered by his lowered eyelashes, almost as long as his moustache, which, no longer an embarrassing wisp, had grown in his exile—a holy icon stampeding in unholy manner through the central plaza. Why would they have taken that path, it being the least practical way to get to the garrison? To incite mockery, obviously. Heredia used to say it, Papa always said it: “Mockery disciplines.” Why not discipline him before the public, then, in that case? Why go to the run-down garrison? “We will walk like Mama Antula the Pilgrim,” I heard him say to a woman as the crowd dispersed. “If necessary, we will walk. So that we may see how they finish off the vile governor.” It was no use: Although a lustrum had passed since Heredia’s mandate, his opponent (former poet, former governor) Francisco Javier López was still, to the masses—though scorned—their leader.

As she beheaded chickens, Porcia repeated: “Of course I saw him. I saw our leader Francisco Javier with his son, the boy Ángel. They were both skinny. There were three of them. I also saw another filthy one, further back in the cart—I recognized him. It was José Segundo, Ángel’s companion. A little figure with slumped shoulders. Dark circles like ditches under his eyes.” They were always together, those two, Ángel and José Segundo. I had last seen them leaving mass together, the bells ringing a tune that sounded like jubilation at the time but which I now understand was mourning. The chafing beneath Ángel’s nose, his youthful bearing, the skinny figure of Segundo, his sickly sidekick, in the shadows.

When Porcia named the other boy, José Segundo, I understood the mistake she had made, the hidden success I had achieved from the beginning. Did Porcia see Angelito in the charcoal scribbles on the worktop? To the contrary: In my crude apprentice lines, I myself saw, all at once, the Jewish nose, the sunken eyes, the stubby jaw of the other man condemned to death. The sidekick, the third convict, the one in the shadows: the gloomy one, the phlegmatic one. Then I realized. I had drawn not the handsome one, not the famous one, not Porcia’s eternal boy (whose face Porcia saw in everything, even in the chicken giblets), not the nephew of Francisco Javier López, former poet, deposed governor (or former governor, deposed poet); not the hero on his feet, not

the smartly dressed one who would receive a shot in the forehead in a few hours, his eyes blindfolded, once the command to fire had been given. The charcoal sketch depicted not Ángel, as Porcia had convinced herself, but Segundo, Roca, the other man condemned to death.

I looked down at my black fingers.

Porcia was overcome by a fit of sorrow. She wiped her face with her apron in an attempt (condemned to fail from the start) to cover her sobs. She was saved from this spectacle by the smoke the mazamorra at the hearth had begun to emit. I wiped my fingers on the balled-up sheets in the laundry room, analyzed my escape options. The maize pudding sizzled, interrupted by clicks of Porcia's tongue as she tried to pull the pot from the fire with one bare hand while, with the spoon in the other, she struggled to stir the mixture, scraping the burned parts off the bottom. I went out into the garden beneath the fig tree canopy, crisscrossed now with shadows, now with flecks of light, the burnt smell still in my nostrils.