

#NTM2017 Premiere: Excerpts from the Award-winning Anthology
Spanish Women of Wonder



Today we continue the premieres at #NTM2017 with two short stories excerpted from the award-winning anthology of science fiction written by women in Spanish, [*Spanish Women of Wonder*](#) (Palabristas, 2015) edited by Cristina Jurado and Leticia Lara. *The Infestation* by Felicidad Martínez presents a humorous and thrilling military space opera involving evolved plants. *Techt* by Sofía Rhei showcases a semiotic dystopia with a touch of cyberpunk, recalling novels such as *Fahrenheit 451* or *1984*. The translator, Sue Burke, does a wonderful job of capturing these two distinct voices. We hope you'll agree and you'll check out this mesmerizing collection.

—Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman

Spanish Women of Wonder

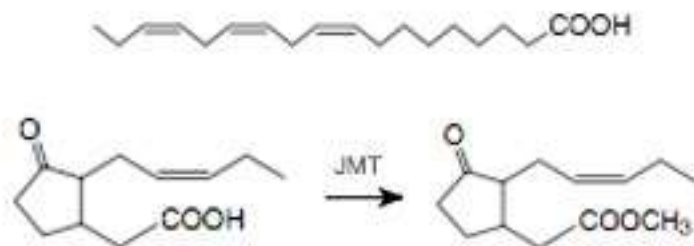
[*Spanish Women of Wonder*](#) (*Alucinadas* –“Mind Trippers”- in Spanish), is the first collection of science fiction stories written by women in Spanish. It was conceived as an ever-growing initiative, empowering women to claim a much-deserved visibility in the Spanish science fiction field.

With the support of experienced editor Ann VanderMeer and celebrated Argentinian SF author Angélica Gorodischer, this collection won enormous attention when published in Spanish, including a nomination in the Best Anthology category at the Ignotus Awards (Spain’s equivalent of the Hugo Awards). Spanish online indie publisher Palabaristas collected more than 200 stories from 12 Spanish-speaking countries through a public contest and editors Cristina Jurado and María Leticia Lara Palomino chose 10 stories, ranging from military science fiction, CliFi, and weird SF to SF thriller, dystopias and cyberpunk.

After a successful [Kickstarter](#) to gain funds for translation into English, *Spanish Women of Wonder* was finally published at the end of 2015 for international exposure.

The Infestation by Felicidad Martínez *translated by Sue Burke*

1



2

Night had fallen, but Hakim was still working in the fields. Other farmers had given up hours earlier, some even days ago. And really, he couldn't blame them. In fact, even he'd been about to throw in the towel when the second infestation came. If it wasn't for

Aadab, he'd have asked for a transfer right away to some other settlement to begin again from scratch (like most of his neighbors), even though that meant losing the rights to ownership and use of his own land.

But his wife was right: they hadn't made such a long and dangerous trip to give up on the prosperity they'd been promised. If Allah was testing them, Hakim's duty was to show they were worthy and to thank Him for His attention. In the end, wasn't it Allah who'd created a planet like this so they could inhabit it? Hadn't it been His intervention that got them passage for two on the ship, despite how difficult it was to get even one spot?

Hakim agreed, and with conviction and renewed energy, he checked to make sure the saturation in the filters hadn't yet reached toxic levels, then he kept pulling giant fleas out of the aspiration tube and shoving them into a portable container.

The filthy bugs had already ruined too much of the harvest, although to the bare eye it seemed intact and healthy. They called them fleas because they looked like that insect from the planet he'd come from (except five times bigger). But they hadn't come to eat the plants, only to crap on them, literally. It would have been funny except that the shit had sunk through the stems and reacted with one of the peptide chains, and now the plants weren't fit for human consumption: eating them caused nausea and dizziness.

And so, while scientists were trying to discover the causes and were debating whether the extermination of the fleas would cause an ecological disaster, since they hadn't been on the planet long enough to understand its ecosystem in depth, Hakim filled container after container of the bugs in the hope that the investigators would finally get down to work and find a way to process the food that had already been infected.

He'd been picking off fleas for a long time and not enjoying it when suddenly he thought he heard a buzz. He jerked, turned around, and aimed the light from his lantern from one side to the other until he finally pointed it directly at the ground. Maybe it was his imagination, or maybe his movement had caused a trick of the light. Whatever it was, the ground seemed to have moved.

At first he convinced himself there was a vole, then he thought maybe earthworms, then he imagined a gigantic ant lion, and the more aware he became that he was on a strange planet, the more grotesque were the ideas that came to mind.

He shook his head and smiled nervously. Obviously just his imagination, and he cursed himself for behaving like a child frightened by a little darkness. Well, really, it was a lot of darkness.

Suddenly he heard another buzz, more intense this time. He turned suddenly, and the lantern struck a stem, fell, and rolled across the ground. As he bent down to grab the lantern, the soil rose up to form a little heap no higher than the width of a palm. He gave a start, frightened.

"It must have been me, it must have," he repeated like a mantra to calm himself down. "When I bent over, my weight made the earth move. That's all."

As fast as he could he grabbed the lantern, and as he stood up, he heard another buzz, and something brushed against his helmet. His body tensed, his shout froze in his mouth, his heart galloped in his chest, and his breath fogged his visor as he panted. Then he felt flesh tear near his ankle and heard his bone snap as something cold and relentless forced itself through.

Fear made him shout, and pain made him sink to his knees on the ground. One

second he was weeping and howling, and the next he grabbed the container full of fleas with both hands and smashed it again and again on whatever was drilling through his ankle. He didn't even stop when the pressure subsided. He only paused and shrank in terror after he heard another buzz near his shoulder, then another, another, and yet another.

Although gripped by fear, his impulse to flee was stronger. He clung to the lantern, stood up as best he could, and began to run and stumble, run and stumble with every stabbing pain that ran up his injured leg. The fog on his visor made it hard to see and his eyes began to sting. His suit had been torn, so soon the exterior atmosphere would make his eyes water uncontrollably.

With buzzes dancing hysterically around him, he desperately took off his helmet and put on the emergency mask that hung from his belt. As things went, he'd barely have twelve minutes before he began to cough, and if he couldn't stop to control the hemorrhage, it wouldn't be much longer before he fainted. But that didn't matter much right at that moment. He had to get home, to find refuge. He needed to be safe.

He ran, he fell, he dragged himself, he got up, he ran some more, again and again as the buzzing multiplied and things struck him constantly, ripping through his suit until they reached muscle. And when he saw the lights of the settlement and felt warm liquid bubbling up from his stomach, he screamed as loud as he could until his lungs gave out.

He was aware that what he felt next was not the result of his imagination:

Eight sharp feet clung to his back trying to anchor themselves on his ribs, enormous wings beat ceaselessly against him, a proboscis stabbed into his neck, and the horrible needle sank down until it had passed through his stomach from one side to the other.

He spit blood. His body rocked at every thrust like a dying marionette, and as he fell to the ground thinking that it must not have seemed like enough to Allah to send fleas to test him, he saw a swarm of hundreds, maybe thousands of grotesque winged shadows zooming down on the settlement, accompanied by the dire soundtrack of heartrending screams from men, women, and children, and an incessant, deranging buzz.

Hakim breathed his last. He wouldn't have cared to know that the reprisals had begun.

3

We couldn't have gotten off to a better start. I'm sure the lunchmeat down there wouldn't say the same thing, of course, but what do they expect? Some people die so that other people have an excuse to kill. It's that simple.

Did they think they could do without us? Well, they can take that and put it where the sun doesn't shine. Really, though, I better stow the cynicism. I'm supposed to be the diplomat in the group, after all.

As the shuttle shakes back and forth, I watch everyone assigned to me out of the corner of my eye. Most of all I watch how they handle themselves and study their tics.

I can't say much about Daswani and Fernández. I might've chosen Daswani myself. He's a good guy, a first-class field medic, and I made him my second in command without thinking twice. But Fernández.... This is the third time we've worked together, and I don't have any complaints about her performance. She could track down

someone's fart from a mile away. I mean, she knows what she's doing and that's the only thing that matters to me, no matter how strange she is: a dyke and a misogynist. How does she manage that? Well, like any hetero misogynist: she never talks while she fucks, and to bed someone, that woman just has to answer yes to one single question.

As for Jaejong and Whitaker, I only know what I read in their dossiers. The Korean is an expert in communications and linguistics, and the American is a genius at blowing things up and setting traps. That's enough to start with, although what I really care about is if they follow my big rule for anyone under my orders: be a complete and utter atheist. I could care less about what anyone else does in private, but during a mission if they find any excuse at all to say some stupid shit, I won't stand for it. If everyone stays quiet, that's just fine.

It looks like the shuttle has passed the turbulence. We can relax. In the half-hour before we land, for the last time, I'm going to review the data we have about the colony and the settlement that was attacked. It's best to have everything fresh in my mind when I meet whoever's in charge down there.

There's one thing that keeps bothering me in what I'm reading: all the settlements are under domes made of a permeable membrane created specifically to allow only the breathable part of this planet's atmosphere to pass through. Because of that, the same way that humans can't last more than fifteen minutes breathing the air outside, any bug or vermin that got through the barrier and into the installations would drop dead fast. In fact, according to this report, a year after the human habitats were finished, the animals learned their lesson and kept far away. So what made these things attack the colonists inside the refuge? And to judge from how the bodies were messed up.... Aren't the only animals on this planet more than two palm widths big supposed to be fish? And why aren't there any remains of whatever attacked the colonists? A paw, blood ... anything?

The pilot says he's going to start the landing. Daswani nods, Fernández smiles fiercely, Jaejong sighs, and Whitaker doesn't bat an eye. Really, they're all pretty calm. There's nothing to fear. Probably this mission will be just another bug hunt.

I clench my jaw. Nothing is ever that simple, especially on a strange planet. Hell, not even back home are things ever that easy.

It's obvious that she'd rather shit on herself than have us here. Sorry, babe, but you're not going to solve your problem just by pushing a pen.

"I'm Dr. Gallagher," she says with tight lips and a big frown. No chance we're going to get along.

I don't hold out my hand for a shake, which confirms her opinion about the military. I also realize Fernández is already falling for her like a dope.

"I direct this installation," she continues, "and, as I advised your superiors, your presence here is unnecessary and irrelevant."

"I understand. But now that we're here, we can take a look around. My bosses will feel a lot better, and you'll have an excuse to get rid of us faster, doc."

Although it seems impossible, Gallagher frowns even harder and every wrinkle on her face gets deeper before she snorts. If she expected me to bite my tongue and be polite even though she's not, she can go fuck herself. If she expected me to take over so she can have an excuse to make things more difficult for me, she can fuck herself too. I know I'm right about what I said, so ... she can go fuck herself.

“Whatever you want. I’m just asking you not to be a bother.”

“We won’t be a bother ... if you give us what we need.”

“Look ... um” She snaps her finger trying to remember the name she didn’t bother to ask for.

“Rosenbaum. Lieutenant Rosenbaum.”

“Wow.” She smiles, which sets off all my alarm bells. “Are you Jewish?”

Are you stupid? I want to answer. “Do you have any problem with the fact that I’m black?” I answer anyway.

Gallagher, red as a tomato, coughs a little and finally says:

“I’m afraid we couldn’t have gotten off to a worse start. My question was inappropriate and we can’t act as if it didn’t happen, so let’s just carry on. What do you need?”

“To begin with, transportation. I want Fernández and Whitaker to take a look at the settlement where it happened. I also need Daswani to have access to the cadavers to study them, to see if anything’s been overlooked. I know you received communications from the settlement during the attack. In fact, Jaejong listened to the recordings on the way, but I’d prefer if he could check the originals.”

“Agreed. Anything else?” she asks as if she had a broomstick stuck up her butt.

“Yes. Although I read your reports, I’d like to talk to the people who actually wrote them up. In fact, I’m especially interested in interviewing the people who had the craziest theories about what happened.”

“No problem.” She smiles with a little disdain. “I see that you worked out what you wanted to do before you came.”

“Dr. Gallagher, I’m German. If there’s one thing we like to do, it’s plan. In addition, we like to carry everything out perfectly. By that I mean carrying out everything correctly and efficiently, of course.”

Daswani manages not to laugh out loud. The director doesn’t know what to do with herself right now.

4

Fernández followed the lines of the furrows, and her conclusion made her frown. She looked up again at the deteriorated dome. Something didn’t fit right: if everything seem to point to a simultaneous attack by land and air, why the hell did she have a feeling this was only one single invasion?

She heard Whitaker coming. He was an expert at incursions, but he wasn’t good at sneaking up on anyone.

I’d like to think that he secured the area, that’s why he’s behaving so confidently, because if he didn’t...

“Anything interesting?” she asked Whitaker, keeping her eyes on the dome.

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“On what you mean by interesting.”

“Oh. Have you found anything worth mentioning?”

“Nothing to indicate a coordinated attack by a group of predators. It looks more like an attack of giant mosquitoes.”

“According to the reports, the only animals on this planet with wings are little insects.”

“That’s the thing. And I’m nobody to contradict the reports.”

“I get it... Could I ask what the hell is up with you?” She was tired of seeing him fidget and twitch as if he were trying at all costs not to scratch himself. “You’re making me nervous.”

“Fuck, I feel like a dick in a condom. This is the first time I’ve had to wrap myself head to toe in synthetic skin.”

“Well, you’d better get used to it because it could be worse. You could be stuck like a sausage in one of those huge suits that the guy wore who brought us here. I promise you wouldn’t like it, especially if we have to do any combat duty.”

“I know, I know, but what can I say? Everything itches. And the full-eye lenses are starting to bother me too.”

“It’s psychosomatic, Whitaker. The army invested a whole lot of money in our equipment so we could fight, no distractions or excuses, so stop complaining.”

“Seriously? Maybe you thought of a way to take a piss without pulling down your pants?”

Fernández clenched her teeth. The same old joke. She was tired of it. She was about to reply with something crude but funny when a mark on the ground demanded her full attention.

She got up and walked toward one of the greenhouses.

“Hey, come back, don’t get angry,” Whitaker said as he followed her. She motioned for him to be quiet, but he kept talking. “Come on, really, it’s not that bad.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

She didn’t look at him, but her tone of voice was enough to make him realize this was important, so he held his weapon tight and this time he made hardly any noise as he moved.

They reached the greenhouse doors, and before they entered, Fernández checked the perimeter while Whitaker took a careful look at the damage to its windows. They weren’t broken, but some were cracked. Obviously something had hit the reinforced glass.

They passed through the security door, designed so that the settlement’s atmosphere wouldn’t come in contact with the greenhouse’s atmosphere – although now that the membrane was damaged, it didn’t matter. It also didn’t matter why someone had bothered to construct a greenhouse when there were more than enough fields outside the dome.

The interior was intact, except for a little damage here and there left by the rescue team when it entered to search for survivors a day after the incident.

“What am I missing?” Whitaker asked when he saw Fernández wrinkling her nose suspiciously.

“When we check the other greenhouses, I’ll tell you.” Just as soon as she had said that she fell quiet, all her senses on alert – above all her hearing.

“What’s happening?” he whispered.

“Shhh!”

After a long period of silence, she took out her portable scanner and motioned for Whitaker to do the same. They both pointed their scanners at the ground and swept them

from side to side. In a few seconds, the panels spit out the results: underground, hundreds of enormous large shadows were moving and twisting.

The first thing that came to Fernández's mind was that they were on top of a wasp's nest.

Daswani knew that something strange was happening when he opened the zipper on the first bag. He didn't have to take off his mask to know that the cadaver stank, and not exactly as he would have expected.

He checked the temperature sensors in the chamber. They were within the proper limits, so the speed of decomposition was not at all normal.

"Other than me, obviously, has anyone else been inspecting the cadavers or entered the chamber on more than one occasion?" he asked the forensic doctor.

"No, no one."

"Does this torso look normal to you?"

"No, not at all."

"Any theory to share with me?"

"No, none."

"Would you prefer that I were anywhere else besides here?"

"No," he answered after thinking it over carefully.

"Perfect." Daswani smiled from ear to ear after giving him a loud smack on the shoulder. "Then we'll get along fine. Mossen, I need you to check the other bags. We should find out if this was just an unlucky choice or if all the cadavers are in the same state. What do you think?"

Mossen, the forensic doctor, ten years older than Daswani, didn't seem to mind the informal way that the soldier was treating him. He nodded and began to check the body bags. Meanwhile, Daswani cracked his knuckles and got to work.

First he palpated the cadaver. It didn't seem as rigid as it should be. Then he took its temperature and discovered it was still a little warm. Possible conclusions? Either someone forgot to put the lunchmeat into the chamber until a little before the team arrived, or this was a recent death. Either way would have been a major mistake by Mossen, who had been in charge.

Although there had obviously been an autopsy, he decided to open the body and take a careful second look. He cut the sutures on the chest and separated the ribs.

He was accustomed to horrendous sights, but what he found left him stupefied. Then he felt a hypnotic fascination.

"Mossen?" he called as if he were singing his name. "How is it going?"

"I've checked about twenty."

"And?"

"Something must have gone wrong with the chamber, because they're all like that."

"Aha. Well, stop that right now. Call for someone to help you incinerate the bodies and prepare an isolation chamber to do it in."

"Why? What's going on?"

"Come and find out."

Mossen, unconvinced, came up to Daswani, who had taken a careful step away from the autopsy table. When he saw what the soldier was pointing to, his jaw went

slack.

“My god,” he uttered. “That wasn’t there when we did the autopsy. I swear it!”

“I believe you. But what’s important now is to burn the bodies,” he repeated slowly to avoid upsetting the doctor and to make the procedure clear. “You have to isolate this and call for an entomologist to come and take a look at this bed of larva here.”

“You say that very calmly, but you don’t like it, not at all. Why?”

“Because whatever attacked the colonists left the body infested with eggs. I don’t know its life cycle, so I don’t know if a week is a lot or a little for something that wasn’t easily seen to grow into larvae this size. It’s the possible speed of growth that has me worried, so make sure you fry these things thoroughly and as soon as possible. I don’t want to have to kill big bugs in an enclosed space.”

Jaejong knew that the maxim *you should listen to the original just in case* was stupid. Maybe it made sense centuries ago, but now it was a waste of time. Copies were identical reproductions, without imperfections or losses. So he guessed that the lieutenant’s orders were really about something else.

That’s why, when the operators in the communication tower grew tired of watching his every move as he listened to the recording and they decided to take a break, he took out his PDA and connected it to the main computer.

Within seconds he established contact with the satellite over that area, and not long after that he managed to connect with all the satellites orbiting the planet. His little piece of equipment wasn’t magic, of course, but it was key – so that the military ship that was also up there (and which they had very carefully made sure no one detected, at least so far) could attach itself to his signal without leaving a trace and close the circuit that he had spent hours trying to establish with all the satellites.

He had to be very careful about what he did. The colonists got nervous when they heard the word *military*. And if they found out that there were fourteen more squads waiting for the signal to leave orbit and land, things could get tense. At the words *it’s for your own safety*, they would have broken out in hives.

As for their scientists, it was better not to say anything. They had the bad habit of labeling soldiers as *airheads* with frightening ease – but, as soon as things got ugly, who did each and every single one of them run to for help? They run to the grunts, and usually too late.

Yes, everyone in the army was brain dead, of course, and that’s why the squad had decided to take so many precautions: because soldiers were idiots.

Jaejong suddenly got tense. He had spent a while monitoring all the different communications channels across the entire planet. Every three seconds he went from one feed to another (more than enough time to decide if the transmission was interesting or not), while in the background he was running the recording that he was supposedly checking.

He waited patiently for the cycle to reinitiate and run through the frequencies again. As a precaution, he decided to pause the other audio, and as luck would have it, just at that instant the operators came back and caught him red-handed: a little plug in his ear and a PDA on his lap connected to the central computer.

“Hey!” one of them shouted. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? I know....”

“Shut the fuck up!” Jaejong said, his anger more than evident.

The operators not only obeyed, they stood stiff as sticks. He appreciated the silence while he mentally crossed his fingers and hoped he had confused the recording in the background with something similar but not the same. Although... he had a good ear and he was an expert.

When he thought he recognized the transmission that had put him on alert, he passed a finger over the PDA screen and ordered it to pause the sweep and maintain the channel for longer than three seconds.

And his worst suspicions were confirmed. He didn't understand the dialect of those colonists very well, but he understood enough to know that they were having problems, and that they were saying almost the same thing as the recording, and....

“Shit, shit, shit....” he repeated again and again while his muscles tensed up, and he activated the record mode.

“What is it?” one of the operators asked timidly.

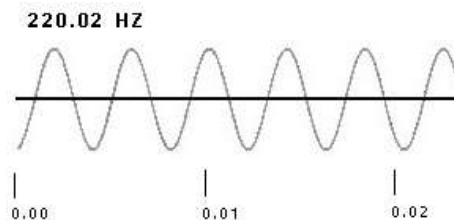
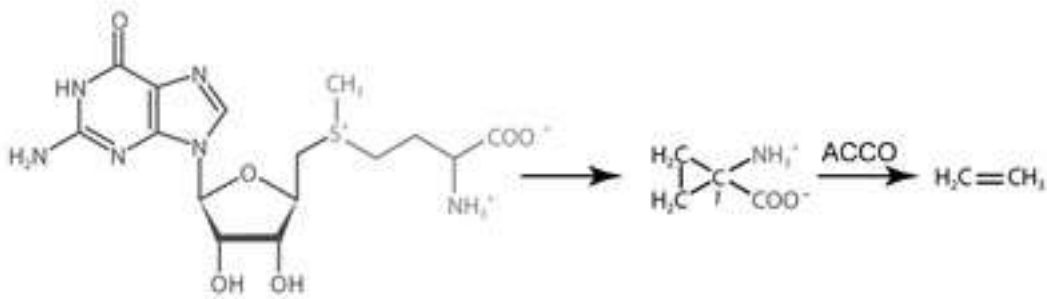
“Quiet!” he bellowed. Then he opened up his communicator. “Lieutenant, Corporal Jaejong here.”

“Rosenbaum here,” came the immediate reply.

“Another attack, Lieutenant. Right now. On the other side of the planet.”

The three seconds that it took for Rosenbaum to answer seemed like an eternity to everyone in the communications control room.

5



6

I don't like to make friends during missions. They have a bad habit of dying. But Heredia is making it hard for me not to like her. Just the way she looks, as if her style is *I don't give a shit about what you think of me*, is making me warm up to her. And worse, she's

the only person who doesn't seem bothered by us – in fact she seems relieved.

She's spent a long time talking away and in terms that are hard for me to follow, to tell the truth. Of all the people with the crazy ideas that I've interviewed so far, every single one made me want to beat my head against the wall the minute they started talking. What a batch of flaming naive mystics.... But this Heredia sought me out to talk to me. She spent a week thinking about what happened again and again and didn't want to say anything until she was sure.

“But this is way too small, right?” she says candidly.

“Small?”

“Sorry.”

“For what?”

“Not nearly big enough?”

We have a little laugh over that. Dammit, Heredia, wait until the mission is over and I'm sure you're safe, then we can keep having fun.

“You were saying,” I continue, “that we're thinking too small.”

“Much too small. We have a whole lot of micro data, but we're not considering the macro data. We're not even interrelating them. I can't believe that with all the communications we have available, it's so hard for us to share what's going on around us except when it's too late. We're on an alien planet where we set up a colony without any kind of thorough investigation. We saw a chance and we jumped in headfirst. And because of that, the least little change, the smallest incident, no matter how insignificant it seems, should be shared. I'm sure that's where we made our mistake. We're not thinking big enough. Every settlement sticks to its own environment and nothing more.”

“So you're sure, if I understand you, that all the infestations and problems all the colonists have suffered in every part of this planet at different times, locations, and situations, are related.”

“I know, it sounds really bad. And even worse the way you just said it, but we still carry burdens from Earth. I know, I know, don't look at me that way. All the knowledge that we drag around is based on our first home. But it's not applicable. Not here.”

“Because...?”

“Because the biodiversity there can't be compared with what's on this planet. You came down in your shuttle and you saw everything green and leafy, right? But did you happen to think that everything here has been taken over by the same species?”

“Sorry?”

“Do you know how many species of plants there actually were on the mother planet before the decline from industrial overpopulation? About three hundred thousand. Do you know how many there are here, on this virgin paradise? One thousand sixty-three. And I can assure you that we don't need another twenty-three years here to make sure we weren't overlooking one. Well, out of all those, there's one present on seventy percent of the planet's surface. It doesn't look like that, of course. If you look outside, you don't seem the same plant all the time. But it's just that if in the natural population all the organisms of the same species had the same characteristics, we'd be talking about a single line, clones, and then....”

“Wait, wait, wait.... Let me catch up. What you're saying is that this planet has been conquered by a single species. A plant. With all kinds of variations and things, but just one. So far, so good. I don't see a problem. But are you also suggesting this is behind

what's happening?"

"What's happened and what's going to happen in the settlements, yes."

Heredia's eyes shine with intensity. I try to stay serious and hold in my laughter by bringing a fist up to my mouth. This is a hell of an idea. A plant, no less, is responsible for all of the... what, really?

"Let's see if I understand you." I clear my throat. "According to you, what's happening is..."

"A reprisal. They're defending themselves from our invasion."

"The plants."

"Yes."

"These things with stalks, leaves, roots in the ground and that... we eat. That it's... well, ordinary plants."

"Listen to me, Rosenbaum. Forget the anthropocentrism, please. It's true they don't have a brain or nervous system. They don't think, they don't plan, they don't conspire, they don't move... but they're living things, and as such, they react to their environment."

"Right."

Damn, I hope you explain this theory a lot better right away if you don't want me to think of you as just another flaming mystic. That would be too bad.

"Lieutenant, Corporal Jaejong here," the communicator spits out.

"Rosenbaum here," I answer with the inevitable sarcastic smile on my lips.

"Another attack, Lieutenant. It's going on right now. On the other side of the planet."

I stare at Heredia. She looks back at me.

"Listen to me," she insists. "They're adjusting themselves to our ability to react."

"We're leaving in five," I answer Jaejong before I dash like a bullet toward the hangar.

What the xenobiologist just told me seems crazy, but I'm eating myself alive because I can't corroborate it, and because I know we'll get there too late. Even if I asked for help from the ships up there, tipping everyone off as to how big our forces are, I calculate that with four hours of butt-clenched travel, they wouldn't get there faster. We could coordinate with the colonists there, but they're just as ignorant as we are. We really don't know what we're facing.

My team and I take off toward what is more than possibly a mass grave. I don't like it, not at all. And for some strange reason, Heredia's theory is beginning to get under my skin.

I won't like what's coming next.

Shit! Those damn fucking bugs. I can feel them twisting, stuck on the synthetic skin. All over me, trying to reach a blood vessel or to work themselves loose if they can't. They're like purple fleas. I have thousands of them all over my body. I don't even want to see my dick. Fuck, I look like goddamn chocolate and mulberry ice cream. I hope we land soon so I can tear all this off and take a good long shower. And I won't even be able to dissolve the skin like I usually do and watch it go down the drain. Daswani insists on keeping the bugs alive so the entomologists can study them. Holy fucking nauseating shit!

I look at Jaejong. He keeps staring at his PDA and covering his eyes so he can listen to the recordings through the earphones better. Do that, listen, listen, you bastard, because if you don't find what you're looking for, I'm not going to read you the riot act like before. I'm going to beat you bloody.

"Shit," he mutters.

I don't want to ask, but I have to know. "Let me guess, it's not the same buzz."

"Motherfucker," Whitaker grumbles. "Even I can tell it's not the same."

"And I keep telling you I'm not talking about the buzz from these bugs, it's the background."

"It's called static, you imbecile," Whitaker says.

"Fuck you! That's not it. I know exactly how to tell one from the other, so stop giving me shit."

"That's enough." I end the discussion. The one who's taken too much shit is me. "That was a fuckup. Eight hours of travel, in fleas up to our balls literally, wasting munition to shoot at a cloud of bugs and I'm sure we didn't wipe out half of them – and besides we couldn't help those people. A total fuckup."

Jaejong doesn't know whether to sit tight or find someplace to hide. Still, he musters up the strength to say:

"I accept the responsibility, but I wasn't wrong about everything." He doesn't seem to care that Whitaker has taken off his seatbelt and is heading toward him to smash his face in. "I think something was calling those bugs," he manages to say before the fist lands.

I let Whitaker give him two clean punches, then order him to stop. It's good to let a little slack now and then, but discipline has to come first.

"Look, Corporal, explain all this or I'll have you cleaning latrines for the rest of your life."

"I noticed it in the first recording. A background noise that didn't correspond to anything. It's not static, it's not resonance from electronic equipment... Nothing. I discarded all that on the way to the science station. The second recording had a buzz, too. I was sure it was the same, I swear, but I just realized that it has a very, very slight variation. I know what the fuck I'm doing. I swear to you that anyone else in my place would be telling you right now that it's the same goddamn sound."

"Why did you say it's effectively a call?"

"Because I suddenly thought about a dog whistle and they seemed alike."

"But you just said it's not the same buzz."

"I know, I know. Different sound, different bugs?"

"This is just bullshit," Whitaker says.

"Greenhouses..." Fernandez murmurs.

We turn and look at her. She's spent the whole trip back staring silently off into space.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Greenhouses. They had them in that settlement too. Call me crazy if you want, but... I think I might've seen a pattern in the movement of these bugs."

"What kind of pattern?"

"Around the greenhouses, I think. I don't know, I don't know," she says, frustrated, which she very rarely is. "Maybe Jaejong is right. Maybe something's

attracting them there.”

“Something? What kind of something?” Whitaker says, still hostile. “What’s inside there besides plants? Come on, don’t fuck with me.”

The pilot lets us know we’re about to land. Everything’s ready down there for us to enter a decontamination chamber so we don’t spread fleas around the base.

Whitaker sits down again, grumbling, and belts himself in. I look at Daswani and realize he’s spent a long time studying me. I know him. He’s not going to ask. He’ll wait patiently for me to say whatever’s on my mind, and meanwhile he’ll keep drilling his eyes into me.

“Is it possible?” I finally ask him in a neutral tone, or at least I think so.

“It’s not my field,” he answers with a shrug of his shoulders. “But I don’t think it’s crazy.”

“Seriously. Plants?”

“Our job is to fight weird things, remember?”

7

When Heredia arrived at the decontamination chamber, her heart clenched like a fist, she found out that Gallagher was already there, rudely ordering the soldiers to leave the building.

The four were naked. Three were pulling off strips of synthetic skin, while Rosenbaum stood facing the director of the center, with his arms crossed and his face grim. He was over six feet of pure, cut muscle, with shining black skin and a gaze that could intimidate anyone. He didn’t seem to feel himself at a disadvantage even in the nude.

“When I report to the high command,” the lieutenant replied, “and if it decides to withdraw us, we’ll obey. Then and only then.”

“Don’t try to test me, Rosenbaum. I could keep you shut up here for weeks on the excuse of a quarantine. I only have to snap my fingers.”

“Oh, no, no. I’m telling you that you *don’t* want to know what we’d do if you forced us to react. Trust me.” He smiled, which froze Heredia’s blood. Gallagher clenched her fist as if she were hanging on for dear life.

“I don’t care,” the director finally replied, her jaw tight. “Talk with whoever you have to. This is a civil problem. Your presence is making my people nervous, and this... is not negotiable.”

“No!” Heredia said without thinking. “They can’t go. We’re going to need them.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“What’s wrong, Heredia?” Rosenbaum said. The expression on his face had changed from aggression to genuine interest.

Does he finally believe me, or is he using me as an excuse in front of Gallagher to stay? She shook her head. It didn’t matter much so long as they listened to her.

“I spent ten hours pulling together data from the other science stations and all the settlements. And it doesn’t look good, not good at all. We have to evacuate the entire colony as soon as possible and not come back until we’ve found a safe way to establish ourselves here or... we decide to give up this planet altogether.”

“What kind of idiocy is that?” the director said.

“The attacks aren’t going to stop. In fact, I’m sure they’re going to get worse.”

“Attacks?” Gallagher laughed out loud. “This is just an infestation. The biochemists are already working on a way to solve it.”

“That’s not true!”

The director instinctively took a step back, shaken by Heredia’s overreaction, while Rosenbaum winked, like a tic caused by suspicion or even worry.

“We’re under attack, there’s no doubt about it,” Heredia continued more calmly. “It’s not very different from what happened on Earth with some species of plants when they faced situations of stress or danger. Corn, for example, when it was attacked by armyworm caterpillars, would let loose a cloud of VOCs that attracted wasps. They’d lay their eggs in the bodies of the caterpillars, and goodbye problem.”

“VOCs?” the lieutenant asked.

“Volatile organic compounds,” Daswani answered, who had joined the group with obvious interest. “Like methyl jasmonate, right?” he said to Heredia with a big, reassuring smile.

“Exactly. If the data that I’ve compared is correct, the different infestations that attacked different agricultural settlements were attempts to expel an invader. For these plants, we’re the infestation, and they’re reacting to it.”

“This is ridiculous,” Gallagher said. “Besides, what attacked the colonists in the settlement next door has nothing to do with... Rosenbaum’s fleas, for example. I’m sure it also doesn’t resemble the other... attacks,” she added with disdain. “Am I wrong?”

“Of course not, but you’re thinking inside the box.” She decided not to enjoy the idiotic look on the director’s face yet. “You’re also a xenobiologist, so you ought to know the answer full well. We’re talking about different regions spread across the planet. The geography, the climate... they’re all different and for that reason the local populations of insects and animals are also different. They simply call whatever is available in their environment.”

“And all the plants agreed to attack at the same time?” Whitaker interrupted. Just like Gallagher, he thought this was crazy, even the way they were treating it.

“Not exactly. I suppose each group began when they received the message.”

“The message... They called each other by telephone or something?” he joked.

“Something like that. Perhaps they used VOCs carried by the air, or maybe by means of the funguses that surround their roots, using them like they were optical fiber, or...”

“Ha! So they use cable for long-distance phone calls. A fucking plant!”

“Or maybe,” she said, ignoring him, “it was by means of some kind of vibration in a specific frequency, or...”

“Vibrations?” Rosenbaum asked, very interested.

“You shouldn’t be taking her seriously, Lieutenant,” Whitaker said.

“I agree with him,” Gallagher said. “This is ridiculous. Plants that talk!”

“They don’t talk!” Heredia shouted again angrily. “Of course they don’t talk. They don’t have a mouth, they can’t gesture, but they certainly can communicate with what they have. With chemicals, basically. Action and reaction. The fact that this language isn’t like ours at all doesn’t mean that it can’t exist.”

Suddenly they began to hear a kind of tapping. The sound was muffled by the walls around them, but the windows transmitted the noise clearly, like drops of water

against glass.

“That’s strange,” Gallagher muttered. “This isn’t not the rainy season.”

Drop by drop, the rain grew more intense until it became a downpour.

“Are there greenhouses in here?” Fernandez asked, not bothering to hide her worry.

“A few, yes. And a pretty big garden. Why?”

The screams from the hallways were the answer.

8

“I suppose the problem is that we’re too used to being the dominant species and getting what we want, too used to imposing ourselves.”

Heredia keeps talking and talking. I’d like to pay attention, but I’m getting sluggish. Twenty-one days locked up is enough time to affect anyone, even worse when I know it’s going to take another three weeks or maybe even more to give a green light to the evacuation.

That’s the problem with this colony: they were thinking with their butts. When they landed here, they dismantled their ship piece by piece to use it to construct the main settlement. Now they have no way to leave the planet. On the other hand, our ship orbiting overhead doesn’t have nearly enough space for all of them, so we just have to wait until they designate another ship after they receive our alert, and then for it to get underway. But that will take some time, obviously.

And until then, here we are. We’ll be the last bastards to be evacuated because my team is here, and we’re supposed to keep the scientists safe until reinforcements arrive. Those reinforcements will be rushing to other settlements right now. I understand the logic behind that decision, but I don’t know how to explain it to a bunch of desperate and frightened people. So I don’t say anything.

“It was because of the mines, right?” Gallagher stammers. She’s collapsed, but I don’t feel sorry for her. Damned pencil pusher. If she hadn’t decided to save money on suits, the situation would be different. “It’s the only explanation. For twenty-three years we haven’t had any problems, but when the prospecting began...”

“It’s possible,” Heredia interrupts. “It really could be anything, or everything together. Although I have another theory. We began to expand, we left the main settlement, we became an infestation, and they reacted. We cut the plant down to give ourselves more room, we uprooted it to make the environment the way we wanted, we reproduced and began to eat it in larger quantities... It’s a species that imposes itself on the rest. It’s more invasive and it has a surprising ability to adapt... and to react, as we found out. We can’t reason with it because it only responds to stimuli. We don’t know the language that it uses to warn each other...”

“But you could find out, couldn’t you?” Fernandez says.

“It’s not that easy,” Gallagher answers, to my surprise. “An investigation like that, and with the proper tests, would take years. Time that we don’t have. There’s only two possibilities, either abandon the planet and look for a solution that can be applied long-term, or wipe it out.”

“Well, then, let’s just bomb the shit out of it,” Whitaker says.

“That’s not a good idea. It covers a lot of the planet’s surface. If we got rid of it,

we'd have a wasteland. That would cause climate change, modify the atmosphere.... In the end, it would change all the conditions that are right for us now."

"Besides, there's an ethical problem," Daswani says. "To completely destroy a species, the dominant one, that besides is clearly capable of communicating even if it's just in a basic manner, would be barbaric. And even more so to take care of a problem we could easily solve by going somewhere else."

"We're humans," Whitaker insists. "We spend our whole life eating vegetables. We're superior to these plants. We build things, they don't. They can go fuck themselves. Let me blow them to goddamn bits!"

The debate continues, wanders off course, peters out. I stop paying attention. I'm tired, very tired, and I know this isn't over yet.

We still can't go outside. Most of the insects are just a nuisance, but others provoke severe allergic reactions, and more of them than I'd like cause death. They land everywhere, we fry them and they keep coming, they have us trapped in different rooms... This is just one fucking hell and I can't do a thing about it. Using bombs to kill flies would be crazy.

We've been in communication with the other settlements. The situation is similar. I'm impressed with the courage of the colonists who say they want to stay and fight, that they've been through a lot, too much, to leave now, but deep down I know it's useless.

Hang on, just hang on. Don't let it get you down. This is what you do. Everyone depends on you. Their survival is in your hands. Just a few days more, just a few. You can do it.

I'm sitting on the floor with the flamethrower on my lap and my back against the wall. Heredia sits down too, at my side, and she has the tact not to talk to me. Perfect, because I need a break.

Suddenly she takes my hand and squeezes it. I don't know if she does this to help me or to help herself. In any case, thank you, Heredia. I'll do everything I can to get you out alive.

"How did you manage to know so much about all this?" I ask her.

"I had a vegan boyfriend. I liked to joke with him and tell him eating plants is just as cruel as eating animals."

We laugh. I miss laughing.

"The thing is," she continues, "that's how I found out that on Earth they already knew that plants had a communication system that lets them warn each other and defend themselves from insects. They investigated its use in agriculture to improve crops, to replace pesticides... And most people came out against that kind of project. You can guess what they said, that it's against nature, that corporations only look for profit at the cost of health... that kind of drivel. But under all that pressure, along with an experiment that turned out to be a disaster, the scientists had to abandon the project. When I learned all that, I decided to keep studying it on my own, using it in the field of xenobiology. And here I am. My ex, by the way, didn't like the joke at all." She smiles.

I give her a tired smile. I don't have the strength for more.

"And you?" she asks me.

"And me, what?"

"Is anyone waiting for you?"

"Yes." I smile, this time with longing. "His name is Grechko. He's a grade school

teacher.”

Heredia holds my hand and squeezes it again.

“I trust you, Rosenbaum. I’m sure you’ll do everything you can to get back to him. And I’ll be there to see it.”

I get a message from Jaejong about a new attack. I sigh, a little relieved. I was about to say, *he’s my anchor in this fucked-up life of mine*. If I got all sentimental like that, I’d break out in hives, and I’m not like that. And this isn’t the moment for it.

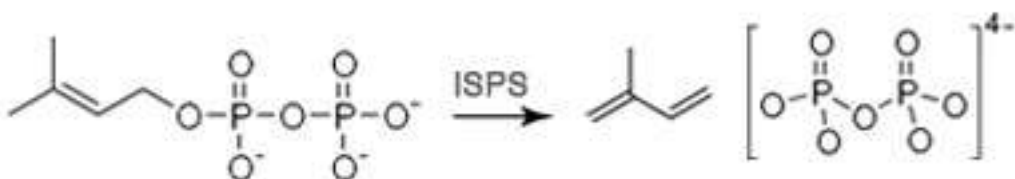
I tell Fernandez to prepare. We stand at the doorway with our flamethrowers ready.

What sucks most of all is that I haven’t seen any real combat. But, well, I’m a soldier. If I have to, I’ll give my life to keep these people safe.

Fernandez jerks the door open. The first thing we hear are screams, then we see an enormous colorless cloud coming for us from the end of the hallway. It hisses, it buzzes, it flies, it crawls, and it’s coming, worst of all it’s coming... toward us.

I realize we won’t last another day.

9



0.00 HZ

0.00 0.01 0.02

Techt
by Sofia Rhei
translated by Sue Burke

The Burton machine began to function once it had recognized the complete structure of the source. The machine was almost three years old, an outdated model, but since there was no budget for an updated version, they'd have to make do.

Ludwig had worked on the source for three full days, more than ten hours each day. He had edited the text in detail, breaking it up into clearly delimited sections, and including notes, appendices, and hyperlinks so the Burton machine could process it. So when the machine lit its beautiful yellow pilot light indicating that the reading had been carried out without problems, the other employees at the production company all congratulated him. They knew that his work was the most complicated of all.

The machine took barely three minutes to generate the short film. Ludwig's colleagues began to work on it as soon as the Burton sent it to the screens at their work stations. They were so absorbed that no one saw Ludwig when he put a hand on the machine and remembered verses from a poet he admired:

I never put a hand on a stone / that did not become warm with my touch.

The emotions aroused in that twentieth century man by ancient architecture was comparable to the feeling of complicity Ludwig had with the machine, one of the few things on the planet with whom he shared a language.

"*Wat du nao?*" one of his colleagues asked.

Ludwig pulled his hand from the Burton as if he had been caught doing something wrong and answered hurriedly:

"I think we should get *King of Katoren* by Jan Terlouw underway. It's fantasy, and I don't know how long it will take. I'll let you know."

There was the habitual silence while his colleagues tried to make sense of the gibberish that had come out of his mouth. He used Long Language with them not just because he knew they were educated: he used it in every one of his conversations as a political statement with the hope that it would not die, or at least not so rapidly. He refused to fall into the trap of social convention and wind up, out of sheer convenience, adopting the dialect he abhorred. Maybe he was eccentric, antiquated, or even in a certain sense used it to call attention to himself, but it was non-negotiable. If he stopped using Long Language, the only island where he could still feel right would be lost, and he would, once and for all, have lost himself too.

"Underway?" one of them asked.

"Go next," Ludwig clarified. He loathed the lack of semantic logic in Techt, but he could remember most of its simplifications and roots.

"No hurry you, 'undertake' take much us," grunted the lighting technician, spritzing her hypertactile screen with a spray of dust to generate effects and textures. Then she blew over certain areas to intensify the effect, forgetting about Ludwig.

It meant they would take a while. The film the Burton had just produced

involved complex visual and narrative aspects. He took advantage of the wait to visit the dark cubicle where Domingo, the editor, worked.

“Now is run the after one?” Domingo asked, trying to speak Long.

“You say, ‘is running’ And ‘the next one,’ not ‘the after one.’”

Domingo smiled. For him Long Language was only a pastime, and he had no need to speak it perfectly. For his work it was enough to understand its written form, but he had become accustomed to listening to Ludwig and now understood almost everything. He was the only person Ludwig could talk to who wouldn't make puzzled or grumpy faces.

They returned to their eternal topic of conversation, the relationship between the written form of stories and their conversion to visual format. Both men were key players in the process: the intersemiotic translator and the editor.

“The next job is a children's film,” Ludwig complained. “It's an excellent book, and we'll see if we can keep it that way.”

Domingo agreed sorrowfully. He didn't like to make films for viewers under thirteen years old. When he made videos for adults, at least, he had something to work with, a message, no matter how tenuous or vague. Sometimes after a projection, they'd handed out surveys to spectators asking them what they thought the film's message had been, and the discouraging majority responded with “Don't Know/No Answer.” After those depressing results, Ludwig and Domingo had experimented, making several films that had no message at all – and they had failed horribly in the box office. Perhaps the adults couldn't locate the message behind the narrative images or they lacked the verbal ability to express it, but films without meaning or moral held absolutely no interest for anyone.

On the other hand, children didn't care if there was any storyline at all as long as there were surprising, dramatic images and enough visual and sound effects to satisfy their hungry senses. They didn't need meaning. Perhaps their more pliable and imaginative minds could *create* meaning.

Children's films were a challenge for the visual and sound art team, who had filled the building's attic with all sorts of bits and pieces, and who would chase a bee until it stung them as long as they could record a new buzz for their samples. They enjoyed creating and configuring the craziest and most surreal films. And yet for Ludwig and Domingo, the lax plots that had proven to be the greatest commercial successes were sheer torture, among other reasons because it usually meant distorting and deforming the original texts until they were thoroughly unrecognizable.

At first Ludwig had been shocked by the way children's films held no educational intent at all. Then he reconsidered his nostalgic ideals, thinking that perhaps people capable of processing large quantities of linear text were no better prepared for deep reflection than those who could rapidly understand several screens at a time. Was it necessary to look for the meaning of things or was it enough just to let it soak in? Perhaps people who simply absorbed images, dialogues, and sounds were happier because they felt no need to interpret them.

Eventually he had reached a kind of agreement between his two past selves. Neither of his earlier positions now seemed right. He regarded any kind of educational goal as containing implicit bias, but he was also sure that verbal

incapacity implied incapacity for humanist thought. When no meaning could be found and was instead constructed, no matter how fascinating the process was, no active communication existed. For that reason, the exact same films should be projected to both children and adults.

Domingo didn't read books, but he enjoyed Ludwig's simplified versions for the Burton so much that he collected them. They both discreetly exchanged comics. Nothing actually outlawed or banned that, but it was so antiquated in the eyes of the hypermodernist throwaway culture in which they lived that it was beginning to seem suspect or perverted.

"Like dramas less and less," Domingo said, who was editing a version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. "Am tired them."

"The same with me," Ludwig answered, who often didn't bother to correct him since it had proven useless. "I suspect that's something else that sets us apart from our companions. They always appreciate dramas because they require little effort: stock sunrises and mists, minor keys from the sound bank..."

Domingo nodded. "Think every story can be disguise as drama or comedy."

"It's an age-old debate," Ludwig said with a smile.

"For this reason edit is so important," Domingo said as he worked, rapidly selecting the best version of the scene from among many options. "Comedy or drama depend the order."

"That gives the impression that there ought to be other important variables, right? The music, the blue-out images... If they heard you, our companions would think their work is useless."

Domingo shook his head. "Nothing more. Just the order. Bring me saddest picture, I spend ten minutes in edit, and I give you comedy, happy and optimistic end. The order is everything."

Ludwig took leave of Domingo, letting him work comfortably with all those panels where alternatives of each scene passed by with hellish speed, and thought he might be right. Contrasts accentuated emotions. It was enough to add a hopeful ending to a series of tragic scenes so that, suddenly, they seemed to form part of a chain of destiny that had needed a long time to be fulfilled. And likewise the most enchanting and inoffensive comedy of errors could become something terrible if a tragic accident took place after so much frivolity. A smile frozen onto a face was more bitter, more biting, than the omnipresent cold.

He left the building. Since most of his work could be done on a small portable device, he didn't need to carry it out in the production studio. Still, he couldn't go home yet: he was obliged by contract to view at least ten films a month. His employers were afraid that if he didn't, he would lose all ability to understand audiovisual language.

On the way to the cinema he saw a group of adolescents, each carrying two mobile devices, simultaneously typing with both thumbs while chatting among themselves. They could maintain three simultaneous conversations.

With a tired expression, he showed the nail on his little finger to the box-office attendant, who used a pistol scanner to examine the printed circuit that contained all his credits and privileges, along with his free passes.

“Ah!” she said with a dreamy look. “Job’n film!”

“Yes, I work in films,” he admitted. “But I don’t produce, direct, or select the cast. So don’t get excited. I know that everyone in a box office wants to be an actor.”

The girl stepped away, frightened by the torrent of words, only able to recognize a couple of concepts. They sounded as unnerving as the spells of evil sorcerers in the films.

Ludwig entered an individual cabin with a single seat and a small triptych panel a meter wide, and switched on the viewing for the latest version of *In Search of Lost Time*. It was a full-length film somewhat longer than usual, in fact it stretched out to the longest format possible: thirty-five minutes. But as in all films, twenty-second scenes overlapped each other, adding more information in the transitions or in flashback image bubbles meticulously calculated so they would never be located in a blind spot.

Using head movements, Ludwig indicated to the cabin which of the three simultaneous plots he preferred to have before him at any given moment. He detected a layer of subliminal sound and did everything he could to ignore it, as he knew he should. But he failed.

He left irritated by the spoiled narrative and a gimmicky special effect that had given him a tremendous migraine headache. His annoyance was caused not just by the speed and simultaneity of the images. The subliminal sound wasn’t intended to be detected, and its perception at a conscious level while his mind was occupied with all those other tasks was extremely disturbing.

He shook his head to try to clear it and consoled himself with the thought that the time had finally come to go home. He was eager to start reading an especially appealing book, but due to lack of time and to work demands, he had never been able to find a few consecutive hours to dedicate to it.

He traveled in the tube wearing earplugs and with his eyes shut so the omnipresent slogans would not infect him with Techt. It was very catchy. He grumbled a curse at Hypatia even though he knew that was unjust: the true culprit was Klink.

Although he couldn’t see or hear the advertisements, Ludwig knew they were there with their compressed temptations, their bait wrapped up like gifts, and their manipulative traps that could set loose primary instincts while their content barely touched the conscious brain. Those three-second announcements with their mix of visual and audio pyrotechnics and their perverse use of Techt condensed everything that he hated about the times in which he had to live. They called them “snips,” obeying the dictate of snappy monosyllables that had overtaken the world.

He left the tube and walked several blocks to his building. He held his breath when he saw old Pai hanging around the entrance, a beggar well-known to the neighborhood. People told horrible stories about her. Rumors claimed that spiders lived in her eye sockets, that she had devoured her own eyes over an anguished love affair, or that she had given them to her hungry child to eat. According to the story told most often, she had been an important sculptor, or a harp player, and to master her art she had become one of the first guinea pigs for testing augmented reality systems, letting her eyes be removed so the devices could connect directly with her optical nerves.

Coming into contact with new, superimposed layers of each and every image of her daily life artistically modeled by the best creative geniuses of the day had led to an enormous improvement in her own creative capacity, and the dihedral supplements had refined her spatial perception and tactile accuracy to amazing extremes. Her fame and success grew until she achieved greatness. Some even said she had managed to live in the elevated part of the city, the summit of civilization.

But something went wrong. Perhaps old Pai had reached an artistic level so complex and exclusive that no spectator could grasp it. Perhaps what she did – whatever it was – simply went out of fashion. The artist fell out of favor, and then into misery and ruin, incapable of providing for her own subsistence or even paying for her ocular prostheses. The most troubling rumor assured, in its usual disembodied, nameless, and unaccountable way, that the old lady had learned to see without needing eyes and could perceive much that was invisible to others.

The gossip spoke of a past full of excesses and glory. The reality of the here and now was an unkempt old woman with two black holes instead of eyes, extremely perceptive and sensitive to the slightest sound. Although Ludwig tried to sneak into the doorway, she became aware of him.

“Ah! Yer der!” she shouted, turning a surprisingly agile body toward him. “Cash! Cash!”

Several times, Ludwig had seen people throw coins at to the other side of the street for the pleasure of watching the blind woman’s anguished search for them. He rarely gave money and would have preferred not to, but he dropped a coin in the palm of old Pai’s hand so she could buy something to eat and drink.

She stammered a couple of syllables of thanks, which instead of coming from her mouth seemed to be emitted from her terrifying carved-out eyes. But when her hand brushed against his, her face’s flabby, servile expression of thanks changed into fear.

“Two bads today you! Two bads!” she repeated and ran off as if the man who had just offered her charity suffered from a contagious illness or brought bad luck.

He sighed as he passed over the threshold. He had almost arrived at his refuge. He lived in the basement of a building on the outskirts of town. He had chosen the area for its rocky subsoil, utterly dry. The lower apartments, which received hardly any light, were the cheapest, and he needed a lot of space to store his precious books.

When he moved in, the doorman had looked at him fearfully, as if he were a dangerous terrorist. Or perhaps something even worse, since terrorists were understandable. But why would anyone want to accumulate all those unhealthy tomes, written in that useless old language no one understood anymore?

Ludwig had to explain in his poor Techt that they formed part of his work and he needed to translate them into machine language to make films. When the doorman heard that word, his eyes lit up. Ludwig realized that he had taken the right tack and showed him posters of the most recent premieres in which he had collaborated.

“For this, talk strange,” the doorman said understandingly, looking at him with something halfway between admiration and pity.

But on that day the same doorman gave him a friendly greeting and handed

him a letter he had received in the post. In addition to involving real paper, the post was such an expensive service that it seemed even more important than eccentric in the eyes of the doorman. Ludwig responded with a smile to avoid a conversation that might make him lose concentration. Mutilated language always compelled mangled thoughts.

He didn't know what irritated him most about Techt: the name itself, which laid claim to a technological quality that in reality was much more present in the Long version of language; the abolition of verb forms, economies of space that obliged cutting "unnecessary" letters from every word, and the superabundance of symbols; or the lack of respect for the recipient in every sense, distilled into that perversion. Snips and glottal stops included.

Safe at home, he sat down for a few minutes in the armchair dedicated to reading, located right in the center of the room. All the basement walls were covered floor to ceiling by metal shelving on rails that permitted three superimposed rows of books. The light from the only small window, an opening of tempered glass of military thickness, was little more than a pale glow, since all the buildings around it were higher than twenty stories. Ludwig allowed himself the minor luxury of an electric light. Except for the purchase of secondhand books on the rare occasions when they went up for sale, he had few other things on which to spend his pay. And the volumes, despite their scarcity since most paper had been burned in the awful energy crisis of '59, weren't too expensive. They were considered eccentric interior decorating, strange little curiosities, a witness of times gone by for which few people felt nostalgic.

He prepared some instant soup, grabbed the book he so much wanted to read, and returned to the armchair around which his silent world revolved. From the shelves, millions of universes waited for Ludwig to select them and light them up with his eyes. He felt them hum, shivering with potential. He thought once again, sadly, that he would never have time to read them all before he died, and he got the impression that all the books that surrounded him gave a brief, soft, dusty sigh.

When he sat in the armchair, safe from the stammering half-language that contaminated the rest of the world and frustrated him so much, he felt at peace. It took him some time to manage to get down to work, and during those minutes that constituted his personal trip to concentration, he liked to look at the thousands of leather and pressboard spines that shaped his private landscape, so different from the unbearable advertisements in the tube and the street.

Just when he had reached his personal nirvana and was about to begin reading, for him the closest ritual he had to religion, someone knocked on the door.

Ludwig muttered an especially dark curse. He left the book on the side table, got up from the chair, and opened the door with a face as sour as if he had brushed his teeth with vinegar.

"Mir Casares," the doorman said in an apologetic tone, "erjnt mes. Caryer say yu ident."

"Fine," he conceded. "I'll accept it."

He'd lived several years in that building and had very rarely received certified mail. What could it be? Something like a shiver of expectation ran up his arms.

The letter carrier was a woman who couldn't have been more than nineteen years old. When she reached the doorway and came into visual contact with the interior of the apartment, her eyes grew wide. They expressed a feeling halfway between surprise and fright.

"Cat got your tongue? Haven't you ever seen the inside of a house?" Ludwig asked, amused.

The girl cleared her throat while she took a micro-sample of blood with a quick shot from her bioidentity reader.

"It is just... I never had the chance... the opportunity to see so many books in a gathering."

"So many books gathered together," Ludwig automatically corrected her, astonished. "Although it would be better to say 'so many books in one place, or at once'..."

The girl blushed, placed a packet in his hands, and fled.

As if in a dream, he closed the door and headed for his armchair. A girl that young speaking Long Language... It didn't fit into the world he experienced every day.

He sat down again. He looked at the book that he was so eager to read, then at the packet. He decided to act responsibly and deal with what was least appealing, so he opened the packet. Inside was only a letter with the return address of his place of work. A letter on *paper*, with an official letterhead sealed by hand.

He swallowed. Perhaps it would not be an exactly agreeable surprise.

#76532643

@ curnt recip LUDWIG KSARES

instnt end mploy.

RE: purch new modl BURTON mach.

legit dsmsl.

no cmpens.

The message had been signed by three of his superiors.

Astounded, Ludwig read and reread the message, hoping its meaning would magically change before his eyes. As usually happens in such cases, it did not.

Dismissed without compensation. Immediately. That told him he needn't bother going to work the next day. Justified cause, it seemed.

He went on the net to look for information about the "new model of the Burton machine." The manufacturer's home page announced the "Burton 2001" with great fanfare. In big icons, it told how recent innovations would permit the machines to make films directly from Techt. Beneath that he found the same information in the alphabetic version of the language. There was no possibility of error.

That was why his dismissal was justified. It was no longer necessary for anyone to work with Long Language to make it comprehensible to the machine. It could directly swallow the impoverished lamentable babble of contractions and icons.

That made sense. For the state film producer, which was obliged by law to transform into film every book that had achieved more than a million readers throughout history as part of the Cultural Guarantee Program (they called it Cultr Gar'nt Progrm , however that was pronounced), Ludwig's salary constituted the biggest expense. It took an average of two days to translate each book into a guideline script intelligible to the Burton machine. The script was basically constructed from Long Language precisely because it had been created to turn traditional texts into images.

But now the Burton machine could work directly in Techt, and given the large quantity of books that had already been translated into that code during previous decades, Ludwig was not needed at all. With the salary they saved, they could make five films per week instead of two.

He knew it would be completely useless to propose any sort of reconsideration of the process to his superiors. Even if he prepared his arguments in Techt and managed to make himself understood, he would never manage to transmit certain nuances into their minds, which were modeled by post-capitalism to work within the parameters of efficiency, speed, and productivity. If he told them that Short Language ("Simplified" was the usual euphemism) meant a loss of nuance, images, and meaning of close to 80 percent, that the translations from the '50s and '60s had been made by amateurs who, on many occasions, barely understood Long Language or, even worse, by linguistic conversion robots...

They wouldn't even understand what he was talking about. They'd look at him suspiciously and reject his out-of-date, nostalgic claims. Simplified Language was democratic, popular. It had imposed itself naturally and fast, in the space of barely a single generation. It had been designed to facilitate communication between the nine simplified languages so automatic translation between them would usually be perfect. Humanity was about to achieve the goal of unifying itself with a single lexicon and a single grammar. Only an enemy of progress would oppose that.

He knew perfectly well what they would think when they heard him talk. *Who is he to act like he's better than we are? If he believes the way we talk isn't good enough for him, he should be polite and smart enough to keep his opinion to himself.* But the fact was, they couldn't even think that, since they lacked the vocabulary to do so. Ludwig could hardly imagine how people using such simple, vague concepts would even be able to think and to reason. Who knew, maybe they'd found a way to think that barely used words and everything was mere images, visceral and intuitive, just like in advertisements.

He'd been fired. In a few months he'd have no income. Damn Hypatia.

Moved by a sort of impulse he wasn't consciously aware of, Ludwig approached a small safe and unlocked it.

For almost twenty years he hadn't opened the box inside.

He took it out of the safe and put it on his bed. Carefully, he opened the hydraulic lid and made sure, with some relief, that its contents were still there and intact. It was probably his most prized possession. Before Hypatia died, the world was full of statues honoring the creator of Techt. Everything seemed to indicate that her original notes for Simplified Language, or Smpl or Alphabet 100 as she called it,

would be worth a fortune years later. That was why she left them in her will to her favorite great-grandson.

A few years later, the statues and holograms of Hypatia had been replaced by images of Klink, the host of a comedy program.

Ludwig held up a photo of his great-grandmother when she was young. It was already starting to fade, but it clearly showed an attractive, dynamic woman whose smile still transmitted mischievous joy despite the decades that had passed and the inert material of the shiny paper.

☞	☹	☾	A	æ	Alt	Z	;	☹	⚡
“	2	📶	G	th	™	C	J	Δ	F
Ψ	Ξ	🔒	S	👤	🕒	!	🔑	life	ω
>	J	@	@	l	L	K	...	prt	<
⏪	10	N	-	🕒	🔄	+	↑	P	🕒
⊖	♂	ctrl	%	α	Ω	X	↓	♀	spr
I	R	#	Đ	🏠	?	&	§	Π	†
V	ÿ	Ø	E	⚙️	↗️	‡	α	bl	Y
8	M	kr	Σ	B	©	U	0	∞	∩
💧	😊	↻	Π	☾	T	√	✂️	☹	▽

He admired the simplicity of Alphabet 100, now in disuse. After Hypatia’s death it had been substituted by the Chess keyboard, with sixty-four black and white little boxes connected to two rear variable control keys (multiplying the simultaneity and possibilities of combination), which made Ludwig dizzy. Perhaps he really was antiquated after all.

In Hypatia’s original model, the most frequently used keys were grouped in the intersections and marked with a darker color: “at,” “okay,” “the” (based on the runic letter Thorn), and “and.” *Correspondence, approval, determiner, and addition* occupied the place of honor in the multiple-touch keyboard whose basic idea, inspired by Hypatia’s experience as a pianist, was simultaneous touch. In that way, each character could be combined with the other 99 to create an essential vocabulary of 10,100 words.

The corners were dedicated to the elemental symbols corresponding to *earth, air, fire, and water*. Next to them appeared the emotions traditionally associated with them. In the center were the icons dealing with universal concepts: *centrality, open space, end, and beginning*.

The complexity of the keyboard, excessive according to some initial skeptics, captured numerous adepts among videogame fans, as learning to use Alphabet 100 resembled a gamelike challenge. Simply by clicking any two keys, a word or phrase appeared on the screen. For example, the key for “time,” represented by a clock face, could mean *past* if it was pushed along with “↓” and *future* if it was pushed at the same time as “↑”. Combined with “sun” it represented *day, or night* when

accompanied by “moon.”

Pushing “life” plus “ α ” created the word *alive*, while “life” plus “ Ω ” created the concept *dead*. The same key “life” combined with “A” signified *animal*; accompanied by “V” meant *vegetable*.

The individual keys represented fundamental concepts like *open* or *closed*, *construction* or *destruction*, *increase* or *decrease*.

Normally, the buttons that represented opposing concepts or antonyms were located in symmetrical positions with respect to the center of the keyboard. In addition to the keys already described were *space*, *individuality* and *group*, *person* and *machine*, *concave* and *convex*, *processed* and *natural*, *excess* and *lack*, *known* and *unknown*... There were also keys for the five senses, for the concepts of *learn*, *forget*, and *dream*, and to describe the physical climate and metaphorically the emotional climate, for basic interactions and the most frequent exchanges.

He took one of the first Smpl machines, which he’d been given for his seventh birthday, out of the box. At the time he’d been fascinated by the device’s ability to generate images or concepts when he pushed keys at random, and it had taken him only a few weeks to be able to write simple sentences. “My dog has left our home and I think it is lost,” for example, was as simple as pressing the keys for (M + *), (life + A), D, *, (\square + *), ?, (* + *). *Possessive*, *animal* followed by D (the system understood that “D” meant *dog*), *dispersion*, *home*, *question*, *loss* (“center” + “disorientation,” which was the meaning acquired by the icon “air” in this context). Seven clicks instead of the 45 that a traditional keyboard would have required, or the 17 that it would have been reduced to in confusing SMS code (m dg lft hom n thk z lst).

The essence of Smpl had changed little, although the icons themselves had when they were turned into Techt. Currently, only official communications, like the letter he had received that morning, medical reports, contracts, and other legal documents were written in the form of Techt that still used old-fashioned letters. Everything else (slogans, thirteen-line digital newspapers, and private messages) were exclusively expressed in symbols and icons.

His great-grandmother, as she explained in a letter to him that he found inside, had filled that box with the first outlines and notebooks, which were frequently peppered with humorous reflections; lists of the statistical frequency of terms, signs, and icons; and her extensive bibliography about generative grammar, linguistics, and the history of writing. No scholar had ever had access to all of that. He imagined, as she had explained in her letter, that this inheritance would become extremely valuable material... and yet, no Techt programmer had ever asked the family for information. They didn’t care about any of that. Once the system had been created and understood, they didn’t need to research its origins to perfect it. What was important lay not in the past but in the future.

Hypatia’s legacy was worthless.

And besides, no one remembered Smpl’s creator. The hive mind preferred to think in terms of collective creation, as if each person who used a 100 Keyboard had contributed to its invention. The statues erected to Hypatia had been melted down to recover the bronze, an essential metal for manufacturing augmented reality prostheses.

The irony in all that was further multiplied when the evolution of Smpl

(Ludwig preferred to think of it as a devolution) and its further compression after Hypatia, had banished from its vocabulary the concept of irony itself.

Her first critics accused her of destroying the beauty of language by substituting simplicity. *If only it had been just the beauty*, Ludwig said to himself.

His great-grandmother never understood that she was creating a virus, not a tool. She could never have anticipated *Klink*, the Yutu program that had spread through the net like a virus, popularizing the new way of speaking, using snips and grunts to substitute for entire words. The comedians who acted out those brief sketches were so ingenious that their skits rapidly went viral. No one could have imagined that the reduced form of language, almost emaciated, practically a ghostly sound, would wind up devouring its mother tongue and completely replacing it.

Stunned, Ludwig went out to the street to look for cardboard boxes that local deli employees had thrown out. The only sure thing was that he wouldn't be paid in the coming month, so he could no longer afford to live in that apartment. He'd have to begin to box up his books.

He had a depressing vision of himself several years in the future living in a tiny room burning books to keep warm, and this future became mixed with the past when he remembered his mother doing the same thing, with tears in her eyes, to save his life.

Ludwig had been only seven years old. An economic shutdown and the depletion of fossil fuels, along with deepening climate change, had meant the immense majority of books in the world met the same fate. In his mind, he held a vivid image of his mother in a basement similar to his current apartment throwing books into a stove while she told Ludwig that stories weren't as important as the fact that people existed who could read them.

He put the book he had so much wanted to read into the first box. Once again it would have to wait.

And then the doorbell rang.

His subconscious summoned up the memory of old Pai's words: "two bads." The first one had already taken place. If a second one did, it might mean that in fact the old lady really could see more than other people.

After weighing the possibility of not opening the door, he decided to do so for the simple reason that he preferred to have one certainty rather than to imagine multiple possibilities, each one more depressing than the last. He walked to the door with the tired, tense, fearful steps.

Once again it was the young letter carrier. Her face reminded him of his mother, perhaps because he had been thinking about her.

"Do you have another letter for me?" Ludwig asked.

"No," the girl assured him. "It is only... I would like to know... you. You speak Long Language. Me... we would like to learn it."

The girl stepped back, letting Ludwig see the boy behind her. He was about twenty years old, completely indistinguishable from any other young man.

"We would like to learn from you," the boy slowly articulated. Ludwig had the impression they both had practiced those sentences at home before they came to see him.

He looked at them for a while. He couldn't come to grips with what was

happening.

“What are your names?”

“Sandra and Patrik,” she said.

Ludwig let a few more seconds pass. He saw fear of rejection on both their faces.

“Are you both of legal age?”

The two nodded. Ludwig gestured for them to come in, and after they had done so, their eyes opening wide when they saw all the books, he closed the door.

“How can it be that two people as young as you want to learn Long Language?” he asked as he prepared some tea.

They told him that a book exchange network existed among some people of their age or even younger. They told him that books, unlike films, gave them the impression of entering into people’s minds, and they had realized that some especially complex ideas couldn’t be expressed in short sentences without creating misunderstandings. Ludwig explained the meaning of the word “trivial,” which immediately fascinated them. They wrote it down in a notebook.

They had read *The Odyssey*, *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum*, *Frankenstein*, and *Nils Holgersson*, and they were surprised that Ludwig knew them all and could converse for a long time about each one of them.

He told them how in other eras, in other societies, he could name them a thousand titles that a well-educated person would probably know. They were filled with admiration: they were so slow to decipher a text they could not read one in less than two weeks. Ludwig spoke to them about the stories that covered his walls. He congratulated them on their skill when they tried to speak Long.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know if I’ll be able to fulfill your request and give you lessons,” he told them, when the light entering by the window faded and reality imposed itself on their dreams. “The letter you brought me earlier told me I’d been fired. I don’t know where I’ll wind up living.”

The two exchanged an anxious look.

“But we can pay the... lessons!” the girl assured him.

“That is right,” Patrik added. “Be many like us. Excuse me: *there are* many like us.”

The boy clenched his fist, angry at himself for having made a mistake. Then Ludwig realized that for Patrik, learning Long Language was even more important that it was for Domingo, who didn’t worry about errors of syntax or noun and verb agreement he might make. And he understood the reason: the editor had managed to learn complex ideas thanks to his work and to the language he’d learned from comics in his childhood, but these young people, the next generation, had perhaps never been exposed to any verbal stimulus throughout their entire childhood. They needed to learn Long in order to think and to gain access to a culture denied to them. They were aware of what they lacked, which was why they considered it so important.

Sandra came close, interested in his glasses.

“May I?” she asked him. “I like... would like to see world by your eyes.”

“*The world*,” Ludwig reminded her.

She repeated the phrase correctly, while Patrik wrote it down. Ludwig leaned

forward toward the girl so she could take off his glasses.

Then he felt excruciating pain.

It was as if when the girl took the glasses from his face, she had taken his eyes with them, plucking them out smoothly and slowly with drawn-out agony. Ludwig, racked by anguish, starts screaming while the world disappears, dissolving into small evanescent panels.

“Stop! No shout!” a woman yells at him. It’s not a friendly voice.

“Sandra! What’s happening?” Ludwig stammers. His own voice sounds strange and fragile.

“No Sandra,” the rough female voice assures him. Ludwig feels someone take him by the shoulders to pull him upright.

He hears the woman whispering to someone else, a man, who, speaking fast and in Techt, seems to want Ludwig dead, although he isn’t angry. Ludwig feels uncontrollable trembling in his knees and a sudden cold knot in his neck.

The woman and man continue arguing. He scolds the woman for not having killed Ludwig, as seems to be specified in some contract. She answers that she doesn’t intend to do in an old man and tells him if that’s what he wants, he can do it himself.

“What’s happening?” Ludwig shouts.

The conversation stops, melting into a silence as tense and thick as the darkness.

“You... memb kw’k,” the woman says. *Soon you’ll recover your memory.*

They drag him into another room and drop his body on a hard little mattress. More snips of argument: the man is afraid of the legal repercussions they could face if they don’t fulfill their contract. The woman responds that those would certainly be better than the legal repercussions for killing someone. Or something like that. Their words are coarse and caustic, so plain and brutal they burn his ears. Then the woman laughs. “What’s this leftover going to do to us?” she jabbars in her mutilated dialect.

A door slams and he can no longer hear them. Ludwig still can’t see anything. He has the vague sensation of having been in a similar situation before. He feels around with his hands and comes to the conclusion that he’s no longer in his apartment.

It’s useless to try to understand or remember anything in his overwrought state, so against his instincts of destruction and flight, he forces himself to lie back on the cot and control his breathing to make his heartbeat return to normality.

As his body calms, his mind does, too. He understands from the pain in his joints and the feel of the back of his hands that he’s an old man now. And he knows, remembers, that he was an old man before.

“Sandra...” he mutters.

Just by hearing his old man’s voice pronounce the name, he recalls that the woman who had been his first disciple and friend, to whom he had taught so much and from whom he’d had the opportunity to learn so much, is dead. He has not just met her. He has passed his whole life beside her.

Images of a funeral form in his mind. He doesn’t remember them from having seen them in any film, only for having been there. In person. Not long ago.

At that moment, like the lash of a whip, he sees another image. A surgical suite, a lightning strike of cold light. And then, nothing. The vacant space of his eyes.

Sandra has died. Illness has taken her after so many years bringing words to those who felt they needed them, to those who knew what they themselves lacked. He remembers her reading the story of Merlin to groups of children, recording audios of Ludwig's books in her own voice to play them in shopping malls, surreptitiously posting illegal signs with beautiful antique words and their definitions, and trying to attract new youths who wanted to learn about themselves through complete language.

His hand shakes as he raises it to his eyes, discovering vacant sockets. The interior of the cavities leaves something sticky and warm on his fingers. He doesn't remember having lost his eyes.

At that moment he discovers he still has tear glands because he feels a couple of tears fall directly onto his nose, missing his cheeks because he has no eyelids.

Sandra has died. Patrik had left many years earlier. Is all that true, or is it a trick within a trick of memory? The experience he just had could only be a virtual immersion with augmented reality glasses, or something like it. He has traveled into the past through his memory to the precise day when he met Sandra.

He is confused. The memories return slowly, like a viscous fluid held back by its own thickness. He doesn't know if he let them take out his eyes voluntarily. Could he have reached such extreme desperation? He'd always felt repugnance, even physical repulsion, to virtual or enriched reality. The few times he had used peripherals or plus-lenses he had felt intensely uncomfortable throughout his entire body, as if his system were rejecting the enveloping lie.

There is only one possible reason for him to have given up his eyes in exchange for reliving that moment in the past: he no longer had any reason to live and wanted to have one final happy day. In that case, it would make sense to have chosen that particular day. The augmented memory-recuperation peripherals, it was said, could re-create the past in every detail. If Sandra was dead, the only way to be with her again would have been to voluntarily take away his own vision, the greatest possible sacrifice for a book lover.

Intangible letters danced in the multicolored darkness of ideas within his mind until they composed the verses he had reread so many times:

*Let none think that I by tear or reproach make light
Of this declaration of the mastery
Of God, Who with magnificent irony
Gives me at once both books and night.
In this city of books He made these eyes
The lightless rulers who can only read
In libraries of dreams...*

Then he understood that he had renounced all his books to see Sandra one last time that day, to return to the first hopeful moment in his life. Perhaps no purer act of love existed.

A new flash: the image of an empty and inhospitable basement, with hard old

beds on the floor where children lie, almost frozen stiff. There's only a stove. With tears in her eyes, a woman throws a book into the belly of the fire. The woman has the face of Ludwig's mother. The woman has the face of Sandra.

Mother.

Sandra.

The woman turns toward Ludwig. He can finally see her face clearly. She's Sandra and she's his mother. They're the same person.

"What's important is the language, not the books," the woman tells him. Ludwig is a child like the rest. "They'll make new books. You've taught them to create their own meanings."

And Ludwig weeps with those tears so amiss that they don't fall onto his cheeks but roll down his nose.

"Language doesn't exist if books don't exist."

Hearing his own childhood voice in the center of his imagination pronounce those words, he realizes they're right. Now no book remains. His library, perhaps the last library ever, has been lost even before Sandra died.

She, with a face that is her face and also his mother's face, and also Hypatia's face, caresses little seven-year-old Ludwig and dries his eyes with her apron, which smells of ashes.

"You asked to relive the past and then die, remember?" she tells him, now with Domingo's voice. The conversation between the employees at the memory recovery center now makes total sense.

"But they haven't dared to kill me. They've made me remember again. I didn't want to remember... I didn't want to live in a world without you, without books."

"You don't have to do that," the woman says with a smile. "You never needed a machine to live the stories in the books that you used to read, right? I'm sure you won't need one to dream either."

"To dream away to death..."

"To dream, yes, so intensely that your body can no longer bear it, no longer continue, if that's what you wish."

Ludwig clutches his arms to his chest, filled with intention, and then relaxes them. His mother, Hypatia, Sandra, hands him a small, leather-bound volume. Ludwig recognizes it, and seeing it gives him childish pleasure, utter relief. On the other side of memory, at the far end of all those stories and all those tales, his mother awaits, Sandra awaits, and Domingo and Hypatia.

With trembling hands, he opens the book that so many times, so many times he had wanted to read, but he never had the time to do so.

About the authors



Sofía Rhei, born in Madrid in 1978, is a writer, experimental poet, and translator. Among many other books, she has translated *La última lágrima* (*The Last Tear*), satirical fiction by Stefano Benni; and *Heck*, humorous fantasy by Dale E. Basye. As a poet, her books include *Las flores de alcohol* (*The Alcohol Flowers*), published by La bella Varovia; *Química* (*Chemistry*), El Graviero; *Otra explicación para el temblor de las hojas* (*Another Explanation for the Trembling Leaves*), Ayuntamiento de Granada; *Alicia Volátil* (*Volatile Alice*), Cangrejo Pistolero; a 3D book of poetry, *Bestiario Microscópico* (*Microscopic Bestiary*), Spórtula; and *La simiente de la luz* (*Seed of the Light*), Lapsus Calami. She coedited the anthology *Sestinas* (*Sestinas*) for Hiperión. In 2007 she won the Javier Egea poetry award.



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About the translator



Sue Burke is a writer and translator who has lived in Milwaukee, Austin, Madrid, and is now in Chicago. She has published short stories and articles in a variety of magazines and anthologies, and her novel *Semiosis* will be published by Tor in January 2018. Her translations include the novels *Prodigies* by Angélica Gorodischer (Small Beer Press) and *The Twilight of the Normidons* by Sergio Llanes (Dokusou), and stories in the anthologies *Terra Nova* and *Castles in Spain* (Sportula). Twitter: @SueBurkeSpain
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