

Giovanna Rivero Santa Cruz

FOUR TALES

1.

The Indian Mirror

I try to catch myself in the mirror. I ignore it, I keep quiet, like Monster, when he's about to attack and I don't know if he'll shoot flames out of his mouth or metal nails out of his eyes, and suddenly the enemy falls down, exhausted, because Monster sneezed. I hold back my urge to sneeze. I don't want the mirror to get nervous and surprise the slightest movement of my modus operandi (I don't know what modus operandi means but it sounds perfect). I want to catch myself; there should be something that I know. I pretend I'm distracted, I play with Tinto until the neighbor lady, that really fat woman says: "Alejandro, leave your poor dog alone." She doesn't know anything about dogs. Dogs like to have their belly scratched, at least mine does. And he doesn't have any fleas, not one! The fat lady is very mistaken! Poor, fat lady.

So I stop distracting the mirror. Everyday my mom blows her breath on it and then cleans it with a rag. "It's from India, it's authentic," she says. Mirrors from India are dangerous, that's what I know because Monster had to face an enemy from India, an expert in hallucinations, that was the last time that Monster lost.

Wham! I turn around! So you are here, huh? I've found you. The mirror says the same thing: "So you are here, huh? I've found you." I frown and the mirror does exactly the same thing. I stick out my tongue to see if it hangs down below my chin like Tinto's does when he's thirsty, and the mirror does the same thing. I come closer, I do like my mom does, I blow my fiery breath on it, but it only fogs up a little and then goes back to being like it was. That is, it goes back to being me.

I give up. "I give up," says the mirror. Yeah, I prefer to play with Tinto and put the fat lady in a bad mood.

Tinto! Tinto! Where have you gone? Tinto is off barking in some corner; he's not under the rug because there's no bulge there. Tinto never hides, he prefers to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. I know his barking.

But now it sounds like his barking is coming from under a barrel. Tinto! Tinto! I look everywhere (why do I never know where things are? Things should be called by their names, those nouns are so stupid, I already know what a noun is, yes, fat lady. "Lady" is a noun and "fat" is an adjective, nothing more, so don't get mad). And Tinto is barking slower and slower and at last I see him, there, black, with his tail wagging from left to right, left to right, and I hold out my hands so the mirror won't swallow him and he runs and jumps in my face and licks me, he licks me a lot, happy, his barking says "thank you Alejandro."

"What happened." asked mom, with that rag still in her hand.

I look at the mirror warily and promise never again to play a trick on it. That's my modus operandi.

Translated by Kathy S. Leonard

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2.

Lava

Juana is unsettled by the brilliance that grows like an evil spirit. She has decided to remain. Luzmila, her oldest daughter, accompanies her. The baby has been taken away by his father, who left with the others. Those remaining in the town are the women and the elderly; the latter because the passing of years has instilled a certain stubbornness in them and they have learned how to confront a volcano. The women, on the other hand, are attached to their homes, those walls that were raised with such effort; they close their ears to the government warnings that declare the area of reddened undulating earth a “danger zone.”

The blaze advances with a dull roar. It is a distant snoring, a hollow clamor. Juana breathes deeply, there is also a volcano in her chest; she could open her mouth and spew words of fire, words that she has always held inside. Luzmila remains silent at her mother’s side. Her thumb plays with the fabric of Juana’s skirt, but nothing in her face, where adulthood has arrived prematurely and mercilessly, nothing betrays her fear. The two women watch the blazing horizon advance. They feel a strange heat penetrating their feet and climbing up their legs. The walls of their hut, accustomed to the morning chill, are suddenly sweating, melting the lime used for whitewashing, a color that lends a feeling of hominess to the dwelling . The bellowing is an absolute echo sung by thousands of beasts, the clouds in the sky become diluted orangeish stains. Is it afternoon? Nighttime? Dawn? Juana no longer remembers time, perhaps she has remained there, not because she is a woman, but because she is old, and Luzmila is not really her daughter, but her mother and her ancestor; she longs to seek refuge at the child’s small breast. Juana stretches her arm out to embrace her daughter, but the lava has entered her house, petrifying her words and her actions.

3.**Iren**

Irene, my small messenger of peace:

Today I was looking at the river, the water trembles in the wind and nibbles the bridge, trying to devour something. The river's hungry. You'll say that it shouldn't be hungry, as if there were little fish inside it. But the river is hungry, it crashes against the bridge, it wants to scale the pillars and slide, slide, and merge back into its own waters as if it's crying.

I was looking at the river for a long time, actually I've been watching over it. All rivers, my love, all of them, every single one of them, has a pixie spirit that cares for it; in our land it is called Jichi, and it appears when someone has been peering at their face for a long time on the water's surface. But this river, this river is a little bit sad today. I've thought that I could go and dip the tip of my feet in, as a way of saying hello. Maybe a little fish will bite my little finger and will gorge itself on the fungus it finds on my toes, what do you think, my dear? Iowa River, that's the name of this river, and it only means that this is the river of the city where I live now. The rivers don't worry too much about their names, although sometimes they impose one, they go crazy, they overflow, devour up the villages and the plants and then people call them "Amazonas," "Big," "Black," "Red," anything you can imagine.

Like these mischievous rivers, you imposed your name, my love. I saw you for the first time, I looked at you like I'm looking at the river now. You were white, like the princesses of the stories who are all white. You were diminutive, like an unfinished pearl, still curled up in its shell. You were, you are, perfect, like your name. Your name means "messenger of peace" (although maybe you don't remember that you cried as if you were a warrior). Your name is Greek, beloved daughter, it belonged to beautiful women who erected empires and, as Mutis says (a man you'll read when you grow up), they destroyed the plans of the strategists, broke their hearts and caressed the marks carved into their skin by poisoned enemy arrows and lances.

So small, so fragile, how will you bear such a name? It seems to me that you have assigned a part of your body to each letter. Let me guess:

The I is on your spine, that's how you are able to stand up so long, with your little head raised, looking at the waning moon, asking yourself perhaps who, who could have dared to eat the other half. The river ate the other half, didn't I tell you? The river is hungry.

The R, oh!, the R *is* a problem, just think, it's the biggest pronunciation problem when you learn another language. That's why I think that, like the Cubans, Irene my dear, you put it under the roof of your mouth and you make enormous balloons with it, and you chew gum, and you savor ice cream.?

The E. You have two in your name. I needed both Es. There I gave you two crystal sparks, there I sang you lullabies, there I told you the secrets that one day will come to soothe you (*lull you to sleep?) like an echo, maybe when I'm not there, maybe when you feel alone. They are your ears, those tiny labyrinths through which words enter your heart, your intelligence, and give you stories.

And the N. The N is lovely. Because if you turn it upside down, it's still N, it's incorruptible, what does incorruptible mean? That nothing can get it dirty, that it's like a blind and grumpy No. Yes, the N are your tantrums. It's good to throw tantrums at life, my love, it's part of being here, on this planet, it's part of asking questions and giving answers. That's why when I tell you "because I said no," remember to throw a tantrum at me. The messengers of peace need explanations. Then forget the explanations, my darling, forget them, they get in the way, they take up too much space in your mind. Forget them and construct new words with the N, as Matilde Casazola wove them in that beautiful poem about the N, where nauta, and nada, and nadie and nenúfar and nácar and néctar and níveo, all begin with N. Invent them, my love.

You carry your name on your fragile back. One day I'll give you permission to go out into the world as a backpacker, with your name slung on your back. Until then, No. No. You're my little girl, my darling, mine.

Translated by Eileen Whilligham

4.

The Day of Atonement

Lola Duarte always knew that her destiny was to be a whore. She knew it on the first Day of Atonement when Don Eusebio Terrazs showed her love between the warm manure and the tanned hides of the day. That happened when she was thirteen, and from then on her days counted. The past was merely a dark certainty. She had arrived at the colony of Jews with the first strong southerly winds of winter, and no human force could work harder than her. In time the Jews grew accustomed to the dark-skinned creature crying each time a baby bled because of the bulge that God gave him below the waist. They explained to her that it was called circumcision, that it was good for the soul and that someday she would make a living by introducing it into her body. But Lola Duarte didn't understand the sweet omen of the trade on her bare behind. She would do so forty years later, facing the extraordinary wealth that shook off her fears about her death. Before, however, she chose clients randomly, guiding herself partly by common sense and partly by the faint taste of nostalgia that the women of the street have. She preferred mestizos and men without too much protocol-smelling of work, of dawn, with the sun from all the crops stored on their backs. This way it was easier to be polished and impress the workers with the caresses learned at the border, since it is well-known among whores that frontier knowledge is the most lucid, like ever so slightly hiding the light behind the darkness of foreboding, or, otherwise, to pronounce the voices that condemn, the prophecy.

That was how Lola Duarte became the happiest and most famous whore of the Colony, and would have remained so until sleep had eased the chore for her with its gentle dream, if at around that time "el gaucho" Moreira hadn't shown up spreading his good-natured laugh and his fresh ideals of equality of the sexes, alleging that the biblical philosophy of Adam's rib was mere historical speculation and that, in truth, matriarchy was the only option for the current times. The women got excited about the eight working hours of the day, which inconvenienced the workers who were used to spending their salary at the bodega after midnight.

The Jews began to worry and finally, in desperation, they resorted to a lawyer without a degree who improvised some law of protection for the prostitutes. Until then they had been working with no reference other than the union managed by Don Eusebio Terrazas, a retired general, who was luckier than the devil to have found at the Colony of Jews the most profitable business in the world. And so, joining the tastes and eccentricities of these men without a homeland, Eusebio put away his war medals and decorations under the mattress and under the soul. But he still knew with genuine pride how to tell a lady from a bitch; in Lola Duarte he admired the high forehead and firm chin, and that was enough to love her in unexpected silence. He even secretly thought about the possibility of saving her dignity and making her his wife, for along the way, with his restrained personality, no man had made him jealous. With Lola, Eusebio took hold of the most intimate rituals. He firmly believed that in this land of no one, even the neighbor's birthday was reason to celebrate, and when he left in search of the south, it was not hard for him to cry a different tune.

Everyone respected Eusebio Terrazas. He initiated the girls into the profession and measured their beauty with a few masculine secrets. None of them ever refused him a warm spot under their sheets and on their days off, especially Lola Duarte, who generously received him between her legs, until the fateful day she looked into "el gaucho" Moreira's eyes. The Jews were on the eve of the Day of Atonement, the festival of this race to forgive the rest of humanity. There were hugs, kisses, a lot of liquor, tears of loneliness, and mothers hollowing out the soul to cradle other children, all Jews of course, which means that among men with no homeland it is easy to anchor life at any corner of hospitality. They had prepared wines by fermenting them more with desire than patience and, dancing with hallucinations flowing through their veins, they looked like sinners dazed by the judgment day. "El gaucho" Moreira took advantage of the easygoing spirit and set himself up on a pile of bundles to begin his heated speech on feminism. He assured them that women were not born to spread their legs for any man who pants like a wild animal, that the men better start paying higher fees to compensate for such humiliation and that, in conclusion, we were all born from a female. He preached his proposals of fairness and justice with such ardor that he had to look twice at the gypsy eyes riveted to his chest from among the crowd. Nobody knew what Lola Duarte saw in that little battered man –physically, that is. The fact is that he followed her without resistance through the bushes and then, enraged with pleasure, he got to know her applelike breasts and the orgiastic passage that consumed his defenses.

The surprise of love was such that they almost didn't hear Eusebio Terrazas's grotesque heavy breathing behind the underbrush, stunned, with the marriage proposal stuck in his lungs. Among crickets, darkness, and the smell of damp earth the leader of the Union of Prostitutes was able to recognize the only woman he had ever loved, damp and surrendering to a swindling outsider who hadn't paid her a cent.

The Jews prepared a formal duel, forming a chain of outstretched arms to avoid hurting widows and children. Each opponent received an identical revolver, and they counted the steps of distance with the exact geometry of suspense. "El gaucho" Moreira and Eusebio Terrazas walked, their backs to each other, barely breathing so as not to move the air, carrying terror in their stomachs, feeling the rush of nervous blood and the smell of the chased beast. Eusebio heard the only shot fired, and fell into a dark well – a pleasant, endless fall, like that of the sleeping man.

The blackout didn't last long, and then Eusebio Terrazas claimed the body of "el gaucho" Moreira in order to bury him. One must bury the enemy with the same respect and hatred expressed in life; that way those feelings don't become fear and take over the night. He gave each of his women a piece of clothing, a smile, some old jewelry, his shoes, and his best underwear; he gave the Jewish women the jealousy of having fought a duel for a whore, and he left Lola Duarte two things – *To redeem you, Lolita*, he told her – a promise and a secret, which in reality, are the same thing, even though the first carries an illusion and the second wisdom. Then he left with shame hurting in his chest. On his way he stirred up dust and mucho vengeance, but he didn't retrace his steps toward the Colony.

Lola Duarte sat down to wait, impassive, practicing a future old age that would arrive in her forties. Finally, one day, actually one Day Atonement, Lola ran her fingers over her face and discovered she had the universal appearance of the dead. She applied carmine to her lips, tired from kissing other people's words, and started walking with a coarse gait due to so many years of sitting, waiting. She got to the place of the promise and unburied the visions of necklaces and gold medals that inhabited her hopes of a less austere life. For a long time she looked at the desecrated tomb, and tears followed her like a mirror; as well, the white bones of "el gaucho" Moreira so that she may at least have him in death. But most people

simply say with certainty that Lola Duarte joined the festivities of the Jews for the right reason. For her this truly was the Day of Atonement.

Translated by Clara Marin
