

**Elena BOSSI**  
**A story and an essay**

**The Glasses**

As she went down in the elevator from the third floor, Alice thought that the evening had been a bit odd. She had let herself be carried away by enthusiasm, and talked too much about herself and her projects with her in-laws. Yet they had not seemed upset, and she noticed they were happy, something that rarely happened. She was never sure about what made them pleased or upset, and too often she felt admonished by their looks. This time instead, she left feeling reassured as if she had been forgiven for having stolen their only son and living far away from them.

Outside the building, her mind still in confusion, she hastened her steps to the D line station. It was late and she needed to arrive at the theatre in half an hour; her son and daughter-in-law would be waiting for her there to go to the play together.

She rushed down the stairs, breathing in the warm air the train had pushed in through the tunnel and that brought ancient smells to her memory: a mixture of childhood, uneasiness, happiness and fear. She could not separate the subway passages from her memories of her father, and although she loved her freedom in the city where she had lived for so many years, the smell carried a murky nostalgia in which her thoughts melted.

People crowded to enter the cars and grab a seat, but Alice preferred to stand up because she was on vacation, eager to watch the others, to feel like a stranger in her own world and to have the privilege of observing the space surrounding her. She made herself comfortable near the door. Her stop was the last on the route and she was ready to enjoy the trip, letting her mind roam in the dustiest corners. She hesitated for a moment, wanting to make sure about the number of stations she would pass through, took the map out of her bag and when she looked for her glasses she realized she had left them behind at her in-laws. She was helpless; she would not be able to see the theatre program, would depend on others to find out what was on the menu at the restaurant and wouldn't be able to read before going to sleep. All her plans were falling apart. Besides, she had not planned to return to her in-laws', and feared that another visit would undo their recent good relationship. She tried not to worry about the problem and relax, but her forgetfulness made her uneasy for the rest of the trip; to calm down, she thought that on arrival she would walk over to Cabildo Avenue and find a store where she could buy a replacement pair.

She arrived at the station and walked a few blocks without finding any such place until she eventually saw an old-looking pharmacy. The building was still in the style of the old drugstores she remembered from her neighborhood, with dark wood shelves. Free spaces on the walls showed tiles with a design that seemed a laurel, a cross and a sword. The domed ceiling was much too high for the modern architecture in that part of the city; the counters with their glass displays placed like in a labyrinth made it difficult to know where to stand to be waited on and only a few shelves had recognizable medicines. Most of the space was full of glass or porcelain jars and wooden boxes. On one of the counters Alice saw a bronze mortar with various seeds and dried plants. On one of the half-filled shelves there was a motto in big golden letters that read "Paracelsus Poultrice" but she immediately realized she must be reading in her imagination since she had no glasses on.

An elderly man with a shiny bald head and very white hair on the sides was closely examining a glass object that he had in his hands and ignored her although there were no other customers. Alice tried to figure out what the object was, but couldn't because of her bad eyesight. She thought she would be late if she was not served soon and coughed so that the man might notice her waiting. Without looking, the old man said:

“With the help of God and my remedies, I can cure the most serious maladies.”

Alice laughed heartily and greeted him. Right away she started to explain what she needed, and the man asked if she had the prescription for the lost glasses so that he could easily find the right ones. Alice had her prescription in her wallet; she placed her bag on one of the counters and started to draw out its contents, sensing her hair becoming more and more untidy as she grew more and more impatient. While she searched through her bag's contents, another apothecary came in through a side door. He was a very short man with a round and tight belly, apple-like, and walked with short mincing steps like a winding toy. He had curly light brown hair, and his face became bulkier near the neck as though his cheeks had collapsed. He looked at Alice seriously and murmured something to his colleague without greeting her. Something about a damaged cathodic tube. Alice found the prescription for her glasses and handed it to the white-haired man who took it and brought it close his eyes to read.

“Well, madam, wait a second, please, until I find the glasses you need.” And he exited through a very small door concealed between shelves that Alice had not noticed, and left her alone with the apple man who looked at her through half-closed eyes as though she were an enemy. Though Alice couldn't see, she looked at her watch to get a sense of when she absolutely had to leave because she still had to walk a couple of blocks to the theatre and had arranged to meet her son fifteen minutes before the performance. The man stood behind one of the counters and stooped to collect something from the glass display. Alice heard him talk and say something like “simila similibus curantur” and decided that her bad sight was also affecting her hearing. To put a halt to the uncomfortable feeling she tried to be polite:

“This pharmacy must be very old.”

“Mind your bag, madam; you'd better remove it from the counter. Those precision instruments are fragile and could be ruined.”

Alice had not noticed them, but now she saw glass and metal objects that seemed to be scales and siphons. She apologized, snatched up her things and mumbled that she was sorry and that she had never seen such things before. The apple man asked her to follow him to the laboratory and though she worried the other man might come back with the glasses, Alice could not say no. She followed the apothecary down a dark hallway that seemed too long, and came into a dark room with stuffed and desiccated animals hanging from the walls and ceiling. The room was filled with a great number of instruments and utensils, presses, furnaces, containers of various sizes and shapes that she supposed were used to make drugs. In the center of the laboratory, nearly filling the room, was a huge wooden table covered with metallic geometric shapes shooting sparks.

“Your colleague went to get a pair of glasses; if he does not see me, he might think that I've left. I have to go back.”

Alice felt dizzy and a little sick, a familiar sensation because her blood pressure dropped frequently. She found the door through which she had come and decided the best thing would be to leave and go to the theatre without the glasses. She would retrieve her prescription, then leave as soon as possible to tell her son about that incredible place and they would laugh heartily because these kinds of ridiculous accidents often happened to her.

Thinking about her family she walked along the corridor which seemed shorter and less dark this time, then realized she had not walked into the store but had taken the wrong way, and the apple man was not there either, so she had got herself into the wrong place altogether. Her son will have been waiting for her for a long time and the performance would be beginning at any moment. Perhaps they would leave her ticket at the box office, they had done that before; she tried to calm down and retrace her steps when suddenly the old man appeared behind her.

“I have several frame styles in various colors: ochre, blue, green, polychrome. Which one would you like?”

“Could you help me find the way out, please? I’m not feeling well.”

“The lady should not be late for the theatre; come with me this way, please.”

Alice already felt too weak to ask how he knew she was going to the theatre. She followed the man who led her into a well-lit and cozy room with three glass cabinets filled with ceramic containers, thick bottles with long and narrow necks. There also was an armchair where the man asked her to sit. Alice recovered a little, and the man said he would bring her something that would make her feel better. She started to protest but the old man rushed out of the room and vanished. He returned with an oval wooden box with some medicine and a porcelain jar with the words “Long Bone Fistula.” The man handed her a pill box with some uncoated pills, and a comb.

“You see, madam, my friend believes that only Allah can defeat disease. It is possible. But Allah will not punish us if we give him a hand. Why don’t you fix your hair? You’ll feel better.”

“Could you tell me the time?”

“Do you think we will get a tax refund this year? Come, your glasses are ready.”

Alice let the man lead her to another part of the store with tiled floors and some wrought iron low shelves. A strong smell of ointments and medicated oils overwhelmed her. She saw a row of jars with labels in an old-fashioned handwriting on high varnished wood shelves. On the wall opposite the entrance a mirror reflected an aged image of herself. She sat in a chair the man pointed at and let him put a pair of glasses on her nose. With the glasses on, she tried once again to look at herself in the mirror, but the whole image appeared distorted as though covered by murky watery waves. Turning her head to one of the shelves, she saw an enormous jar full of black creatures. To her horror, Alice thought that they were leeches, but when she hastily removed her glasses, the glass jar disappeared and the old man was handing her another pair of glasses. Alice put them on and looked at her wristwatch. Then she realized that the performance had finished and her son was no longer waiting for her.

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### **On *Mulánimas*, Werewolves, Vampires and Other Monsters**

#### **The rhetoric of deformity**

The monster offers a surprise. Two terms are joined in the monster in an incomplete way and a different system originates from the original ones.

A werewolf is the wolf shape contained in the shape of a man or vice versa. The *mulánima*, an Andean monster, unites a woman or a woman's soul and a mule. The legend—which is known from Mexico to Argentina—tells of a woman who is punished for incest or for having sexual relationships with a priest, metamorphosing into a mule that runs from the church to the cemetery at night. During its ride it swallows everything in its path. To exorcise the *mulánima*, a valiant man must remove the spell. Neither the werewolf nor the *mulánima* can be understood as the simple addition of the characteristics of both components (human and animal), for a link in the relationship has been lost. Nor can the results allow the originating terms to be discovered. The being cannot recognize itself and the tension between the elements that do not match stands out. Superimposed elements do not fit and this causes surprise, a chaotic impression. Frankenstein's monster is a man who can not articulate its inner part with his body and thus is not able to recognize himself as a man: there is continuity between his inner self and his patched body, made up with parts of other bodies. There is no chance of a distinction between the other, the stranger and oneself. His self is literally fused with the other.

The missing link is in charge of bringing about the mystery. That is probably why a fair portion of the narrations about monsters are about explaining the origins—a sin, an experiment that is an example of man's arrogance, a forbidden union. To know its origin, to know how the monster is formed seems to let us approach its essence. The aim is to answer "What is it?" with the reply to "How is it made?" or "What is its origin?" The image of a monster always testifies of something lost—paradise, a link, an answer which is no longer possible.

If we think monsters have the skill to metamorphose, two possibilities must be taken into consideration—the change can be effected through free will (as it is for the witches, the liquid metal cyborgs, certain aliens) or the transformation is involuntary (as for the werewolf, *mulánima*, the incredible Hulk, the invisible man). On the whole, in the latter case, we can conclude that the metamorphosis is the gist of the narration and its protagonists are subjected to a fatal destiny. The actor himself is at once the subject and object in the process of change.

Texts are frequently crossed by discourse of oral tradition and by media discourse that remakes and resignifies tradition. And here too, incompatible elements whose relationship is lost are linked.

Monstrosity can link opposites: man-beast, light-darkness, what is inside and what is outside; however, as those ends meet, the borders where the meeting takes place vanish. Connectives melt, and limits become confusing. Background and form, interior and exterior, the animal and the man.

The human and the non-human elements (animal, machine) articulate in the monster without a link. Thus, between the taurean head of the Minotaur and its human body there is a neck missing where the parts are articulated.

### **The eyes and the jaws**

When we speak about monsters, discursive expectations lead us to expressions of aggressive fierceness. Nevertheless, there are quite a few monsters whose ferocity is also a defense, not just a stance of attack. As long as metamorphosis or deformity is something imposed upon a passive subject-object, ferocity can be interpreted as a defense attitude, the creature resisting destiny or its creator (be it an individual in particular or society in general). This is the case of Bram Stoker's Count Dracula, the monster created by Dr Frankenstein, the werewolf, the *mulánima*, and Batman, as well as most of his enemies.

In general, the gaze is highly significant in monsters. Their gaze has its own light, and the light does not come from the outside. Monster iconography usually gives us a monster with very bright red or white eyes. Their eyes always shine in the dark, a mysterious, magical element that blurs the limits between the object and the light that shines on it. It is not “normal” for light to come from inside and emanate outward. The gaze is a parcel of discourse. The eyes “talk”: they speak about the transformation or the hidden monstrosity or, conversely, speak about the human part that lives deep inside the monster. Let us remember, as an example, the gaze games in Francis F. Coppola’s *Dracula* or the end of *Wolf*, starring Michelle Pfeiffer, in which the metamorphosis of the female character is shown in the eyes, whose gaze changes during the process.

If the light comes from inside it might be because the monster does not look at the other; it looks at itself, it lights itself up with its own gaze, looks at its change, looks at its deformity. It is the gaze of queerness and terror, the monster is afraid of itself, the look is a defensive one that represents the fear of oneself that has discovered the other. It is the image of agony whose centre is the missing nexus. There is a kind of missing link in each metamorphosis which perceives the possibility of seeing oneself as different from the other.

Other notable elements in monsters are the jaws, which speak to the animal part, reminding us of the darkness in the cave and in the wild. Many monsters in the movies have adopted this element as a synthesis to show the essence of monstrosity (see, for example, *Alien* and similar creatures, movies with killer dogs or wolves, and even some gods). Beings like werewolves, the *mulánima*, vampires, Chronos and Saturn, and some extraterrestrials tear and devour. The jaws show a speechless mouth. It seems that we never hear the voices of most monsters, and even if a few of them do have voices, it might be dangerous to listen to them—sirens, for example, sing to make sailors lose their way or lose their minds.

The jaws are themselves a terrifying cavern, like the bottom of the sea. The dark, void space that dilutes and melts shapes merges everything.

The teeth in the jaws are the fangs that tear and wound the victim. The developed fang is a feature of an animal. In several cultures (like some Indonesian populations, for example), these teeth are intentionally filed down because canines symbolize evil.

The monster is usually associated with an interior and a depth. Monsters’ places are dark and marginal—the cave, the cellar, the attic, the deserted castle, the deep interior of a forest, lake and sea bottoms. That is why the eyes shine: to see and to be seen in the darkness that is their habitat. Darkness blurs the monster’s contour and merges it with the surrounding space, with the bottom, with the depth. The monster is part of the darkness and the darkness is part of its body.

### **The pain of tension**

When a being metamorphoses it suffers pain, it is surprised, it panics at the changes—there is another will, a presence made evident in the strangeness. Beyond its own will, there is another that leads to the hidden mystery each monster has—each belongs to two or more different paradigms between which the nexus is elided, fracturing the being’s continuity. This elision causes instability—the monster that comes from a metamorphosis is in permanent process, in a fight, and does not rest. The change of shape implies a structural variation where one being becomes another, keeping something from the first one in some way—a trait only recognizable by someone else—and losing the perception of its own self. A game of opposites occurs. These opposites are constituents of the new being in which there is a struggle between man and animal, man and god, man and machine, man and alien (we do not always know very clearly who is who) or two different men. The monster is not a being

at rest who has achieved synthesis but an unstable being in permanent process, a form marked by the instability of two or more beings, two aspects in conflict. The monster is the place, the agony between two internal forces that oppose each other. It is a being that fails to recognize itself, or establish the similar and different elements. It lacks a mirror where its image is reflected.

In fact, the monster frequently has problems with mirrors—Snow White’s witch has a magic mirror that brings her face to face with the truth, vampires and ghosts have no reflection, Medusa and the basilisks self-annihilate if they see their reflection (and here they resemble Narcissus). Evil forces generally break mirrors. They are beings who cannot recognize themselves and gaze at their own visage in surprise. The horror that a monster causes is, above all, the horror that it locks up in itself. The “other” is locked up in its own body as something alien, without the possibility of an encounter. Two or more beings that, despite being together, cannot meet even in the name, were-wolf, mula-anima, bat-man, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. As when our gaze seeks the deforming mirrors at the fair to be attracted and repelled, to laugh and to feel revulsion, in a way the mirror contains monstrosity- at the bottom, behind the image, there lies the other.

### **The *mulánima*: form and anti-form**

I would like to ponder the exorcism needed to save the *mulánima*. According to Argentine oral narrations, a square that resembles a room must be drawn in the street with a knife. There must also be a door facing the direction from which the *mulánima* comes. You must kneel in the square, make the sign of the cross, plunge the knife into the ground and begin to pray. When the monster approaches, you must stand up swiftly and remove the curse.

In the case of the *mulánima*, the woman’s soul has gone back to a prehistoric era of myth, an era that also precedes the separation of things and of space and the subject from the object. She devours whatever crosses her path, her image is reflected in storms. The geometry of the square does not yet exist—it is just an ideal shape with which the rational mind represents space. She is a regression of the human form that rejects civilization and history, and exorcism must bring her back to human space-time. The drawing made with the knife creates a depth, reconstructs the space-time lines, the lost volume. The speed of her fury, irrational, is subjected to geometric morphology, to the lines of perspective. The room is the limit, the protection, the threshold between the here and there, an interior and the world, and returns to the discontinuity. The wall is the limit. The prohibition, the infinite must not cross to “this side,” it cannot cross the edge of the wall. The deed of the valiant man that performs the exorcism is the construction of a “representation” space, a symbolic gesture that destroys the coming and going and establishes the relationship between the interior and exterior at the same time, between here and there. The destruction of the spatial fiction of the narration seems to aim at the recovery of space that man invents and draws at will from his own body. The room is also an extension of the man’s body, and the *mulánima* leaves her body now to enter the man’s body.

The valiant man’s drawing traces out space-time and frees the monster from nothingness, leading it back into the safety of culture.

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*Translated from the Spanish by Cristina Piatti,  
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