

A Cruise to the Galapagos Islands

Antonio Cisneros

*A Cruise
to the
Galapagos
Islands*

(New Marian Songs)

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A Journey up the River Nanay

1

It wasn't in those meanders where freshwater fish swim about that I, magnificent captain broadcaster freelancer, on a hundred pesos a month on the water and a hundred and thirty on land, felt terror at what's left of my ordinary life. Terror of the tiger's claws—cold arcs of raw onion—I felt on the terrace of that so-called happy bar—a mass of legs and buttocks under the burning sun—a few metres from the main square, slippery as the deck of a cruise ship awash with waves, wrecked on a rock in the river Nanay.

It's the time of year when the tortoises lay their eggs on the beach and then swim downriver as if wanting to escape from their young (or ashamed of them), those soft-bellied, half-blind chelonians, good for a stew when they're six months old. Monkey prick chilli. Cotton skirts slit up the thigh flare to those perfect salted buttocks. A coleopteran navigates the light. Pulped. And still the kingfisher flies quietly over the quiet waters. Nothing speaks of the turbulent shoals of fish swirling in the depths like flies around the maddened orifice of a gilthead bream.

There's a wild, Prussian blue silence, also. On the other side of the wooden blinds, around twenty oriental cattle rub against each other so intently that the thought comes of some perverse pact, darker than a gambling debt or a love story. Besides, it's enough to look at how the waters of the Nanay flow beside my window to know it's almost 40 degrees in the shade and 90 percent humidity. Now I know when the heat is intense I need to keep away from woollen blankets and bodies that produce a horrible thirst and heat up the air.

Suddenly, without warning, the grass stops in the mist. Where the landscape is an engraving with ash trees, eucalyptus, and clumps of geraniums. There's also a woman splashed by the high waters as they dash against the rocks. She's almost naked and gazing at a group of dolphins who keep a safe distance. In fact there are a lot of other things. But none of them yours, tedious diabetic. Shut up and learn. The only things that are yours are a few doses of insulin and a herd of yellow pigs.

Souls in Purgatory

The Virgin of Carmel sways in the top part of the scene. Nothing special, maybe, compared to the Virgin of Lourdes, with her serenity, or the pomposity of Our Lady of Paris. Still, her compassionate eyes fill me with consolation. Like the rows of streetlamps when the day ends and night hasn't come. The yellow lights above the cliff top. Just look at the way she holds the Christ child. Not flustered like first time mothers who'll drop the baby at first shove. The calm face, more like a matron than a Madonna, tells you that behind death, where gluttony and desire cease, there's a protective shield for this soul when it's free of x-rayed flesh, without time or memory but still burning like a roasting pig. Impossible, in fact, to imagine all that suffering without the certainty that the chubby and good-natured Holy Virgin of Carmel will stretch out her arms to us after thousands or maybe millions of years (in purgatory after all there's no time) and wipe away our tears and with infinite patience remove the fleas and bugs from us. While the trumpets sound on high and on the earth our much-loved grandchildren honour us with carob branches and a drum.

An archaeological visit

I don't know why it was but he kept wanting me to show a deadly fear of the orange hill that stuck out like a dead horse dumped in the rice fields. "Don't you feel it's eating your soul," he said and all I managed to do was say no and hold off the intense sunlight and the wind that came from the funeral bundles. Afterwards we went down to the beach and did justice to a dish of crabs while he insisted on his rituals which were by now ostentatious and merciless. And he didn't stop until the calm hour of the long waves that come before high tide. The dead, however, stayed in their place—comfortable, well-located, harmonious. My poor immortal soul, in spite of the droning voice and the roar of surf, remained intact like the sun or a poisonous cactus. A fast motorbike flashed suddenly between the black carob trees of the night.

The city

And what happened to the city, described, not so long ago, with a wealth of detail. There's only a four-by-four embedded in the mud and the green and black tops of the immense African ficus trees. Only yesterday the votive offerings (a head, a pair of kidneys, and a lung) shone on the western wall of the chapel. Portentous miracles of holy father Urraca, a model of prudence and chastity. The high windows (delicious sherbets) of the old French chemists have also gone to dust. The blue promenade (lovingly named in my poems) is simply rocks smashed down by the storm. Even so, as someone condemned to death, why should this sudden, sinister horizon that appears under my bed really matter to me?