

## The Problem

You wake up tired after not sleeping well, surprised to find you spent the night before having dreams that were mildly—no, not mildly, highly—highly erotic, and this comforts you somehow since sex dreams are benign and you almost never have them, once every six months at most. In these dreams you were having sex with one of your students, the one who always sits in a way you find distracting and when you think about this man you think, if you were a man you think, things would be different—things would be different, indeed. But then the thought exhausts you and you console yourself and arrive late to your dance class.

The dance teacher is a woman with a calm, intelligent quality who impresses you because she used to dance with Merce Cunningham, and you move your body imitating moves you think that Merce would make, long curves broken by sharp angles. You are having trouble breathing so you ask her to open the doors of the studio because the space doesn't feel like it has enough air in it, and then she says to you «¿Oxígeno?» because that was the word you used. Later she will speak to everyone in English and ask if you understand and you will confirm by nodding your head, but the language that she uses to speak to you is your own, and the question «Understand?» is for the people who don't.

You end the class content and hungry and covered in sweat and then go home to eat a little more than you really need, which you notice when you stand naked before the mirror before you shower—a certain excess of flesh in the hips and ass even though you are in better shape now than you were before and eat reasonably well although you probably drink too much. You observe what they call getting older, the few gray hairs you noticed for the first time a few weeks ago, and your skin in certain moments gives certain clues as to what awaits you in the years to come, this: this body, which is less elastic than it once was.

You were going to have a shower but now you don't have time since you have another dance class to go to and are testing yourself since you often think

that dancing is what makes you happiest, but then you think you'd rather take a nap or watch some TV show you don't even like. So you change your underwear and take the metro and wait longer than expected and arrive at the other class. The other class is in an unfamiliar space named after Chekov and the teacher is an unfamiliar man who smiles a lot and who, although he is Swiss, reminds of you of an American televangelist. The studio doesn't have any natural light or windows, it is a small black box filled with sixteen people and a newly stripped wooden floor, and as you warm up, practicing a technique called Flying Low, the teacher sings out the moves as though he were psychotic or possessed, and the floor covers you in *serrín*, sawdust, a word you don't know in Spanish so you call it *polvo*, dust, though later you will look it up in the dictionary when you sit down to write. The dust is in your nose and eyes and you can't stomach the thought of being there for the eight hours the two-day workshop is supposed to last, so you leave, and feel free but also strange, or stranger, maybe. You stop by a discount fruit-and-veg store where you buy two kilos of strawberries, and when you receive your change you put the coins in your coin purse but don't take the time to put the ten-euro note in your wallet properly, you just sort of fold the bill into a slot, and when you take the metro to go home you take out your wallet to get your ticket and the ten euros fall to the ground, and a middleaged Spanish woman who looks rich—well, not rich by any means, but rich enough for Tetuán—picks the money up without looking back and when you realize what's just happened she is already going up the stairs to the exit and your ticket is in the turnstile, bleating at you insistently to pass through, and you say to the guy next to you—well, not to the guy, to no one—*Estos diez euros se me han caído a mí*, and you realize that you sound a little crazy and you feel a little annoyed, or not so much annoyed as stranger still, and so you pass through the turnstile and wait for the train.

You get on the train with your fruit and with the people who look half-sad and half-exhausted—the metro lines that go to the poorer barrios have a perpetual grimness to them that the trains stopping at Sol, Tribunal, Sevilla, Canal, and Retiro do not—and a man gets on the train and plays the violin and he isn't any good, though not as bad as the guys who play guitar in the metro station Legazpi, two Andean men who wear sunglasses and have an old cassette tape that always plays the same awful Dire Straits song, and whenever you see them you think that Dante forgot to add several circles to Hell, which would be the outer stations of various metros around the world, stations like La Gavia, where tourists and those who can afford

to live in the city center never go, and on this train you don't feel like reading or dying or doing anything, really, and your Ipod has died so now you don't have anything left with which to construct a bubble of ignorance. A guy gets on wearing a backpack shaped in such a way that you imagine a guitar inside it, though for all you know it could be empty, or full of strawberries, and the guy says that instead of playing a song he's going to tell a few jokes, and the level of discomfort in the car rises since everybody pretends not to see or hear him, though you at least have the good fortune that people here see you as nothing more than a *guiri*, you can pretend not to understand him since you aren't supposed to understand and so your expression of stoic desperation doesn't change one bit. Among the awful jokes he tells in what seems to be a Dominican accent is this: One day, a little boy gets beaten up at school, and when he goes to his mother to tell her what happened, she says, Don't bother, I already saw it on YouTube. He pronounces YouTube the way people say YouTube here: *jew-too-bay*. No one laughs and he says *Tough crowd* and exits without collecting a cent. Fifteen minutes later, you feel stranger still and more desperate to get off the train and so you get the keys to your apartment out, they hang from a small coin purse on a chain, and a man gets on whose nationality is unknown and his face is completely burned and his hands are small and shrunken and he is crying *Ayúdenme signori per favore, ayúdenme*, and you have about seven euros in change in your purse of which you give him one euro fifty, letting the coins fall into his hand, and before you are able to pull away his palm touches and acknowledges yours, his fingers are curled forward in a fist that scares you a little and then you regret not giving him more—you had made a calculation and in that calculation this man was only worth one euro fifty—you feel cheap and he says *Grazie*, you don't know why he uses the Italian word, he doesn't look Italian, maybe he's Romanian or Romany, and he shuffles through the car and another woman gives him another coin and he gets off at the same station you do, Sol, and after watching him act out his role of Misery and Despair it feels strange to walk by him, the artifice of the intimacy and fixity of the train ride now broken—you have to dodge him on your way up the stairs to the other metro line as if he were you, just another person changing trains on the way to somewhere—and you wonder where he might be going and how he wound up the way he did, but there is no story, just the possibility that he takes the money he earns from his wounded cries and spends it on his kids or on medicine or rent or food or beer, and you wait for what seems like ages for another train and then it finally arrives and you get off at the next stop and as you exit you

see four ambulances and two police cars, and you think about what you saw in this same plaza the day before, a drunk man who shat himself and kept on drinking, and you start walking the one block it is toward your home when a co-worker calls your name, and though you aren't wearing makeup and have a dirty sweater on inside-out and your dance pants are covered in sawdust, you don't feel as embarrassed about being spotted like this as you would have thought—what actually embarrasses is you being caught wearing a look of Misery and Despair on your face, your miserable face—and well, he looks good, well-dressed but not over-dressed, a fitted sweater and jeans, and you wonder for a moment what he looks like underneath these clothes even though you already know the answer to that question, because six months ago you both got drunk at an office party and wound up in your bed, but didn't have sex, you didn't want to because he had a girlfriend although that didn't seem to matter to him then—and well, he doesn't have a girlfriend now, your co-worker said that they broke up three weeks ago—and last night you felt a little bit stupid because you thought he was trying to invite you out for a drink but you said goodbye to him the way you always do, a kiss on each cheek and a *Have a good weekend* and that's it—even though you're not so sure that was it now, in this moment, as you stand before him in the Plaza Lavapiés. You make small talk for a few minutes and then you tell him about your dance classes but you say you don't want to bore him and he lies and says he's interested and you say *Why don't we go for a drink but let me shower first, we could go to that rooftop bar one block over since it's nice out*, but he doesn't know where it is and he needs to buy groceries so you say he should just stop by your house when he's finished with his errand which is a bit weird because you say *Stop by my house* as if he already knows where you live, and he does—or doesn't—remember where that is, but neither of you mention this, and so you point to the street around the corner from the plaza and he asks you What number and you tell him and then he leaves. It's only when you go to unlock the main door of your building that you realize you told him the wrong number, you walk up the four flights to your attic apartment and look for something, a letter or an email, anything that might indicate you always thought you lived at number 84 and not number 68, but everything says 68, and you ask yourself what this means, if yesterday you were complaining to your coworker friend about not being able to get a drink with this guy and now you run into him and give him an address that isn't even yours. You don't have any way to get in touch with him because you never exchanged the more obvious numbers, those to your respective cell phones or *mobiles*,

as he would call them, and after you shower and dress you *bajar*, as you would say, to look for him, you walk to calle Amparo 84 and the building isn't a cell phone store or a fruit vendor but an apartment building, same as yours, with an apartment *quarto primero*, same as yours. You walk back to the corner where you ran into him to see if maybe he is standing there, but it's raining now and with your makeup and tight pants and cigarette and umbrella you feel uncomfortable waiting there for him, and you think that maybe the way you look isn't that different from the women who wait on calle Montera, and maybe what you're looking for isn't that different, either. So you go upstairs and read an email and write back *Great* or *Not So* and then *bajar* once more to look for him. He isn't there, so you *subir* again to watch a TV show online that you don't even like and then listen to the sound of the rain, which you like, and then decide to read something. You read a story by P, written in, as P would say, *lo que se llama vulgarmente la segunda persona*, and you think it's been awhile since you've written anything, you haven't done a *cazzo*, you would say, so you begin to write. You write without knowing to what end, really, if there is an end to what you desire to do, but then all things have ends, really, or maybe when we think things have ended that is exactly when, not what the cliché tells us, that they begin, no, but in that moment maybe there's a continuation or transformation that we can't see but is there all the same, like the stations of a metro or an ash cloud. It doesn't seem so far-fetched when you consider that when you think things will continue as they do they don't, beds empty and rivers end in waterfalls and chickens, chickens always lose their heads, but you hope before it's all over or when, when, will everyone have a chance to live their lives in other buildings, which look like ours but have a different number, where they are happier and need less, *donde se cogen sin ser cogidos y se aman sin ser perdidos*.