

### For History Class

Some fifteen billion years ago, according to those who know, a glowing egg burst in the middle of the emptiness and gave birth to the heavens and the stars and the worlds.

Some four or four-and-a-half million years ago, a year more, a year less, the first cell tasted the broth of the sea and liked it. Thus the cell divided, to share the drink.

Some two million years ago, woman and man, almost apes, stood up on their legs and reached out with their arms and embraced and entered one another, and for the first time they experienced the joy and the terror of seeing each other, face to face, while doing so.

Some four-hundred-fifty thousand years ago, woman and man struck one stone against another and lit the first fire, which helped them stave off the winter.

Some three-hundred thousand years ago, woman and man spoke the first words and believed they could understand each other.

And there we are still: wanting to be two, dying of fear, dying of cold, searching for words.

### Wanderings

Carlos Bonavita always told me: “If it’s true what they say about the road being made by walking, you must be the Minister of Public Works.”

I’m a walker, I like to wander along the waterfront of Montevideo. I wander the city that wanders me: I walk and my city moves, where I head she comes, she crosses my path at every step. And while I walk, words are walking inside me.

I have a body stuffed full of words. My blood tests always show more words than red or white cells. The doctor frowns and tells me: “Your cholesterol’s all right, but your word-count. . . ”

In my comings and goings all along the waterfront, words come and go all along me: they seek each other out, find each other, come together; and together they grow and bit by bit turn into stories that want to be told. Then, stories knock at the doors of my body, the door of the mouth, the door of the hand, wanting out, wanting to give themselves, while I wander along the edge of the river wide as the sea.

It was there, at the edge of that river-sea, where I too knocked, once, years ago, on the doors of a body, wanting out, wanting to give myself; and I was born.

## City of Words

The post office boxes of Montevideo have been there since olden times, made of bronze, adorned, stacked one on top of another from floor to ceiling.

I go in the afternoons. And every time I go, before I open my box I pause, key in hand, and I cock an ear. The boxes form a city of words, and I listen. There lie letters from many people, addressed to many people, from every place on the map of the world. Letters cannot remain silent, and these speak all at once. I don't understand what they say, but I pretend to pick out the voices: the letters laugh, sigh, moan, growl, whistle, sing, all crazed with desire to be opened and read.

## Shipwrecked Words

At night, Avel de Alencar worked away at his forbidden task. Hidden in an office in Brasilia, he photocopied, night after night, the secret archives of military security: reports, dossiers and files that called tortures *interrogations* and murders *confrontations*. During three years of clandestine labour, Avel photocopied a million pages. Those documents were the complete confessional of the military dictatorship then living out the final days of its absolute power over the lives and miracles of all Brazil.

One night, among the papers pulled from the military's files, Avel found a perfumed letter. The letter had been written ten years previous, but the paper's perfume had not faded entirely and the kiss that signed it remained intact. The print of half-open lips at the foot of the words looked fresh.

From then on, whenever he came across a letter, Avel would pause in his work at the copy machine. He found many letters. With them were the envelopes the military had intercepted.

He did not know what to do. A lot of time had gone by. No one was waiting for these letters any more. They had been written by people, and they were addressed to people, but now they were messages from ghosts to ghosts. And yet, Avel could not read them without feeling that he was committing an act of violation. Weren't these words still alive, even if they were sent from the dead and forgotten to places no longer there and people no longer there? Avel couldn't bring himself to return them to the military's files. That would have been like sending them back to prison. He thought of tearing them up, and he felt like a criminal.

At the end of each night, Avel placed the letters he found into their envelopes, stuck on new stamps and dropped them in the mailbox.

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