

LITTLE BOYS DON'T CRY... DO THEY?

Belazarte told me this story:

Do you still remember Teresinha? The one who unintentionally murdered two men, the brothers Aldo and Tino, and was left with two children when her husband was arrested?... It seems like her husband's sacrifice took away the evil eye that was on her: she was wretched as no other woman, but nobody else murdered anyone because of her, nobody else suffered. Alfredo, on the other hand, was kept in the pompous palatial Prison, ruminating the twenty years behind bars his calamitous partner had made him swallow. Injustice, bitterness, desire... so much that could not be digested patiently by so many other maws... the result: Alfredo experienced such an indigestion that he turned out to be one of the most uncongenial men in prison. No one liked him, and the sour fellow spent his prison time wallowing in an endless and harsh mire of petty penalties. But I'm wasting my time talking about him.

Teresinha did feel wretched, poor woman! Her body was still half-good and many a braggart would ask her for at least a roll in the sack for a buck. She refused, at first thinking of the beloved Alfredo, then thinking of murderous Alfredo. She was almost giving in, but there was always that idea of Alfredo leaving prison with a new knife to slit her open. And so, virtue prevailed in a cold fright, without any joy or feeling. Teresinha would come home in a senseless rage, and vented her spleen on the first thing that was weaker than herself. She saw her mother practically dying as she stood there, because of her precocious old age, taking a whole five minutes to get some underwear off the clothesline, and that did it: she threw a bundle of dirty clothes at the old woman:

"You'll end up falling asleep with those boxers in your hand!"

She stepped in. Could she even call it a home? It was a drover's shack unfit for anyone to live in, that's how dirty it was. Two objects standing in for chairs, the table, the bed. On the floor there was another mattress, the home of cockroaches which at night danced on the old woman's face, the natural playground of tiny little animals in this life.

Nobody slept in the other room. It became sort of a kitchen for the family, often not seeing a lit match for days. A lit match meant coal in the little portable stove and some kind of food that could be cooked. And often there would be no food to prepare... But that was no problem in Teresinha and her mother's dictionary: wasn't the stove right there? Their dictionary gave that narrow space of a few cubic meters of moldy air the preposterous name of kitchen.

In this hut-like home the young woman lived with her mother and her leftover son. He was certainly a leftover in so many ways. He was a leftover because, after all, love to Teresinha, my dear Lord! Experiencing all types of unfairness, wanting a man physically,

with no man to be had, forgetting Alfredo, loved by Alfredo who threatened, and with a death on her conscience... whose hands' only consolation was crystal-clear water on boxers, slacks, socks, with seven days of body sweat... and, to top it all, hating some customers who always owed last week's wash ... Teresinha had to bear it all. And to slam anything near to love, adding insult to injury, there came her nagging blasted mother-in-law, hated but welcomed for bringing a monthly ten *milréis*. The *figlia dun cane* strutted in, for she had her own means, at about thirty *contos*, who knew? and told her off for no reason.

Could that full-blown woman feel any love, at thirty and a dry spell, a body from Ceará, and a soul now long gone!... And Paulino, now almost four years old, had never known, since he was eight months old, what it was to feel a warm bosom, with breasts, two arms squeezing him, a word *figliuolo mio* to top this delight, and a mouth eventually drawing nearer to our face, puckering up lightly, making a sweet sound, the sound of a mother's kiss.

Paulino was a leftover in that house.

And he was so much more than a leftover since his smarter older brother, seeing that all was going downhill from there, was lucky enough to have the microbe of the typhoid fever deposited on his tongue by a guardian angel. The microbe reached his tiny little belly, started having more and more babies, a million per hour, and not even two nights later there was inside of him such a promenade of stomping microbes that the asphalt of his tiny guts was run through. And the unbaptized child went to the limbo of the guiltless pagans. Paulino was left over.

Of course, he still didn't know he was such a leftover in this harsh world, but, he did know very well that in that house there was nothing left to eat. He was raised on hunger, starvation was his sustenance. Unaware of the mysteries of his body, he would wake up frightened. It was the Guardian Angel... Hell no! it was the Angel of Malice who would wake Paulino during the wee hours so that he wouldn't die. The wretched little boy would open his eyes in the darkness that stank of the room, and sort of realized that he was eating himself up from the inside. At first, he would cry.

"Be quiet, guadion!"

"Be quiet" my foot! Hunger was pressing... Paulino would stand on his bow legs and, swaying, eventually reached his mother's bed. Bed... she had sold the large bed when once she was at the end of her tethers and the doctor gave her a choice to either give him the bed or pay twenty bucks for healing her wounded foot. She gave him the twenty by selling the bed. She cut the mattress in half and put one of the halves on three boxes. This was her bed.

Teresinha would wake up fatigued, with her son's tiny little hand slapping her face. She was overcome with rage. She slapped her hand in the air, not caring where it landed, on eyes, at the pit of his stomach, thump!... Paulino rolled away with a well-founded longing to bellow at the top of his lungs. But then his body remembered a time when his bellowing had resulted in a clog heel striking his mouth and he gave up on crying... He would

whimper so mildly it even lulled Teresinha to sleep. Tiny, round, pinched, just like a roly-poly.

The suffering was so intense that it ignored the huge throes of hunger, Paulino would fall asleep in pain. At daybreak, the cooler temperatures aroused his body all over again. In a daze, Paulino was astonished to see he was sleeping on the floor, far from grandma's mattress. He felt a tiny little ache on his shoulder, another tiny little pain on his knees, another tiny little pain on his forehead, right where it touched the floor. He barely noticed these tiny little pains because of the *guaçu*²¹ pain he felt from the cold. He crawled fearfully because the dark was all alive with the shadows of dawn, opening and closing the eye of crevices here and there. He shooed the cockroaches and nestled in the illusory warmth of grandma's bones. He could no longer sleep.

Finally, around six o'clock, having become familiar with life because of the bakers, dairymen and all the men loaded with food who would pass at a distance, a dreary warmth would germinate in Paulino's body. His mother was also waking up with the struggles of life. Sitting up, vibrating with the sensuality of the morning which fills us with unbridled desire, Teresinha almost burst, squeezing her arms against her breasts, belly, everything, pressing one leg against the other with such steam that her kidneys hurt. An impatient and aimless hatred, stemming from virtue maintained at the expense of a great deal of misery, sprouted inside her, a virtue which she herself was certain would sooner or later have to come to an end. She would look for her clogs, bellowing at her mother, "didn't she know it was time to get up", that she should fill the pail with water, etc.

Paulino then let go of the emerging warmth in his body before the two women did. He would patrol the kitchen because the happiest moment of his life was at hand: a piece of bread. And what a Sunday it was to Paulino when, because a client had paid, because the mother-in-law had showed up, or something like that, they would drink coffee with sugar besides the bread!... He would quickly sip, burning his tongue and his tiny white lips, the hot water which was sublimely delicious because of a hint of coffee. And he would go outside to eat the bread.

Not in front of the house, no, that was the place where the faucets, the vat and the clothesline were. The women were doing their laundry and it was all unyielding harshness: fights and reproaches, non-stop. And Paulino's leisure bore the brunt of it. He always ended up with hardly any bread and someone's knuckles at the top of his head, a sharp pain throughout.

He stopped going there. He would open the kitchen door, which was closed but not locked, would walk down a step, and run off laughing to the delight of his pal, the cold, among the tufts of grass and the first bur bushes. Those bushes behind the house were the forest. There Paulino enjoyed his aches without disguise. Sitting on the ground, or hitting the eye of the anthills with his heels, he would start to eat. Suddenly he almost fell lifting his tiny leg, ouch! off the ground, to kill the ant biting at his ankle. He would pick up his slice

²¹ "Big" in tupi.

of bread and restart lunch, amused at the scrunch-scrunching of the sand stuck on the bread, now rattling on his little teeth.

But he would not forget the ant. Bread gone, needing to distract his hunger, the warrior boy would arise. He looked for a splinter of wood, he would hunt for ants in the bushes. It was not, after all, such a small wooded area, for behind it came the floodplain, and there was nothing but a hint of fence sealing off the grounds. But Paulino never entered the floodplain, which was too big for him. The bushes with nameless plants, where the sun added to idleness, was enough for him.

Stick in hand, there he would go in search of ants. The tiny ants, he didn't care for them. He would only pounce on the big ones. When he found one, he would chase it patiently, breaking through the twisted branches of the bushes, from where oftentimes he would come back with hand and leg burning from having scraped them on some *mandarova*²². He would bring the *saúva* to the clearing and spent hours playing with the tiny wretched thing, until the tiny wretched thing died.

When the *saúva* died, Paulino's suffering was renewed, he was hungry again. The sun was already high, but Paulino knew that only after the factories whistled would there be rice and beans during times of abundance, or another piece of bread during scarcer times, fortunately fewer and fewer. He was struck by such woeful hunger that no defeated *saúva* could take his mind off it. He was in a funk of misery, heavy-hearted with the repetition of daily sorrow. He would sit on anything, his cheek in hand, the tiny head turning to one side, dejectedly. Eventually, in some laced shadow he learned to sleep off his hunger. He fell asleep. He had no dreams. Flies would come with wings and buzzing and embroider his open little mouth where sweetish remains could be found. Asleep, Paulino suddenly closes his bashed lips, moves, opens his contracted legs a little and warm piss leaks down his shorts.

Short nap. He woke up long before the factories whistled. He chewed on his starving mouth, his tongue licking the juices lost on his lips. The scrunching of sand and something that tasted kind of sweet. He removed it with his hand to see what it was, there were two flies. Yes, flies, but they were slightly sweetish. He put the flies on his tongue again, savoring them, then swallowed.

And that is how camouflaging hunger began, by means of all the swallowable things in the bushes. It didn't take long until he became "a gobbler", as they say: he replaced *saúva* hunting for damp soil picnics. As for ant eating, well... He would place his face on the ground close to the little anthill mounds, his tongue positioned. When an ant came out, Paulino released his skilled tongue, glued the ant onto it and, rubbing it against the roof of his mouth, felt an infinitesimal roundness. He would put that tiny little roundness between his teeth, crush and swallow the illusive spit. And what a fortune it was when he ran into a bunch of ants moving in line together! Crawling on all fours, with his tush spying up at the

²² Poisonous lizard.

clouds, he would lick the floor, ant-eater-like. He would snuff out a live line of ants in a wink.

In this hope of appeasing his stomach, Paulino sank to the most disgusting things. No, sinking is not the right word. He was unable to establish a hierarchy for disgust, and the lowliest eatable object he thought of was the ant. However, I can't deny that once, even a cockroach... He caught it and walked off chewing, more innocently than ye, children of disgust. However, one thing must be understood: this food was far from filling. The factory would whistle and the rice and beans would find Paulino stuffed full of illusions, not starving at all. He started to wizen, darkening like a winter's day.

Teresinha never noticed. At this point, the muzzle of virtue was so worn out that you could foresee the moment in which the woman would break out, free, into the world. This was a time in which blows came down on every part of Paulino, blindly, no matter where they landed. When she came home, she could hear Fernandez's bell ringing on his wagon. He was a lank fellow with some background, a bit slow, though very vigorous. He was around twenty-five, if a day older! And he became smitten with the worn-out woman, who knows why. The muzzle broke. As he carried the bundle of clothes for her, he stepped into the hut as if he were a guest. Teresinha then offered him coffee and consent. The granny, soiling her tongue with the most incomprehensible cursing, settled in the kitchen to sleep with an astounded Paulino.

In any case, the grub got better, and the paunchy little fellow discovered the secret of pasta. But he was very afraid of the man. Fernandez was more than congenial to him the first time he appeared, and when he left the room in the morning and they drank coffee together, Paulino trustfully played with the man's long leg. But he then received such a blow that he felt down in the dumps for a while.

Of course, the mother-in-law was bound to find out, she did and came for a visit. Teresinha, with feigned cheer, said good morning to her and the large *mulatta* answered back bitchily. But now Teresinha didn't need her anymore and replied as furious as a weasel. What a heated squabble! Paulino couldn't even find a way to slip off, for the old woman would point at him saying "my grandson" and again "my grandson" on and on. And she told Teresinha she was on her own, because she would not sponsor the dirty business of an Italian now entangled with a Spaniard. Teresinha yelled back that Spaniards were much, much better than any Brazilian, you know! You daughter of a negro! Mother of a murderer! I don't need you, you know! *Mulatta!* Big old *mulatta!* Mother of murderer!

"You're the mother of murderer, you sow! You made my son unhappy, you curse of the devil, you stinking wop!"

"Get outta here, you mother of a murderer! You never cared about your grandson, and now you strut in all high and mighty! Take your grandson if you want."

"I think I'll do just that! Poor innocent child, who doesn't know the mother he has, you sow! You sow!"

She picked up Paulino, who was kicking, and off she went, heels beating the pavement, arranging her Sunday shawl, as she passed the few curious faces at midday. She then turned to make the most of the audience and show how decent she was:

“Listen! You, there, I won’t pay any more rent, d’you hear me! I protected you because you were my wretched son’s wife, but I’m not here to harbor a mare!”

Teresinha, madly enraged, was already looking around to find a stick, something that would kill the *mulatta*. The lady decided it would be best to leave once and for all, triumphant, click, clack.

Paulino was surging and swelling on the warm flesh. He cried, scared, no idea of what was going on, on an unknown street, and all those people, that strange woman and him without a mother, without bread, without the bushes, without grandma... he didn’t recognize a thing anymore! My God! How wretched he was! He felt horrid fear through his tiny little blue body. What’s more, he couldn’t cry with all his heart, for he had clearly seen that the old woman had a big shoe with a really big heel, worse than any clog. It would probably hurt so much, that heel hitting the tiny little teeth, ripping his lip... And Paulino, horrified, almost stuck his hands whole in his mouth, quite artistically creating what could be a damper.

“My grandson, poor thing!”

With her big, hot hand she held his tiny little head, settling it on her rubber neck. Carried in a delightful way in those good arms, the shawl adding even more warmth to our absolute joy... And the old woman looked at him with a comforting piety... My God! What could that wonderful feeling be!... It’s an outburst of tenderness, Paulino. The old woman crushed him against her chest, hugging him, pressed her face to his and then kissed and kissed him, unveiling this major mystery to the child.

Paulino felt he might relax. For the first time in his life, the concept of future expanded until the next day on his mind. Paulino felt he was protected, and the next day there would certainly be coffee with sugar. Hadn’t the old woman approached his face with her lips pressed together, and hadn’t she given him a smooch that sounded so good? Yes, she had. And Paulino’s mind extended to the next day, imagining a huge cup, the size of the old woman, full of coffee with sugar. He felt like laughing at two pious tears she shed, but right in the middle of the drop, a boot appeared. It grew and grew and turned into the size of the old woman. Paulino took up a soft whimpering again, like on the nights his whinny lullaby would rock Teresinha to sleep.

“Damn it! Enough with the crying now! Walk a little, c’mon!”

The boot heel stretched up enormously and became the chimney across the street. Paulino’s crying stopped, but it stopped choked with fear. They had arrived.

This was a real home... You walked into a garden so full of flowers you felt like yanking out all the strawflowers and, after climbing some steps, there was a parlor with two portraits on the wall. A man and a woman who was the old woman. Chairs, a big chair with room enough for many people. On the tiny little table in the middle, a vase with a pink

flower which never withered. And little white towels on the chairs and on the table, which would be fun for cutting out a bunch of tiny pellets...

The rest of the house equally astonished the little exile. Then, two other very beautiful women, who always wore navy-blue skirts and white blouses, showed up. They stared coldly at him. Those four big black eyes descended from up above and zap! They swatted Paulino's soul. He was dizzy, motionless, stuck to the ground. All at once, there was terrible arguing. I don't know what the old woman said, and one of the students answered back cheekily. The old woman answered roughly with "my grandson". The other answered in a loud voice, and a storm of "my grandson" and "your grandson" flashed over Paulino's head. The story increasingly got worse. When there were no longer any more high pitches for the three voices to climb to, the old woman slapped the daughter who was closest, and the other ran off, thus, managing to escape from being hit with a spoon on her noodle.

The emergence of Paulino couldn't bring together any more horrors. And the funny thing is that, for the first time, the horror awakened his intelligence to new heights. The concept of future, which had reached the next day only a while ago, extended and extended far too much, and Paulino noticed that he would spend the whole next day, and the next, and the next, and all the next days, amidst anger and abuse, and days like that would probably never end. Evidently, unaware how numbers added up, more than three thousand years of next days gathered in the child's feeling of panic.

"Go pick up that spoon!"

No one knows how those half bows moved, but Paulino picked the spoon up from the floor and gave it to the old woman. She stored the spoon and went inside. The porch was empty. Everything was neat, and the shadows of the rapidly closing afternoon pulled in, erasing all the unknown objects. Just the table in the middle was clearly still there, striped red and white. Paulino got closer, to lean on its leg. He trembled in fear. A delicious smell sizzled inside, and from the porch's shadows, a monotone, tic-tac, noise settled his emotions. Paulino sat on the floor. An enormous calm started covering his quelled thought: he was free from the old woman's heel.

She wasn't like his mother, no she wasn't. When she felt angry, she wouldn't throw a boot, she would throw a light spoon, shining in silver. Paulino rolled up and lied down, resting his head on the floor. He felt awfully sleepy, with so much exhausted feeling. There was no longer any risk of being hit with a clog on his tiny little tooth, the big mulatta only threw that silver spoon. And Paulino didn't know whether spoons hurt when they hit. He fell asleep peacefully.

"Get up! What are you doing? This boy must've had a hard time, Margot! Look how skinny he is!"

"No wonder! What can you expect from a mother always whooping it up, partying day and night, nothing good could come out of that!"

"Margot... You know the exact meaning of bitch, don't you? I think we could say Paulino is a son of a bitch."

They laughed.

“Margot!”

“Ma’am!”

“Send Paulino here for some food!”

“Step in, boy! ”

His bow legs swung faster. A kitchen where you couldn’t even move. The old woman pulled up the doormat with her foot.

“Sit yourself down here and eat up, do you hear?”

It was rice and beans. The meat Paulino saw from the corner of his eye disappeared through the porch door. A four-year-old boy probably doesn’t eat meat, imagined the old woman, who was always in some kind of agitation, with her daughters’ upbringing.

And life’s miseries changed for Paulino, but went on being miserable. The grub was a lot better and plenty, but Paulino was being haunted by the vices of the bushes. The big mulatta didn’t have any more of those outbursts of tenderness of the first day, she was one of those people whose mechanisms for living don’t go beyond the fulfillment of duties. That kiss was sincere, but only within the conventions of the tragedy. The tragedy was over and, with it, the tenderness too. And, still, Paulino kept within him a longing for those kisses.

He wanted to approach the girls, but they hated him and would pinch him whenever they could. Nevertheless, the youngest, Nininha, who was wickedly curious, and whose grades were never as good as Margot’s, was the one who took on the responsibility of bathing Paulino. When Saturday came, the little one, a bit astounded and afraid of being pinched, would feel the caress of a beautiful, fiery face rubbing against his little body. Every time that was over, the girl, feeling a beastly anger, dressed him in his little nightshirt, hurting him, “stay put, you little brat”, and there it came: a pinch that hurt so much, my God!

Paulino went down the kitchen steps, in a flunk as he walked down the little corridor that lead to the front garden; he pulled open the gate, always closed, with an effort, and sat down, hands on cheeks, his little head turned to one side, and there watched the world ebb.

And thus, between pinches and harsh words he couldn’t understand at all, “tiresome urchin”, “murderer’s son”, he was ebbing, just like the world: thin dark and earthy, obliterating himself more and more. But what could he do? He would drink his coffee and right away they told him to eat his bread in the backyard, otherwise, pig! he would dirty up the whole house. He’d go to the backyard, and the ground was so humid, a blasted temptation! He didn’t even realize it was a temptation, since no cuffing, no spoon slap forbade him from eating earth. Grind, grind, he chewed a tiny bit, swallowed, chewed another bit, swallowed. And invariably around ten o’clock, as the students’ rush came haunting the serenity of life, he had to sit on that scratchy doormat, swallow the rice and beans, in hopeless fatigue.

“My Lord Jesus, this boy doesn’t eat a thing! Lookit how he stares at the food! Why on earth do you git your face soiled like that, you pig!”

Paulino felt scared and instinct made him swallow hard, waiting for the coming spoon slap that never came. However, this time a light flashed in the whole mechanism for the old woman:

“Could you be...! You’ve been eating soil, haven’t you? Let me see!”

She pulled Paulino towards the kitchen door with her two huge hands burning hot:

“Open your mouth, boy!”

She pulled up his lips. Soil on his tiny little teeth, on his gums.

“I said open your mouth!”

And her finger opened his little soiled mouth wide, his tongue showing down to the root, which was all clay-colored. The licking he took, Lord Jesus! It began with a slap right on his open mouth, which gave off a funny kind of sound, bop! And I balk at how it ended, there was such a medley of cuffing pinching slapping. And endless cursing, which is, after all, just like a slap for a small child.

That was when Paulino’s biggest martyrdom began. None of them wanted him to stay inside the house, he would really have to live in the backyard. But, before the bread, there would a pummeling of threats, word-of-honor: Paulino would go down the steps completely empty-headed, feeling the world was beating him. What now?... Bread was gone and the soil was there, provoking, calling him... But those three pinchers didn’t want him to eat the tasty earth... Oh, temptation, for the poor little cherub! He wanted to eat, but he couldn’t. He could, but then there would come the old woman’s thumb every other hour to drill his tiny little mouth... To eat? Or not to eat? He would run from temptation, climb the little steps, stay at the top, staring at the wall so as not to see. And the earth always calling him there, the good earth, all his, five easy steps below...

Fortunately, he didn’t go through too much. Three days later, I don’t know whether he played at the door with the boys from across the street, he showed up coughing. The cough got worse, kept on getting worse, and eventually Paulino heard the old woman say, in a wild rage of displeasure, that it was a dog’s cough. Now they’d have to take the boy to the doctor - instead let’s give him the syrup Dona Emilia showed us. Neither Dona Emilia’s syrup, nor the five *milréis* spent at the neighborhood’s cruddiest apothecary healed the tiny little tyke. He’d really have to bear with the disease that would go away by itself after finding no more resonance for the cough.

The poor thing barely felt his throat scratching and he would quickly put his hands on his head, restless, and how! hastily swallowing to see if it would go away. As soon as he went looking for a wall to lean on, the fit would come. Slobbering, eyes slobbering, nose slobbering, his mouth open and no longer able to close, heaps of slobbering. The poor little thing would sit right where he was, otherwise he’d be sure to fall. The chair would spin, the table would spin, the smell in the kitchen would spin. Paulino, nauseated, dizzy, his whole body broken.

“Poor thing. Hey, go cough outside, you’re messing up the floor, go!”

He found a way to build strength from fear and left. Another coughing fit came, and Paulino would lie down, his mouth kissing the ground, though now he didn’t feel like

eating the soil at all. A very long time would go by. Paulino, stayed in the same position. His body didn't even ache anymore, such was his abjectness, his head couldn't think anymore from having taken so much injury. He would lie there; the moisture from the ground might worsen his cough and possibly kill Paulino. But after a while, a tiny spark of strength would emerge and the drive to get up. He starts getting up. Feels like going in. But he could dirty up the house and there would be that pinch on his tiny little chest. And it was no good because they would send him out again anyway.

It was late afternoon and the workers passed by in all those streetcars... all in all, he could amuse his rheumy eyes somewhat. Paulino sat at the front gate. Night fell, life bustled. A dusty April wind rose to put its hand on our face, gently. The sun, clinging to the far-off crest of the floodplains, stained the weary space red and green. The groups of workers passing by looked almost black against the light. All was very clear and black, puzzling. Monsters ran darkly, with young men hanging on stirrups, whipping up clouds of red dust on the sidewalk. People, more monsters and large horses on beautiful carts.

At that moment, Teresinha walked by. She came looking real smart, I kid you not, with yellowish shoes, stockings giving her beautiful legs a rosy hue, knees showing. Above that, a light blue dress, more beautiful than the April sky. Above it all, mommy's face, beautiful! With that dark hair forming a pompous knot and the hair scarf beaming Neapolitan blue on the dark skin flushed by the colors of Paris.

Paulino got up, unaware, feeling a baffling spark of festive reactions in his body, "Mamma!" he yelled. Teresinha turned upon being called, it was her *figliuolo*. I don't know what plummeted on her conscience, she ran, the silk kneeling on the sidewalk and enraptured, she pressed Paulino against her full bosom, hurting him quite deliciously, one had to say. Teresinha cried because she was very unhappy as well, after all. Fernandez had dumped her and the undecided girl had buckled under once and for all. Seeing Paulino dirty, abated, she felt all her own misery, and kind of pulled herself away from the bedecked life she has been living. She cried.

Only then did she cry for her son, who looked horrendously thin, and was more fragile than virtue. He was probably going through hell with his big *mulatta* grandma... For a second she mulled over taking Paulino with her. However, keeping the thought even from herself, it was undeniable that Paulino would be a huge pain in the arse. Then she looked at his clothes. It wasn't made of very good fabric, but, after all, it would do. She clung to this disguise which erased her conscience, "my son is being well treated", and, thus, never thought of him again, ever. She kissed him on his mouth, still wet with snot, swallowed her tears, *figliuolo*, she couldn't, hugged and hugged him, covered him in kisses. She left smoothing down her dress.

Paulino standing there, without a gesture, without moving, saw the blue dress disappear in the distance. He turned his little face. There was a piece of wrapping paper, all greasy, rolling comically on the floor. He could take three steps to catch it. It wasn't worth it. He sat down again on the step. The afternoon colors were graying placidly. Paulino pressed his cheek against the tiny little palm of his hand and half seeing, half, listening in

exhausted indifference, sat still. Even the snot flowed from his open mouth to his hand. Then it dripped on his nightshirt. Which was dark, so it wouldn't stain.

PIÁ NÃO SOFRE? SOFRE

Belazarte me contou:

Você inda está lembrado da Teresinha? aquela uma que assassinou dois homens por tabela, os manos Aldo e Tino, e ficou com dois filhos quando o marido foi pra correição?... Parece que o sacrifício do marido tirou o mau-olhado que ela tinha: foi desinfeliz como nenhuma, porém ninguém mais assassinou por causa dela, ninguém mais penou. Só que o Alfredo lá ficou no palácio chique da Penitenciária, ruminando os vinte anos de prisão que a companheira fatalizada tinha feito ele engulir. Injustiça, amargura, desejo... tantas coisas que muito bucho não sabe digerir com paciência, resultado: o Alfredo teve uma dessas indigestões tamanhas de desespero que ficou dos hóspedes mais incômodos da Penitenciária. Ninguém gostava dele, e o amargoso atravessava o tempo do castigo num areião difícil e sem fim de castiguinhos. Estou perdendo tempo com ele.

A Teresinha sofria, coitada! ainda semiboa no corpo e com a pabulagem de muitos querendo intimidades com ela ao menos por uma noite paga. Recusou, de primeiro pensando no Alfredo gostado, em seguida pensando no Alfredo assassino. Estava já no quase, porém vinha sempre aquela idéia do Alfredo saindo da correição com uma faca nova pra destripá-la. E a virtude se conservava num susto frio, sem nenhum gosto de existir. Teresinha voltava pra casa com uma raiva desempregada, que logo descarregava na primeira coisa mais frouxa que ela. Enxergava a mãe morrendo em pé por causa da velhice temporã, pondo cinco minutos pra recolher uma ceroula do coaral, pronto: atirava a trouxa de roupa-suja na velha:

— A senhora é capaz que vai dormir com a ceroula na mão!

Entrava. Podia-se chamar de casa aquilo! Era um rancho de tropeiro onde ninguém não mora, de tão sujo. Dois aspectos de cadeira, a mesa, a cama. No assoalho havia mais um colchão, morado pelas baratas que de-noite dançavam na cara da velha o torê natural dos bichinhos desta vida.

No outro quarto ninguém dormia. Ficou feito cozinha dessa família passando muitas vezes dois dias sem fósforo acendido. Porque fósforo aceso quer dizer carvão no fogãozinho portátil e algum desses alimentos de se cozinhar. E muitas vezes não havia alimento de se cozinhar... Mas isso não fazia mal pro dicionário da Teresinha e da mãe, fogareiro não estava ali? E o dicionário delas dera pra aqueles estreitos metros cúbicos de ar mofado o nome estapafúrdio de cozinha.

Nessa espécie de tapera a moça vivia com a mãe e o filhote de sobra. De sobra em todos os sentidos, sim. Sobrava porque afinal amor pra Teresinha, meu Deus! vivendo entre injustiças de toda a sorte, desejando homem pro corpo e não tendo, se esquecendo do Alfredo gostado pelo Alfredo ameaçando e já com morte na consciência... E só tendo na

mão consolada pela água pura, ceroulas, calças, meias com mais de sete dias de corpo suado... E além do mais, odiando uns fregueses sempre devendo a semana retrasada... Tudo isso a Teresinha aguentava. E pra tampar duma vez todos os vinhos do amor, inda por cima chegava a peste da sogra amaldiçoada, odiada mas desejada por causa dos dez milréis deixados mensalmente ali. A filha dum cane vinha, emproada porque tinha de seu aí pra uns trinta contos, nem sei, e desbaratava com ela por um nadinha.

Podia ter amor ãa mulher já feita, com trinta anos de seca no prazer, corpo cearense e alma ida-se embora desde muito!... E o Paulino, faziam já quase quatro anos, dos oito meses de vida até agora, que não sabia o que era calor de peito com seio, dois braços apertando a gente, uma palavra “figliuolo mio” vinda em cima dessa gostosura, e a mesma boca enfim se aproximando da nossa cara, se ajuntando num chupão leve que faz bulha tão doce, beijo de nossa mãe...

Paulino sobrava naquela casa.

E sobrava tanto mais, que o esperto do maninho mais velho, quando viu que tudo ia mesmo por água a baixo, teve um anjo-da-guarda caridoso que depositou na língua do felizardo o micróbio do tifo. Micróbio foi pra barriguinha dele, agarrou tendo filho e mais filho a milhões por hora, e nem passaram duas noites, havia lá por dentro um footing tal da microbiada marchadeira, que o asfaltinho das tripas se gastou. E o desbatizado foi pro limbo dos pagãos sem culpa. Sobrou Paulino.

É lógico que ele não podia inda saber que estava sobrando assim tanto neste mundo duro, porém sabia muito bem que naquela casa não sobrava nada pra comer. Foi crescendo na fome, a fome era o alimento dele. Sem pôr consciência nos mistérios do corpo, ele acordava assustado. Era o anjo... que anjo-da-guarda! era o anjo da malvadeza que acordava Paulino altas horas pra ele não morrer. O desgraçadinho abria os olhos na escuridão cheirando rúim do quarto, e inda meio que percebia que estava se devorando por dentro. De primeiro ele chorava.

— Stá zito, guaglion!

Que “stá zito” nada! Fome vinha apertando... Paulino se levantava nas pernas de arco, e balanceando chegava afinal junto à cama da mãe. Cama... A cama grande ela vendeu quando esteve uma vez com a corda na garganta por causa do médico pedindo aquilo ou vinte bagarotes pela cura do pé arruinado. Deu os vinte vendendo a cama. Cortou o colchão pelo meio e botou a metade sobre aqueles três caixões. Essa era a cama.

Teresinha acordava da fadiga com a mãozinha do filho batendo na cara dela. Ficava desesperada de raiva. Atirava a mão no escuro, acertasse onde acertasse, nos olhos, na boca-do-estômago, pláa!... Paulino rolava longe com uma vontade legítima de botar a boca no mundo. Porém o corpo lembrava duma feita em que a choradeira fizera o salto do tamanco vir parar mesmo na boca dele, perdia o gosto de berrar. Ficava choramingando tão manso que até embalava o sono da Teresinha. Pequenininho, redondo, encolhido, talqualmente tatuzinho de jardim.

O sofrimento era tanto que acabava desprezando os pinicões da fome, Paulino adormecia de dor. De madrugada, o tempo esfriando acordava o corpo dele outra vez. Meio

esquecido, Paulino espantava de se ver dormindo no assoalho, longe do colchão da vó. Estava com uma dorzinha no ombro, outra dorzinha no joelho, outra dorzinha na testa, direito no lugar encostado no chão. Percebia muito pouco as dorzinhas, por causa da dor guaçu do frio. Engatinhava medroso, porque a escuridão estava já toda animada com as assombrações da aurora, abrindo e fechando o olho das frestas. Espantava as baratas e se aninhava no calor ilusório dos ossos da avó. Não dormia mais.

Afinal, ali pelas seis horas, já familiarizado com a vida por causa dos padeiros, dos leiteiros, dos homens cheios de comidas que passavam lá longe, um calor custoso nascia no corpo de Paulino. Porém a mãe também já estava acordando com as bulhas da vida. Sentada, vibrando com a sensualidade matinal que bota a gente louco de vontade, a Teresinha quase se arrebatava, apertando os braços contra a peitaria, o ventre e tudo, forçando tanto uma perna contra a outra que sentia uma dor nos rins. Nascia nela esse ódio impaciente e sem destino, que vem da muita virtude conservada a custo de muita miséria, virtude que ela mesma estava certa, mais dia menos dia tinha de se acabar. Procurava o tamanco, dando logo o estrilo com a mãe, “si não sabia que não era mais hora de estar na cama”, que fosse botar água na tina, etc.

Então Paulino, antes das duas mulheres, abandonava o calor nascente do corpo. Ia já rondar a cozinha porque estava chegando o momento mais feliz da vida dele: o pedaço de pão. E que domingo pra Paulino quando, porque um freguês pagou, porque a sogra apareceu, coisa assim, além do pão, bebiam café com açúcar!... Chupava depressa, queimando a língua e os beicinhos brancos, aquela água quente, sublime de gostosa por causa duma pitadinha de café. E saía comer o pão lá fora.

Na frente da casa não, era lá que ficavam a torneira, as tinas e o coaral. As mulheres estavam fazendo suas lavagens de roupa e era ali na piririca: briga e descompostura o tempo todo. Quem pagava era o reinação do Paulino. Acabava sempre com um pão mal comido e algum cocre de inhapa bem no alto do coco, doendo fino.

Deixou de ir para lá. Abria a porta só encostada da cozinha, descia o degrau, ia correcorrendo se rir pra alegria do frio companheiro, por entre os tufo de capim e as primeiras moitas de carrapicho. Esse matinho atrás da casa era a floresta. Ali Paulino curti as penas sem disfarce. Sentado na terra ou dando com o calcanhar nos olhos dos formigueiros, principiava comendo. De repente quase caía levantando a perninha, ai! do chão, pra matar a saúva ferrada no tornozelinho de bico. Erguia o pão caído e recomeçava o almoço, achando graça no requetrequê que a areia ficada no pão, ganzava agora nos dentinhos dele.

Mas não esquecia da saúva não. Pão acabado, surgia, distraindo a fome nova, o guerreiro crila. Procurava uma lasca de pau, ia caçar formigas no matinho. Afinal, matinho não muito pequeno porque dava atrás na várzea, e não havia sinão um lembrete de cerca fechando o terreno. Mas nunca Paulino penetrou na várzea que era grande demais pra ele. Lhe bastava aquele matinho gigante, sem planta com nome, onde o sol mais preguiça nunca deixava de entrar.

Graveto em punho lá ia em busca de saúva. As formiguinhas menores, não se importava com elas não. Só arremetia contra saúva. Quando achava uma, perseguia-a paciente, rompendo entre os ramos entrançados dos arbustos, donde muitas vezes voltava com a mão, a perna ardendo por ter relado nalgum mandarová. Trazia a saúva pro largo e levava horas brincando com a desgraçadinha, até a desgraçadinha morrer.

Quando ela morria, o sofrimento recomeçava pra Paulino, era fome. O sol já estava alto, porém Paulino sabia que só depois das fábricas apitarem havia de ter feijão com arroz nos tempos ricos, ou novo pedaço de pão nos tempos felizmente mais raros. Batia uma fome triste nele que outra saúva combatida não conseguia distrair mais. Banzava na desgraça, melancolizado com a repetição do sofrimento cotidiano. Sentava em qualquer coisa, descansando a bochecha na mão, cabeça torcidinha, todo penaroso. Afinal, nalguma sombra rendada, aprendeu a dormir de fome. Adormecia. Sonhava não. As moscas vinham lhe bordando de asas e zumbidos a boquinha aberta, onde um resto de adocicado ficou. Paulino dormindo fecha de repente os beiços caceteados, se mexe, abre um pouco as perninhas encolhidas e mija quente em si.

Sono curto. Acordou muito antes das fábricas apitarem. Mastigou a boca esfomeada, recolheu com a língua os sucos perdidos nos beiços. Requetreque de areia e uma coisinha meia doce no paladar. Tirou com a mão pra ver o que era, eram duas moscas. Moscas sim, porém era meio adocicado. Tornou a botar as moscas na língua, chupou o gostinho delas, enguliu.

Foi assim o princípio dum disfarce da fome por meio de todas as coisas engulíveis do matinho. Não tardou muito e virou “papista” como se diz: trocou a caça das saúvas pelos piqueniques de terra molhada. Comer formiga então... Junto dos montinhos dos formigueiros encostava a cara no chão com a língua pronta. Quando formiga aparecia, Paulino largava a língua hábil, grudava nela a formiga, e a esfregando no céu-da-boca sentia um redondinho infinitesimal. Punha o redondinho entre os dentes, trincava e engulia o guspe ilusório. E que ventura si topava com alguma correição! De gatinhas, com o fiofó espiando as nuvens, lambia o chão tamanduamente. Apagava uma carreira viva de formiga em três tempos.

Nessa esperança de matar a fome, Paulino foi descendo a coisas nojentas. Isto é, descendo, não. Era incapaz de pôr jerarquia no nojo, e até o último comestível inventado foi formiga. Porém não posso negar que uma vez até uma barata... Agarrou e foi-se embora mastigando, mais inocente que vós, filhos dos nojos. Porém, compreende-se: eram alimentos que não davam sustância nenhuma. Fábrica apitava e o arroz-com-feijão vinha achar Paulino empanturrado de ilusões, sem fome. Pegou aniquilando, escurecendo que nem dia de inverno.

Teresinha não reparava. O buçal da virtude estava já tão gasto que via-se o momento da moça desembestar livre, vida fora. Foi o tempo em que tapa choveu por todas as partes de Paulino cegamente, caísse onde caísse. Quando ela vinha pra casa já escutava a companhia do Fernandez, carroceiro. Era um mancebo de boa tradição, desempenado, meio lerdo, porém com muita energia. Devia de ter vinte-e-cinco anos, si tinha! e se

engraçou pela envelhecida, quem quiser saiba por que. Buçal arrebentou. Quando ele pôde carregar a trouxa pra ela, veio até a casa, entrou que nem visita, e Teresinha ofereceu café e consentimento. A velha, sujando a língua com os palavrões mais incompreensíveis, foi dormir na cozinha com Paulino espantado.

Em todo caso a bóia melhorou, e o barrigudinho conheceu o segredo da macarronada. Só que tinha muito medo do homem. Fernandez fizera uma festinha pra ele na primeira aparição, e quando saiu do quarto de-manhã e beberam café todos juntos, Paulino confiado foi brincar com a perna comprida do homem. Mas tomou com um safanão que o fez andar de orelha murcha um tempo.

E lógico que a sogra havia de saber daquilo, soube e veio. Teresinha muito fingida falou bom-dia pra ela e a mulatona respondeu com duas pedras na mão. Porém agora Teresinha não carecia mais da outra e refricou, assanhada feito irara. Bateboca tremendo! Paulino nem tinha pernas pra abrir o pala dali, porque a velha apontava pra ele, falando “meu neto” que mais “meu neto” sem parada. E mandava que Teresinha agora se arranjasse, porque não estava pra sustentar cachorrice de italiana acueirada com espanhol. Teresinha secundava gritando que espanhol era muito mais melhor que brasileiro, sabe! sua filha de negro! mãe de assassino! Não careço da senhora, sabe! mulata! mulatona! mãe de assassino!

— Mãe de assassino é tu, sua porca! Tu que fez meu filho sê infeliz, maldiçoada do diabo, carcamana porca!

— Saia já daqui, mãe de assassino! A senhora nunca se amolou com seu neto, agora vem com prosa aí! Leve seu neto si quiser!

— Pois levo mesmo! coitadinho do inocente que não sabe a mãe que tem, sua porca! porca!

Suspendeu Paulino esperneando, e lá se foi batendo salto, ajeitando o xale de domingo, por entre as curiosas raras do meidia. Inda virou, aproveitando a assistência, pra mostrar como era boa:

— Escute! Vocês agora, não pago mais aluguel de casa pra ninguém, ouviu! Protegi você porque era mulher de meu filho desgraçado, mas não tou pra dar pouso pra égua, não!

Mas a Teresinha, louca de ódio, já estava olhando em torno pra encontrar um pau, alguma coisa que matasse a mulatona. Esta achou melhor partir duma vez, triunfante ploque ploque.

Paulino ia ondulando por cima daquelas carnes quentes. Chorava assustado, não tendo mais noção da vida, porque a rua nunca vista, muita gente, aquela mulher estranha e ele sem mãe, sem pão, sem matinho, sem vó... não sabia mais nada! meu Deus! como era desgraçado! Teve um medo pavoroso no corpinho azul. Inda por cima não podia chorar à vontade porque reparara muito bem, a velha tinha um sapatão com salto muito grande, pior que tamanco. Devia de ser tão dóido aquele salto batendo no dentinho, rasgando o beijo da gente... E Paulino horrorizado enfiava quase as mãozinhas na boca, inventando até bem artisticamente a função da surdina.

— Pobre de meu neto!

Com a mão grande e bem quente pegou na cabecinha dele, ajeitando-a no pescoço de borracha. Carregado gostoso naqueles braços bons, com o xale dando inda mais quentura pra gente ser feliz... E a velha olhou pra ele com olhos de piedade confortante... Meu Deus! que seria aquilo tão gostoso!... É assomo de ternura, Paulino. A velha apertou-o no peito abraçando, encostou a cara na dele, e depois deu beijos, beijos, revelando pro piá esse mistério maior.

Paulino quis sossegar. Pela primeira vez na vida o conceito de futuro se alargou até o dia seguinte na idéia dele. Paulino sentiu que estava protegido, e no dia seguinte havia de ter café-com-açúcar na certa. Pois a velha não chegara a boca ajuntada bem na cara dele e não dera aquele chupão que barulhava bom? Dera. E a idéia de Paulino se encompridou até o dia seguinte, imaginando um canecão do tamanho da velha, cheio de café-com-açúcar. Foi se rir pras duas lágrimas piedosas dela, porém bem no meio da gota apareceu uma botina que foi crescendo, foi crescendo e ficou com um tacão do tamanho da velha. Paulino reprimou chorando baixo, que nem nas noites em que o acalanto da manha embalava o sono da Teresinha.

— Ara! também agora basta de chorar! Ande um pouco, vamos!

O salto da botina encompridou enormemente e era a chaminé do outro lado da rua. O pranto de Paulino parou, mas parou engasgado de terror. Chegaram.

Esta era uma casa de verdade. Entrava-se no jardimzinho com flor, que até dava vontade de arrancar as sempre-vivas todas, e, subida a escadinha, havia uma sala com dois retratos grandes na parede. Um homem e uma mulher que era a velha. Cadeiras, uma cadeira grande cabendo muita gente nela. Na mesinha do meio um vaso com uma flor cor-de-rosa que nunca murchou. E aquelas toalhinhas brancas nas cadeiras e na mesa, que devia distrair a gente cortando tantas bolotinhas...

O resto da casa assombrou desse mesmo jeito o despatriado. Depois apareceram mais duas moças muito lindas, que sempre viveram de saia azul-marinho e blusa branca. Olharam duras pra ele. Aqueles quatro olhos negros desceram lá do alto e tuque! deram um cocre na alma de Paulino. Ele ficou tonto, sem movimento, grudado no chão.

Daí foi uma discussão terrível. Não sei o que a velha falou, e uma das normalistas respondeu atravessado. A velha asperejou com ela falando no “meu neto”. A outra respondeu gritando e uma tormenta de “meu neto” e “seu neto” relampagueou alto sobre a cabeça de Paulino. A história foi piorando. Quando não teve mais agudos pras três vozes subirem, a velha virou um bofete na filha da frente, e a outra fugindo escapou de levar com a colher bem no coco.

A invenção de Paulino não podia ajuntar mais terrores. E o engraçado é que o terror pela primeira vez despertou mais a inteligência dele. O conceito de futuro que fazia pouco atingira até o dia seguinte, se alongou, se alongou até demais, e Paulino percebeu que entre raivas e maus-tratos havia de passar agora o dia seguinte inteiro e o outro dia seguinte e outro, e nunca mais haviam de parar os dias seguintes assim. É lógico: sem ter a soma dos números, mais de três mil anos de dias seguintes sofridos, se ajuntaram no susto do piá.

— Vá erguer aquela colher!

As metades do arco se moveram ninguém sabe como, Paulino levantou a colher do chão que deu pra velha. Ela guardou a colher e foi lá dentro. A varanda ficou vazia. Estava tudo arranjado, e as sombras da tarde rápida entravam apagando as coisas desconhecidas. Só a mesa do centro inda existia nitidamente, riscada de vermelho e branco. Paulino foi se encostar na perna dela. Tremia de medo. Chiava um cheiro gostoso lá dentro, e da sombra da varanda um barulhinho monótono, tique-taque, regulava as sensações da gente. Paulino sentou no chão. Uma calma grande foi cobrindo o pensamento aniquilado: estava livre do tacho da velha. Ela não era que nem a mãe não. Quando tinha raiva não atirava botina, atirava uma colher levinha, brilhando de prateada. Paulino se encolheu deitado, encostando a cabeça no chão. Estava com um sono enorme de tanto cansaço nos sentimentos. Não havia mais perigo de receber com tamanco no dente, a mulatona só atirava aquela colher prateada. E Paulino ignorava se colher doía muito, batendo na gente. Adormeceu bem calmo.

— Levante! que é isso agora! Como esse menino deve ter sofrido, Margot! Olhe a magreira dele!

— Pudera! com a mãe na gandaia, festando dia e noite, você queria o que, então!

— Margot... você sabe bem certo o que quer dizer puta, hein? Eu acho que a gente pode falar que Paulino é filho-da-puta, não?

Se riram.

— Margot!

— Senhora!

— Mande Paulino aqui pra dar comida pra ele!

— Vá lá dentro, menino!

As pernas de arco balançaram mais rápidas. Uma cozinha em que a gente não podia nem se mexer. A velha boa inda puxou o capacho da porta com o pé:

— Sente aí e coma tudo, ouviu!

Era arroz-com-feijão. A carne, Paulino viu com olho comprido ela desaparecer na porta da varanda. Menino de quatro anos não come carne, decerto imaginou a velha, meia em dificuldades sempre com a educação das filhas.

E a vida mudou de misérias pra Paulino, mas continuou a sempre miserável. Bóia melhorou muito e não faltava mais, porém Paulino estava sendo perseguido pelos vícios do matinho. Nunca mais a mulatona teve daqueles assomos de ternura do primeiro dia, era uma dessas cujo mecanismo de vida não difere muito do cumprimento do dever. Aquele beijo fora sincero, mas apenas dentro das convenções da tragédia. Tragédia acabara e com ela a ternura também. E no entanto ficara muito em Paulino a saudade dos beijos...

Quis se chegar pras moças porém elas tinham raiva dele, e podendo, beliscavam. Assim mesmo a mais moça, que era uma curiosa do apá virado e nunca tirava as notas de Margot na escola, Nininha, é que tomara pra si dar banho no Paulino. Quando chegava no sábado, o pequeno meio espantado e muito com medo de beliscão, sentia as carícias dum rosto lindo em fogo se esfregando no corpinho dele. Acabava sempre aquilo, a menina com

uma raiva bruta, vestindo depressa a camisolinha nele, machucando, “fica direito, peste!” pronto: um beliscão que doía tanto, meu Deus!

Paulino descia a escada da cozinha, ia muito jururu pelo corredorzinho que dava no jardim da frente, puxava com esforço o portão sempre encostado, sentava, punha a mão na bochecha, cabecinha torcida pro lado e ficava ali, vendo o mundo passar.

E assim, entre beliscões e palavras duras que ele não entendia nada, “menino fogueto”, “filho de assassino”, ele também passava feito o mundo: magro escuro terroso, cada vez se aniquilando mais. Mas o que que havia de fazer? Bebia o café e já falavam que fosse comer o pão no quintal sinão, porco! sujava a casa toda. Ia pro quintal, e a terra estava tão úmida, era uma tentação danada! Nem ele punha reparo que era uma tentação porque nenhum cocre, nenhuma colherada, o proibira de comer terra. Treque-trrleque, mastigava um bocadinho, engulia, mastigava outro bocadinho, engulia. E ali pelas dez horas sempre, com a pressa das normalistas assombrando a calma da vida, tinha que assentar naquele capacho pinicando, tinha que engulir aquele feijão-com-arroz num fastio impossível...

— Minha Nossa Senhora, esse menino não come! Ôi só com que cara ele olha pra comida! Pra que que tu suja a cara de terra desse jeito, hein, seu porcalhão!

Paulino assustava, e o instinto fazia ele engulir em seco esperando a colherada nunca vinda. Porém desta vez a velha tivera uma iluminação no mecanismo:

— Será que!... Você anda comendo terra, não! Deixe ver!

Puxou Paulino pra porta da cozinha, e com aquelas duas mãos enormes, queimando de quentes:

— Abra a boca, menino!

E arregaçava os beiços dele. Terra nos dentinhos, na gengiva.

— Abra a boca, já falei!

E o dedo escancarava a boquinha terrenta, língua aparecendo até a raiz, todinha da cor do barro. A sova que Paulino levou nem se conta! Principiou com o tapa na boca aberta, que até deu um som engraçado, bóo! e não posso falar como acabou de tanta mistura de cocre beliscão palmadas. E palavreado, que afinal pra criancinha é tabefe também.

Então é que principiou o maior martírio de Paulino. Dentro da casa, nenhuma queria que ele ficasse, tinha mesmo que morar no quintal. Antes do pão porém, já vinha uma sova de ameaças, tão dura, palavra-de-honra: Paulino descia a escadinha completamente abobado, sentindo o mundo bater nele. E agora?... Pão acabou e a terra estava ali toda oferecida chamando. Mas aquelas três beliscadoras não queriam que ele comesse a terra gostosa... Oh tentação pro pobre santantoninho! queria comer e não podia. Podia, mas depois lá vinha de hora em hora o dedão da velha furando a boquinha dele... Como?... Não como?... Fugia da tentação, subia a escadinha, ficava no alto sentado, botando os olhos na parede pra não ver. E a terra sempre chamando ali mesmo, boa, inteirinha dele, cinco degraus fáceis em baixo...

Felizmente não sofreu muito não. Três dias depois, não sei si brincou na porta com os meninos de frente, apareceu tossindo. Tosse aumentou, foi aumentando, e afinal Paulino

escutou a velha falar, fula de contrariedade, que era tosse-de-cachorro. Si haviam de levar o menino no médico, em vez, vamos dar pra ele o xarope que dona Emília ensinou. Nem xarope de dona Emília, nem os cinco milréis ficados no boticário mais chué do bairro sararam o coitadinho. Tinha mesmo de esperar a doença, de tanto não encontrando mais sonoridade pra tossir, ir-se embora sozinha.

O coitado nem bem sentia a garganta arranhando, já botava as mãozinhas na abeça, inquieto muito! engulindo apressado pra ver se passava. Ia procurando parede pra encostar, vinha o acesso. Babando, olho babando, nariz babando, boca aberta não sabendo fechar mais, babando numa conta. O coitadinho sentava no lugar onde estava, fosse onde fosse porque sinão caía mesmo. Cadeira girava, mesa girava, cheiro de cozinha girava. Paulino enjoado atordoado, quebrado no corpo todo.

— Coitado. Olhe, vá tossir lá fora, você está sujando todo o chão, vá!

Ele arranjava jeito de criar força no medo, ia. Vinha outro acesso, e Paulino deitava, boca beijando a terra mas agora sem nenhuma vontade de comer nada. Um tempo estirado passava. Paulino sempre na mesma posição. Corpo nem doía mais, de tanto abatimento, cabeça não pensando mais, de tanto choque aguentado. Ficava ali, e a umidade da terra ia piorar a tosse e havia de matar Paulino. Mas afinal aparecia uma forcinha, e vontade de levantar. Vai levantando. Vontade de entrar. Mas podia sujar a casa e vinha o beliscão no peitinho dele. E não valia de nada mesmo, porque mandavam ele pra fora outra vez...

Era de-tarde, e os operários passavam naquela porção de bondes... enfim divertia um bocado pelo menos os olhos ramelosos. Paulino foi sentar no portão da frente. A noite caía agitando vida. Um ventinho poento de abril vinha botar a mão na cara da gente, delicado. O sol se agarrando na crista longe da várzea, manchava de vermelho e verde o espaço fatigado. Os grupos de operários passando ficavam quase negros contra a luz. Tudo estava muito claro e preto, incompreensível. Os monstros corriam escuros, com moços dependurados nos estribos, badalando uma polvadeira vermelha na calçada. Gente, mais monstros e os cavalões nas bonitas carroças.

Nesse momento a Teresinha passou. Vinha nuns trinquês, só vendo! sapato amarelado e meia roseando uma perna linda mostrada até o joelho. Por cima um vestido azul claro mais lindo que o céu de abril. Por cima a cara da mamãe, que beleza! com aquele cabelo escuro fazendo um birote luzido, e os bandós azulando de napolitano o moreno afogueado pelas cores de Paris.

Paulino se levantou sem saber, com uma burundanga inexplicável de instintos festivos no corpo, “Mamma!” que ele gritou. Teresinha virou chamada, era o figliuolo. Não sei o que despencou na consciência dela, correu ajoelhando a sedinha na calçada, e num transporte, machucando bem delicioso até, apertou Paulino contra os peitos cheios. E Teresinha chorou porque afinal das contas ela também era muito infeliz. Fernandez dera o fora nela, e a indecisa tinha moçado duma vez. Vendo Paulino sujo, aniquiladinho, sentiu toda a infelicidade própria, e meia que desacostumou de repente da vida enfeitada que andava levando, chorou.

Só depois é que sofreu pelo filho, horroroso de magro e mais frágil que a virtude. Decerto estava sofrendo com a mulatona da avó... Um segundo matutou levar Paulino consigo. Porém, escondendo de si mesma o pensamento, era incontestável que Paulino havia de ser um trambolho pau nas pândegas. Então olhou a roupinha dele. De fazenda boa não era, mas enfim sempre servia.

Agarrou nesse disfarce que apagava a consciência, “meu filho está bem tratado”, pra não pensar mais nele nunca mais. Deu um beijo na boquinha molhada de gosma ainda, procurou engulir a lágrima, “figliuolo”, não foi possível, apertou muito, beijou muito. Foi-se embora arranjando o vestido.

Paulino de-pezinho, sem um gesto, sem um movimento, viu afinal lá longe o vestido azul desaparecer. Virou o rostinho. Havia um pedaço de papel de embrulho, todo engordurado, rolando engraçado no chão. Dar três passos pra pegá-lo... Nem valia a pena. Sentou de novo no degrau. As cores da tarde iam cinzando mansas. Paulino encostou a bochecha na palminha da mão e meio enxergando, meio escutando, numa indiferença exausta, ficou assim. Até a gosma escorria da boca aberta na mão dele. Depois pingava na camisolinha. Que era escura pra não sujar.