

Extract from *Cronos* by Linda Lê (Christian Bourgois éditeur: 2010), taken from Chapter 1 (pp7-12; 16-17) and Chapter 2 (pp 23-26).

[Translator's note: the symbol *** has been inserted into the text to indicate that a passage of the original text has been omitted from the translation. The extract from Chapter 1 sets the scene; the section from Chapter 2 is from the first letter written by Una, the protagonist, to her exiled brother Andréas.]

Chapter 1

The soldier is thrusting again and again with his rifle butt at the man, who is clasping a book tightly to him. *Die, you rat!* he hisses. His face a mess of blood, the man slides to the ground. The soldier tears off his glasses, throws them down on the pavement, crushes them under his boot. The man opens his mouth as if to cry out, but all that emerges is a muffled groan. He clutches at his aggressor without letting go of the book. The other man strikes at him even more furiously. A reddish tinge is spreading across the book cover. The man seeks cover by a wall. The streets of Zaroffcity are deserted. It is curfew time. Nobody breaks the ban on going out and gathering together. Only the man with his book, absorbed in reading, had remained seated on a bench in the poor light of a street lamp, forgetting that at dusk snipers turn the town into their hunting ground, and that any poor devil found afield will be suspected of spying. Huddled up, back up against the wall, the man is trembling from head to toe. With a grin twisting his lips, legs planted wide apart, the soldier raises his rifle, takes aim and fires, emptying the magazine, then turns on his heels and disappears down the avenues leading to the presidential Palace, leaving behind a corpse riddled with bullets.

The walls of Zaroffcity's public buildings are covered with posters proclaiming official decrees:

It is forbidden to cross the barbed wire marking the town's borders.

It is forbidden to circulate between nine o'clock in the evening and seven o'clock in the morning, on pain of immediate execution.

It is forbidden to hold meetings. Setting up any organised group is an infraction punishable by death.

It is forbidden to slander the Grand Guide, the supreme Leader, who steers this nation wisely for the good of his subjects. Anyone guilty of defamation will appear before a special court.

It is forbidden to enter into correspondence with expatriates, who are peddlers of false information intended to denigrate the Grand Guide.

It is compulsory to wear the distinguishing marks (scarlet ribbon, indigo braid, black knot) that indicate membership of a particular class.

It is compulsory to turn a deaf ear to the call of the blood and to disown one's kin in the name of devotion to the Grand Guide alone, father of all inhabitants of Zaroffcity.

It is compulsory to observe to the letter any order issued by the Minister of the Interior and Justice, who is invested with absolute power and authority to question any potential agitator.

The list of interdictions and imperative orders is interminable. The Zarovians are compelled to learn it by heart without ever knowing if they are in fact transgressing the Code. The slightest *faux pas* earns them a drubbing, if not summary execution. Surrounded by informers, they curb their tongues, never uttering a word of truth that could be interpreted as a sign of insubordination. Mistrust fetters fraternal feeling. Everyone is wary of attracting the animosity of their fellow men, who will stoop to any depths of baseness in order to win the favour of the régime.

It is the Minister of the Interior and Justice, Karaci, who incites terror, rather than Zaroff, who has set himself up as the Grand Guide. Zaroff murmurs to himself that Karaci's methods of inquisition are monstrous, that there is no act of inhumanity he will not embrace. Yet anyone foolhardy enough to loosen their tongue over the exactions demanded by Karaci is promptly muzzled: with their tongues cut out, the luckiest amongst them are left to rot in the depths of gaol, whilst others find themselves swinging at the end of a rope after they have long macerated in penitence.

Recruited from the very dregs of his mercenaries, the Minister's notoriously bestial bully-boys are a young girl's nightmare. With Karaci's blessing, they are captured and submitted to atrocities until, on the verge of death, their still-trembling bodies are transported to the rough land to the north of the town where they are doused in petrol and burnt. Savage guard dogs gorge themselves on their charred flesh, sharpening their fangs on the girls' skulls. Equally preyed upon by Karaci's fiends is the intellectual, branded by the scarlet ribbon, custodian of forbidden writings. Should he fall into their hands, his eyes will be gouged out, he will be skinned alive and then dismembered and left on display in the main square as a warning to any man of letters whose spirit may be tempted to rebel.

Sights such as this would be enough to fill even a jackal with horror, but the majority of Zarovians are so hardened, so accustomed to seeing innocents martyred that their only concern is to remain silent, to make themselves invisible, as elusive as ectoplasm, in order to escape from these predators who are rewarded for their skill in honing new tortures. They make a mockery of the Stoic adage 'Sustain and abstain', using it in justification of their *laissez-faire* philosophy: witness to abominations, they turn a blind eye and keep their heads down.

Zaroffcity, populated by pallid shadows, is a land consumed by the sun and yet it seems plunged into darkness under the heavy shroud of desolation bearing down on its inhabitants, caught in the vice of denouncement. Each morning brings a deluge of anonymous letters whose authors do not hesitate to resort to this method, advocated by the police, to callously rid themselves of friends or neighbours they have turned against or of parents whose disappearance would be welcome. The poor wretches thus exposed to denunciation have no choice but to find a new home and new identity, putting themselves at the mercy of fraudsters in black market operations who will concoct new documents and, for an extortionate sum, provide them with some kind of precarious abode. The more adventurous, determined to risk their skin, attempt to flee the land by bribing some smuggler – usually a turn-coat acolyte of Karaci – who promises them the moon and then dupes them. Few and far between are the pitiful pariahs who, hotly pursued, actually manage to escape: the vicious tangle of electrified wire at the gates of the metropolis has turned it into an immense prison. Then there are the gatekeepers, Cerberus-like, who, from the top of their watchtowers, let loose a spray of machinegun fire to welcome anyone reckless enough to approach the barbed wire. The nights resound with the shriek of sirens and shots. Everyone knows that atrocities are being perpetrated, but no one says a word, for the only safe course is to play dumb when Karaci the Terrible, raging, is exerting his supremacy.

The Minister of the Interior, a vigorous thirty-year-old with a sharp face, a jutting jaw and eyes as piercing as gimlets, always has the air of a carnivore, claws at the ready. A common soldier at the time when the Grand Guide was whipping up his military *coup d'Etat* and grasping the reins of the town, he distinguished himself by his loyalty to the putschist and by his relentlessness in hunting down rebels. Soon nicknamed 'the Hyena', he became a sergeant infamous for his sadism during interrogations, and later a captain, zealous in sending out bands of men to implement his principles of exacting an eye for an eye. It was by infiltrating and bringing down a network of rebels, who he savagely assassinated, that he won the trust of the supreme Leader.

Karaci's absolute power over the town should have been enough to immunise him against any sense of insecurity, but, hellishly superstitious, he reinvokes primeval beliefs, and will not make a single decision without consulting his coven of seers, hunched over the entrails of sacrificed beasts. If the auguries are against him, he convokes his astrologers and confers with them in a babble only comprehensible to the initiated. Already he believes he is being targeted by factions in league against him. Any sudden noise in the streets makes him jump: he is sure that treachery is brewing against him. At such times, his nerves raw, he is filled with phobias. He wears white gloves so as not to soil his hands, and a mask so that he does not have to breathe in air that has been polluted by others. When he is alone, he checks and double checks that all the doors and windows are locked. When his dinner is served he is

convinced that the meat has been poisoned, that he is being fed some witches brew. Barely recognisable, panting, he curls up on the ground in a foetal position. Red blotches appear on his arms, his neck, his chest. His skin is enflamed and he scratches himself like a flea-ridden cur. Nearly suffocating, he gets up and guzzles alcohol until he collapses, completely drunk. Is he in the clutches of remorse? Or has all dignity simply deserted him? Regaining consciousness, he slashes at the furniture, smashes mirrors. For days on end, he locks himself away in his bedroom. His household, uncomprehending, speculate that he is afflicted with lycanthropy: he crawls on all fours, howls, whines and pounces as if lunging at his prey. Hounded by the spectres of old men he has massacred, he incants magic charms to rid himself of them. He coils up in the darkest corner of the room, with his head buried in his arms, and barks out curses at imaginary assailants. When, drained, he lifts his head again, it is only to pull out his revolver and let loose at the crowds he sees bearing down on him. His room is fit only for pigs: he keeps his white gloves on yet vomits all over the place. The stench fills the air with a noxious miasma, yet he seems not to notice, oblivious to everything. This heedlessness heralds a change: inexplicably, after a few nights, he returns to humanity, emerges from his lair, and loses no time in instigating new and draconian measures and in avenging his hour of weakness against the first person to cross his path.

Chapter 2

Andréas,

At the workshop of Zimmermann – the lute-maker who came to town not long before the putsch, and who, despite certain well-concealed acquaintances, is in Karaci's good books because he is the only one who repairs and sells musical instruments here – I have met someone who appears to be trustworthy. He is one of Zimmermann's circle of double agents. He has assured me that he has the means of getting this letter to you. I don't know if I am right to trust him, but for the time being I do not have any other way of getting word to you. The police are ever more vigilant since a grenade was thrown at the windows of the Ministry of the Interior. The student who they interrogated has not confessed, despite being submitted to every torture imaginable. There's a policeman on every corner – no one can slip through their net.

If Karaci were to hear from his henchmen that I have been corresponding with you, he would, as he has assured me, show me no mercy. Yet simply being his wife is a punishment in itself. Myriad are the malevolent brutes who, supposing me to be in league with him, would not hesitate to stone me. Equally innumerable are the Tartuffes who fawn upon me in the hope of pleasing him. This evening, despite the curfew, the Grand Guide is banqueting with his generals in his 'garden of earthly delights'. I told Karaci that I would not go to this revelry. He flew into a rage, grabbing hold of me: so I was going to be stubborn, was I? Well then, my father need only say farewell to me on his way down to the dungeons.

This is the same old blackmail that Karaci always uses. He curbs me by threatening the person most dear to me with reprisals. This was exactly how he forced me to marry him. I have been under his thumb ever since. My solitude is so great that I sometimes think I am going mad. I do not know all the details of Karaci's ill deeds, but his look of exultance speaks volumes: he has trampled more than one unfortunate underfoot – his triumph ever grows. At night I hear hammering at my door and cannot sleep, convinced that his men are going to seize me. If they kill me, it will be a release. But I must take care of Father – how will he manage when I am no longer there for him? He and you are all that I have got. But your life is now in Satoripolis and Father has slipped back into childhood. The astronomer who was once fêted wherever he went is now nothing but a senile malcontent. I have to spoon feed him, wash him and dress him, otherwise he does nothing but sit and mutter. Now and again he suggests we do a puzzle, and patiently puts the pieces together only to mix them all up and start again once the picture has been completed. This game sometimes keeps us busy for two days on the trot. At least then for a while I forget that he is losing his faculties irreparably. He can't recall what he was doing just moments ago, yet he recollects events that took place twenty-five years ago. He talks about you as if you were still the round-eyed little boy who he took in, asking me to become your sister. That was a blessed time: the Grand Guide was still nothing but a braggart whose big talk was not taken seriously, and the name 'Zaroffcity' had never yet been heard – a melting pot of every race imaginable, migrants were drawn here as to a land of milk and honey.

I loved you straight away. You had a mop of jet-black hair, an elfin face and an aquiline nose. You had come from overseas. You never spoke a word about the death of your parents during the voyage, but you wore a locket with their portrait around your neck. You used to follow Father around, and he taught you our language. Impish, curious about everything, eager to learn, sometimes infuriated by grammar, you would come up with the most startling of phrases, speaking a kind of gobbledegook, vibrant with colourful expressions. As soon as we got home from school, we would cram our algebra and revise our biology lessons, then we would go and watch a science-fiction film. In the evenings we would leaf through encyclopaedias together or I would read you tales of exploits from picaresque novels whilst you, sitting astride a wooden horse and armed with a cardboard sword, set off to battle with the Cyclopes. In the summer you taught me to paddle; we went down the river humming songs we had made up. With our skin bronzed by the sun and our eyes shining, we would stop at a café to gulp a *grenadine* and smoke a forbidden cigarette, or we would raid a shop and share the booty – poor spoils usually, but it was enough to put us into high spirits. We would squabble when we got back home and were looking for something else to do: you would get out the racquets to play badminton, whilst I, dabbler in geography, unfolded a map of the world. And so we grew up, in sweet nonchalance. Father taught us about white dwarfs and supernovae. We understood nothing of the mutations of stellar nurseries: to us, Perseus and Andromeda would always belong to the realms of mythology. Grieved by our stupidity, he would try to din something into us, but our minds

were elsewhere – you were dreaming of taking to the stage, but I didn't have any plans for my future other than a vague copycat wish to become an actress, even if it was just as an extra. You spent your time rehearsing speeches, dressing up as Dracula, a cosmonaut or a grizzly, trilling fantastical poems of your own invention, working your way through the classics even though you really loved modern literature. I never doubted that you would soon shoot to glory.

All that is so far away now: you made it to Satoripolis; Father and I are the hostages of Karaci...

Your Una.