

THE ISLANDS

Carlos Gamerro

Translated by Ian Barnett
in collaboration with the author

Introduction by Jimmy Burns



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Chapter 1

ACRYLIC & GLASS

A fly caught in the web, while the spider, replete from its last meal, takes a while to reach him, can have a pretty good time of it if he relaxes while he waits. The threads are an almost intangible gossamer: they accompany the movements of his body without hampering it – as long as they aren't too violent. It's like stretching out in a hammock on holiday, with nothing to do but swing in the breeze and gaze at the blue of the sky through the cracks of your eyes. Yeah, you bet, I could lie here like this my whole life. And if I don't squirm too much, I can't even feel the threads, they're so fine, it's like floating on my back in the air. Yes, they only become real when I try to wriggle free.

I hadn't been able to get the image of the fly out of my head all morning; it had been haunting me for hours as I rolled in the bedclothes, which somehow always dragged me back at the last; and whenever I was on the brink of persuading myself there was nothing to worry about, that it was just another job interview, the image of the fly would alight on my brain again.

Maybe it was the time I got the message – eleven at night – or the fact that, rather than summoning me by phone or





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sending me an e-mail, they came all the way to my apartment and rang the bell – not the entryphone down on the street, but my actual doorbell. The piece of work I opened the door to was broad-shouldered and muscled, looking not unlike a horse’s rear end in a two-piece, complete with cropped, greying hair, bristling moustache, mirrorshades (despite the ungodliness of the hour) and Italian shoes, one toe of which he discreetly jammed in the door to stop me slamming it in his face. A spook for sure, but too well-groomed to be Intelligence or the Army; he looked more like one of the many who had been privatised in recent years. He handed me an open envelope and I pulled out a card: Sr Fausto Tamerlán requests the pleasure of your company at 10.00 a.m., 1st June 1992, at his offices in the Golden Tower, Tamerlán & Sons, Puerto Madero. It looked like a wedding invitation.



‘Be there,’ grunted the sharp-suited thug when I looked at him inquisitively. ‘Or I’ll have to come and fetch you.’

The telephone had been ringing all morning, a secretary’s voice vying with the buzzing of the fly in my sleep-addled brain, leaving messages on the answering machine every fifteen minutes from ten o’clock sharp – urgent at first, then imploring, until she broke off in mid-entreaty and was replaced by a familiar voice: ‘Fifteen minutes,’ was all it said before putting the receiver down. Before they were up, I was combed and dressed and navigating the streets on the 22 bus, whose chrome-plated handrails felt like they were wrapped in sticky threads, as if a candyfloss seller had just disembarked, and for a moment I wondered if I wasn’t still in bed dreaming of the spider-web.

Four blocks before my stop I got a seat, which I grabbed to



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be rid of those tacky rails, and then, through the green glass of the closed window, they hove into view: the twin towers of Tamerlán & Sons, cutting through the sky above the captive water of the docks and the empty, red-brick storehouses and the defeated cranes. I'd seen them countless times, but it was always like the first: they were less unreal in memory than face to face, as if only the imagination could conceive of the expanse of muddy waters that is the River Plate crystallising into those two immaculate ice palaces. For a city that hasn't managed to raise itself from the oppressive horizontality of pampas and river in over four hundred years an elevation of any kind takes on a faintly sacred character, shielding its inhabitants from the crushing gravity of the two interminable plains and the vast sky that bears down on them; and I was now about to become one of the few mortals ever to enjoy the privilege of seeing the famed towers from the inside.

I got off at the entrance to Puerto Madero and set off across the long esplanade leading up to them. From a distance the profusion of winter suns reflected in their mirrored panes confused them into a single block, a monolithic structure that, instead of a building erected by men, looked at times like a newborn mountain, unblemished by erosion, forced through the tender, green skin of the pampas by the subterranean agonies of some colossal cataclysm. But as I drew closer, the uniform summit of ice divided into two identical needles: two razors lined up blade-to-blade, leaving between them an intolerably narrow space through which the rebounding sunlight burst with blinding, almost supernatural violence. They were so perfectly alike it was easy to imagine they were a single building leaning against a gigantic mirror: a golden mirror in which





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the silver tower was reflected gold, a silver mirror making the golden tower's silvered sister.



This was nothing to what I found inside. There were mirrors on the walls, mirrors on the ceiling, mirrors on the floor, mirrors on the mirrors – although ‘on’, strictly speaking, is inaccurate: there were no walls or ceilings or floors other than mirrors; there was nothing but mirrors, and I floated in their midst as if the law of gravity and the points of the compass had all of a sudden been overruled. I'd barely ventured a few steps before I was turned into some proliferating, tangled polyp, a Hindu god with ten legs, a hundred arms and a planetary system of heads. If I looked down, the black stone floor, polished to the point of dementia, wanted to swallow me in an unfathomable lake; if up, the ceiling burned with white fire, heightening rather than alleviating the gloom of the lake, one spotlight multiplying the next in a blossoming of reflections that stopped me dead in my tracks. (There is something appalling about a black mirror: your reflection stares back from an impossible distance, the other side of death.) Enveloped in a whirlwind of motion, like the only one moving in slow-mo through a film on fast-forward, I crossed the paths of men and women scooting left and right like tracer bullets, in and out of invisible doors, swiftly converging on their reflected forms and at the last moment, instead of shattering, melting into them and vanishing. They performed complex greeting rituals when they met, circling around each other in complicated dance patterns like social insects, some taking off the dark glasses most of them wore and waving them in the air as they spoke. There seemed to be hundreds of them, although it was difficult to decide if there were so many people or simply the image of a few, repeated ad infinitum in the





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deceptive panes. One person alone stood motionless, staring in my direction through mirrorshades.

‘Got your message,’ I said in a friendly tone.

‘So where have you been?’

‘Overslept,’ I answered pulling a sleepy face, even though the excuse rarely worked after midday.

‘Sr Tamerlán is very strict in matters of punctuality,’ he informed me. ‘He won’t stand for his employees being late.’

‘I’m not his employee,’ I reminded him.

‘But I am,’ he retorted, and without saying another word he began to walk towards the lifts, while I trotted after him, the familiar taste of slippers in my mouth again. By the time I caught up with him, he was inserting a card between two panels, one of which slid aside to reveal a lift made entirely out of glass. ‘Only for people with direct access to Sr Tamerlán,’ he muttered, leaving me barely a chink to squeeze through. ‘A lot of them wait a lifetime and never get to use it,’ he added, burdening me with a vague and, in my view, rather unfair sense of guilt for the thirty floors of our ascent.

On our way up, one stratum of the glass beehive after another passed before my eyes, and I looked on in astonishment at how the tower began to organise itself as the demented confusion of the mirrors gave way to the geometric order of translucent glass. I suddenly understood why: the mirrors were all one way, the mirrored ceiling of each level becoming the transparent floor of the one above, whereby the tower seemed to grow as floor after floor unfolded beneath our feet. At the speed I was going it was difficult to grasp the general layout, the organising idea: it must have been something very simple to have produced such complexity.







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The lift deposited us – quite literally: the floor slid forward on arrival – in a sealed vault where rainbows of triangular mirrors crept over each other at the speed of molluscs, slowly overlapping in a shifting kaleidoscope. My chaperone inserted his card into an invisible slot between them and they fell into line smoothly and noiselessly to form a long corridor, which, from the warmest to the coldest, glowed with all the colours of the spectrum.

‘Don’t worry about how to get there. The walls will lead the way. Oh, and by the way, send my regards to Verraco when you see him: Freddy’s the name,’ he added, and before I had time to get my question out, he’d disappeared like a fly on the tongue of a toad.



As I walked down the corridor the walls laced shut behind me; I had no alternative but to go on. I came out into a lobby where the aggression of the mirrors was tempered by thick Renaissance tapestries in which a hart, comic-strip fashion, was by turns startled, pursued, harried and felled by the hunters’ hounds and arrows. When it spoke to me, it did so in the emotionless, electronic voice of a computer.



‘Lie down please.’

I lay back on a couch upholstered in black leather so soft it felt freshly skinned, and a seated figure materialised in the matching armchair at my head. His smell reached me before his shadow did, a smell of dust blown off old books, of ash and dead insects in a spider-web. Then I saw him reflected in the mirror on the wall. He was a man of indefinite age, greying hair and Freudian beard, thick glasses and hands gnarled like the branches of a rose tree. His torso was sturdy, a block of wood, but his arms and legs were as thin as matchsticks, four more



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and he'd have looked just like a spider. He was wearing coarse woollen trousers and a dull-coloured tweed jacket, unbuttoned to reveal the butt of an automatic weapon peeping out against the stiff, light-blue cotton of his shirt.

'Turn away please,' he said, and I realised the electronic voice was his natural one. I did as I was told. Two minutes elapsed in total silence.

'I've come to see Sr Tamerlán,' I explained finally.

'Why?'

'He sent for me.'

'What for?'

'I suppose he must be in need of my services,' I ventured.

'What services?'

'Security systems specialist. Networks. Viruses. Um . . .'

'In a word.'

'Hacker,' I answered without hesitation.

'The metal detector,' I saw him glance at a console built into the arm of his chair, 'has registered a foreign body in your head. Show it to me.'

'I can't. It's inside.'

'Explain please.'

'A piece of helmet. A soldier's helmet. A memory . . .'

'We'll get round to your memories some other time,' he cut in. He didn't move his eyes when he wanted to look at something, but turned his entire head the way a mantis does. The staring eyes met mine.

'Don't look at me. The appointment was at ten. It's twelve thirty. Explain yourself.'

'I have trouble getting up in the morning,' I told him. 'So I wait till noon. Mornings give me the fear. Every night I go



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to bed thinking “Tomorrow. Tomorrow I’ll make it,” but the alarm clock goes off (actually, it’s a voice program I designed) and fills me with dread.’

‘What fills you with dread?’

‘The feeling that the worst night-terrors pale into insignificance beside the horror of a routine morning. The burden of the day. Having breakfast. Looking out of the window. Going outside. Taking a bus. Once I get moving, the fear goes and I find it enjoyable, even elating. But when I’m fighting with the sheets, it all looks terribly threatening, and I lie there suffering for hours before I can get up.’

‘Consequences.’

‘The later I get up, the more real my fears become, and I spend the rest of the day in a fog of puffy eyes, with a bad taste in my mouth and a feeling like I’m walking on dirty hospital swabs. Once I cross a certain threshold, I know the day’s a write-off and I reason to myself that the later I get up, the less of that write-off I’ll have to bear, although of course every hour I subtract from the horror intensifies the dull ache of the ones still to go. By night-time I have insomnia from it all and can’t get to sleep before daybreak . . . when the whole cycle starts again. Umm . . . can I ask you a question?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re Sr Tamerlán’s bodyg— head of security, I take it?’

‘Yes, I’m his psychoanalyst.’

‘What’s with the weapon then?’

‘What weapon?’

‘Not the word. The other one.’

‘Oh. That’s to protect him from his own fantasies.’

‘It isn’t for killing real people?’



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‘You’ll discover that in Sr Tamerlán’s case that distinction is quite beside the point. Follow me,’ he said, and when he stood up, I realised he was barely five feet tall. Swaying unsteadily on two of his legs – probably because he was used to eight – he led me through a mirrored panel, which opened and closed so smoothly and silently it was like stepping through a wall of mercury.


As a boy, one of my favourite bits in the Road Runner was when Wile E. Coyote, in his enthusiasm to catch the mocking bird, would confidently go on running on thin air without realising, until the Road Runner pointed out the void beneath his feet, and only then – as if things only happen when we become aware of them – would he start to fall. I took my first steps into Sr Tamerlán’s office in the same spirit of innocence and immediately had to cling to the nearest column. Through the thick glass on which I stood yawned the other twenty-nine storeys of the tower, growing in chaos and complexity, and diminishing in clarity level by level, just the way, when you peer into a crystal sea, the waters get murkier the deeper you look. This office was apparently the point of maximum visibility: the one place from which the rest of the building became transparent – the one place with no mirrors. It was difficult to decide which was worse: the towering chaos below, or this unbearable order into which it finally resolved itself.

‘Remain standing, please,’ said the bodyguard, whose presence I’d momentarily forgotten about, in the voice of someone inviting me to take a seat, and, gliding fearlessly along the threads of his web spread across the void, he squeezed into a tiny side-room, whose transparent door spun on its axis as he went through, and turned its mirrored face to me.






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He hadn't said anything about not walking, so, as the minutes ticked by and I was getting bored, I sauntered over to the imposing desk: a half-moon of thick, tempered glass driven into three supports of living rock positioned in the centre of the room. At one end was a small city of monitors and video-screens, computer terminals, phone and fax switchboards, printers that, chirruping like cicadas, fed now and then on walls of continuous feed. The other half of this great arc was given over to more personal objects: a riding-crop with an exquisitely fashioned Creole-silverwork handle; a black stone tray full of white sand raked into sinuous and harmonious furrows around three little grey rocks; a well-trained bonsai ombú – save for the leaves, which were almost normal size – set in an astonishingly faithful replica of a fenceless pampas. But what caught my eye was an acrylic prism about the size of a gold ingot, with a long, opaque object inside. This object must have been about a foot long and as thick as my wrist, bluntish with a pebbly relief at one end and tapering slightly to a little tail at the other, all of an even coffee colour. I held it up to the light, rotating it in my fingers the better to appreciate its shifting, iridescent sheen. That's strange, I thought, looking at it in this light you'd swear it was a . . .



' . . . turd.'

I turned without flinching, still holding it in my hand. I gazed at it admiringly. A truly impeccable piece of work. Not a bubble or a burr to interrupt the perfect union of crystalline and opaque matter. Smiling, I handed it to Sr Tamerlán.

'An admirable piece.'

'And a useful one,' he replied. 'Anyone that puts it back on the desk in disgust when they realise does little to earn my



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respect. It's a detector. I read the language of the body, and the hand that holds the turd never lies.'

He held it aloft, turning it round and round in his deft fingers the better to appreciate its purity of form. Then, for the first time, he looked at me.

'You've passed the test.'

'What if I hadn't?'


He put the ingot to his cheek to feel its coolness, and dreamily closed his eyes. They were as blue as the flame of an acetylene torch.

'This isn't any old turd, you understand.' He put it back on the desk and leaned on it with his full bulk. 'It's of great sentimental value to me. You might say it's worth its weight in gold, if it weren't for the fact that its value is incalculably greater. Don't bother putting a figure on it. Everything you see, my castle, was born from it as from a germinated seed. I should make it clear first of all that this is my turd, the product of my body, my blood, my cells, my bowels – that perfect and bafflingly complex machine. Not even your most state-of-the-art computer could come close to simulating the miracle our body performs silently, humbly, day in day out. But we're not talking about any day or any turd. It is the indelible memory of the night that made me that's preserved in here. This prism is the treasure chest of my most precious memories. As you can appreciate it, I shall open it for you. My partner – you've heard of him I take it. It took me years. It wasn't simple, the way it is for you lot, altering reality by pressing a few keys without getting your hands dirty. No. It was long and gruelling and complicated. First, I had to get him out of the way for a while, so that the running of Tamerlán & Sons – it






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had another name in those days – would temporarily be in my hands. Then I had to bury myself up to my neck in papers and papers and more papers, and win over people and people and more people, selling cheap and buying dear, shelling out for favours I hadn't received to people who deserved no better than a bullet in the head. Never had I stooped so low, never had I lived with the taste of humiliation for so many days and nights on end. But it was worth it – I relished it – because it was the last time. When I succeeded, when control of the company had, like barely tilting scales, shifted unquestionably and permanently into my hands, I celebrated with a huge feast, on my own. In the course of the meal – I was on dessert I think – the news of his death reached me. Then, and only then, did I call for the golden chalice. Gold, Sr Félix, was the source of our family fortune, which goes back only to my father. When we came to this country, just the two of us, fleeing from a devastated and hostile Europe, we brought it over with us, all of it. Most was spent immediately, establishing the roots of the empire you can now view from these heights, but we decided to keep a tiny amount as a souvenir, so as never to forget where we came from – in the chalice that I used, on that night of nights, to drink to my victory. The bottom of the chalice was full of . . . let's call them gold nuggets, that had passed into my hands like a torch when an accident took my father's life and delivered me defenceless into the hands of his partner – my own until that night – who took advantage of my grief and youth to lay his greedy hands on everything, including my body. The only thing he respected was my chalice. I drank its contents in one, washing them down with the most expensive champagne, and felt a pleasure inconceivable for anyone who





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hasn't experienced it in the flesh, that of the polish and caress of pure gold nuggets sliding down my throat to my stomach as if borne on the crystal waters of a stream. A few hours later, and for the first time in years – all the years that I'd lived in that monster's clutches – I loosened my bowels and shat, shat that magnificent, prolonged turd you now behold, instead of the timid, constipated little pellets that always used to drop into the toilet bowl with that pebbly plink that brought tears of humiliation to my eyes.'

He opened them to look at me.

'My son's killed someone,' he said. 'In this very room. Threw him out of that window.' He pointed to the one immediately behind me. 'Five nights ago. To explain what your job will be, you've been allowed a privilege reserved for a happy few: to penetrate to the heart of the diamond.'

I thought this would be the moment to show I was worthy of the honour.

'You want me to erase all the data from the police files. Hold up the investigation. No big deal. There are lots of people who could do it.'

'You are a piece of trash, aren't you.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You have the eyes of an insect. Dead eyes, only connected to your brain. The eyes of the living throb with the beating of their hearts, they light up, they die away. Yours don't. They have a constant, mechanical frequency. A continuous hum. Like mine. That's why I make my less fortunate employees wear mirrored sunglasses when speaking to an inferior. It makes them more ruthless.'

'In the war . . .,' I began.

