

THE REMAINDER

Alia Trabucco Zerán

Translated by Sophie Hughes



SHEFFIELD - LONDON - NEW YORK

This edition first published in 2018 in the UK by And Other Stories
Sheffield – London – New York
www.andotherstories.org

First published as *La Resta* by Editorial Demipage in 2014
Copyright © Alia Trabucco Zerán, 2014
English-language translation © Sophie Hughes, 2018

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transported in any form by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher of this book. The right of Alia Trabucco Zerán to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or places is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-911508-32-8
eBook ISBN: 978-1-911508-35-9

Editor: Anna Glendenning; Copy-editor: Saba Ahmed; Proofreader: Sarah Terry; Typesetter: Tetragon, London; Typefaces: Linotype Neue Swift and Verlag; Cover Design: Tree Abraham. Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book was supported using public funding by Arts Council England.



Supported using public funding by

**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



To my mother and father

Off and on: one week there, the next nowhere to be seen, that's how my dead began, out of control, every other Sunday then two in a row, catching me unawares in the strangest of places: lying at bus stops, on curbs, in parks, hanging from bridges and traffic lights, floating down the Mapocho, they were scattered all over Santiago those Sunday stiff, weekly or bimonthly corpses which I totted up methodically, and the tally rose like foamy scum, like rage and lava it rose, till I twigged that adding them up was really the problem, because it makes no sense for the number to rise when we all know that the dead fall, they blame us, they drag us down, like this stiff I found slung out on the pavement just today, a solitary corpse waiting patiently for me to come by, and it just so happened that I was strolling down Bustamante, looking for a dive to have a beer and ride out the heat, this sticky heat that melts even the coldest calculations, so that's what I'm doing, gasping for a watering hole to cool off at, when on the corner of Rancagua I spot one of my pesky dead, all alone and still warm, still deciding whether to stay in this life or head into the next one, there he is, waiting for me in a hat and woollen coat, as if death lived in perpetual winter and he'd dressed for the occasion, right there with his head lolling, so I rush over to get a proper look at his eyes, bend down and lift his chin

to catch him, to inspect him, to own him, and that's when I realise he has no eyes, no, just a pair of thick eyelids hiding him, eyelids like walls, like hoods, like wire fences, and I'm shaken up but I take a deep breath and I pull myself together, breathe out, crouch down and lick my thumb, wet it from top to bottom and hold it up to his face, and I gently raise his stiff eyelid, slowly draw back the curtain to spy on him, surround him, to subtract him, yeah, but a horrible fear pecks at my chest, a paralysing dread, cos his eye's swamped with a liquid that's not blue, or green, or brown, the eye peering back at me is black, a stagnant pool, a pupil that the night has clouded over, and I plunge to the depths of that socket and see myself, crystal clear, in the man's dark iris: drowned, defeated, broken in that watery tomb, but at least then I grasp the urgency, cos this corpse is a warning sign, a hint, a get-a-move-on, I see my face buried in his, my own eyes staring back at me from his sockets, and finally it clicks that I have to knuckle down, shake a leg if I'm going to get to zero, yeah, and just as I'm calming down and getting ready, just as I take out my pad to make a note of him, there, in the distance, is that unbearable wailing, the ambulance accelerating furiously, hurrying me as I subtract him, because adding them up is a big mistake, yeah, counting *up* is not the answer: how can I square the number of dead and the number of graves? how will I work out how many are born and how many remain? how can I reconcile the death toll with the actual sum of the dead? by deducting, tearing apart, rending bodies, that's it, by using this apocalyptic maths to finally, once and for all, wake up on that last day, grit my teeth and subtract them: sixteen million three hundred and forty-one thousand nine hundred and twenty-eight, minus three thousand and something, minus the one hundred and nineteen, minus one.

()

That night it rained ash. Or perhaps it didn't. Perhaps the grey is just the backdrop of my memory and the rain I recall was, quite simply, rain.

The sun had already set and the whirlwind of hugs and kisses, of haven't-you-grown and how-time-flies had settled as evening fell. I had one very clear mission: to listen out for the doorbell, check thumbs for ink stains and, if all was in order, open the door. So seriously had I taken my mother's instructions ('that *key* role,' as she kept saying), that I'd felt compelled to give up my barbies, bury them in the back garden and at last assume my role as doorkeeper. I was all grown-up. I was going to be the one to guard the house, I thought, as I plunged the dolls into the soil, unaware that soon after I'd hand them down, black with dirt, to Felipe.

I dutifully carried out my job, greeting the stream of guests as euphoric as they were nervous, and who, having hesitated at the gate (the mud, the wild shrubs, the weeds invading the soil), let themselves be swept up in the revelries once inside. I remember all of this well but without a hint of nostalgia. I remember the damp smell of the earth, the tart berries on my tongue, the mud encrusting itself on my knees (turning me stiff, turning me to stone). Dusty memories shaken out, stripped of any yearning. I've learnt

to tame my nostalgia (I keep it tied to a post far away), and besides, I didn't choose to hold on to this memory. It was the fifth of October 1988, but it was my mother, not I, who decided that date would never be forgotten.

It was already late when I spotted three strangers walking up to the gate. Two giants and a regular-sized girl who took an unusually long time to find the bell. Eventually they called out a name, the wrong name, 'Claudia, Claudia,' they shouted hesitantly, watching their backs for any shadows that might be lurking. The girl was the only one who stayed silent and didn't move. Her blonde hair, her bored expression and the piece of gum hopping from one side of her mouth to the other gave her away as the guest my mother had told me about that morning ('get ready', 'say hello', 'make her welcome', 'smile nicely'). She didn't even look up when I opened the door. Standing stock-still, her eyes boring into her white espadrilles, hands buried inside her faded-jean pockets and a pair of headphones covering her ears – that's all it took, she had me. To her right a tall, blonde, bearded man ushered her in, his hand resting on her head (submerging her, burying her). And to her left, straight as an arrow, a stern-looking woman surveyed me, her face vaguely familiar, I thought, as if from an old photo, or a movie, but she interrupted me before I could put my finger on it.

'This is Paloma,' she said gesturing to the girl, shepherding her impatiently through the gate. 'And you must be Iquela? Give her a hug,' the woman ordered. Paloma and I did as we were told, feigning we knew each other, feigning a long-awaited reunion, feigning our parents' nostalgia.

Paloma seemed like a rock star to me. She refused to move from the hallway when we went inside the house and her parents didn't try to persuade her. They disappeared in a

The Remainder

merry-go-round of hugs, it's-been-so-long, I-don't-believe-it, Ingrid's-here, and almost without my noticing it, Paloma and I had been left on our own: two unflinching statues before the parade of guests who flitted indecisively from the living room to the kitchen, from the kitchen to the dining room, from excitement to fear. Paloma was listening to music and didn't seem to care about anything beyond her feet, which were tapping along to a tune, jiggling up and down furiously. One, two, silence. One, two. I didn't know what to say to her, how to interrupt her or overcome the shyness that had left me with next to no fingernails. I'd got used to spending my time with the grown-ups, and her mysterious presence, announced by my mother as if she were heralding the arrival of an angel or a Martian, had kept me on tenterhooks all day. Completely mute, no doubt having been dragged against her will to this lame party, the only bone Paloma threw me was the beat of her heel against the floor. It was the only clue as to what she was listening to, I thought, creeping one of my feet towards hers and tapping along until I'd become part of that inaudible chorus. She tapped two beats and I another two. But soon after, with the pair of us almost dancing on the spot, she froze; we both froze. Paloma turned and stood in front of me, looming ten, maybe fifteen centimetres taller, before taking my hand, turning my palm upwards and passing me her headphones.

'Place them on,' she said, with that clumsy turn of phrase and strange accent. 'Place them on and put play,' she insisted, still chewing on that squashed white worm. In the end she wrapped the small black pillows around my ears herself, indicating with a finger against her lips that I should follow her in silence. I walked alongside her, as close as I could, hypnotised by the silky bra strap peeping out at her

shoulder, the tip of her plait like a fish hook hanging down at her waist, and that music coming from some corner of my mind: a guitar, a voice, the saddest lament in the world.

Trying at all costs to slip by unnoticed, Paloma and I tiptoed into the dining room. Wine glasses, tumblers, a mountain of newspapers, pamphlets and a battery-operated radio were spread the length and breadth of the table where my father and hers were patting each other on the back, touching one another's faces as if needing to confirm that their names really coincided with their bodies. On the radio, the programme my parents listened to every night was just about to start, the maniacal drum roll and familiar refrain announcing the beginning of an endless stream of bad news. It was the soundtrack to those years: the interminable era of the drums. I explained to Paloma that the radio wasn't old. It ran on batteries so that we were prepared, so that we wouldn't be caught short in the event of a power cut.

'During the blackouts, Felipe and I play Night-time,' I whispered, moving in closer towards her ear. 'We play at disappearing.'

I don't know whether Paloma didn't hear me or just pretended not to. She walked off and began to compare tumblers and wine glasses, picking them up and holding them to her nose before rejecting them with a look of disgust. Only two passed her ruthless selection process and ended up in front of me.

'White or pink?' she asked in her guttural voice.

'Pink,' I said. (Did she really say *pink*? Does the memory still count if I've forgotten my reply?)

Paloma handed me the glass of wine and took a tumbler of whisky for herself. 'Delicious,' she whispered, stirring the ice with her forefinger. 'Have it. Have the wine. Or don't you

The Remainder

like it, Iquela? How old are you?' she asked without blinking, and I noticed hundreds of freckles dotted all over her face, and under her eyebrows a pair of eyes so blue they looked fake. Plastic eyes. False eyes that were judging me, exposing me. She gave a well-rehearsed grin, a mechanical flash of teeth, not even close to a real smile, and then she spat the little worm into the palm of her hand and moulded it into a ball between her forefinger and thumb.

'You first,' she said pointing at my glass. 'You drink,' she insisted, still refusing to leave that slowly hardening round mass in peace.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and, tilting my head back, downed the wine in one, two, three torturous swigs. I couldn't contain a shudder as I opened my eyes. Paloma was polishing off her whisky, not a single hair raised. An ice cube crunched between her teeth and she placed the tumbler on the table, satisfied, cool as anything. Now she really was smiling.

The guests were getting louder now, interrupting one another, pacing frantically around the room, talking faster and faster, producing more and more noise and fewer words. The radio made itself heard among their voices: second count of votes in. My mother was shuffling back and forth nervously.

'What do you think?' she said into thin air, or to anyone who felt inclined to answer. 'Will the military even respect the outcome? Another drink anyone? More ice? Shall we turn up the radio?' and then she let out a few tinny bursts of laughter, a laugh I remember so well. I couldn't believe those ear-piercing hoots were coming from my mother, the slot of her open mouth (her bright white teeth a cliff edge).

I didn't want Paloma to see her like that. I wanted to go up to her and say, 'Mum, I love you lots, lots and lots, be quiet. I'm begging you, shush, Mum, please.' But the drums on the radio drowned out her laughing, or her shrieks fell into rhythm with that drumming, which told us it was time to be quiet, to settle down and listen to the results, 72 per cent of the votes counted.

With the news bulletin now over and no more alcohol left on the table, Paloma announced to me that she wanted to smoke. She took my hand and led me along the hallway. I remember we were swaying. A new kind of excitement was rushing through me, a giddy sensation that Paloma interrupted just a few steps later.

'And your cigarettes?' she asked with one of her floppy 'R's, gripping my hand and looking at me with those eyes that left me no choice but to shut up and do as she told me.

I led her to my parents' room at the back of the house, where the din of the party barely reached us. Paloma went in and began to comb every inch of the bedroom, without even looking behind her first. I, on the other hand, clamped my eyes shut and closed the door (shut your eyes to shut out the world, so that no one can see you). When I opened them again, Paloma was waiting impatiently for me.

'So?'

I pointed to the nightstand. That's where my mother kept her cigarettes, matches and the pills she took sometimes, on the occasional grey day and without fail on blackout nights. There was only one cigarette left in her packet of Barclays, but Paloma opened the drawer, rummaged through it and removed a fresh one. She also took a pack of pills, and all these things vanished inside a red purse which had appeared as if by magic, hanging from her shoulder (because

The Remainder

this is the kind of detail you do remember: the glare of a red purse).

The floor began to shift beneath my feet, a lazy rolling motion like the sea, which I navigated uneasily, happy yet fretful, as Paloma and I zigzagged our way through the house. Together we passed the hallway and the living room, and together we left behind the murmur of voices and the latest count, 83 per cent of the votes now in. I gripped her hand as tightly as I could and led her outside, away from where our fathers were shouting at one another. Her father had stood up from his chair and mine was hiding behind his reading glasses, the ones that split his face in two.

Leaning against the wall, my father used a knife to clink his glass. Ding, ding, ding. Silence. Ding, ding. It was as if that sound might protect him from the German's wrath, which seemed to have been brewing for years, ready to be released in that very moment. 'A minute's silence,' my father called out, achieving the desired hush, a pause he used to raise a toast to a whole catalogue of strangers, a list of people with two names and two surnames, as tradition dictated we refer to the dead.

I closed the sliding door to the front garden behind me and Paloma and I stood there in the darkness and silence (was it ash coming down, or was it raining?). The lights had gone out, and the grown-ups had only just noticed everything had turned black: 'power cut', 'someone's brought the line down', 'turn up the radio' (and I thought about my mother and her pills, her pills). Paloma lit a candle and removed the packet of Barclays from her purse.

'We'll have a cigarette?' she asked, her R falling flat, before she carefully removed the wrapper from the box. She pulled out the golden paper inside, threw it on the ground

and tapped the packet twice with the palm of her hand. Two cigarettes popped out. I took mine between my forefinger and middle finger, imitating my mother when she smoked. Paloma, on the other hand, raised the packet to her mouth, took the filter in her lips and drew the cigarette towards her as if it were incredibly fragile. Then, dipping her head, she brushed the tip of the cigarette against the candle's flame. A professional. The flame lit up her eyes and she inhaled, squinting (red eyes, I thought, pink eyes). The tobacco glowed and a white, dense smoke hung in the air, millimetres from her lips. I watched her, fascinated and jealous, 88 per cent of the votes counted, as that haze emerged from her mouth and immediately dissolved around her.

I was in awe and asked her to teach me. How did she know all those moves? How long had she smoked for? How did she do it without coughing? 'You have never smoked?' she asked, taking another drag. 'But you have tried these pills before, no?' she said, popping one of the capsules out of its pack and placing it on her tongue, still shrouded in billows of smoke.

I felt a nervous flutter in my stomach and a burning in my chest and face. I replied that I hadn't, no, of course I'd never smoked.

'It's gross,' I said, concentrating on a fixed spot on the floor, a different spot to the one she'd stared at when she first turned up at our house. I studied the ground looking for something beyond her espadrilles, beyond my feet and the soil, beyond myself, a secret I couldn't unearth. I told her she would end up with black nails, dull skin and yellow teeth. And those pills were for my mum, for the grey days, for blackout nights. She ignored me and carried on talking, telling me how she smoked every morning before school in

The Remainder

Berlin with her friends. I didn't know where Berlin was, but I imagined her blowing those clouds of smoke through an enormous pale-green forest, and I hated her.

Inside the house the lights had come back on and the radio was on full blast, drowning out our conversation. Paloma's dad was going ballistic, yelling and wagging his finger at my father.

'Fucking grass. Squealer. Don't you dare raise your glass to them, you son of a bitch.'

My mother walked into the living room just then, and on finding Hans ranting at my father she picked up the first glass she saw, refilled it, and went over to him, holding it in front of herself as if it were a shield, putting a translucent distance between them, begging him with that pink wine to calm down.

'Please, it's not worth it, Hans. Let's have a drink, eh? Let's celebrate the good news. What good will it do now, after everything? Today's a special day, Hans,' she said, forcing the wine on him and managing to tame his irate finger. 'Some things are better left unsaid.'

Paloma's mother was watching the scene unfold from an armchair, nodding her head and wearing what seemed to me a strange expression, as if only now, amid all the shouting and votes, from inside the eye of all that rage, did she truly recognise my mother (Claudia? Consuelo? not even she knew). My father, on the other hand, was crestfallen and mute. He looked as if he wanted to say something, smoke a cigarette, listen to music till he fell asleep (the ends of his feet poking out of a blanket, the gentle whirr of the TV), but the German was on the attack again – 'Fucking snitch!' – and my father's voice seemed to be trapped. I wanted to hug him, to protect him from it all. A new kind of silence

had grown between Paloma and me, which I broke when I couldn't stand the shouting any more.

'I want to smoke, too,' I said, 93 per cent of the votes counted. 'I'm going to get out of here with you,' I added, unaware that this promise would go unfulfilled for so many years.

Paloma turned her back to the sliding door, took out the little box of matches, lit one and held it up to my mouth.

'We will just smoke,' she said ('Cigarette?' she would learn to say in time). 'It's important,' she added, jiggling the cigarette between her lips.

I nodded, wanting to ask her how to do it, if my chest would hurt, if the smoke would burn, if I would suffocate on the inside. But the flame was going out before my eyes and there was no time for questions.

I inhaled deeply and without another thought.

I inhaled and my throat clamped shut like a fist.

I inhaled just as my mother came out of the sliding door, looking for me.

Paloma jumped and drew away.

I hid the cigarette behind my back and for a second, as my mother approached, I managed to hold in both the smoke and my coughing fit. My mother crouched down and looked me in the eyes. The smoke in my chest was desperately looking for an exit. She hugged me and held on tight, and I heard thousands of votes being counted, I felt the cigarette burning between my fingers, I saw Paloma's giant of a father striding towards mine, and felt the smoke pushing and pushing. My mother held me by the shoulders, dug her nails into my skin and spoke to me between snuffles, her voice cracking like the branches of a dead tree.

'Iquela, my girl, don't ever forget this day.' (Because I mustn't forget anything, ever.) 'Don't ever forget,' she repeated,

The Remainder

and the dry cough finally burst out of me. It rose up and shook me till I was completely hollowed out.

The air had cooled and it felt like the taste of wine, like berries, like Paloma's Rs. A thick, harsh air, a closed sky. As soon as my mother left, Paloma came back over to me. She rubbed my back, patted it a few times and then placed three pills in the palm of my hand (a bright white ellipsis). Then she took out another three, which immediately disappeared into her mouth.

'Take them,' she said, as if inviting me to be part of a secret ritual. 'Take them, quick,' she insisted, and I took them without thinking while Paloma held my face in her hands.

I swallowed the pills, despite how bitter they were, despite how afraid I was, as she leant in towards me and closed her eyes (hundreds of eyes that couldn't see me). I closed mine, wanting to play Night-time, Blackout, to play at disappearing. I closed my eyes and tried to picture those endless pale-green forests shrouded in the haze flowing from her mouth. I wasn't expecting the kiss. It lasted barely a few seconds, neither rushed nor lingering, just long enough for Paloma and I to catch the exact moment her father punched mine, for my coughing fit to return and drown out the final count of votes, and for me to watch as my mother hugged someone else, so that they, too, would never forget that day.