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## **Sombrio Ermo Turvo (Cloudy Sombre Bleak)**

**Veronica Stigger**

**Translated by Zoë Perry**

### **THE WELL**

For Donizete Galvão

I lay my whole body down, like a pope, at the edge of the well, my ribs brushing against the ground and red ants climbing up my belly and towards my arms, which at that precise moment were wrapped in an embrace around the well's unexpectedly warm rim, but when I tilted my head to kiss the pure waters, as I'd done every day when I shut my eyes before drifting to sleep, since that Sunday the well was left behind, there was no water; the well was no longer a well, but an endless, black hole emanating a damp heat, which made me smile as I realised I had finally found what I'd been looking for all those years when, under the pretense of quenching my thirst, I lay my whole body down, like a pope, at the edge of the well: the only possible path of return to the earth's fiery womb.

## THE BRIDGE

*Todo empezó como una broma.* When Pedro realised that he'd been living for a decade in the city he'd chosen to call his own, there in that foreign country, and in all that time, he'd never once crossed the weathered, old Roman bridge, he decided he never would. And that's not all: he also decided that under no circumstances would he ever cross over to the other side of the river, even if that meant taking the long way round on circuitous, almost impassable streets in order to leave the city solely by northern routes. Years passed and what was once merely a childish whim, had turned into a strange phobia. It was impossible to determine precisely when Pedro began to believe in the excuses he made for avoiding the bridge and that side of the city: it was dangerous, there were wolves and students and, if he crossed it, something unexpected – a bolt of lightning, a meteorite, a piece of wreckage from a spaceship – would surely strike him down. Another ten years went by, and Pedro not only stood firm in his resolve but grew even stricter with regards to his established precepts: he wouldn't go anywhere near the bridge. Relatives who visited from far away resented not being able to cross said bridge in the pleasure of his company. He even refused to utter the bridge's name. If it couldn't be avoided, he would whisper it, almost inaudibly, as if saying 'cancer', or 'death'. His stubbornness – perhaps now it could more accurately be described as fear – prevented him from knowing that the bridge was covered in cobblestones and had granite walls; that on one side an imposing prehistoric sculpture of a bull watched over all those who crossed it; that in the very middle were stone benches, where, during the day, passersby would pause for a moment to admire the landscape, take some pictures, or just rest, and at night students from the university would gather there to count shooting stars; that on its other side there were numerous trees, much leafier than those on this side, which, when blown by the wind, made a strange sound, like steady, pouring rain; and they weren't wolves, but dogs who let out long howls as they listened to the song of the frantically moving leaves. Late on one of the hottest mornings in August, when no one dared venture out into the unrelenting sun, Pedro went to take out the trash and, having accomplished the task, something, which he would never be

able to put his finger on, prompted him to go for a walk. He strolled down toward the city centre, past the university, past Antonio's bar, which was closed for summer holidays, past the cathedral, past the alleyways that led to the Art Nouveau Museum, the empty square, the bookstore, the church, the school. Maybe it was all that sun setting his fiery head of hair even more aglow, maybe it was a touch of delirium from impending dehydration that drove Pedro down to the riverbank. Without realising where he was, he kept on walking, head down, sweating, thirsty as he'd never been before. He walked a few more yards until something gleaming on the stone pavement caught his eye. He came closer, saw it was a coin. Its silver surface reflected the sun with such intensity that it almost blinded anyone who looked at it. Pedro stooped down to pick it up and saw that it was a coin from another age, of very low value, without any current economic worth, and one of its sides bore the effigy of an old dictator, no less. He grinned, blew on the coin (more out of habit than actually believing it was dusty) and tucked it in his pocket, he was wearing shorts he had set aside for decades to wear only on unusually hot days, as was the case then. When he stood back up, he noticed that he was facing the fateful bridge, the bridge he had avoided for so many years and that, like a hidden god (he realised only now), had determined his movements within the world up to that point. Although he'd refused to look at it, even in photos, drawings, or paintings, he had no doubt that he was now standing before it. He had never come so close to the Roman bridge and was now paralysed, unable to move. He wanted to scream out, cry for help, but when he opened his mouth, he produced nothing more than a murmur. He wanted to text someone to rescue him from that place, but he had forgotten his phone on the living room table – after all, he had only gone to take out the trash. It was even hotter now, the sun's rays beating down. Not a soul passed by, nor would one. With no alternative, Pedro stood beside the imposing prehistoric sculpture of the bull, staring at the bridge. He'd had no idea it was so long, or that it was so hot down there on the riverbanks. Even after the sun went down, the air was still scorching. Pedro thought that if he stayed where he was any longer, the heat accumulated in the cobblestones would melt the rubber soles of his flip-flops. But he didn't budge. Night fell and Pedro still stood there, staring at the bridge. He was no longer sweating, or

thirsty. It was the middle of the night when he saw the boat approaching. It was a simple fishing boat, with no motor, no sail, no oar, no flag. It drifted along with the wind, swaying to and fro, at times nearly tipping over. It rocked so lightly and so weightlessly that it seemed to be made of paper. The blue and white paint on the wood, weathered by time and water, was peeling off in various places, but the name, scrawled in oxblood, remained intact: *Gaia*. Or was it *Gaio*? Pedro's nearsighted eyes couldn't tell for sure. The boat was adorned with strings of colourful, old-fashioned lanterns, of the kind no longer made, hoisted up with what from a distance appeared to be two broomsticks wedged crudely into the bow and stern. Altogether, the whole thing resembled a sort of floating country fair. A rectangular wooden table, covered with a red and white checkered tablecloth, occupied nearly the entire length of the boat. Around it – who knows how, given the tiny space – were five wooden chairs with cane seats. Seated on four of them were two young men and two young women. The men had beards and were also redheads, like Pedro. They were dressed only in shorts, no shirts or t-shirts, and wore colourful flip-flops. A third man – the only one wearing a hat, a wide-brimmed, light-coloured Panama hat – stood at the bow, chest held high, hands on his waist like a sentry. The women, meanwhile, had skin so white they appeared almost translucent. Their hair, by contrast, was dark as night. Their bodies were draped in light, sleeveless, floral cotton dresses and, like the men, they also wore colourful flip-flops. On the table were two bottles of white wine, a roast leg of lamb, a dish of red potatoes, a green salad with tomatoes, a block of cheese cut in half, a large round loaf of bread, five plates, five glasses, five forks, and five knives, all plastic, as well as apples, pears, oranges, and grapes, bunches and bunches of grapes. With the exception of the sentry, everyone was smiling and chatting away. When they saw Pedro, they stopped talking and waved. Pedro looked around and saw that there was no one else there, that night, in the Provincia Negra. Their waving, therefore, could only be directed at him. Pedro! Pedro! Pedro! they shouted. And Pedro was not the least bit taken aback that those strangers knew his name. Hail, Pedro! They were now on their feet, greeting him as they waved. With all the commotion, the boat went catawampus, tossing this way and that. Before Pedro could decide whether or not to raise his arm

and wave back, the boat, as if powered by the simple will of those who traveled aboard it, docked at the riverbank. The sentry then extended his right hand to Pedro, palm up. Pedro was surprised that his palm did not have a single line or wrinkle or callus: it was entirely smooth, the way a newborn's palms must be. The sentry waggled his hand impatiently, closed it, then opened it again, indicating with this gesture that he wanted something. Pedro felt in his pockets and found the coin he'd picked up by the bridge. He smiled for the second time that day and placed it in the sentry's outstretched hand, who then closed it and stepped back, making way. Pedro climbed aboard the boat, sat on the only empty chair, which he now understood was reserved for him, and smiled one last time before setting sail.

## **THE ENGINEER**

Mateus arrived early, very early. It wasn't even daylight yet. As usual, he had come on foot, along the train tracks, under the dark of night. He liked the bracing feeling of the early morning air on his face. It woke him up, he'd say. He came in uniform, with helmet and gloves. He'd had to leave the house at four in the morning so he wouldn't be late for the meeting, scheduled for five. João was already there, also in uniform and with the indispensable helmet. Standing alone on the tracks, head down, hands clasped at his chest, he prayed. Mateus thought it was odd, he'd never seen him praying. He'd even thought his friend was an atheist. He thought about greeting him, goofing around, saying he looked like the Engineer with that sort of pious devotion, but decided against it. It wasn't the right time for that. Mateus walked over to him slowly, treading softly on the gravel that carpeted the ground. A few steps away from his friend, he stopped short. He didn't want to interrupt João. After all, maybe it was a good idea to pray. If Mateus had known how to pray, he would surely have joined him. But he didn't know how, and so he waited. João was so focused that he didn't notice Mateus approach. Still as a statue, only his lips moved. But it was impossible to make out what he was saying, even up close. What if he wasn't praying? What if he was just *pretending* to pray? Mateus thought, concerned. As he stood there, mesmerized, contemplating whether it would be a problem to pretend to pray instead of actually praying, João ended his

presumed prayer, stepping his right leg back a little and gently bowing, bending his left knee forward, as if saluting some higher authority. When he finally looked up, he saw Mateus. He gave him a big grin and hugged him tight. Let us be strong, brother, he whispered in his left ear, almost in a kiss. May we be strong. Mateus buried his face in his friend's shoulder, as if to sniff the nape of his neck, and held him even tighter against his chest. May we be strong, João repeated once more. Mateus broke away from his friend's embrace and asked if the others had already arrived. No, they weren't there yet, they would arrive later. And the Engineer? He's in there, said João, pointing. See? He's always in there, muttered Mateus, I think he lives in there. João motioned for Mateus to follow him. Mateus placed his left hand on João's right arm, and they proceeded together. Dawn was breaking. They got off the tracks and rounded the train car where the Engineer was. João and Mateus hunched over, their knees bent, trying to move as quietly and discreetly as possible. As they passed the window through which you could see the Engineer, they couldn't resist and peered inside. He was a scrawny fellow, with a gaunt face and bony limbs like a fakir, but even the Engineer could barely squeeze into that cramped space. Standing, he had positioned himself as best he could inside the tight gap between one wall and another: he leaned his hip against the partition behind him, stretched his legs forward, leaned his arms on the panel ahead, laid his head on his arms and slept like that. He was snoring loud enough to be heard from the road where João and Mateus were. Trust me, Mateus whispered in João's ear, the Engineer sleeps in there. Standing up? I don't know if he's always standing, but he sleeps in there, that's for sure. Gringo son of a bitch, grunted João. It was light out now, an overcast day with grey clouds heavy in the sky. João and Mateus spotted their other friends, all three in their respective uniforms and helmets. Tiago was the first to see them, too. He waved from afar and ran up to hug them. Today's the day, comrades, he said, smiling as he embraced João and Mateus, both at the same time. Then the brothers, Pedro and André, the youngest of the group, embraced them. Besides their uniforms and helmets, they were carrying walkie-talkies. Here we are, partners, come what may, Pedro said. Is the Engineer already there? asked André, to which João replied yes. I think he lives in there, muttered Mateus, inaudibly. Did you bring the tools? João unzipped his coat and revealed a hammer and pruning shears strapped to his leather belt with strips of red fabric. Mateus lowered his right hand and a Swiss army knife dropped from inside his glove. And you? André rolled up his pants leg and pointed to a knife strapped to his

boot. Pedro lifted his shirt to reveal the sisal rope that was tied around his chest. And Tiago took a thick roll of duct tape from one pocket, and a screwdriver from the other. João then clasped his hands at his chest in another prayer. Pedro and André did stretches, as if they were about to go play some sport, moving their arms up and down and side to side. Tiago, following their example, grasped the instep of his right foot and lifted his leg back against his buttock, stretching his thigh muscle. He held his foot for about twenty seconds and repeated the same movement with his left leg. Mateus, not knowing what to do, chewed his fingernails. He paced impatiently back and forth, pausing only to check the time at brief, regular intervals. When the prayer was over, João did his strange curtsy again. Recomposed, he took a deep breath and called out, clapping his hands: let's get going, comrades, we can't risk the others arriving. Everyone smiled, albeit with a touch of sadness. They put on their sunglasses, adjusted their helmets, and set off. João was the only one who didn't put on his glasses.

## **THE BULL**

Eduardo had been putting off this violence and this bliss for some time. Finally, at eleven a.m. on the longest day of the year, there he was, standing in front of José, a rancher on the border between Uruguay and Rio Grande do Sul, a legendary practitioner of the art of roasting cattle in its own hide. José had been clear: the shot should be fired from behind, and in the head. If the bull had any inkling it was about to die, the meat would toughen. Eduardo nodded. As he approached the bull, however, he whispered something, perhaps a name, or a prayer, so that the animal turned round and, the moment Eduardo pulled the trigger, the bull looked him straight in the eye.

*The above extract was translated by Zoë Perry*

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