

Excerpt from *Quiet Creature on the Corner*

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Translated by Adam Morris

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Someone knocked on the door, and I went to open it, already knowing who it was: the eldest son of the neighbor lady, a crazy kid that had this obsession with coming to ask me for a nail; for the hundredth time I said I didn't have any more, but, like always, he needed to nail something—this time it was for nailing a beam, yes, nailing a beam in the ceiling above his mattress. He was almost shouting, banging, banging, banging, until he bled. I looked up because that was the direction he pointed so vehemently, I looked and saw the split ceilings in the corridor: I just need to borrow one nail, the kid was repeating, one loaned nail, that's all. The kid was gagging, and, as usual, he suddenly fell silent and returned to the apartment where he lived, with such a distressed expression that it seemed he'd just practiced a defeat that no other child was even capable of imagining.

While mother was watching TV, seated on the shredded sofa, I went downstairs to see if anything was new, and as I descended I thought of her—that it really was a good idea for her to go to São Borja, because there was every reason to believe that it was all headed for collapse here in Porto Alegre, and I wouldn't know what to do with her.

Around the building downstairs it was nearly a jungle, damp, parts of it always flooded, frogs croaking ceaselessly. There wasn't anyone there.

I leaned an arm against a column, stared down at the floor, my slit-open sneaker. I could take advantage of the silence to write a poem, pull a piece of paper and pen from my pocket:

images of things undulated, pursuing me, perhaps a thin stem, very thin, adrift on the breeze. That was when I heard someone singing, a high-pitched voice. I looked around—undulating things, the fine stalk, very fine, adrift on the breeze would have to wait for another time. I went looking for the person who was singing. It had to be nearby, it wasn't coming from upstairs in any of the apartments. My steps drifting, I looked in all the corners, the voice quite high. I went toward the ruins behind the building, where the voice seemed to be coming from, ah, it was the girl that lived on the top floor, Mariana if I'm not mistaken, seated on a chunk of ruin, younger than me, singing a romantic ballad by a singer who was hideous but provoked hysteric screams from girls in the auditoriums on the TV shows: hey, I said to her, you all alone out here?

The girl kept singing a while longer, then suddenly stopped and said with the sky the way it was today, so full of stars, with the moon so high, it was likely that the Druidesses would be descending by the bunches. This girl was like that, always talking about Druidesses and other strange beings. She said she never went to school, that she went every day to her hideout on the top of a hill, and stayed there singing all morning long.

When she started up with the thing about Druidesses my first reaction was to think that I was sleepy, that I'd go to bed, or maybe get back to that poem.

But a second later, when she began to sing, I saw that, no, it wouldn't be so bad to spend a little time there. It wasn't cold. I stayed, wandering through the ruins, and she started singing a song that wasn't so bad. The night was clear and the ruins were yellowed by the moon.

Suddenly I realized I was so close to the singing girl that I could almost feel her breath. I didn't say anything. She stopped singing. I noticed there was a wall covered in dots that hid us from the building. I hit her with a kiss, and she fell with me onto the wet earth, my tongue passing through a muffled murmur in the girl's mouth, for sure a scream if I were to take my mouth off

hers—and it was too late, I needed to suffocate that scream. I came right as my dick went in, and that dry murmur, the shout I suffocated by crushing my mouth against hers, stopped. And I got up.

I went back to the apartment. My mother was sleeping on the shredded sofa with the light on. I went to my room, threw myself on the bed, and fell asleep.

I awoke in the middle of the night to voices outside. I got up, went to the corner of the window, and saw brigadiers talking to some guys that were getting out of a red Escort, and a station wagon with a spinning light on top. The wagon had parked diagonally in front of the Escort; one of them started cuffing the guys, the other pointing his gun.

It had become routine to be awakened during the night by troubles like these in the neighborhood. Police, car thieves, drug traffickers, even on calm nights like this one, it wasn't strange for shots to ring out, and there I was, like on so many other late nights, peering from the corner of the window, not wanting to be seen, because if I were I'd certainly fall under some kind of suspicion.

I sat down on the bed, hearing the brigadiers' siren. After that the silence returned. In the living room my mother was snoring. Tomorrow she'd go to São Borja.

I saw a bolt of lightning cut the sky, everything went blue, then came the thunder. I returned to the window and another lightning bolt illuminating the sort-of clearing where they were constructing the building next door. The Escort was still there; I doubted I'd be able to sleep; a downpour was starting to rail against the window, the water blocking my view outside; I thought how my life was really taking its time figuring things out; and my mother snored as if to say: don't even tell me. And I was still there, staring at the drops that wouldn't let me see outside, unable to sleep, with not even a way to take a walk in the street due to the rain. I went to the living room, the light was still on, and I could've stolen my mother's wedding ring right off her finger, and even taken my time rolling out since she wouldn't wake up, but that wedding ring probably wasn't

worth a nickel, and I was a coward anyway; I called out to her, asked her to make me a tea because I was feeling woozy, ready to vomit.

Early the next morning I took her to the bus station—she was leaving at eight—the rain had stopped, but the sky hadn't opened up, clouds were moving along lashed by a wind that seemed to come from the south, the temperature had fallen and my mother kissed me, I said that she was doing the right thing by moving to another city, and the bus left.

I went up Borges Street and jumped on the bus back, and right when it was passing along the ridge of cemeteries, I looked from up there down at Glória again—the church towers—I coughed, spit out the window, crossed myself furtively, laughing to myself, pulled the cord for a stop, got off, said hello to a neighbor who had his kid in his lap, took a shortcut that led over to my building—I could already smell the eucalyptus in the clearing of the next-door building—I saw a paddy wagon and two brigadiers talking with a guy who saw me and said: that's the man.

There were five prisoners in the cell where they stuffed me. I've never seen people as ruined as those five, there were scars and occasional holes all over their whole bodies, mouths completely toothless, one of them with a hairlip that had never been fixed—and even worse than toothless was the guy with only one rotting, snaggletoothed canine, bleeding.

But before that I had waited hours for the sheriff. The police searched me all over, took a wad of papers with my poems on them from my pocket, spread the papers over the sheriff's desk, and when he arrived they started asking me if I had brothers, a mother or a father still living, and when I told them how my father took off and my mother and I had fallen into poverty, that I had to leave school to eke out a living for us, the sheriff seemed to take a real interest: he leaned toward me, thumped me on the shoulder, and yelled for me to tell all about that time, that was the reason for everything, that was where everything had started.

Go ahead, he concluded impatiently.

So then I told him about that time, an assortment of things from here, leaving things out there, and then later, later there was last night, and his eyes bulged at me, another blow to the shoulder when I said I'd stayed at home, that I'd gone to bed early, early since I had to take my mother to the bus station. He called over a police reporter, a completely blond man—the tufts of hair coming out of his ears, even those were super blond.

“Let's hear it”, the reporter said, gathering up the papers with my poems.

Then came the jailer to take me to the lockup.

When I came in one prisoner asked me what time it was, another if I had something to give him, another that he'd strangle me at night, another that he knew I was a poet, and I should write a poem in charcoal beside his mattress. The fifth one didn't say anything.

That night the five of them made a big racket masturbating, the bunks squeaking, the guys slapping the walls, their labored breathing audible when they came, nearly bursting. I was the only one lying on a mattress directly on the slab floor. Waiting out the sleepless night, I knew that if I stayed there much longer I'd end up participating in the communal jackoff session.

Then they were snoring and it was dark, the only light a single lamp that was oscillating in the drafty corridor. The window in that little hole had iron bars that left such a narrow space between them that not even an arm would fit; I took a board from under one of the beds, pushed it against the wall, got on top of it, and peered out at the night through the bars. A guard was passing hurriedly in the distance in front of me, a rooster began to crow.

While I waited for it to get light I remained there, seeing if maybe some verse might emerge; maybe I'd have to get accustomed to this, to these guys, discuss a way of getting out of here; or maybe it wouldn't be so rough, I'd find some company in the five guys, if I stayed with them through what would come, with the five pent-up and stinking bodies, eventually letting me

see them without repugnance, capable of putting an arm around them, talking with them about something, planning something with the ugly and spent men.

When it gets light out I'll turn to the interior of the cell, and the newspaper with the story about me will be passing from hand to hand, and this will calm me, restore my sleep, because the five will see proof that I am one of them.

The day was breaking and I walked around the cell, and for every eye that opened, every stretch, yawn, fart, belch I was there watching, and I did the same myself; I also stretched, yawned, pretended to fart, belched, and this was how I managed to penetrate that set of ugly, pent-up bandits.

A prison bitch with a turban on her head appeared on the other side of the bars and passed a newspaper to one of the prisoners: the newspaper was already open to the police blotter, and there was my photo—me seated there in front of the sheriff, my busted sneakers—and beside my photo a three-by-four inch portrait of Mariana.

I didn't get to read anything written in the story, not even the headline; I only had time to see the photos. I wanted to take advantage of the bitch's presence somehow to, who knows, say I needed to talk with the sheriff; if maybe she couldn't do me a favor and talk to him: sure, the bitch replied, smiling; she couldn't stop smiling.

Do me a favor, I repeated, and the urge to shake the bars came over me; I clenched the bars, but as I was about to shake them the urge to vomit overtook me and I stopped.

I saw that the bitch was no longer there; the prisoners were making a big commotion with the newspaper, calling me a retard and letting out the strangest cackles, much as I'd like to laugh if I were so bold.

In that cell "retard" became my name; I got closer and mentioned taking the newspaper from them; they held me down and began to tickle me, poke me, pull on my dick—one had huge

fingernails, he could only scrape when he touched me—in the middle of the confusion someone bit my hand, ATTACK I yelled, and I threw myself headlong into the jacket of I couldn't tell which prisoner, my head spun, and then my eyes were hurting, I felt like I was on the verge of the flu.

I was wiping snot on the sleeve of my shirt when I heard a voice from behind me calling: the jailor, telling me to come with him.

The metal bars half opened and I went out, the jailor steering me by the arm down the corridor, I heard the murmur of the sheriff's room, but when I got to the door they all went silent, two flashes exploded, I noticed a huddle of reporters in a corner taking notes, then, suddenly, the huddle broke and they also went quiet, and in the middle of the reporters appeared Mariana's scared expression. She looked panicked, regretting that she'd reported me to the police, and from the looks of it she'd ask me for help if she could, she was so young and was so flagrantly scared, there, in the middle of those reporters asking her questions; I went toward her, but when I got close various arms detained me; Mariana took a three steps in my direction, slightly lifted her arm as if to reach out to me, maybe to undo her denunciation, but she knew it was already too late.

They pulled her away, and took her through a door next to the sheriff's desk. I felt a touch on my shoulder, looked back, it was a man wearing a hat and a black overcoat—he reminded me of a photo I'd seen of a street in Vienna in the thirties—and he didn't take his hand off my shoulder, telling me I was coming with him, I was leaving this place, I was going to a clinic in São Leopoldo, and he handed me a package, saying that there were some books of poetry and some paper for me to write on.

Wow, I sighed to myself, my entire life looks like it's about to change. More flashes exploded, and I said that yeah, I was ready, we could go.

The reporters and photographers stopped at the door to the sheriff's office, the man opened the car door, I got in and said, softly: and now São Leopoldo.

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João Gilberto Noll is the author of nearly 20 books. His work has appeared in Brazil's leading periodicals, and he has been a guest of the Rockefeller Foundation, King's College London, and the University of California at Berkeley, as well as a Guggenheim Fellow. A five-time recipient of the Prêmio Jabuti, and the recipient of over 10 awards in all, he lives in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

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