

LETTER

summer 2011

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Dear Readers,

We have a couple of new things to announce with this Summer 2011 catalog. First off, in September, we're going to publish our first work from China, Can Xue's *Vertical Motion*, which has been translated by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping. Can Xue has already established herself in English translation, with books available from New Directions, Yale University Press, and Northwestern University Press. She's been praised by the likes of Susan Sontag and Robert Coover (and even the *New York Times*), and many of her stories have first appeared in the pages of *Conjunctions*.

In addition to Can Xue's collection, we have four other excellent titles coming out this Summer, *My Two Worlds*, the first of three Sergio Chejfec titles we're publishing; *The Book of Happenstance*, which is the second title we've brought out by South African writer Ingrid Winterbach; *Guadalajara*, the next in our ongoing series of books by Quim Monzó; and, *The Guinea Pigs*, one of the funniest books I've ever read, and a reprint we've wanted to bring out for years.

The other "new thing" alluded to above is the official launch of Open Letter ebooks. Starting this January, a number of Open Letter books will be available in Kindle and EPUB editions for your Kindle, iPad, iPhone, Nook, Sony Reader, computer, etc., etc. Looking forward, we'll continue to release e-versions of our titles simultaneously with the print editions, giving readers the chance to buy whichever form they prefer. See page 24 for information about all Open Letter ebooks.

As always, you'll find an order form in the back, and a donation form on the other side of this letter. We are a nonprofit publishing house, so all donations are fully tax-deductible, and every dollar helps.

Enjoy!



Chad W. Post

Director, Open Letter

chad.post@rochester.edu

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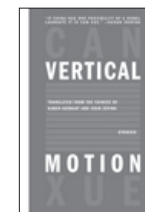
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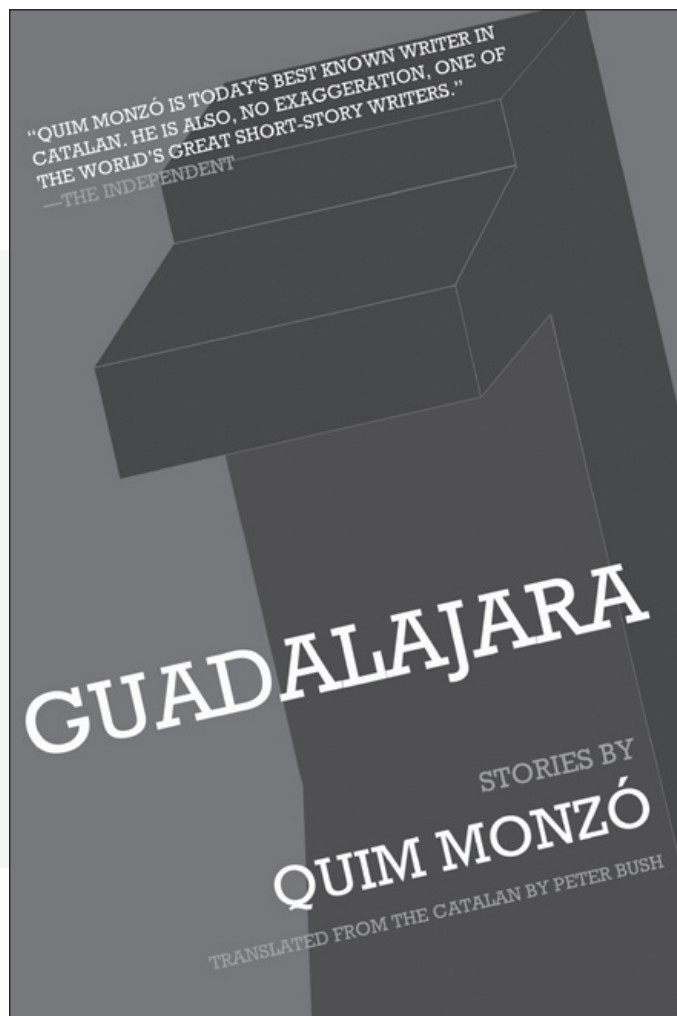
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FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION
JULY 12, 2011



Jul. 2011

Short Fiction
\$12.95 (pb)
135 pgs.
5.5" by 8.5"
978-1-934824-19-1

\$9.99 (ebook)
978-1-934824-50-4

(World English)

GUADALAJARA QUIM MONZÓ

Translated from the Catalan by Peter Bush



"Today's best known writer in Catalan. He is also, no exaggeration, one the world's great short-story writers."

—*The Independent*

"A gifted writer, he draws well on the rich tradition of Spanish surrealism . . . to sustain the lyrical, visionary quality of his imagination."

—*New York Times*

READ AN
EXCERPT

All the heroes of this story collection—the boy who refuses to follow the family tradition of having his ring finger cut off; the man who cannot escape his house, no matter what he tries; Robin Hood stealing so much from the rich that he ruins the rich and makes the poor wealthy; Gregor the cockroach, who wakes one day to discover he has become a human teenager; the prophet who can't remember any of the prophecies that have been revealed to him; Ulysses and his minions trapped in the Trojan horse—are faced with a world that is always changing, where time and space move in circles, where language has become meaningless. Their stories are mazes from which they can't escape.

The simultaneously dark, grotesque, and funny *Guadalajara* reveals Quim Monzó at his acerbic and witty best.

Quim Monzó was born in Barcelona in 1952. He has been awarded the National Award, the City of Barcelona Award, the Prudenci Bertrana Award, the El Temps Award, the Lletra d'Or Prize for the best book of the year, and the Catalan Writers' Award. He has been awarded *Serra d'Or* magazine's prestigious Critics' Award four times. He has also translated numerous authors into Catalan, including Truman Capote, J. D. Salinger, and Ernest Hemingway.

Peter Bush is a renowned translator from Catalan, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. He has translated such writers as Juan Goytisolo, Leonardo Padura, and Luis Sepúlveda, and was awarded the Valle-Inclán Literary Translation Prize for his translation of Goytisolo's *The Marx Family Saga*. He is currently visiting professor at the University of Málaga.



from "A Day Like Any Other"

The compulsive liar has spent an hour on his terrace, soaking up the sun. It's a pleasant feeling after a cold winter, but a moment comes when all that sun makes him feel queasy. He puts a hand over his eyes, gets up from the lounge, goes inside, slips on a shirt and jacket, and walks out into the street. While he's crossing the esplanade, he stares at the abandoned car that's been parked by the football ground for two years and now has neither wheels nor doors. Why the hell don't they move it and turn it into scrap metal? A heron flies low over the cemetery. He turns left and takes the long, sloping road.

He walks past the bar, which is halfway down the road; he stops when he's about to leave it well behind. He wonders for a moment whether to go in or not and finally decides he will: he pushes the door open and lets out a general, Good day, aimed at the owner and some customers who are playing dominos. He leans on the bar and orders a beer. The waiter serves him and, inevitably, asks how life's treating him. The liar says, Well, and gulps his beer. His mustache is coated white. A rather badly tuned radio is blaring out a melody punctuated by sounds that usually express pain. He watches the domino game for a while. One of the players asks him if he wants to join in the next round, and he waves a hand to indicate that he doesn't. He turns around, takes another gulp of beer, and gazes at the Russian salad under the glass cover. The golden-brownish hue of the mayonnaise makes him feel like ordering some. The owner sees him looking its way and asks him if he wants to order. The liar says he doesn't, because if he eats something now he won't want dinner and his wife will nag. The owner smiles because it's a standard joke: the liar isn't married, he lives alone and always uses his imaginary wife as his excuse. When, for instance, he wants to leave and the others insist he has one for the road, or when they say he should play football with them on Sunday and he doesn't feel like it. He sometimes adds in children for good measure: a girl who, depending on the day, is between three and seven years old, and a boy who initially didn't exist and is now even older than his sister. The owner washes a glass under the tap and is about to follow their ritual, extending the liar's joke about the would-be wife by asking him whose wife, given he doesn't have one. But before he can open his mouth, the liar asks him loudly—so everyone can hear—if he's seen the

circus they're setting up on the esplanade. The owner is drying the glass. Nobody answers. The liar turns to face the domino players and continues in the same vein: There are three trailers, one of them huge and cage-like. One of the players raises an eyebrow, looks at him, and says, Of course, there are. The liar pretends to be indignant: What does he mean "of course"? Is he implying it's not true? He swears they're setting up a circus on the esplanade. He's seen the letters on the ground; they're made of bulbs that will soon light up on the signboard on the tent: RUSSIAN CIRCUS. The tent, he adds, is almost erected. There are four trailers. No, five, not four. And six cages: with lions and tigers. And three elephants: big as houses. The domino players have finished their game and stare at him in astonishment: How can he be trying to make them believe yet another of his lies? However much goodwill they might feel, how could they believe a man who always lies, who lies even when there's no need to lie, when he won't reap any benefit from lying? Their disbelief doesn't waver for a moment or give way to doubt, but, as always happens, the liar speaks so convincingly and so heatedly that, as usual, they don't believe him, but they are fascinated by the passion with which he tells and elaborates his lie. The elephants, for instance, soon become twelve rather than three; the tent is a triple, not single, affair; and the trailers, parked beside it in serried ranks, soon occupy an area the size of a football pitch. As he listens to what he is saying, one of the domino players (they've finished the game and not yet started another) feels his eyes begin to blur. No circus has come to town in thirty years, and he's sure, at the rate things are going, that no circus will ever erect its tent on the esplanade again. None of them misses having the circus (not even the liar, although he'd argue the opposite if need be), and if a circus ever did come, they wouldn't be at all interested: circuses belong to bygone times, and even then people weren't interested. However, their lack of interest doesn't stop them from listening, fascinated by the way he unrolls the canvas sails and erects one tent after another, how he makes the drums roll and multiplies the number of acrobats with such conviction, even though he never thought any of them believed him, let alone that, by virtue of his persistence, he himself would believe his own story. Only one (on the deaf side) asks in an unduly loud voice if anyone wants another game. But nobody answers: someone else has already suggested immediately going to the esplanade. He doesn't need to twist their arms. They now harangue each other, put on their coats and scarves, and are in the street. ■

SERGIO CHEJFEC MY TWO WORLDS

Translated from the Spanish by Margaret B. Carson

Aug. 2011

A Novel

\$12.95 (pb)

120 pgs.

5.5" by 8.5"

978-1-934824-28-3

\$9.99 (ebook)

978-1-934824-49-8

(World English)

"Without a doubt, Chejfec deserves greater recognition.
My Two Worlds paves the way for the novel of the future."
—from the Introduction by Enrique Vila-Matas

MY TWO WORLDS

SERGIO CHEJFEC

Trans. from the Spanish by Margaret B. Carson/Intro. by Enrique Vila-Matas



"A novel that is both unique and opportune, it challenges the conventions of Argentine literature that were becoming light and predictable."

—Rodolfo Enrique Fogwill

"Without a doubt, Chejfec deserves greater recognition. *My Two Worlds* paves the way for the novel of the future."

—Enrique Vila-Matas (from the Introduction)

READ AN
EXCERPT

Approaching his fiftieth birthday, the narrator in *My Two Worlds* is wandering in an unfamiliar Brazilian city, in search of a park. A walker by inclination and habit, he has decided to explore the city after attending a literary conference—he was invited following the publication of his most recent novel, although, as he has been informed via anonymous e-mail, the novel is not receiving good reviews. Initially thwarted by his inability to transpose the two-dimensional information of the map onto the impassable roads and dead-ends of the three-dimensional city, once he finds the park the narrator begins to see his own thoughts, reflections, and memories mirrored in the landscape of the park and its inhabitants.

Reminiscent of the writings of Robert Walser and W. G. Sebald, Chejfec's *My Two Worlds* is at once descriptively inventive and preternaturally familiar, a novel that challenges the limitations of the genre.

Sergio Chejfec, originally from Argentina, has published numerous works of fiction, poetry, and essays. Among his grants and prizes, he has received fellowships from the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in 2007 and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation in 2000. His books have been translated into French, German, and Portuguese. He teaches in the Creative Writing in Spanish Program at NYU, and *My Two Worlds* is his first novel to be translated into English.

Margaret B. Carson translates contemporary poetry, fiction, and drama from Latin America. Recent translations include Virgilio Piñera's "Electra Garrigó" and Griselda Gambaro's "The Camp," published in *Stages of Conflict: A Critical Anthology of Latin American Theater and Performance* (2008). She teaches in the Modern Languages Department at Borough of Manhattan Community College.



Only a few days are left before another birthday, and if I've decided to begin this way it's because two friends, through their books, have made me realize that these days can be a cause to reflect, to make excuses, or to justify the years lived. The idea occurred to me in Brazil, while I was visiting a city in the south for two days. In truth, I'm not sure why I agreed to go there, without knowing anyone and having no idea about the place. It was a hot afternoon, and I was walking around looking for a park about which I had almost no information, except for its somewhat musical name, which, by my criteria, made it promising, along with the fact that it was the biggest green space on the map of the city. In my mind a park that big had to be good. For me a park is good if, first of all, it's not pristine, and second, if it has been taken over by solitude, which becomes an emblem, a defining trait for walkers, who might be sporadic, but, from my point of view, must be completely absorbed or lost in thought, as well as slightly confused, as if walking through a space at once strange and familiar. I don't know if abandoned is the right word; what I mean is a place that appears to be set apart from its surroundings, which could be any park, anywhere, even at the antipodes, out of the way, indistinct, or better yet, where a person, prompted by who knows what kinds of associations, withdraws and is transported to some other, indeterminate location.

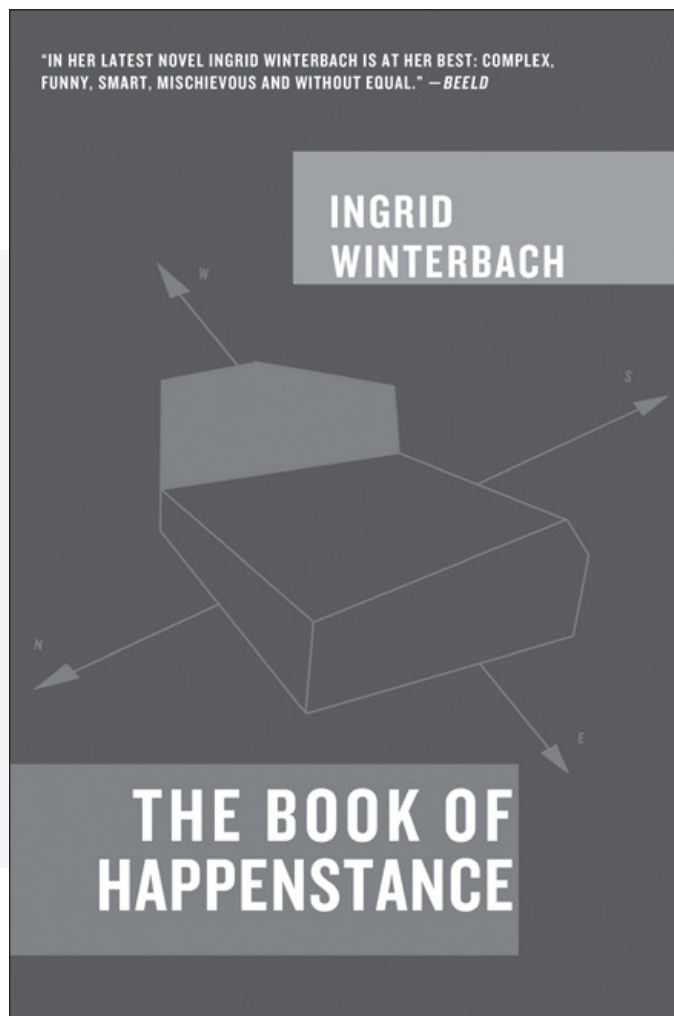
The day before I had attended a literary festival, and when it was over I walked through the plaza where the local book fair had been organized, in what I assumed was one of the city's historic districts, though many of its original buildings or landmarks seemed to be missing. People were walking slowly, crowding into the streets because of their numbers. I must have been the only solitary walker that day, which luckily no one noticed; families, groups of friends, and couples went on with their business as I wandered about. Earlier, while waiting in an empty room for a panel discussion to begin, I read in the newspaper that every year, during the book fair, the crafts market moved its stalls and tables to adjacent streets. I forget why I thought this important, and even more, why it stayed in my mind. (The following day I discovered, a few blocks away, its temporary site, where the artisans had organized themselves by craft, as if protecting themselves from some imagined danger.) At the end of the discussion, I didn't stay to ask questions; in fact, I was the first to leave the room, searching for a quick exit to the street. I rode down a

glass elevator that looked onto a large interior garden, and when I finally left the convention hall, which must have once been a government palace, I had no choice but to join the steady stream of people, like a fugitive trying to blend in.

The layout of the plaza was traditional: a rectangle with two diagonal and two perpendicular paths that met at a statue in the center. Despite this simple design, I began to feel lost within a few minutes, no doubt because of the crowds, along with the dense greenery and the evening shadows. I repeatedly found myself standing in front of the same bookstalls; in reality there were only a few displaying titles that piqued my interest, which was limited in any case, and only after peering over the shoulders of an army of onlookers did I realize that I had already stopped in front of these books. But because I felt there was more area to cover, I wasn't sure which stands I had already visited. And so I joined the multitudes again and let myself be carried by the flow. I remember that as I walked, the repetition of the light bulbs decorating the stands, as if in a movie, made me feel drowsy. The food stands, also mobbed with people, had been set up at the rear of the plaza behind the statue on a short street that led to several government buildings. Depending on the breeze, the odors from the burners, generally of fried foods or rancid oil, wafted over; at times I could see columns of smoke billowing through the strands of light bulbs and the fringed edges of the awnings. Anyway, I should say that it was the sensation of being hemmed in by an incessant swarm of people that prompted me to think of the existence of a park I'd want to visit. It would be a just compensation, I thought.

If you look at the map of the first city that comes to mind, everything seems walkable: it's simply a matter of following the street plan. But on the afternoon in question, reality, as usual, turned out to be different. The retaining walls of the elevated streets, the access roads and overpasses, the ramps for pedestrians or those exclusively for cars were all barriers that time after time, and in a variety of ways, kept me from leaving the place I'd chosen in the center of the city for the sole purpose of walking to the park. If I tried to take the long way around, however, I would risk getting lost or, even worse, spending the rest of the day wandering through indistinguishable and unavoidably sad streets; for if the map had proved useless in showing me the shortest way, it was absurd to trust it for a longer one . . . **||**

FIRST ENGLISH TRANSLATION
JUNE 14, 2011



Jun. 2011

A Novel
\$14.95 (pb)
254 pgs.
5.5" by 8.5"
978-1-934824-33-7
(North America/UK)

THE BOOK OF HAPPENSTANCE

INGRID WINTERBACH

Translated from the Afrikaans by Dirk and Ingrid Winterbach



"This is an extraordinary story from an extraordinary writer. . . . If you haven't experienced the mind of Ingrid Winterbach yet, she is a writer who clings to your soul."

—Pretoria News

"This text is, in all meanings of the word, sublime."

—Die Burger

READ AN
EXCERPT

A middle-aged lexicographer, Helena Verbloem, travels alone to Durban to assist in the creation of a dictionary of Afrikaans words that have fallen out of use. Shortly after her arrival, her apartment is burglarized, and her collection of precious shells, shells that she had been collecting for a lifetime, is stolen. Meeting with indifference from the local police, she decides to investigate the crime on her own, with the help of her new friend from the Museum of Natural History, Sof. While investigating the crime, Helena reflects on the life she's lived—her ex-husband, her daughter, her lovers, her childhood—and begins to fall in love with her married boss, Theo Verway.

An alternately sublime and satirical meditation on love, loss, and obsession, Ingrid Winterbach's *The Book of Happenstance* is an emotionally affecting masterpiece from one of South Africa's most exciting authors.

Ingrid Winterbach is an artist and novelist whose work has won South Africa's M-Net Prize, Old Mutual Literary Prize, the University of Johannesburg Prize for Creative Writing, and the W.A. Hofmeyr Prize. *To Hell with Cronjé*, also available from Open Letter, won the 2004 Hertzog Prize, an honor she shares with the novelists Breyten Breytenbach and Etienne Leroux.

(Translated from the Afrikaans by Dirk and Ingrid Winterbach.)

Of that particular evening I recall first of all that I drank too much. I remember that the young editor Herman Holst was there—a neat, inhibited fellow, who has since vanished into the void to seek his happiness in America. He and the poet Marthinus Maritz often hung out together at the time. I went to Felix du Randt's flat with the two of them. I regretted having ended my relationship with Felix some weeks previously and wanted, at least, to restore something of our relationship of trust. If I remember correctly, the poet and the editor were more than keen to accompany me. Starved for a little action. It was late when we arrived at Felix's flat. I was in a worked-up and overemotional state. Sexy Felix du Randt, with his sharp, sly, foxy face, received us politely, but was icy cold towards me. From his side, reconciliation was not an option. Never could I have foreseen that foxy Felix, with his warm, freckled skin, who just a few months before had regarded me with such passion, such tenderness, such loving certainty, would turn his back on me so implacably. The more he distanced himself from me that evening, the more hysterical I became. What did I want from him? That he should take me back into his arms? That he should smile on me tenderly and intimately as he had done in bed some weeks before? That he should promise eternal fidelity, after I had made it clear that he was not the right man for me? Felix revealed a different side of himself that evening, the existence of which I had never suspected.

Marthinus Maritz is dead. Felix I never saw again; he had been head of some language institute or linguistics department somewhere up north before dying in a car accident in his early forties.

The poet Marthinus Maritz, filled with grim and misguided yearning, walked with a slight stoop. His torso was fleshy, his feet pointed slightly outwards; his heavy, dark, bearded head was too large for his body. His gaze was at once challenging and bewildered; in his eyes was the light of poetic possession. His first volume of poetry was a huge success. He was passionate about poetry, ambitious, intellectually energetic—even indefatigable—but an emotional cripple. A despairing, tormented man. His childhood had been difficult, his mother had neglected him shamefully, her lovers had mistreated him. He was married; we attempted something sexual once or twice, but we were verbally attracted to each other, not physically. His first volume of poetry was hailed as a gift of God to the

THE BOOK OF HAPPENSTANCE INGRID WINTERBACH

Translated from the Afrikaans by Dirk and Ingrid Winterbach



language. Where else in Afrikaans is there another debut—a comparable volume, in fact—in which pain, uncertainty and emotional abandonment are expressed equally poignantly, where there are as many heart-rending poems about youthful illusion and despair as in that first collection of poems by Marthinus Maritz? He could not equal that again. Wallace Stevens was one of his favourite poets. The motto in that first volume was a quotation from a poem by Stevens. Marthinus was an incongruous figure, and he felt himself increasingly disregarded and isolated. He abandoned poetry, tried to make money. Succeeded. His business enterprise was a huge success; he became very wealthy, took up poetry again, but could never write anything to match his first volume. Perhaps he thought that if he became a fat cat like Wallace Stevens, he would be able to write like him.

Marthinus was a man with a penetrating intelligence and an uncontrolled aggressive streak that ran like a fault-line through his personality. His aggression was mostly directed at women, though. I did not realise it then. That evening, when I ranted hysterically and deliberately spilled wine on Felix's new white mohair carpet, Marthinus slapped me on both sides of my face with abandon. I recognise the intensity only now, thirty-odd years later. It gave that man great pleasure to slap me publicly, on both sides of my face, so that the fingermarks were visible, ostensibly to calm me down. Felix du Randt, my ex-lover, looked on expressionlessly and fetched a cloth to mop the red wine from his expensive new carpet. It was clear that everything he had previously emotionally invested in our relationship he had now reinvested in that costly white woven mohair carpet. He regarded the wine stains with abhorrence. I doubt if he would have intervened if Marthinus had treated (punished) me even more roughly.

But besides Marthinus Maritz, Felix du Randt and Herman Holst, there appears to have been a fourth person present, the indistinct Freek van As, who observed everything that evening and had a conversation with me about Plato, if I am to believe him. The editor has disappeared, the poet and the former lover are dead, only Freek van As remains. After twenty-seven years he strides forth from the nebulous regions of the past to remind me of an incident that occurred in my late twenties. Am I still interested? It is over and done with, that period of delusion and poor judgement. ■



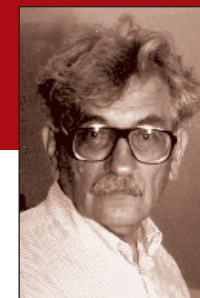
May 2011

A Novel
\$13.95 (pb)
167 pgs.
5.5" by 8.5"
978-1-934824-34-4
(World English)

The Guinea Pigs was originally published by The Third Press (1973), and most recently by Northwestern University Press (1986).

THE GUINEA PIGS LUDVÍK VACULÍK

Translated from the Czech by Káča Poláčková



"One of the major works of literature produced in postwar Europe. This brilliant book must be read."

—*New York Review of Books*

"The extraordinary adventures of a petty bank clerk, of his guinea pigs, his family, and his weird superiors are all shrouded in an eerie conviviality which chills the reader."

—Antonin J. Liehm

READ AN
EXCERPT

A clerk at the State Bank begins to notice that something strange is going on—bank employees are stuffing their pockets with money every day, only to have it taken every evening by the security guards who search the employees and confiscate the cash. But, there's a discrepancy between what is being confiscated and what is being returned to the bank, and our hero is beginning to fear that a secret circulation is developing, one that could undermine the whole economy.

Meanwhile, the clerk and his family begin to keep guinea pigs, and at night, when everyone is asleep, our hero begins to conduct experiments with the pets, teaching them tricks, testing their intelligence and endurance, and using some rather questionable methods to encourage the animals to befriend him.

Ludvík Vaculík's *The Guinea Pigs* is one of the most important literary works of the twentieth century. Vaculík owes much to Kafka, his fellow countryman, but he had direct experience of the oppressive absurdity that lived in Kafka's imagination, which here is expressed with an ironic and knowingly innocent Czech smile.

Ludvík Vaculík was born in 1926 in Brumov, Czechoslovakia. His novels *The Axe* and *The Guinea Pigs* and the essays collected in *A Cup of Coffee with My Interrogator* established his international reputation. One of the leading literary figures during the Prague Spring of 1968, his manifesto *The Two Thousand Words* led to his banishment from the Communist Party, the censorship of his writing, and decades of persecution; it also contributed to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. From 1973–1989, he ran a samizdat publishing house, Padlock Editions, which printed and distributed over 400 banned titles.

Káča Poláčková has translated numerous prominent Czech writers in addition to Ludvík Vaculík, including Josef Škvorecký and Bohumil Hrabal.

But let's not talk about filth, children, let's talk about pets, which are nicer. We never seriously had any pets at home. Keeping a dog in Prague is something of a luxury, keeping a cat is difficult. We did try it with a tom-kitten once, that's a baby tomcat. He was cute and charming and amusing. Yes, the kitten was fun and the boys were naughty, but he scratched up all our furniture and things, and ended up peeing in the shoe-rack, so we got rid of him. "Got rid of him" is a very suspect turn of phrase that I never used to like; it could mean giving him away, selling him, banishing him, but it could also mean drowning him, feeding him to a larger animal, smashing his head against a wall or even worse. When I say "got rid of him," it only means that we gave him away, nothing worse than that.

On Saturday I made a little bed for the soot-black kitten in the bottom of a wicker basket, Eva sewed a canvas top onto the basket, and I took off to visit a friend of ours who lives in the woods. On my way there, I saved the life of a viper that I saw from a bridge I was crossing. It was struggling to get out of the forest creek, under the overhanging bank. A viper, children, is a poisonous snake. I happened to see it because I had stopped on the bridge, partly to rest for a moment, and partly because that would have been a perfect chance to drown the kitten, if that had been my intention. It was with a feeling of horror that I imagined how I would feel if I were sewed up in a basket and the water started to seep in, and me not able to get out. I also wondered what they would say at the State Bank. And that was when I caught sight of the snake in the water.

I knew right away that it wasn't a harmless water snake. The common water snake would behave far more skillfully in the water, and besides, the writhing snake under the bridge had the typical zigzag pattern of a viper down its back. The poor thing was apparently fighting with all that was left of its feeble strength. It was so exhausted that it couldn't even turn itself around so that it might pursue a cross current direction towards the other side, where the bank had a gentler slope to it and where it could have easily wiggled out of the water. Instead, it writhed at the base of the other, steeper bank, bumping its head into the soil under the overhanging ledge, making pieces of the bank break off and float downstream. First, of course, I asked myself whether or not a viper deserves saving. My first impulse was to hit it on the head with a rock. After I had saved it and it had disappeared into the underbrush, I realized that I didn't have the children with me, and that if I had wanted to, I could have sat by the creek as long as I pleased, watching to see what it would do, how it would approach the end of its life, and possibly rescuing it at the last possible instant.

THE GUINEA PIGS LUDVÍK VACULÍK

Translated from the Czech by Káča Poláčková



If it seems to you, my dear young readers, that my thinking was a bit perverted, let me disclose to you a minor truth—but consider it a small lesson of a moral nature—all things being equal, my purest and most natural instinct was when I wanted to kill the snake. And my most perverted impulse, if you will, was—having saved its life already—my present urge to dissect the act for you here, and your being so interested in it. If I were truly noble, I'd have helped the viper out of the water and walked away without ever a second thought, and above all without writing about it here, possibly without writing anything about anything ever again. You see, I have my own theory about virtue. It came to me one day when I was fourteen. It is such a good theory that I wouldn't change a word of it even now that I'm almost forty and on the verge of early old age. I might add that if any of you hasn't come up with his own original theory about at least one thing in life before you turn fifteen, you'll never come up with one later, not about anything, even if you get to be a member of the Academy of Arts and Sciences . . .

But those of my young readers with a good memory must be on the verge of reminding me that I've drifted away from the subject of the kitten in the basket. Well, anyway, it was a slightly foggy spring day, and the kitten was traveling through the wood in a basket. When we reached a broad place in the path, out of sheer excess energy, I took and swung the basket around a few times over my head and down again. Of course I was careful that the velocity (that is, the speed) was not too small for the kitten, because, if the revolutions had been too slow, the kitten would have bounced around inside the basket for lack of gravity. I didn't want him to hurt himself, and so I was considerate enough to keep increasing the speed of rotation, until my shoulder began to ache. But I don't think any of you would have done any less.

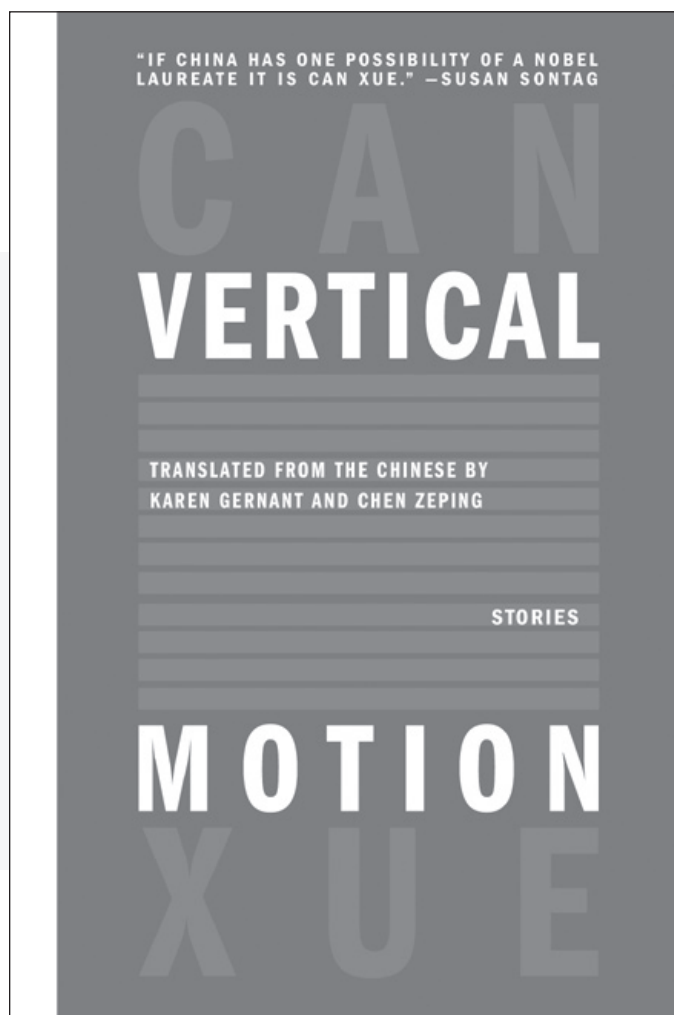
The kitten was welcomed warmly at my friend's home. It got some milk and some meat. I got some soup from the lady of the house, and some meat, some strawberry pudding and some coffee. Yum. The house was in the woods, and the doors and the windows were open all the livelong day. The kitten could come and go as he pleased, and didn't have to explain anything to anybody. Nobody even asked him about anything. Right at the foot of the forest was a village, certainly full of mice, with probably even a few cats. As I sat there eating my strawberry pudding and drinking my coffee, I looked out the door and the windows to assess the kitten's new possibilities, and I wished that I could have something like that too. ■



"There's a new world master among us, and her name is Can Xue."

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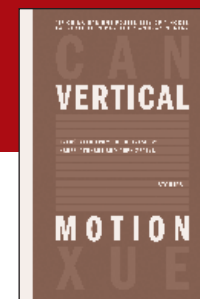
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EXCERPT

Two young girls sneak onto the grounds of a hospital, where they find a disturbing moment of silence in a rose garden. A couple grows a plant that blooms underground, invisibly, to their long-time neighbor's consternation. A cat worries about its sleepwalking owner, who receives a mysterious visitor while he's asleep. After a ten-year absence, a young man visits his uncle, on the twenty-fourth floor of a high-rise that is floating in the air, while his ugly cousin hesitates on the stairs . . .

Can Xue is a master of the dreamscape, crafting stories that inhabit the space where fantasy and reality, time and timelessness, the quotidian and the extraordinary, meet. The stories in this striking and lyrical new collection—populated by old married couples, children, cats, and nosy neighbors, the entire menagerie of the everyday—reaffirm Can Xue's reputation as one of the most innovative Chinese writers in a generation.

Can Xue, meaning "dirty snow, leftover snow," is the pseudonym of Deng Xiaohua. Born in 1953, in Changsha City, Hunan province, her parents were sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, and she only graduated from elementary school. Can learned English on her own and wrote books on Borges, Shakespeare, and Dante. Her publications in English include *Dialogues in Paradise*, *Old Floating Cloud*, *The Embroidered Shoes*, *Blue Light in the Sky* and *Other Stories*, and most recently, *Five Spice Street*.

Karen Gernant, professor emerita of Chinese history at Southern Oregon University, and **Chen Zeping**, professor of Chinese linguistics at Fujian Teachers' University, collaborate on translating, and more than thirty of their translations have appeared in literary magazines. This is their tenth book.



from "The Brilliant Purple China Rose"

Mei lived on a small, lonely side street in the downtown area. The five-story building had been constructed in the 1950s. Mei and her husband Jin lived in a three-room apartment on the first floor.

Mei's home was a little unusual: except for the kitchen, all the appliances and furniture were covered with cloths of various colors, as if the two of them were about to go traveling. [. . .]

Mr. Jin seldom took off these covers, for Mei handled everything for him. All day long, he lay on a chaise lounge and read a thick book, *A Collection of Illustrations of Wild Plants*, and looked repeatedly at the pictures in it. His chaise lounge was the only piece of furniture not covered with a cloth. Lying on the chaise lounge, he was staring with his left eye at the book's illustrations of *humid euphorbia* while at the same time glancing sideways at the shoe rack. He said loudly, "The cat has pulled the cloth on the shoe rack down to the floor!" From the kitchen, Mei heard him and rushed over to re-cover the shoe rack. Jin was obviously a sensitive person, too.

In the small garden outside, Mei grew neither flowers nor trees. From strips of bamboo and plastic film, she created an awning—a long one which looked ridiculous. Inside the plastic awning, she raised a strange plant from seeds that Jin had bought through a relative who lived in another place. The seeds were a small, purple crescent shape. Jin dug a furrow that was one foot deep and buried these seeds in it. He told Mei that this plant was the rare "underground plant." None of it was on the surface. After the seeds were buried, they would grow straight down. He also fertilized and watered their plants, and then Mei covered them with the plastic awning. Jin said, After this, you don't need to tend them. You need only keep this plastic awning in shape, that's all. When this plant grows underground, it makes strict demands of the environmental conditions. In short, the less environmental change the better.

"Mei, what kind of treasure are you growing?" the neighbor Ayi asked.

"The China rose."

"Why don't I see any buds?"

"They grow downward, and the flowers also blossom underground. It isn't the China rose that we're accustomed to seeing. The flowers are only as large as grains of rice, and the petals are stiff."

Mei blushed. She was repeating what Jin had told her. In her own mind, she didn't have a good grasp of it. With her goldfish eyes bulging, Ayi looked at her for a moment and then silently entered the apartment.

Mei told Jin that their neighbor Ayi didn't believe they were growing the China rose. Just then, Jin was shaving, and his face was covered with lather. Blinking his little triangular eyes, he said he hadn't believed it, either, at first. Whether people believe it or not has no bearing on this China rose's growth. With that, he went into the bathroom. Holding a mop, Mei stood there thinking. Presumably, Jin understood this clearly in his own mind. When the seeds were seen under the lamplight, they did look like a singular variety. She remembered two nights ago, the two of them had put their heads together and taken stock of these seeds. She bent over and mopped the floor. When she reached the desk, she noticed a seed that had been left next to a leg of the desk. She quietly picked it up, wrapped it in crepe paper, and put it in the kitchen cupboard.

In the afternoon, Jin napped on the chaise lounge. As for Mei, she sat on the sofa. She could rest just by leaning against the back of the sofa and dozing a little. When her eyelids grew heavy, she heard someone knocking on the door. Twice. Not continuously, but with an interval between them. Who would knock this way? Was it a child playing a prank? She didn't open the door. She heard Jin snoring softly. After a while, just as her eyelids were growing heavy again, the knock on the door came again—this time, twice in a row. Still light and hesitant. Mei had no choice but to go to the door.

Ayi was standing outside. Her face was pale, as if she'd been frightened.

"I'd also like to grow a little of that variety—that variety of China rose. Do you have any extra seeds?"

"No. Old Jin brought them back through a relative. If you want some, we can ask someone's help again."

Ayi looked terribly disappointed. Then her expression turned to spiteful probing—she impertinently stuck her neck in and looked into the room. Where neighbors were concerned, Mei generally did not invite them into her home. Ayi's unusual behavior made her a little nervous.

"I just remembered. I still have one seed. Do you want it?" Her expression was almost one of apple-polishing.

"You have one? Sure, I'd like it. Let me have it."

When Ayi took the seed wrapped in crepe paper, she gave Mei a hard look. ■

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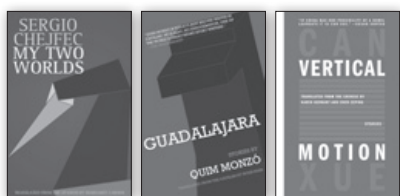
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