

The Scale of Maps

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Translated by Mark Schafer

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I

If a small man were to kiss your hand then immediately launch into a description of the hand crank used to open a window, what would you do? Given my line of work, I should not have been considering such questions. And yet, I confess that for the first few minutes Sergio Prim had me confused. Standing before me, he spoke of the small metal part. His deep, trembling, porous voice flowed more slowly than was typical in this type of patient. He was considerably shorter than I, and his arms moved about through a lower layer of the air, which perhaps is why I barely noticed them. But memory now highlights the way his hands fluttered like a bashful magician's as the only dissonant note in Mr. Prim's calm presence.

"Facing my desk is a window that overlooks an inner courtyard," he said confidentially. "It's very old: a wooden frame, a black window catch and a pane of frosted yellow glass. You open the catch by turning a crank that is round at the end—let's call it a thick point. I'm asking you for help because I'm considering going to live there."

I led Mr. Prim into my office. The sky had grown dark as if it were about to rain. Sergio discreetly cleared his throat and

settled into one of the large armchairs I had inherited from my grandparents. I turned on a table lamp on the other side of the room; its circle of light did not extend to where we sat. Before retreating behind my large wooden desk, I offered him a cigarette, which he declined.

“So, you’re considering going to live in your office?”

He gave me a melancholy smile.

“No, not at all. It’s not the office that’s important but the crank. Though in any case the crank is just one option. There are many points—hollows. If you have no objections let’s call them hollows. You’re going to tell me that there’s nothing wrong with frequenting a few hollows now and then. You’re right, quite right. But as you will see”—Sergio Prim’s arm fell against the armchair with surprising force—“my problem is that I need them. They are the only way I have to stop myself. This very afternoon, had it not been for a hollow, I certainly would not have made it here, I wouldn’t be talking with you now, for I would have snapped the headphones of that boy in the minibus right in two.”

I sat up and shuffled a few pieces of paper as I attempted to disguise my excitement. Many years back, Julio Bernardo Silveria had come to my office complaining of a similar ailment. His case changed the direction of my doctoral dissertation as well as the biography of my emotions.

“I happened to sit,” Prim continued, “directly behind a young man wearing one of those tiny devices for listening to music in private. It was ridiculous. The headset was letting out enough noise—modern, monotonous, you know the kind—to annoy the passengers sitting next to him but not enough for us to enjoy the music naturally. Meanwhile, the young man, oblivious to the racket he was making, was nodding his head as he flipped through the

pages of a glossy magazine. I was thinking of Brezo and that irritating little noise only annoyed me more. That was when a small, wicked fantasy came to me. I imagined myself gently grasping each end of that young man's halo and spreading them farther and farther apart until they formed a straight line and—crack!—a broken set of headphones.”

“But you restrained yourself,” I noted with feigned detachment.

“Not exactly. I looked for a hollow. I found it in the fabric of the coat the man sitting next to me was wearing. And I inhabited that nook for the remainder of the trip. Look, nook. As you can see, one letter can alter a man's entire life.”

Prim slid the armchair closer and as he leaned forward his figure gathered strength. He had the type of build that favors its owner when he is sitting, preferably behind something that conceals his disproportionate stature. Two short lines connected his neck to his shoulders. His face, on the other hand, seemed to have been molded by a cruel twist of fate to sit atop the uniform of an elegant messenger for the czar: the eyes of a startled fox, a straight nose, cheeks the shape of equilateral triangles, a head of thick dark curls, and under the shadow of an ample gray moustache flecked with white, his lips, shiny and red like a wax apple.

“Perhaps you would like to know why I chose the fabric of a coat,” he added softly. “I can't answer that yet. As far as I have determined, objects conceal invisible hollows. But I don't yet know if our ability to detect them depends on a common characteristic—if all objects are interconnected—or on the state of the person who approaches them seeking protection. What I do know is that I've started to write a treatise on the subject.”

“It's an interesting idea,” I said by way of encouragement. More than once at the beginning of my career, I had the misfortune

of seeing how a hasty judgment, a hint of indifference or scorn could irremediably demolish men who held childlike illusions. Ever since, I have taken special care not to discourage patients who choose to take on tasks of their own free will. In this case, however, my interest was disingenuous, like that of a photographer taking a picture of the bullet that will kill him.

Sergio Prim settled into the armchair and gazed at a corner of the ceiling. From where he sat, a distant tone in his voice, he reprimanded me:

“It’s not that easy. Do you know that the first known *map-pa mundi*, made by Anaximander of Miletus, dates to the sixth century before Christ? There was a time, exaggerated and self-absorbed, when our planet existed without maps. If a man wished to represent a region of Africa on a flat surface, he had to go there or else rely on the reports, memoirs, and accounts brought back by explorers. I find myself in the same situation. To write a treatise on the hollow—all points belong to a single hollow—I have to go there. It still has not been mapped, and the few eyewitness reports by those who claim to have frequented it are terribly imprecise. Thus my ‘interesting idea,’” he said, repeating my words with a look of reproach, “requires that I set out on an expedition, that at the age of thirty-nine, I go off in pursuit of an unknown dwelling place. Do you see what I’m saying? To venture into as yet undiscovered regions with this feeble body of mine. And don’t think I use that last adjective lightly. Over the course of my life, I have broken my femur three times, my ulna twice, and my metatarsus once. My muscles often tremble inexplicably, I experience dizzy spells and feel that I’m on the verge of crumbling into the air.”

As if trying to demonstrate this, Sergio Prim began wrestling with his dark overcoat. Underneath was a wool sweater of a color

somewhere between beige and pink, and the collar of a blue shirt peeked out at his neck. In fact, Sergio Prim was slight of build in the torso if not exactly skinny. Yet his words, combined with the smartness of his attire—the straight crease in his pants, the refined, creamy weave of his sweater—made me imagine that his body was fragile, thin as a sheet of paper, practically fictitious.

“What is the reason for your visit, Mr. Prim?” I asked, secretly afraid that the business about the hollow would be nothing but a fleeting obsession.

“I want to know what’s going to happen with Brezo, the Vanished Woman,” he said slowly. “For a week now her eyes have been flying around like bats, knocking against the walls, spinning round and round on the blades of imaginary fans in every room of my apartment.”

Sergio Prim went over to the window. When he opened it, the moiré curtains fluttered in the wind and the lamp shook. It had started to rain. I paused for two or three minutes, listening to the slow drizzle. But Prim interrupted me:

“By the way, did I mention that I’m being followed?”

His remark startled me. Perhaps he was one of those people who spend their days reading books on psychiatry, write down symptoms in a notebook, study them, and then come in to harass us. Once my beloved had sent just such a person to spy on me. I observed Sergio Prim with suspicion. His light sweater blended with the cheek-colored fabric of the curtains. He stood with his back to me, looking out at the street, his prominent head round and nocturnal. Then he closed the window and I saw his face reflected in the glass. I relaxed. Sergio Prim had a sober look on his face and was not lying.

Sergio Prim was not lying because I am Sergio Prim.

2

Never before have I revealed my strategies. I am embarrassed. I wish I could expunge myself with an eraser while you, readers, grasp the nature of my ruse.

Only to reappear in the next paragraph. I was always a prudent man. I would offer thanks for that which did not deserve gratitude and beg forgiveness for actions that could not possibly have caused offense. So I don't mind doing it again: Please forgive me, or at least accept my explanation. What would you have thought as you read these pages had I started by saying, "My first visit to the psychologist took place . . ."? You might not agree with my conclusions, but you would be mistaken to dismiss them simply because I, their architect, am unbalanced. No, no, not at all. I was engaged in a project in which the psychologist played a role, and that is why I went to see her. She would provide me with the scientific foundation, the touchstone or black siliceous rock against which I would rub the gold of my imagination. Over the last three days, however, events have accelerated, and I have come to rest at this Earthly convergence of crosshairs, a place free of error whose image weighs on me like a debt of honor, like a final responsibility. It is eight in the evening. Outside, the willows yield to the shadows with a shiver. In

the living room below someone puts on a record of *habaneras*; the music filters through the hallways. I wrap a scarf around my neck, open the window, exhale her name—"Brezo"—and let it float in the air like an iridescent ring of smoke.

I stand here before you, I, the hopeless substitute for the strategic genius who should have been carrying out this mission, preparing to deploy my troops with the exquisite fervor of someone who knows that winning or losing is out of his hands. In a hotel room, on an unfamiliar table, I will draw the maps and give the final orders to an exiled band of guerrillas in rebellion that is none other than myself. Oh, Brezo Provocateur. Why do you incite my outlandish imagination, incite it and me, the two of us, to climb over barricades when we are not agile, to suffer insults and fight duels when we are not bold?

Watch how I found Brezo in a supposition. It was nighttime and it was raining. The red brake lights, white headlights, and orange directionals created a ballet of shifting reflections on the pavement. It was October, but my head filled with strings of lights and trees lit up like Madrid at Christmas. Immediately I thought "Maybe she's back," because every year, no matter where she was, Brezo would return to spend Christmas Eve with her widower father. I imagined her walking from her house on Calle Alcalá and imagined her recognizing my silhouette under the eaves of the bus shelter. "Let's suppose," I said to myself, "that I felt her cold, slender fingers covering my eyes. What would I do?" At that moment the number 9 opened its doors and Brezo appeared. She got off the bus escorted by a cluster of passengers. I watched as she quickly crossed the street, the walk signal blinking, and I debated with myself, frozen, astonished, as if trapped and suspended within a single, gigantic, accented "o," the accent as large as it was terrifying. Traffic

was moving again when I snapped out of this trance, but I took off running, entrusting myself to that little red man, and reached the sidewalk on the other side of the street safe and sound. I ran uphill, such a large, grotesque figure—at my age!—the shoes of a duck slapping the puddles, my left arm raised, umbrella at the ready. I ran disheveled by my urgency until I could almost touch her, and I would have covered her eyes with my hands had she not turned around first.

“Sergio Prim!” you laughed, my devilish geographer with walnut-colored eyes.

“Brezo Varela,” I stammered as you took shelter under my umbrella and wrapped your arm around mine. “Brezo,” and I held back from saying, “Perch beneath this portable porch.”

Four unimaginable months have passed. Do you see that bicycle without brakes speeding down that sandy path? Do you see the gentleman steering it in terror, hands over his ears, legs crossed, his torso bouncing on the seat? If you get a little closer you will recognize my face. And I confess to you that on that night, walking arm in arm with Brezo, all I could do was to make sure the brakes were not going to work.

3

A man takes a step and nothing happens. A man crosses the threshold of the same doorway 14,637 days in a row. And the 14,638th time he discovers a stag with a full rack of antlers under the lintel. For ten years now I've seen Brezo only during vacations, listening—I, her listener, I, her mentor—to stories of her life, offering her made-up episodes from my own. Why bore her with the truth? As you may have guessed, the story of Brezo and me is none other than that of the stag. Listen. A man walks alone until he no longer has the faintest notion of the number that denotes his loneliness. Night falls and the same man is walking arm in arm with the woman he loves. She lifts her head, looks at him, then takes his hand in hers, laughs. And the man doesn't know what to do. You'll tell him: Kiss her. Of course, kiss her, but sex is transient, ladies and gentlemen, passion is chancy. Who am I to offer shelter to the body of another? And yet, I kissed her.

Brezo came up to my apartment, looked out from the balcony, and let me stroke her on the side like a bird. It was not yet nine o'clock. The twilight of neon signs filled my room. I got undressed first, and she was meek and beautiful as she took off her white shirt. To watch her shoulders, the agility with which she moved, acquired

in unnamed experiences. Slender and proportioned, she lay on the bed naked, as if wishing to be my own representation—not Brezo, not her life story, just a representation offered up to me, her arms extending the lines of her body, my hand on her back, and my astonishment. Why had she chosen me? Why, after all these years? I am a small man, I have the shoulders of an old boxer, and pale skin. To look at her was to perceive a total absence of silences, as if it were at last possible to imagine a space without crouching monsters, without painful memories, as if I had lost my fear of tripping on the crack between two tiles, of plunging my hand between one section of air and another.

I caressed her slowly. At first she was afraid of being overtaken by ecstasy, so I protected her. I asked her before I made any unusual movement and took care to rouse a gentle purring in her body until I watched her wake fully to desire, lifting herself like an apparition over my misplaced body, my dazzled eyes, and she existed in me. I filled her and she responded with a moan like a bubble of light and an ecstatic smile. My god—what had caused taciturn Brezo, somber Brezo, self-absorbed and serious Brezo to smile at me like that? My hands dreamed over her small breasts, I kissed her in disbelief, defenseless in the face of her defenselessness, which she offered to me, yet growing larger like a happy man. All the while her back was time itself, and years of my life rippled through her thighs, years I'd never known, years when I wasn't walking along the fence that surrounded the high school field, quiet and deep in thought, years when no one muzzled my desire, rather, every action I took could always be taken back, for it was beautiful, good, and pleasant. The whites of her eyes so close they were surprised to find me so close. So close that her collarbone fit in my hand, so close that her hair was losing control—enveloping me as I kissed her until she lay

fully extended, the plain of a woman. I continue to watch her. Her red nipples are an alarm calling me; she has spilled her sensuality onto my bed for her own amusement. But if I am a skeptic, if I have established solitude as my safe-conduct, what happened to me as I looked at her face, beautifully distant on account of my body? I was her distance and she was inhabiting me when I heard her say, laughter spilling from her mouth, I feel faint. What did you do to me, madwoman? What are you doing to me?

When she left, day breaking, vain and dissolute, when the white taxi disappeared, I instinctively searched for the smell of Brezo on my clothes. Dumbfounded, I scanned the sidewalk, muttering "I never would have thought. . . ." Finally I ducked into an English pub. As I recovered my senses, I was once again filled with anxiety. I asked for a glass of aged rum, though I rarely drink and even less often do I find myself in frothy spots like this—red leather seats studded with buttons, thick cardboard coasters. It was not Brezo's absence that troubled me but my fear. What would I do with her now? How would I proceed from one day to the next? I never cultivated the art of being with other people. I never learned to reconcile my state of rest, my private convalescence in a lodging room of the world lit by a single lamp, with the sharp breath, like a gust from a storm, that the new guest lets out upon arrival. During that time in my life when I was surrounded by other people—first my family, then Lucía, my wife for four years—I found that people who had just come into the house inevitably spoke in an overly high-pitched voice and stood in the entranceway longer than necessary, squandering words, repeating a message that I in my intolerance meticulously screened out. Moreover, the bodies that had just come in from outside usually brought with them clouds of cold or muggy air, pollen or rain, depending on the season. I would gaze

at them from where I sat, submerged in my armchair, and though I've never worn glasses I would feel like a retired professor, one of those professors who connect with the universe through two round, silvery lenses.

I noticed my eyes were burning: I was surrounded by smokers. A young man in a waiter's outfit began to play the piano. A blonde woman with gloves on raked the lapel of a gentleman who looked like me. Get out, I told myself. Get out of here. You can fall asleep tomorrow and you have to finish writing those pages on the southwest sector. Such humidity outside. Such smell of Brezo. Such insomnia filling my apartment.