

FROM THE PAINTER OF BIRDS

He took her by the hand and led her across the room to the lone mirror. “Come on, don’t be afraid”—he said.

It was a tall mirror, slotted in between two columns of drawers, an art nouveau piece that matched neither the wardrobe nor the bed. It hung between two perpendicular volutes, positioned so that the light of an oil lamp would be reflected in the mirror. It had lasted from the 1930s, its oddness frozen in time, purely so that she and Walter Dias could be reflected in it that rainy night. But the lamp did not light both their faces evenly because the flame kept flickering, caught by some draught coming in through the roof tiles. Then he said—“Look, look!” And drawing closer to her, he tried to get both of them within the frame of the mirror. “Look, look!” he said, raising his voice, making the night more dangerous, making her feel guilty because of the risks they were all running. But what was surprising was that he spoke as if unaware this was a reprise of another moment. “God, we’re so alike!”—Walter was saying, holding the lamp closer, forgetting all about the photograph he had left with Maria Ema. Or, rather, it was as if Walter had forgotten about everything he had left her because, apart from photographs taken later on with a Kodak, next to the agaves, in which the images were so tiny and indistinct that the people in them resembled dead nestlings or crowds of ants, there had only been the one true photograph, predating all others. But that night, he seemed not to remember. “We’re so alike!” he kept saying.

The photograph was postcard size and brownish in color, and in it the child was sitting on Walter’s lap, both of them protected by the arms of a high-backed chair, but Maria Ema used to hide the photograph where no one would find it. In the Valmares house she buried it so that only very occasionally would it resurface among the china and the folds of bed linen, or else tucked into the back of the Flemish paintings suspended on bits of wire at almost ceiling height, leaning into the room toward the middle of the table, as if about to hurl themselves down on us. In the 1950s, she would hide it behind one of those paintings, then she would move it to another painting, or change the position of the painting itself. And on Saturday afternoons, she

*From *The Painter of Birds* by Lidia Jorge. Translated from the Portuguese by Margaret Jull Costa (Harcourt, 1998). Reprinted with permission.

would climb onto a chair that she balanced on some steps in order to retrieve the photograph concealed behind the obliquely hung paintings, and she would point to her on her uncle's knee. "Uncle Walter Dias!"—Maria Ema would say. And the child colluded in the secret, in those hiding places where the photo was forced to skulk amidst the encroaching multitude.

However, what mattered that night were not Maria Ema's concealments or dissemblings but the existence of a photo in which soldier Walter was no longer dressed as a soldier, but was wearing a linen suit and holding the child closely in his arms, both of them looking at the camera perched on a tripod like the belly of a wading bird, both looking at the same fixed point with the same pale eyes. Those who loved them would say they were the eyes of angels, those who did not that they were like cats' eyes. Later, Adelina Dias would describe them as cheetahs' eyes. But those personal transfigurations were of no importance. It mattered little which animal or angelical family they belonged to. Angels must always feel a longing for the night in which they once were animals, and wild beasts doubtless dream of the shining day when, in the guise of angels, all creation was theirs to hunt. There was no solution to that double nostalgia. All that mattered was that those two pairs of eyes of indefinable species were looking in the same direction, and during the years preceding Walter's visit on that rainy night, she had always imagined how his body and his cheek must have pressed close to hers and how, for a moment—possibly longer, but for at least the time required for the photograph to be taken—she would have been enfolded in his male perfume and would have contaminated him with her sour child's breath. And that was what she wanted to say to Walter Dias on that condensed night, during which something fundamental was being repeated in front of the mirror, but she did not have the words or the time or the ability. They stood there together, he holding the lamp up in front of his drenched raincoat and she, by his side, wrapped in the bedspread. "Please look at what's right there in front of us!"—he said, and he leaned his head against hers, and rain dripped in through the roof, fell on the flagstones outside, making that encounter possible. A repetition of what had happened twelve years earlier, on the day of the photograph. Yes, she knew what was right there in front of them.

In the photograph too they had the same curly hair and their heads were touching. She didn't know how they had ended up going into Matos, the photographer's shop, nor how they had reached Faro, nor could she recall the

route taken by the buggy, nor the railway line that traversed the fields. All she could remember was the railway station, with its checkered wall tiles, with its tall beech trees, and the way the train whistled as they set off, the steam exploding into the hot countryside. Indeed, she had no idea how they had left or how they had come back, how they had escaped the vigilance of Francisco Dias and his multitude of sons. She assumed Maria Ema must have come too, that she must have gone with them, and that the three of them fled in the buggy along the narrow road flanked by ripe wheat. Only afterward would they have taken the train. But none of that mattered as they stood before the narrow mirror. What mattered was that for one day, in 1951, the three of them had been together. The two of them were not, therefore, looking at the camera, but at the person who had come with them—Maria Ema Baptista, standing next to the camera covered by a black cloth beneath which the photographer was hunched, and expecting from both of them some courageous act that would never be more than an image. But she did not know if she actually remembered that moment or if it was an invention based on the image. She knew she could still feel the touch of Walter's cheek when he lifted her onto his lap and the camera took the first picture. The two of them caught in that brief splendor, a gentle knocking at the door of an instant eternity. The certainty that, even if the flash were the lightning from a storm, they would always be together. And that was what she wanted to say but could not say on that rainy night, when part of the photograph was being repeated in the mirror.

Tonight, though, in order for Walter to tear his gaze from the floor and walk freely about this room as if walking along a quay, an empty quay, it should be said that the image protected her, when, later, she had to face the rabid dog, the closed door, the enigma of mathematics, the darkness of the house, her first sexual encounter or the interpretation of *The Iliad*. When someone called to her from the far side of the night, and even though no one was expecting her, she went toward that call. She ran that risk, defied the yawning mountain pass that opened up between the steep slopes of the void. That image protected her, that photograph of Walter shown to her briefly, amidst almanacs and soup tureens, wrapped in brown paper, hidden at the bottom of boxes and behind pictures. Afterward, long afterward, she remembered seeing it among the silverware, when Custódio Dias knew Walter Dias would never again return. By then, the Americans were already racing toward the moon, and she was twenty years old and sleeping soundly on such various

pillows as sand dunes and the seats of cars. In other words, she had become the legitimate daughter of soldier Walter. But all that happened long after the rainy night.

“You’re frozen!”—he said, leading her back to the bed and sitting her down on it still wrapped in the bedspread. “Tell me about you, about what you do?”

And lit by the oil lamp he was holding, Walter walked over to her desk, asking her if she had any talent for drawing. He leafed through notebooks, unpled the piles of books, turned to her and said, satisfied—“At least our handwriting’s similar.” And then he went over to the wardrobe and opened it and slowly riffled through her clothes, though the light of the oil lamp barely penetrated that far. And she saw him there, in his light-colored raincoat, which she knew was drenched with rain, but which he did not take off, and she wished he would take it off, just for a moment, just to avoid the feeling that, though he was there, he was really en route to somewhere else, but she could not ask him anything. And he closed the wardrobe, far more noisily than he should have, because the rain had slackened at that moment and his footsteps had become audible again. Besides, when he came back from the wardrobe, his eyes seemed paler, and it occurred to her that he would not bother to try to tread softly anymore. And for a moment, she thought he was about to do something inappropriately loud, make a rebellious gesture or a noise that would wake those asleep, that would get them all out of their beds, the occupants of the west room, the children, the grandfather, as well as Blé and Alexandrina, the foreman and his wife, and the three mules, and the few chickens and rabbits, who would all come scurrying from their houses and hutches if Walter refused to tread softly. And that would be too terrible, and she covered her face with her hands so that it would not happen. But he came over and sat at the foot of her bed; his eyes were their normal color again, although his eyelids were red, as was the rest of his face. “It’s all right, we’ve still got time. Over there, you’ll have a wardrobe just for your clothes, and completely different clothes too. Warm clothes, so you can cope with the cold. On the way to university, you’ll see girls playing snowballs, their fur hoods pulled so far down over their noses, you can barely see their eyes”—he said, smiling again.

But it wasn't true, we didn't have time.

Besides, he himself shook the lamp and saw that there couldn't be much more time and that soon he would have to take off his shoes again and go down the stairs, vanishing like a shadow that had never been. "Until now, I've never given you anything . . ."—he said again, trying not to make any noise as he replaced the lamp on the dressing table.

The lamp had returned to its proper place. She too had returned to her proper place, leaning against the headboard. At that point, she wanted to say—Wait! But she couldn't. Perhaps because it seemed so simple and easily enumerated, she wanted to tell him about the most palpable legacy he had left her, she wanted to say how, until the age of fifteen, she had grown up accompanied by his army kit. Because then he would understand. Before he went back down the damp stairs, she had to explain to Walter Dias how a handful of rags and eyelets could constitute the person who had worn them, and how that person could remain in the house and provide company and protection until some force or some person undid it, and even then, some fundamental part would still remain. So he could come into her room, laugh and sit down wherever he chose, with no need to give her anything else. On the contrary, she was the one who was indebted to him.

Yes, before that encounter dissolved into nothing, it was vital that she tell him that his uniform had been kept in the wardrobe in the room where she slept. The geography of confusion and chance had ended up placing it in that very room, wide enough to be a living room, and in which the wardrobe now swayed on the farthest wall. And she would have listed everything piece by piece, the rucksack, the boots, the gaiters, the uniform, the overcoat, the cap, the canteen, the scarf and the belt, all of which was tantamount to having the whole of Walter inside the wardrobe. The uniform and cap, in particular, had remained hanging in the darkness like a person waiting day and night for a visitor to come. The daughter slept only yards from the uniform, separated from it by the opaque door. But his daughter knew where the key was and what it was for. She used to slip it into the keyhole, turn it, and then the soldier's body would appear. She calculated that she was barely taller than the sleeve of the overcoat. She would climb into the wardrobe to measure herself against the sleeve. As I said, the daughter often used to go and see these

clothes hanging in the wardrobe until, one day, how I don't know, the moths got to them. Suddenly, a voracious colony of moths moved in and devoured the clothes, and when Alexandrina realized they had made a nest there and that this was the source of all the other larvae infesting the clothes in the rest of the house, the overcoat, uniform and hat were carried out into the garden and buried beneath the loquat tree as if they were evidence of a crime. "Bury them good and deep!"—said Alexandrina, and Blé dug deeper and deeper, as if the uniform were an animal with flesh that would rot. Maria Ema was there and she had let them cover the uniform with earth. For a long time afterward, the daughter would hear the spade thudding down on the cloth, on the body of the cloth, and Maria Ema never saying a word. Then they gathered up the rest of the inheritance Walter had left her and took it away.

Wait—she wanted to say.

During the years that followed, they had let time fade and wear away and transform all those things into bits of objects scattered on the ground, assimilated into it, until they had taken on the same color and substance of the earth. But she wanted to tell him that there were some objects that did not disappear, that merely ceased to be material or to have any weight and became instead a memory. They became an invisible fluid entering and leaving the invisible body of the person, becoming incorporated into the circulation of the blood and into the caverns of the memory, to remain lodged there in the very depths of life, persisting alongside it, and all he needed to do that night was to hold up the oil lamp to the body of his daughter in her nightshirt, with the bedspread wrapped around her, to confirm that those objects still lived on inside her head. In silence, with no words to express it, she had stored away those things that had been her inheritance, preserving them entire and intact as beetles inside a pyramid. If Walter were to hold the lamp up to her head, he would see that inside it she had preserved his black gaiters, the enamel canteen, the white scarf, the brown rucksack, the gray flannel uniform and the woolen greatcoat with its long sleeves. And that was what she would have wanted to say to him.

She should have told Walter—who one moment had set the lamp down on the bedside table and the next was holding it up near her head, as if he could not get a close enough look at her, or as if he wanted to set fire to what he saw—that she had not witnessed the destruction of that part of her inheritance

with indifference, but rather with the impotence of those who know the earth is the impatient resting place of all its engenders. Children of tender years know that, just as they know everything about death and life. Then they forget. She knew it from the instant Walter's rucksack began to be one with the grass by the wall, at the far end of the mound, and the fact she had acquired that knowledge through Walter's possessions bound her to another soil of an unfamiliar color, but which she knew was waiting for her like a kind and peaceful land where she would experience utter rest. She knew all this from Walter's dispersed possessions. And she wanted to tell him, so that he would stop making promises about expenses, about savings and investments, about glorious places where she would find mortarboards complete with tassels just like the ones worn by those little statues of wise owls, and about liberal professions in liberal worlds, but she could not move her tongue, she could not say a word, she who had brought him there by sheer force of thought. Now, after a hard, lashing downpour, the rain was falling softly, and it was then that Walter realized the lamp might be a liability.

"Listen!"—he said, turning the flame as low as it would go.