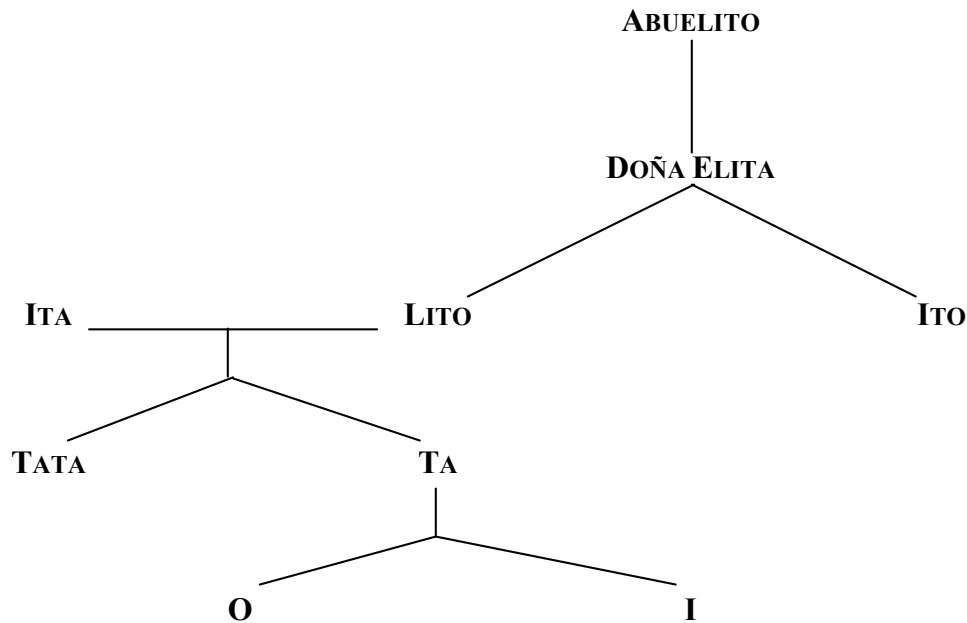


Eduardo Febles

LIZZARDS AND BUTTERFLY BATS



FAMILY TREE



If I try to remember the first things, it would be the lizards and the butterfly bats.

But that's another story and not this one.

This story is only in the telling. So my grandfather told me this story. Not all at once. I have gathered these fragments from the times that he was not lucid, when his mind was stretching already into the confines of death. And from the dead, he has brought these fragments that I shall now write. Not like Lazarus, who did not speak.

There's no beginning to this story, only the remembering of the last things. And through

the memory of his own death my grandfather was born. Not until he remembered his death did he realize that life was but one long remembering.

And what if you remember too late?

The terrain that you see out there, through the window, it belonged to my great grandmother. The memory of her death still haunts me today. And that of her father, and her father's mother. We don't remember how it came to be, that terrain. Some story of Spanish settlers, generations ago. And that's why I have so many memories of Spain. Sometimes I still dream of Spain. Somewhere in the Basque country. Others say that the terrain was always there, that it had always belonged to us.

So the terrain is important to the story. I have never seen it, but you can see it there, through the window, stretched out before you. It belonged to my great grandmother.

Sometimes when I go to bed, I cannot breathe. Asthma. And then I remember my grandfather. He is breathing through me.

In the verandah, you can see him. He is reading a book. A fly is buzzing naggingly near his cold lemonade. The sweat is falling from his forehead and blurs the words, as if tears were falling from the effort. You can hear him breathing.

"Lito."

That's Doña Elita calling my grandfather. You can see her inside the house looking through the screen at my grandfather who is reading.

The house used to be modest. Two bedrooms with eight children piled into each of them. They called Doña Elita "la parida" because she had had so many children. Some were twins though. Most died young. Some were from my great grandfather, who didn't have a name.

When he was born, the comadre was holding my great great grandmother's hand. This is not the beginning of the story though. And besides, this is not part of the story.

So the modest house, after my grandfather's death, became the terrain that you see stretched out there. Huge. Only in death could it appear so big.

"Lito."

That's what they called him. I don't know why.

"Rafaelito."

My grandfather is the man that you see there in the verandah reading. If you listen closely, you can hear him breathing.

Sometimes when I go to bed, I hear him breathing and then I cannot sleep.

He said that he was reading.

I remember that day vividly. The day that Doña Elita got so mad that she stamped out into the verandah and ripped the pages from my grandfather's book.

"A sick boy should not be reading. You know what the doctor said. No reading."

She never yelled, Doña Elita. But her temper was known all throughout Camagüey. In Camagüey, where the boys and the girls were reputed for their beauty, there lived a Doctor that was a close friend of Doña Elita. The Doctor had told her that it was proven that asthma could not be cured and that it was caused by butterfly bats common in Camagüey.

Some say that those butterfly bats go back to before the time of the Indians.

The Doctor told Doña Elita that reading was bad for the boy. It aggravated his condition.

Lito heard the Doctor telling that to his mother.

Lito saw the Doctor touch his mother's bare arm.

When I go to sleep and that I cannot breathe, I think of the Doctor touching my great grandmother's bare arm.

So Lito took all of his books and took them to the slaves' quarters. They were mostly about geography.

"Lucumí Indiai."

That's my grandfather talking. You can see him there in the slaves' quarters. Lucumí Indiai is Don Raúl's slave.

The slaves do not belong to Doña Elita. Her house was modest. Only after my grandfather's death did it become a big house. Only after my grandfather's death, did she have slaves.

They belonged to Don Raúl, who had the most important library in all of Cuba.

He even had books in French.

Years later, Don Raúl died while riding a horse near the river that you see there. He owed my grandfather big, for Lito had represented him in the court of law when he had been accused of his wife's murder. This happened during the revolt. When he died, he left his entire library to my grandfather. Even the books in French. The Cardinal tried to steal the books from Raúl's estate. My grandfather being a lawyer and all, he knew that they belonged to him. So he told the Cardinal that he couldn't take the books, for Don Raúl had bequeathed them to him. The Cardinal blushed with anger and prayed. I still have one of Don Raúl's books in my shelves, Zola's Thérèse Raquin. The book contains a dedication from a certain Carmen de los Órganos, who was proven guilty of Don Raúl's wife's death.

"Lucumí Indiai."

Lucumí Indiai was one of Don Raúl's slaves. He was from the town of Yorubaland, faraway in Africa.

He gave Lucumí Indiai all the books about geography to hide them from his mother.

But this day, he was reading on the verandah.

Lito is sitting across the room from me, here. He is over there in the verandah.

In Cuba.

You can smell the food. Frijoles negros and fried plantains.

Doña Elita stamped out into the verandah and took the book from my grandfather's hands. She shredded it to pieces. My grandfather started to cry. I can still hear the tears falling on the ground, ticking like Abuelito's clock.

Abuelito is silhouetted on Lito's forehead who is sitting in front of me in Cuba.

I don't know who Abuelito is. I think he was my nameless great grandfather, though I thought that he was nameless. When he was born, the comadre was holding my great great grandmother's hand. But this is like the lizard, it does not belong in this story.

So Abuelito had a clock. It ticked. It ticked to the rhythm of tears falling from the effort of reading. It ticked to the memory of those words erased by the tears falling from the effort of reading. It ticked with the love of the tears falling from the cascade over the rocks. My mother Ta had swallowed Abuelito's clock and it ticked inside of her. I used to hear it when she fed me from her being.

My grandfather cried because Doña Elita had taken his book and she had destroyed it. The words were ripped apart. He later tried to glue it together and managed to make some sense out of the book. Sometimes I think that that book is this story, that this story is but a residue of those lost words. That in that book he lost his power to remember. He lost the power to remember his own death.

He started running away from the house and he went to the slaves' quarters to look for Lucumí Indiai.

Lucumí Indiai had been shot by Don Raúl. No reason, just anger. The books were burnt.

So Lito just cried and had an asthma attack. He was heaving like a railroad, gasping like a butterfly fluttering against a quinqué.

He was remembering his death.

The Doctor came and talked to my great grandmother and told her that under no circumstances was the child to read ever again. He looked at my great grandmother with the lust of a traveler lost in a desert stumbling into the mirage of his own oasis.

So the terrain that you see out there belonged to Doña Elita. And the house that you see in that painting, with the traditional Cuban tinajón, that was the house where my grandfather lived. He died of an asthma attack when he was ten. But through the remembering of his death, he was born again. Only through the remembering of death can we be born again. Life is but one long remembering.

I remember already writing the first sentence to this story. It was so long ago, before I was ever born. This story goes back to the time of the butterfly bats.

Lito had a brother named Ito. Ito was completely inside of Lito when they were born. They were twins. Lito, in turn, had twin daughters, Tata and Ta, who had two sons, my brother and I, O and _ . I am nameless like my great grandfather whose name was Abuelito.

My mother's sister, Tata, is the one that died when she fell from the balcony. Some suspect that it was a suicide. Some even dared to say that it was her father Lito who killed her. But I think that only the word death is important here. And besides Tata is like the lizard.

So the painting that you see there, that's the house. You can even see the verandah. If you look closely, you can see the silhouette of the memory of my grandfather reading. This story is but a silhouette of my grandfather's death. He is the one telling me the story as he sits across me inside the painting. This story is the silhouette of the memories that my grandfather brought back from his death at the age of ten when he had an asthma attack.

My grandfather thinks that the house that you see painted there is the house near the Cascade of Tears in El Barrio de la Caridad, but only when he is on the other side of his memories. Only in that side can the house be as nice as the one painted here with the tinajón in front of it. Only in that side can the terrain belong to Doña Elita. Only in that side of the memories can he still be living there and telling me the story from inside of the painting. The living only live in the telling of the past. Sometimes my grandfather seems sad. I think that it is when he remembers his brother Ito and his wife Ita. I think that he is sad only on this side of the memories.

At night, when I have asthma and I think about the Doctor, I think about Ito.

The Doctor delivered my grandfather in that house that you see painted there. If you look closely, you can hear Doña Elita's screams as she gave birth. The ricochets of her screams formed shadows that still haunt me at night. The silk-cotton tree outside my room crawls inside and engulfs me in the fears of Doña Elita's womb at the time of my grandfather's birth. The lizards and the butterfly bats live on the silk-cotton tree. Tata's screams reminded Lito of his own birth and that is why he killed his own daughter.

The Doctor's face became pale as he saw the twins. They were born simultaneously for Lito's body was completely engulfing his brother's, like a shadow from a silk-cotton tree.

Tata screamed the evil out of our family. In her screams, everything that the family

tried to forget surfaced with echoes of Lito and Ito's birth. Maybe that's why no one seemed to care about her illness. We needed her. Now we carry the screams inside of us and there is no one in the family that can purge us from the memories of our death.

The woman that you see in the picture frame, that's Ita. Her skin was whiter than it appears in the picture though. It looked as if she were sculpted.

She died in an accident.

The girl from Tampa almost married Lito, but in the end, Ita did.

Words that should have been uttered but never did come out in the silence of our conversations. The crevices that separate our memories are cemented through the silence of the words that should have been uttered.

"I need new shoes."

That's Ita speaking to Lito. You can hear her voice in the silent memories resonating inside of my grandfather.

"It's cold out. Put on a shawl."

He was always like that, my grandfather. He liked to command. He didn't like to suggest.

I need new shoes. It's cold out. Put on a shawl.

"We can go by the store and buy the Port wine bottles that I want to give to the Doctor. He did not let me pay the last time."

Hatuey was an Indian that lived when the butterfly bats first came to Cuba.

Sometimes at night, when I cannot sleep because of my asthma, I think about the Doctor, about Ito, and about Hatuey.

"Do you want to go out in this weather?"

"I need new shoes."

"We can go by the store and pick out the bottles of Port wine."

It happened in Cuba and in Miami.

It happened in the memories of all of us. In the memory of Abuelito, and Lito, and Ito, and Tata, and Ta, and O, and me. And in the memory of Ita. And of Doña Elita and Don Raúl and Lucumí Indiai and the Doctor. And of Hatuey and Victoria. Ita remembered her own death. In a car. In Cuba. Near the house that you see painted there. She is the woman that you see there in the picture frame. She looked as if she were sculpted.

"I need a new shawl."

"Put on your shoes."

That accident is still happening, right now, in the writing of the accident. It had actually never happened until now, until the writing of the accident. It is still happening in the screams echoing from Lito's and Ito's birth and Tata's madness.

The girl from Tampa had blue eyes. She had studied French in Paris.

Put on your shoes. We can pick out the bottles of Port wine for the Doctor.

My grandfather did not know how to drive a car. He was driving the day of the accident. The accident happened twice: in Cuba and in Miami. It happened many times, in many different ways. It had already happened at the time of Hatuey's death in his fight against the Spanish.

In Camagüey, there is a wise tree where many lizards live. The tree is a Ceiba, and it has been there since the beginning of time. But this is not the beginning of the story. The tree was there even before the beginning, even before the tree could be here, in this story. The tree is the one that you can see there in the painting of the house where my grandfather lived.

It was cold out, and she needed a shawl. I'll drive you to the store and then I'll go buy the bottles of Port wine. I'll pick you up afterwards.

She died in the accident.

None of the bottles broke in the accident.

At night, I hear the sound of unbroken glass. As my grandfather tells me the story, right now, from the other side of his memories, his silence is like the silence of the unbroken bottles of glass. Through this silence, he tells me the story of Ita's death and of his own.

At night, I hear Hatuey running through the forest to avoid the Spanish.

Though I never met her, Ita used to tell me that it was thanks to America that she married Lito. Ita was from El Barrio de la Caridad, where my grandfather lived in the house that you see painted there with the traditional tinajón in front of it and with the wise tree where the lizards and the butterfly bats live together. One summer, she went to Key West, Cayo Hueso, with her sister America to study English at the Convent of La Virgen de la Caridad. That same summer, the blue-eyed Miss Smith came from Tampa to visit a relative in El Barrio de la Caridad.

My grandfather first saw Miss Smith at a popular ball celebrating the end of the war with the Spaniards.

The Spaniards had been there forever. My ancestors came from Spain, and that's why I have so many dreams about Spain. Hatuey was one of the first Indians to rebel against the Spaniards. He fell in love with one of Don Raúl's ancestors, Victoria, who was married to a Spaniard from the Basque Country. She was one of the first Spanish women to live in Cuba.

When Hatuey saw her, it reminded him of the story of my grandfather, who fell in love with Miss Smith upon seeing her. But Lito had forgotten his destiny, and he was punished. He had forgotten that life was but one long remembering. He had forgotten his marriage with Ita, many years later, after having met Miss Smith at the ball to celebrate the defeat of the Spaniards.

When Hatuey saw Victoria, he fell in love. Upon seeing her, he remembered. He remembered her from the beauty of the foam at the Cascade of Tears. The Cascade of Tears is not far from the house that you see there, in the painting, and if you look closely you can feel the spray of love coming from the effort of the tears falling over the rocks. They used to kiss under the wise tree.

Victor, who was married to Victoria, started to doubt her when he felt her cheeks humid with the spray from the Cascade of Tears. She smelled of love.

He told her that they had finally captured the renegade of Hatuey and that they were going to kill him. He looked at her face for signs of weakness. Her hair smelled of sadness, and he knew.

She implored the Indian gods, and she was transformed into a butterfly bat. She flew out to find Hatuey. As Víctor was getting ready to kill him, Victoria started flying above her husband, forming a whirlpool of a halo above him. She sucked the life out of him. Víctor died from an asthma attack. Hatuey was free to go. Some say that he became a lizard and that's the reason why the butterfly bats and the lizards live together in the wise tree.

When Lito saw Miss Smith, Victoria started fluttering like the butterflies around a quinqué, an oil lamp. Victoria remembered. When Lito was going to kiss her, when he was just about to forget, his breath was taken away. He remembered his mother and the books that he wanted to read, and Lucumí Indiai. That was the second time that my grandfather died. He died at the age of ten and then at the age of twenty, and he is still dying as he tells me the story from inside the painting that you see there. And only through his death can my grandfather live again. Only through death can we be born again.

When he came back from the dead, Miss Smith had gone back to Tampa. Her blue eyes lingered in his memory like the scent of the sadness that emanated from the ivy hanging on the wise tree. And from the tree, the smell of love reached him. He saw my grandmother framed through the window. Ita was back from Key West. At first, he thought that it was La Virgen de la Caridad that was taking him away to the land of the dead once more. She had already appeared the day of Ita's accident.

Everybody thought that Ita would marry Ito, since that was in the order of things. But Lito fell in love upon seeing her, and they married, for Victoria saw that their love was good, and that Ito was cursed with the screams that resonate in Tata's madness. Victoria watches over Lito, keeping away all the other butterfly bats.

When I cannot breathe at night, I pray to Victoria and I ask for forgiveness from my sins. The shadow from the silk-cotton tree brings in the smell of sadness from Victoria's hair and the sounds of wings fluttering against a quinqué. In that silence, I hear the screams of Ito and Tata, and that of the unbroken bottles of glass.

Some people think that it was because of Lito's wedding that Ito turned out the way he did. His "yes" that Night of Tears changed the course of our history. That "yes" created tremors in the memories of my mother Ta and in the memories of my grandfather Lito and in the screams of Tata.

"Yes. Ta."

Ta was teaching that morning like any other morning.

She needed new shoes.

Ita died in an accident. She died twice, in Miami and in Cuba.

She needed a new shawl. Lito told her to put on her shoes, that I would take you to the store and then I can go pick up those bottles of Port wine that I want to get for the Doctor since he didn't let me pay the last time.

Ta was teaching like any other morning. Nobody knew that that was the day of the Night of Tears, even though everybody remembered it as such.

"Yes. Ta."

A neighbor came to see Lito.

"They are coming tonight. Ito betrayed your daughter and you for marrying Ita."

Lito understood.

Ita needed new shoes. She died in an accident.

During the Night of Tears, the Cascade engulfed the whole island, and the spray of her love fell upon the Cuban people. People were throwing buckets of water from their balconies. Tata jumped off one of the balconies and her screams resonated throughout the island. Victoria was flying around the wise tree and Hatuey crawled upon my room with the shadows of the silk-cotton tree. The spray from the Cascade covered my body. It smelled of sadness. I woke up with an asthma attack. I prayed to Victoria and a ray of light filtered through the window dissipating the shadows from the silk-cotton tree.

La Virgen de la Caridad appeared to my grandmother the day of her accident. She told her that she was going to die. But Ita knew already that it was going to happen, that she needed new shoes and that the bottles were not going to break.

The police came to Ta's school the day of the Night of Tears.

She was teaching like any other day.

Tata fell from the balcony as people threw buckets of water onto the street. And as she fell, she screamed one last scream. Doña Elita woke up from the scream and remembered the day that she gave light to Lito and Ito. Ita woke up upon hearing Tata's scream, and she

remembered the accident and the unbroken bottles of Port wine. I woke up upon hearing the scream, and I remembered my own death, years later, in an accident, falling from a balcony. And the silk-cotton tree was inside of my room, hovering over me with the smell of sadness.

The river that you see painted there, near Doña Elita's house, it turned red with blood the Night of Tears. Don Raúl's blood had spilled upon the river when he had his accident. Buckets of Tata's blood were thrown out of the balcony of the house that you see painted there. As the spray from the Cascade fell upon the people, it turned red with anger. The bottles of Port wine were stained with Ita's blood, as if they had been broken.

Ta left that night. She dressed up as a nun in order to flee. She went to Miami. She swallowed Abuelito's clock so as to take it out of Cuba. It was the only way to take it out. Ita had told the police about her.

"Yes. Ta."

And as I try to sleep, my grandfather tells me the story from inside the painting. The wise tree is outside, casting its Cuban shadows inside of my room. And I'm afraid. La Virgen de la Caridad appeared to me once, too. The shadows were dissipated as the memory of my grandfather waned like the wax melting from a big white church candle. The memory of my grandfather emanates from inside the painting. It smells of the sadness of Victoria's hair as she flies inside my room, keeping the other butterfly bats from attacking my breath. It smells of love.

And as I try to remember my grandfather, the painting fades with the loving spray from the Cascade of Tears.

He is there in the painting. If you listen, you can hear him breathing. You can hear him telling me the story. The ricochets from his voice fade away, melting like the wax from the candle, covering my body like buckets of blood thrown from a balcony, from the balcony that you see there in the painting.

The terrain that you see there, through the window, it belonged to Doña Elita. But that's another story, and not this one. This story is about the lizards and the butterfly bats.

If I try to remember the last things, it would be the lizards and the butterfly bats.

If I try to remember the first things, it would be my own death, through the death of the memories of the voice, the voice of my grandfather resonating inside of my head, inside of the painting that you see there, hanging on the wall.

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