

He dreamt that he was in prison

by Mario Benedetti, 'Buzón de tiempo' (*Suma de Letras: 2000*). p.37-41. Translated by Rohan James Rice.

The prisoner dreamt that he was in prison. About the nuances, of course, that were different. For example, on the wall in the dream there was a poster of Paris; on the real wall there was only a dark water stain. In the dream-prison a gecko ran about the floor; in reality he was accompanied by a rat

The prisoner dreamt that he was in prison. Someone massaged his shoulders which made him feel better. He couldn't see who it was, but he was sure that it was his mother, who was an expert at such things. Through the wide window entered the morning sun and he bathed in it as a gesture of freedom. When he opened his eyes, there was no sun. The tiny, barred window (three palms widths across by two high) overlooked an air well which was nothing but a pit of darkness.

The prisoner dreamt that he was in prison. He was parched so drank ice-cold water in abundance. And the water immediately flowed from his eyes in the form of tears. He was conscious of why he was crying, but all the same he couldn't confess it aloud. He looked at his idle hands, those that before had constructed torsos, faces, and limbs from plaster, entire bodies in ceramic, women from marble. When he woke up, the guards were spying on him, his eyes were dry, his hands dirty, his joints stiff, and his lungs bereft of air.

At that point, the prisoner decided that it was better to dream that he was in prison. He closed his eyes and conjured a portrait of Milagros between his hands. But he wasn't content with the photo. He wanted Milagros in person and thus she appeared in a sky-blue nightie with a bright smile. She grabbed hold of him so that he would undress her and he, making no mistake, took off her clothes. The naked Milagros was of course a miracle to behold, he began recalling her with all his memory and utter enjoyment. He didn't want to wake up, but wake up he did, just seconds before the oneiric orgasm. And there was no one. No photo, no Milagros, no sky-blue nightie. He admitted to himself that the solitude was becoming unbearable.

The prisoner dreamt that he was in prison. His mother had ceased the massages, amongst other things, because it had been years since she died. He was overcome by nostalgia for her gaze, her singing, her care, and her caress. For her reproaches and her apologies. He hugged himself, but it didn't feel the same. Milagros reappeared and was saying her goodbyes from someplace far away. It seemed to him to be a cemetery, but it couldn't be. It was a park.

He raised his hand to wave goodbye. But his hand could only form a fist, and as known, fists cannot wave goodbye.

When he opened his eyes, the rickety, foldaway bed diffused—as always—an unwelcome chill. Trembling and numb, he tried to warm his hands with his breath. But he couldn't breathe properly. There, in the corner, the rat was still looking at him just as frozen. He lifted his hand and the rat lifted a paw. They were old acquaintances now. Sometimes he tossed him a piece from his horrible, paltry prison menu. The rat was grateful.

But then the prisoner missed the green, agile gecko from his dreams and slept to bring him back. He found out that the gecko had lost its tail. A dream, therefore, not worth the pain of dreaming about. And yet he nevertheless began counting on his fingers the years he'd lost. One, two, three, four and he woke up. In total there were six and he'd completed three. He counted them again, but now with his fingers missing.

He didn't have a radio, a clock, books, a pen, nor a notebook. Sometimes he sang softly to tentatively fill the emptiness. But each time he remembered fewer songs. As a boy, he'd also learnt some prayers that his grandfather had taught him. But whom was he going to pray to now? He felt swindled by God, yet he didn't want to swindle God in turn.

The prisoner dreamt that he was in prison and that God had come to him and confessed that he felt tired, that he was suffering from insomnia which had left him exhausted. Occasionally, when he finally did manage to get to sleep, he had nightmares in which he tried to assist Jesus from the cross, but He was insistent and wouldn't allow it.

The worst of all, said God, is that I have no God in whom to turn to. I'm an Orphan with a capital O. The prisoner felt terrible that God was so alone and abandoned. He could see that God was sick with loneliness now that his supreme, undying, perpetual fame even intimidated the saints (those canonized as much as their understudies). When he woke up and remembered that he was an atheist, he put aside the pity he felt for God and instead pitied himself, for he was the one who captive and alone, submerged in muck and tedium.

After uncountable dreams and restless nights, came a sleepy afternoon in which he was shaken awake without the habitual abruptness. The guard told him to get up because they had granted him release. The prisoner was only convinced that he wasn't dreaming when he felt the cold of his makeshift bed and verified the eternal presence of the rat. He sympathetically waved it goodbye and went with the guard who handed him clothes, some money, the watch, a pen, and a leather wallet: the handful of things that they'd taken from him when he was incarcerated.

When he got out no one was waiting for him. He began to walk. He walked for almost two days, sleeping by the side of the road or amongst the trees. In a suburban bar he ate two sandwiches and had a beer, rediscovering a long-lost taste.

When he finally arrived at the house of his sister, she almost fainted in surprise. They held each other for close to ten minutes. After crying a little, she asked him what he was thinking of doing. For now, a shower and some sleep, frankly I'm shattered. After the shower, she took him up to the attic where there was a bed. Not a filthy foldaway bed, rather a clean, white, comfy bed. He slept for more than twelve hours without waking. Curiously, during that long rest, the ex-prisoner dreamt that he was in prison. With gecko and all.