

‘A Fence’

by Patricio Pron

01. One morning (it doesn't really matter which, but it's March, it's Saturday, it's the year 2010, it's the twenty-seventh) a young man is jogging with his dog down a quiet street in a residential neighborhood south of the German city of Hanau when something happens – the dog runs ahead or lags behind or darts off in search of something that caught its eye and is hit by a car. When the car's bumper strikes the dog's ribs, the bottom of the bumper, which is particularly sharp, slits the animal's stomach open and turns red; immediately afterward, the rest of the dog's body is swallowed by the car, which stops after a few meters, when it's already too late. When the dog's owner rushes to the car and sees that the animal has been run over, he quickly calculates that the chances of saving the dog are zero; nevertheless, the animal is still panting softly and tries to stand, all the while looking up at him, its eyes nearly popping out of its head. The dog, of course, is unable to stand since its body has been sliced in half, and the dog's owner kneels next to it and begins to pet it and whisper soothing words as tears stream down his face. The animal stops breathing seconds later, and, when the young man goes to pick up the dead body, he notices its intestines are full of *Argiope* spider larvae; since the young man is studying to be a veterinarian, he is able to identify the larvae on the spot, and then remembers two things he recently learned in one of his classes: first, that the females of the species simulate coitus with each other to entice the males to mate; and second, that after consummation the males release their sperm-filled sex organs inside the females and try to flee, but are typically caught and devoured by them.

02. Moments before (let us restate, even though it doesn't matter, that it's March, it's Saturday, it's the year 2010, it's the twenty-seventh), upon realizing she ran over the dog, the woman driving the car stopped in the middle of the street and got out of her vehicle, bringing a hand to her mouth to suppress a scream. After, she remains standing beside the car, accompanying the young man's tears at the sight of his run-over dog with a silence that she hopes he interprets, in deference to his pain, as a sign of her sorrow and remorse, but that is actually due to the fact that she can't think of anything to say. She brings a hand to her cheek, confirming that she, too, is crying. Inside her car is a paper bag with the name of a store printed on the outside, inside the bag is a box of red lace lingerie and a silver vibrator in a small case. The woman, of course, isn't even thinking about the objects in this moment, but has the sneaking suspicion that everything's gone wrong and has been going wrong for some time now and hopes that things will start getting better soon, which is why she'd left the house this morning to buy these things—on the off chance they'd make her husband, whom she hasn't made love to in months, begin to notice her again.

03. A few kilometers north of where the woman and the run-over dog and the dog's owner are located (it's still March, it's Saturday, it's the year 2010, it's the twenty-seventh), the woman's husband is sitting before a doctor who has just informed him he has prostate cancer. The man thinks he should be interested in learning his chances for survival, in the treatments employed in these kinds of cases and their costs, but when he opens his mouth it feels dry and he thinks he may have bad breath and the only thing that comes to mind is to ask for some water.

04. Facing him, the doctor gets up from his chair and leaves the room to get a glass of water and on his way he passes a colleague's examination room. The doctor steals a mournful glance at the small nameplate on the door, thinking about her and her perfume and then silently spelling out her name. They've been lovers for a few years now, even though both of them are married and are careful to avoid having the affair interfere with their lives. Yesterday (it was March, it was Friday, it was the year 2010, it was the twenty-sixth, not that any of this really matters) the doctor's wife was loading

the washing machine when an unopened condom slipped out a pants pocket. The secret that the doctor had been keeping from his wife ended in that instant. Not because of the condom itself, which on its own didn't prove much, but because both he and his wife know he had a vasectomy eight years ago. His belongings now sit in a box in the trunk of his car, and he hopes that by the time he gets to the clinic's parking lot he'll have figured out just where to go.

05. In this same moment (it's March, it's Saturday, it's the year 2010, it's still the twenty-seventh) the doctor's wife is at the supermarket buying groceries. She's pushing a shopping cart and absentmindedly tossing into it the items she takes from the shelves. What does she buy? A kilo of rice, packs of ham and smoked turkey, two bottles of vegetable oil, a pack of Palle-brand pasta, two jars of dill pickles, a dozen free-range eggs, three loaves of par-baked frozen bread, two cartons of apple juice and one of tropical punch, three frozen ham-and-pineapple pizzas (the only kind she likes), honey, a kilo of tomatoes, a head of cabbage, pork chops, a box of instant mashed potatoes, a half-kilo bag of frozen Brussels sprouts and a kilo of carrots. On her way to the checkout she stops for a moment at the magazine rack by the floral department and a home decor magazine she often purchases catches her eye; when she leans in to take a copy, she notices that the cover photo is of an elderly couple standing beside each other and smiling, and she sees herself in the aging woman and her husband in the aging man even though both of them are still relatively young, and for the first time since the condom incident she realizes they are no longer going to grow old together, and she starts to cry.

06. The supermarket cashier is blowing her bangs out of her face and waving a package of goat cheese over the scanner, which produces a beep just like the beeps produced by meat, free-range eggs, regular eggs, six-packs of beer, Christian magazines, and pornographic magazines, all of it reduced to a beep buzzing in her head on nights she can't sleep. She looks up for a moment at the checkout screen and is about to tell the customer the total when she notices the next customer in line start to cry while looking at a home decor magazine. Then the goat cheese falls from her hands. Of course, it's March, it's Saturday, it's the year 2010, it's the twenty-seventh.

07. It's March, it's Saturday, it's the year 2010, and it's still the twenty-seventh but spring has already arrived. A few kilometers from the supermarket, in order to enjoy the first few rays of sunshine of the year, a shepherd leans against a tree and falls asleep.

08. Once again: it's March, it's Saturday, it's the year 2010, it's the twenty-seventh. Some kilometers over the head of the sleeping shepherd flies a commercial airplane. Inside the airplane a woman is leaning against a window, watching the sheep below and thinking, if the shepherd doesn't wake up soon, the sheep will wander off and roam the mountainside, lost, and wind up wolf food. She wishes she could do something to wake the shepherd, shout or make some kind of gesture, but she knows that he can neither see nor hear her. The woman is a writer. Many kilometers from here, the owner of the run-over dog is carrying a book of hers in his backpack, along with a bottle of water and the two apples he was thinking of eating in the park after his jog. Yesterday afternoon the woman in the car saw a book of hers in a bookstore and almost bought it, but didn't. At different points in their lives, both the doctor who is the lover of the man with the vasectomy as well as the checkout girl have read this writer, and in general both of them enjoyed her books and would recommend them to other people. Nevertheless, the writer hasn't written anything in a while; some nameless thing is bothering her and keeping her from writing; after numerous attempts, the writer has given up, and she would gladly give up calling herself a writer if it weren't for the fact that, on occasion, other people remind her that she is one. Looking down on the sheep through the airplane window, the writer thinks about them lost on the mountainside and tells herself the shepherd has abandoned

them – the writer and the sheep – for good, and then she tells herself that, if she could, she would gather up the sheep herself to keep them from getting lost. Then she thinks, if the Bible is right and God is fundamentally a certain type of writer, then he’s the type who is indifferent to the fate of his characters, to those who get lost and suffer and die having never been understood, and, once more she thinks, if God were a just writer, he would create a fence made of words so that his characters wouldn’t wander off and wind up lost, and this fence of words would be the world but also the story, and in it, characters wouldn’t get lost like sheep but would live, in one way or another, forever. Then the writer, who isn’t very good and never has been, for the first and maybe the last time, understands.

09. A few meters from the writer an elderly man is locked in one of the airplane bathrooms. The man has furtively gathered all of the life vests he could find under the empty seats and then locked himself inside the bathroom with the vests; there, he inflates them. After doing so he puts them on his arms and legs – and when he can’t fit any more on, he just inflates them and lets them fall to the ground and then piles them on top of himself. The elderly man thinks the plane could go down at any moment, and that doing this with the life jackets will save him. It’s still March, it’s Saturday, it’s the year 2010, it’s the twenty-seventh, but this doesn’t really matter in the least.

Translated from the Spanish by Kathleen Heil

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