

Homeless Shelter

Phillip Barron

I.

She asked me why I was reading the book. My first thought was that she too found the long middle section uncomfortable. The brutal depictions of murders of women, especially as they are recounted in the clinical and observant detail of police investigators, are bruising to read. Even though Roberto Bolaño raised awareness of the *femicidas* of northern Mexico and exposed the violent misogyny of the *maquiladora* region, by simply reading the book, I felt complicit. I assumed that she felt as raw as I was feeling, but I answered with what I had rehearsed. Saying anything other than practiced phrases still felt unfamiliar in my mouth. I told her that I chose it because it was lengthy and that I hoped it would keep me company for the first few months of my stay in Quito, Ecuador. But she had not read *2666*, and that wasn't why she was asking. She hadn't read anything by Bolaño. She simply noticed more people carrying his books into her café in recent years, and she wondered why.

It was not the first book by Bolaño that I had read. In fact, it would be one of the last, as I had already read nearly all of the others that had been translated into English. I discovered Bolaño only after the terrible excitement about his books had settled down. Bolaño died in 2003, and I didn't read *By Night in Chile* until after I returned to North Carolina from a visit to Chile in 2006, after he had already passed away.

In 2010, I traveled to Ecuador to stir up the mud in my brain. Staring down the isolating experience of living in a foreign country, speaking a language foreign to my tongue, I brought *2666* with me so that I could count on something familiar in the middle of

so much self-imposed mental exhaustion. My plan was to read it in English first, and then in its original Spanish. By the end of four months in Ecuador, I could see the mud settling into a new pattern, one that would take me to California next, inching closer to the life of a writer.

"Gómez Palacio," a story that first appeared in English translation in *The New Yorker* and later in the collection, *Last Evenings on Earth*, has nearly everything you need to know about Bolaño's writing. It opens with the narrator, a poet, arriving in the eponymous small town in Mexico's rugged state of Durango for a temporary job at an arts council. Right away, the narrator shares his ambivalence toward the town and the job, "I knew I wouldn't stick to running a writing workshop in some godforsaken town in northern Mexico."

Bolaño fills the story with moments of discomfort. The unnamed narrator "couldn't stop shivering in spite of the heat." He notes that the arts council is "a two-story building whose only redeeming feature was an unpaved yard with a grand total of three trees and an abandoned or unfinished garden." And when the director asks over breakfast about the narrator's bloodshot eyes, he confesses that he does not sleep much.

But his physical discomfort and cynicism toward small-town life ultimately feel false. They are a shield the narrator wears to keep himself at a distance from others. The true moments of vulnerability in "Gómez Palacio" come when the narrator catches himself lost in thought or enjoying time spent with the arts council's director. He lives in a highway motel where, without a car, he relies on the director for rides at the beginning and end of the day. One night, they drive farther on the highway, passing the edge of town and driving into the desert.

"On the horizon I could see the highway disappearing into a range of hills. The night was beginning to approach from the east. Days before, at the motel, I had asked myself, What color is the desert at night? A stupid rhetorical question, yet somehow I felt it held the key to my

future, or perhaps not so much my future as my capacity for suffering. One afternoon, at the writing workshop in Gómez Palacio, a boy asked me why I wrote poetry and how I thought I would go on doing it. The director wasn't present. There were five other people in the workshop, the five students: four boys and a girl. You could tell from the way they dressed that two of them were very poor. The girl was short and thin and her clothes were rather garish. The boy who asked the question should have been studying at university; instead of which he was working in a factory, the biggest and probably the only soap factory in the state. Another boy was a waiter in an Italian restaurant, the remaining two were at college, and the girl was neither studying nor working.

By chance, I replied." (*Last Evenings on Earth*, 124-125)

In this passage are elements of many of Bolaño's characters: an introspective narrator shares loosely linked reflections that reveal both an inner life of searching and an unbridgeable chasm between one's personal disappointments and desire for a sense of home.

The main characters in Bolaño's stories are always writers and most often they are poets. And yet, their writing is not central to the stories themselves. In "Gómez Palacio," for instance, the narrator demurs when asked about his writing, even though he leads a writing workshop. At the end of the story, the arts council director tells him, "I know you'll forgive me my eccentricities, after all we both read poetry." To which, the narrator silently realizes that he is "grateful she hadn't said we were both poets."

In *The Savage Detectives*, Bolaño's most celebrated book, the plot follows the trail of two "visceral realist" poets who help a young woman escape Mexico City and spend the next several years on the run in Europe and north Africa. The five connected parts of the posthumously published tome 2666 include scholars in search of a post-World War II German novelist, a sports journalist, a Chilean literature professor relocating to a Mexican university, and the

German novelist who comes out of hiding to travel to the same northern Mexican town around which the other characters have been orbiting. The main character in *Amulet* calls herself the Mother of Mexican Poetry and hangs out with (and cares for) many younger poets of Mexico City. Yet, in none of these stories do the events of the book unfold around the characters writing. The opening and closing sections of *The Savage Detectives* are supposed to have been harvested from a character's diary, but the novel never shows us characters in the act of writing, making time for writing. Instead, the focus is on the life of a writer that takes place away from journals and typewriters. In each of Bolaño's stories, while writers are the main characters, Bolaño focuses on their social lives rather than their writing lives.

With one major exception. The novel *A Distant Star* focuses on a workshop poet who ascends to the position of an air force officer under Pinochet's new regime in Chile. He becomes famous for writing nationalistic slogans in the sky with his plane's contrails. *A Distant Star*, along with the mock reference book *Nazi Literature of the Americas*, parodies the very government that exiled Bolaño from his home country of Chile by characterizing fascism as the political ideology of failed artists. He inverts Hunter S. Thompson's observation that bad art flows from fascism, when, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Raoul Duke observes that "the Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war. This is the Sixth Reich."

Writerly characters in Bolaño's stories seek each other out. They visit one another, and often they sleep with one another. In "Gómez Palacio," the narrator and director share a quiet understanding of each other's sense of longing. So why is the narrator grateful that "she hadn't said we were both poets"?

"It wasn't yet completely dark, but it was no longer day," when the lethargic story's most significant scene takes place at sunset and just after. The director and narrator drive out of town to a spot where, because of the curve of the highway in the distance, the lights of a far-off town sparkle in the desert heat. From where they have parked on the side of the road, the director shows the narrator how the light of an oncoming car:

"turned back on itself and hung in the air, a green light that seemed to breathe, alive and aware for a fraction of a second in the middle of the desert, set free, a marine light, moving like the sea but with all the fragility of earth, a green, prodigious, solitary light that must have been produced by something near that curve in the road—a sign, the roof of an abandoned shed, huge sheets of plastic spread on the ground—but that, to us, seeing it from a distance, appeared to be a dream or a miracle, which comes to the same thing in the end." (*Last Evenings on Earth*, 129)

The in-between. The abandoned and the functional. The mystical and the rational. The liminal space between wilderness and civilization. The liminal time between day and night. Bolaño's stories meditate on the in-between, and in "Gómez Palacio," it is never clear what the narrator is running from or running to. We learn only that he has come from Mexico City and, by the story's end, is bound for Mexico City once again. We know him only in this in-between space, in this town that is on the way somewhere else, in this temporary job that is a waypoint on an aimless path.

In speeches and interviews, Bolaño said repeatedly that, when it came to literature, he did not believe in exile. Instead, he believed that literature itself was a balm on one's feelings of aloneness and dislocation. After five unstable months in Chile immediately after Pinochet's 1973 coup, Bolaño left his home country for a second and final time. "That was the beginning of my exile, or what is commonly known as exile, although the truth is I didn't see it that way." Exile is "a question of tastes, personalities, likes, dislikes," he says, and "where literature is concerned, I don't believe in exile." The community that his writer-characters share with one another speaks to his sense that, even when one is living in a foreign country, one finds a home in the literature one carries with her. "No one forced Thomas Mann to go into exile. No one forced James Joyce to go into exile," Bolaño continues. "In the best case, exile is a literary option, similar to the option of writing. No one forces you to write."

II.

When she asked me whether I had read any books by Gabriel García Márquez, I knew that behind her question was another question, which was, why wasn't I reading Gabriel García Márquez. In other words, she was asking why, in the literary world, was the Colombian being replaced by the wild Chilean exile?

Answering her question clarified for me why I had chosen the posthumously published constellatory book to be my companion for at least the first two months of my stay in the high Andean capital. There are two answers. The first is that my process for making significant decisions often involves interpreting the myriad smaller, insignificant decisions that bring me to the bigger one. In other words, I sometimes do things that I understand as significant only later.

In 2666, I found many of the themes familiar to me from Bolaño's other stories: a plot that spanned the Atlantic Ocean, held together loosely by characters in search of answers to personal and professional questions. Scholars, writers, and especially poets populated Bolaño's other novels, and they were all present in 2666 as well. But more than just stories with existential writers for characters, Bolaño's writing captures an essential affect of post-modern, post-Cold War globalization.

The scholar Peter Boxall writes that a pivotal scene in 2666 "takes place at a lavish and decadent Nazi dinner party in a German castle, in the early days of the Second World War." A dinner guest, playing his role for the evening as impresario, asks the others whether the historical figure Jesus had any understanding of the global reach that Christianity would have. "Did Jesus Christ, who apparently knew everything, know that the world was round and to the east lived the Chinese and to the west the primitive peoples of the Americas?," he proposes. Of course not, the character answers his own question, because Jesus' vision of the world was limited to that of a carpenter's son. Boxall argues that this scene captures a fault line that runs throughout all of Bolaño's works: that fiction is "constantly giving way to... this catastrophic encounter with a mode of being that it cannot sustain." Fiction, that is, cannot capture the world as it is: global, multi-lingual, fractured. Whereas in Kafka's

work, the specter of bureaucracy haunts modern life, Bolaño, writing a century later, knows that capitalism's reach is now more dispersed and at the same time more suffocating. And yet, by acknowledging the limitations of what fiction can portray, Bolaño's works come that much closer.

As in "Gómez Palacio," 2666 answers this epistemological gap only with restlessness. While writer-characters may find home with one another, they do not find feelings of home in a place. Nostalgia is scarce in Bolaño's stories, and ambivalence is plenty. Commodified goods and culture cross national borders easily. The writers who populate his stories also cross borders, but only because they are condemned not to find the home that products do.

III.

In September 2001, I started a PhD program in a philosophy department. Two years later, I earned an MA and left, unable to answer for myself the crisis of relevance that started in my second week of graduate school. The careful, neutral writing style that professional philosophy encouraged students to adopt paled next to the events that came to be known as 9/11. It was not the kind of writer I wanted to be. It was not the kind of writing I admired. Yet, leaving the program, I felt homeless all the same.

I displaced some of those feelings of homelessness by working for an elite center for advanced study in the humanities. It was a job I stumbled into by answering an advertisement looking for someone to organize files. It morphed into a career organizing conferences and editing an online journal of scholarship. Around the time the job turned into a career, I realized that I was still unhappy and that my unhappiness had something to do with giving up on my own writing.

But the work was interesting. It was work in the service of projects conducted by the center's fellows—humanities scholars on sabbatical with uninterrupted time to research and write. It was at the center that I met the poets Rachel Blau DuPlessis, John Wilkinson, and Piotr Sommer. And it was from them that I learned that good writing needs time away. Because of my job, I felt more

strongly than ever before that I wanted to become a writer. What kept me from becoming a writer sooner was my job.

I was working at the center when I started reading Bolaño. Every day, surrounded by writers directing their own writing projects, I felt that I needed more agency. The problem was that it was a stimulating place to work with smart colleagues and genuine intellectual exchange. I needed distance to see the cause of my own discomfort, to see myself in a liminal space rather than at a point on a predetermined narrative arc.

And so, at a café in my adopted neighborhood in Quito, when the owner and barista asked me why I was reading Bolaño instead of Márquez, I struggled to explain in Spanish that Bolaño's vision of global literature offered me comfort while I was living abroad. Although *One Hundred Years of Solitude* transcends Colombia and rises to the level of Latin American literature, Bolaño writes stories that cannot be contained by borders. Because he never felt at home, Bolaño's writing embraces a global perspective, filled with transient characters crossing borders both political and cultural. Their restlessness is their pulse; it is how they know they still have something to do. In Ecuador, I didn't read to learn where I was. I read to know I wasn't alone.

The second answer to her question is that we aestheticize our lives in order to interpret them. My first book of poetry, *What Comes from a Thing*, is in conversation with Bolaño. It contains poems on liminal spaces, placelessness, and migration in search of meaningful work. I use what I learned studying philosophy and write about the tension between intrinsic and extrinsic value. Although I write about philosophical concepts and problems, I don't write as a philosopher. I write from an in-between space. It is the only place I have ever felt comfortable.

In real life just as in a Bolaño novel, the social lives of poets are the most visible. In 2016, I attended my first AWP: a three night parade of literary readings punctuated each morning by an enormous book fair. Poetry readings generally are not well-attended (compared, say, to a film's release), but, especially during AWP, they are well-documented. Photographs and recordings are shared in the performance spaces of social media. But it is the quiet, invisible, unsocial work that makes us writers. One of the paradoxes of

writing is that we often use our writing for conversation with others. Lonely work to render the world less lonely.

Through Bolaño, I felt that I was not alone in my restlessness. At the center, many of my colleagues had comfortably worked there for decades and continued to work there until they retired. There was one other younger colleague who also had a passion for international travel and literature. We often talked about how the many comforts of the place where we worked scared us. He left the center to take a job as a librarian in Morocco and then Egypt the same summer that I moved to California. He helped me pack up the moving truck, and after, we drank beers on the back porch. As a parting gift, I gave him my copy of *The Savage Detectives*. It was marked up and dog-eared. He offered to mail it back to me when he was done. I told him to pass it on to someone else.

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Bio

Phillip Barron is a poet working at the intersection of poetry and philosophy. His first book of poetry, *What Comes from a Thing*, won the 2015 Michael Rubin Book Award and was published by Fourteen Hills Press of San Francisco. His writing also appears in *Philosophy and Literature*, *New American Writing*, and *Brooklyn Rail*. He is currently working on a PhD in philosophy at the University of Connecticut and eager to get back to the West Coast. <http://phillipbarron.com>