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The Revenge of the Idyllic

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The Revenge of the Idyllic
Sergio Chejfec
Translated by Margaret Carson

I was walking through the historic center of Caracas with no destination, and on one of those undifferentiated blocks that lie north of the Capitolio I came across an old school-supplies store, with almost no merchandise for sale and its shelves barely stocked. The owner had decided to distribute the few items that remained throughout the space, and for that reason it seemed like a museum installation, or something decorative, because each object took on a distinctiveness uncommon to its nature, which was meant more for use than for contemplation. This unexpected sight unsettled me; I wanted to observe each object as if it held some cipher, because I couldn't imagine that that sequence of display had followed from a simple action. So I carefully contemplated the dark wooden drafting triangle, the huge ruler adorned with its millimetric festoon, the softcover notebook that stood upright, warped by the passage of time, the hardcover notebook gratuitously laid flat, the compass from another era, large and heavy like an offensive weapon, etc. They were mute objects, of a silence so ancient they'd been old even in my school days. The owner stayed in the background, abstractedly looking out at the street, behind his thick glasses and dressed in a brown guayabera, made somewhat attentive by a visitor who was perhaps, I thought, interrupting his days-long isolation.

I was about to leave, but beforehand I gave one last, panning look and could see, under the glass top of a display case, some small white, blue-striped packets containing postcards of Caracas. It took me only a moment to awaken the man from his reverie and request him to show them to me. There were four or five sets, all identical; the price had been marked down considerably. If I'm remembering correctly, if you bought three you'd pay for two, but if you took only one it meant paying for one and a half. You couldn't figure out where on the scale the

fair value lay, whether at the price of the five, of three, or of one. I saw the legend on the cover: “10 color postcards,” “Views of Caracas,” and was moved by a feeling of nostalgia. I myself, who had been in the country barely forty-eight hours. But in that cover was an appeal to the past in which I felt myself included, mainly because, like any postcard, it wasn’t aimed at native Caraqueniens especially, but instead at visitors, with the bonus, in this case, of promising a version of other years. And what more can a foreigner ask than to partake of the past of his new city?

I opened one packet and discovered cityscapes from the 50s. They reminded me of those movies with scenes of panoramic exteriors: the city as a space where everything flows in an orderly way, and where the monumental hierarchy of the spaces organizes the perspective. I imagined possible similar postcards of my own city, I thought of equivalent postcards of an unknown city, or of a nonexistent one. I wasn’t acquainted with any of the places displayed in the views, much less their names, some of which prompted in me vague Caribbean reminiscings, obviously, also botanical and historical ones, none of which, however, I could verify and assign a reference point or precise origin. I do not exaggerate if I say that from then on I appropriated that vision of Caracas, I made it my own, as if it were a matter of a founding secret.

And so I decided to buy all the available packets, because in one selfish act I wanted to hide from the view of anyone else, of the clueless soul who might be rambling in my wake, those landscapes I had decided were exclusively mine. It was a gesture of appropriation, and at the height of my vanity I saw myself mailing these postcards to friends, offering up images that did not correspond to the present, as if the physical distance I had decided to install, so to speak, between my friends and myself had additionally allowed me not only to observe other times but also to gain direct access to another temporality. Because I wanted to flaunt them like bits of

lived experience, it was I who in saying “I’m sending you this” actually meant to say “I am here.” No one would be so naive as to read into it “This is how it is,” but everyone was, like me, going to think “I experienced this.” These images thus joined exoticism and shared experience, and for me were above all objects of contemplation and at the same time documents, the closest thing to relics.

Even as I was congratulating myself on the good luck of having stumbled on the postcards and was looking them over time and again, a new element attracted my attention. I saw that small holes had formed on each surface, in the most random places and of varying sizes; and I saw, too, that there was a continuity among them, that is, the hole in one postcard coincided with that in the preceding postcard or the postcard that followed. I mean I noticed, as the seller awaited my decision, looking out longingly at the street once again as if being inside his store had turned him into a miserable wretch, I noticed that the packets had fallen victim to termites. Or moths. After some moments of surprise and bewilderment, this defect, far from discouraging me, filled me with excitement. It was an effective symbol of the workings of time; a new proof, let’s say, of originality; the precise deterioration that made them unique, and that for that same reason far from detracting from them ennobled them. So I paid the few coins they cost and was soon in the street once more. The carts selling glasses of *chicha* were attracting more customers, and I was pleased with the postcards in my backpack.

In any event, the story didn’t end here. Instead it began at this point, or it shifted, for when I arrived back home and could look at the images carefully, these views moved me as images of a harmonious and slightly exotic city. Recently arrived, I had at hand a good portion of the imaginary past. This represented past was inseparable from color, the sole protagonist of the images. What would Caracas be without its colors? The publisher must have asked himself this

question, so as to take immediate advantage of the contemporary technical advances that allowed him to include as many greens, reds and pinks as his Caraquenian color sense imposed. That's why the coloration is so charged—impastoed, you might say—and imaginative, even undreamt-of, like the number of pink automobiles, in registers that are hard to find outside of the most expressionist ranges of Pantone.

I kept the postcards as a sort of treasure. They're the decorative tribute to a landscape that has no need of exaggeration, and yet almost inevitably provokes it. Every now and then I would mail them to friends, and they generally thanked me because they all felt transported to vague idyllic eras belonging to a time that had been extinguished once and for all (every one of them was silent about the perforations, as if they were admitting that it's better not to speak of what's ominous). The postcards told of the idyll between city and geography, one of the keys to the feeling of nostalgia. The search for that union was expressed in the intensity, not just the variety, of the colors, which were at the point of overflowing every border but without intruding upon the composition. As for the other intervention, the tunnels, I also found a meaning in them: they could be the perfect metaphor for the evils of the expanding city, etc.

But these holes interested me most of all in their concrete manifestation. I understood them as elements of fiction-reality. For example: a streetlamp on Plaza Rafael Urdaneta in the El Silencio neighborhood peeked out on a rooftop above Avenida Sucre.

A sidewalk on Avenida España was the equivalent of a car driving on Avenida Nueva Granada, in front of the Esso station; a red rooftop on Avenida Francisco de Miranda was in contact with La Rinconada race track; the deserted streets in Las Acacias with a park on Avenida Andrés Bello or with the plinth of the statue of Indio Tiuna, etc.

The burrowings proposed possible itineraries, coupled not only distant, random points, always emblematic, but above all different times: as the years passed, the pinholes ended up being the only truthful thing about these postcards: the rest might have been torn down or, what is almost the same, no longer exist as a fact in accordance with reality. The coordinates and the proportions of Caracas had changed, the landscape had taken on another meaning, the urban motifs were different, the ideas about the use of space and its capacity for regulating had been modified, etc. And so these routes proposed by the tunnels remained as silent motors of imagination. That is, it disturbed me to notice that the infestation, as it's called, had something to say on this subject and, still more, that I was willing to consider its signs.

The devouring insects proposed an open, rapid script, touching on the elements and devoting themselves to the next, always the next, situated immediately following the one before. I envied this mechanism and told myself that one of the best lessons I could take from it was the process. To design the route, to write the story of these elements with as happy a combination as that of the termites, which were successful at achieving a lasting material inscription (there is nothing more inscribed than a perforation, as if the effort of physical writing had gone right through the card stock) and an elusive connotative act.

But as always happens, the problems didn't end there. I would stop, I do stop, every so often to look at the postcards and I'm fazed by the surface (of texts we always have only their surface), that dreamland quality or innocuous quality they convey, as if Caracas were a transparent city, with everything in plain sight, pure beauty, and with nothing to hide. In a single image you see a neighborhood, made smaller in the distance, a barely discernible cluster of houses, covering the hillside in the background; it's the postcard of Nueva Granada, of course.

But it's not this falsification that fazes me; the truth is, we're used to being deceived all the time. There's another, more ominous fraud, though it took me years to notice it. The postcards seek to show the true, peaceful reality, but they err in proposing, in their artifice, clear air.

I think, in my justice-seeking vision of reality, that the termites wanted to refute that idyllic representation of the light and went to work accordingly. The light in Caracas is never diaphanous; it is always turbulent, grainy, shimmering because of the mountain to the north, whose valley follows the path of the sun, and besides, clouds are constantly coming and going. There lies my main critique of these postcards, their original sin and their fraudulent state. From the valley the light is like a clotted mass that is completely dispersed only when evening falls; the refraction diminishes and only at that moment can one contemplate the distance with no interference. Twilight, being brief, is anticlimactic and has a mortal beauty: the day dies out quickly, when the air has achieved the greatest degree of transparency.

And so I can also think of the termites' work as an act of justice: the promise of ruin that literature always flaunts in the face of so-called reality.