

Dinosaurs

The bathroom had pink tiles. That was one thing. Another thing, I told them, was a squat, oblong window above the sink. Too squat to let a body through, but enough to let the Buenos Aires songs come in, and keep coming in. It was a Tuesday night. I remember because as I was peeing, a guy was walking by outside, on the other side of the wall, and he was singing, 'Saturday, Saturday, Saturday, oh Saturday night is over.' I heard him like he was right next to me. The window was just above my head and had no flyscreen or glass or anything. I remember because I was drunk and I thought, that at least is true, because it is Tuesday and so Saturday night is over. It is true like so very few things are.

But that's what I was thinking, and I would have noticed if Gabo came in. Or if Gabo was there, because I would have wanted to talk to somebody about how it was Tuesday and Saturday night was over. I'm just trying to explain what I'm thinking when I've been drinking like that, because I think definitely, even if not properly. Definitely, Gabo didn't come through the bathroom.

It was the night that Juan did a set on his own, or rather, with a different band. He was alright. He was doing acoustic, all soft and murmured, with choruses like a pop song and a guitar around his neck. That was around when he figured he's a handsome guy and all the romantic guys were singing bossa nova like the Brazilians.

He brought around a new girl that night, this skinny brunette. I don't remember her name. She was on the edge of her seat just listening to Juan, not talking to one of us even though she was sitting at our table. She had a real sad face, although she was nervous and laughed a lot, with

a dainty chin like a bird and wet eyes. She looked miserable all the time, that's just the way her face was. She asked me about Gabo, when everyone was talking about Gabo.

"You were with him that night, weren't you, Manu?" she asked me.

"We were all with him. He was with us." She had never said a word to me before, and here she was calling me Manu.

"But you were," she stopped, "you were *with* him, weren't you?"

Then I wanted to kill her and I must have looked it because she took off. I was on a short fuse those days. I knew everyone wanted to ask me about Gabo, but she made me really angry. Maybe she was embarrassed that she couldn't outright say we were fucking, Gabo and I. But that's all it was, and it wasn't a big deal. Maybe it was just her sad bird-eyes.

We all met Gabo at the university. The student union Zapatas held a midnight rally, one of the first ones. Mostly speeches and poems, with all these young kids in jeans and a manifesto sticking out the back pocket. They asked us to do some songs. Rafael's sister was in the Zapatas and that's how they knew us.

I can't remember the set list, because I already got high while the kids were doing their speeches and reading from Che or something. So we got up and in the middle of this song I forgot what came next. I was playing bass as well as singing, and I got stuck on two notes for about five minutes. I think it was d flat and e and I just played d flat-e, d flat-e, d flat-e over and over. The guys were freaking out and the kids were getting uneasy, obviously. Rafael's sister was probably shitting her pants.

But then I started singing, ‘something, there’s something, something’s in the water,’ and I played that infernal bass line again while I thought of something else. It sounds like it was all an accident, but I sung it because I’d been thinking about this stuff for a while. I said, ‘there’s something in the water, you know, something in the water.’ The kids loved it.

We were doing what we’d heard was going on in Tucumán. Los Perros had a song about building a raft and escaping, and Almendra was doing this song about ice falling over the city, freezing the city when everybody is asleep, that was probably the best one I knew. The guys and I hadn’t talked about it, but we played it and it was what the kids wanted, even though they hadn’t asked for it. It was a time when nobody was saying anything, not really.

That was also before we really knew for sure that the kidnappings were real. We’d heard rumours about some activists and students in Rosario. But nobody knew their names and it was all very uncertain. Maybe they just read the Vedas and left for the Andes one morning, or got broke and went back to their mothers in Tigre. You didn’t know who you could ask, either, in case it was true.

But at this point the vultures hadn’t come after musicians yet, or city kids. It was early enough that everyone was perversely excited about being involved. The whole thing was thrilling. Something was in the water.

After the rally, we went drinking with some of the kids in La Boca. They were poets, carriers of the manifestos, and we had big conversations about things we didn’t really know. Gabo was one of these poets. I remember the first thing he said that night, because it made me wonder if he was retarded, and that’s why everybody fell silent when he spoke. We were all talking about Che, good Che, father of the young Latin American poets, saint of the Latin

American bar room, and the baptism into his patronage by spirits, by which I mean fernet, loud and drunk, and suddenly Gabo said:

“I don’t care if I fall.”

He hadn’t spoken all night. It was a high, stringy voice, like it had to be, to be squeezed out of such a skinny body. But it was lyrical, like he was reading poetry. Everybody stopped to wonder what the fuck.

“As long as somebody picks up my gun and starts shooting,” he said.

Then another student, who recognized the Che quote, shouted out and squeezed Gabo’s shoulders. It left his dark green sweater ruffled and showing a bit of his collarbone. I looked at him, and felt uncharacteristically embarrassed when he stared back at me. He was a pale guy, his brown hair so light that it sometimes looked ginger, and he was slim, no, slender with almond eyes like an Asian. He was the weakest person I’ve ever seen, and the most serious.

In bed, he embarrassed me with his seriousness. I took him with me, after the bar, thinking that his serious looks were seductive and wanting to reward him for his Che quote and the obvious respect that the other students had for him. But I was unsure, because I didn’t get any other signals. Even when he started taking his clothes off, slowly, studiously, it was as though I wasn’t there, like he was at home and didn’t want to leave a wrinkle in folding up his green sweater, his khaki pants, his thin t-shirt, and his cotton briefs. I was embarrassed again of his skinny body. I stood watching him because I didn’t feel like I could touch him, which made me strange. That was Gabo’s trick, he made me strange and melancholy, although mostly I was just wondering what the fuck, is he retarded or a poet. Then I got mad at my own strangeness and went after him.

Gabo wrote a song for us in September, or was it November. He'd been at a lot of our gigs. He'd come from the university and sit with the other kids, not drinking or talking with them, but they always saved his seat for him and fell silent when he spoke, like their secret god. I still don't really get it. We were hanging out with the university kids a lot by then, and some other odd people that talked about rock and poetry — and who drank a lot, of course — just hanging out, like we were all waiting for something to happen.

After 'Something In The Water,' the guys and I only played songs like that. New songs, nothing sentimental anymore, and about the thing that nobody was talking about. Pablo knew this other student poet, Maria, he was sleeping with her, and she wrote an insane song for us called 'Mister Scissors.' It was about a guy that worked in the theatre backroom, cutting out scenes from a film that starred his lover, editing and rearranging the clips, and at night he comes home and cuts her up in bed. It was good, really freaky. The first night we rehearsed it, Maria was standing right up next to the stage, in front of me, and she kept shrieking 'louder, louder, louder.' I listened to her, because honestly I was scared of her, and the song gets into a climax that is everything shrieking, like the lover in the song when she's being cut up. I don't know how Pablo gets into bed with someone like that, but good, because we started getting more attention with that song.

Maybe Gabo was jealous of Maria's success, and that's why he wrote a song for us.

"I wrote you a song," he said.

He got up in the middle of the night suddenly, like an alarm had gone off, and walked over to his window ledge where he had the piece of paper folded up. He didn't have handwriting like a poet, his letters were big and childlike, and the song was about dinosaurs.

"Read it slowly," he said. That wasn't hard because my hangover was coming.

"Imagine the dinosaurs in your streets, imagine the dinosaurs in your bed, imagine the dinosaurs disappear."

"Slowly, slowly."

"The dinosaurs will disappear, the dinosaurs will disappear," I read.

I didn't even sing it, I was too tired, but Gabo nodded, his eyes serious and his body naked. In my stupor, the song made sense, although in the morning it sounded a bit funny. But by then I had trusted him enough, this strange, skinny god of the young poets, and the song became our greatest.

We performed 'Dinosaurs' in Tucumán in November. It was a huge gig, they called it a happening, and all the kids came down from Buenos Aires and Rosario, even Santa Fe and Montevideo, for it. The greatest bands were there, it was a big deal. Almendras were there. They knew about our dinosaur song like we knew about their snow song. They even looked like us, these four guys in their 20s, haggard like they didn't have a mattress between them or a mother. We had Juan, though. Nobody had a handsome guy as Juan.

Gabo travelled with us, not anything special, by which I mean, not with me. A group of Buenos Aires students had started coming with us everywhere, including Gabo and Maria, who was sleeping with Juan by then. A couple days before we left for Tucumán, I passed this kiosko in Buenos Aires that had kids' books next to the chips and candy, like El Principito and Mafalda.

They had a children's book about dinosaurs and when I saw it, I had to get it. But it felt stupid when I brought it home so I gave it to Gabo. I thought, he might like it, he's strange.

He took the book delicately like it was going to crumble, which made me impatient. I grabbed the book and flipped over to this page I'd flagged.

"This one is you," I said, pointing at one of the dinosaurs. "*Apatosaurus*."

It was one of the vegetarian ones, with a long skinny neck like Gabo's or rather, like Gabo's body, and scaly skin.

"You are not one at all," he said. I was angry for a second, and then I realized it didn't matter if I was not any of the dinosaurs in the book, it was a stupid kids' book, but if I was, I think I would be one of the big flying ones, with bloody wings.

Things got really crazy after the Tucumán performance. There were thousands of people in the hall, and even more outside on the grass. Everyone was camping because the hostels were full and nobody slept that weekend anyway, except with each other. I didn't see Gabo again because the band was constantly swarmed with people, and also I was blind drunk the whole time. We had made it then, really made it. We played Dinosaurs over and over, everyday, and it was great every time, everybody wanted more. The kids worshipped us and chanted our names. Different kids came back to Buenos Aires with us, though some of the same faces stayed, but it was hard to keep track because like I said I was drunk the whole time and there were a lot of people around.

Everyone saw Gabo for the last time on the Tuesday. We weren't doing anything in particular that night, we were just out drinking at some bar in Palermo, the guys, Maria, and the

kids that came with us. He didn't come home that night and the next and the next and soon we realized that we had seen him for the last time. No one could talk about anything else, not for the usual reasons, but because we were really scared. They asked me about it. Did I know where he lived? Did he seem scared around then, did he seem like he knew what was going to happen?

Once, we all sat down and talked about what we remembered of that night.

"He left early."

"He was acting strange that night."

"He's always strange."

"The bathroom had pink tiles," I told them.

I was passed out in the bathroom when Gabo left, on his own. It must have been a long time, because everyone thought I had left too. But I was sitting in the bathroom, staring at the pink tiles because I was dizzy.

In the end, we didn't figure out anything and didn't feel any better. We didn't meet to play anymore, there seemed to always be something more important to do, although I didn't really have anything to do, except drink.

By the end of the month, Juan and Maria left to go to Juan's country home. They didn't tell us where it was, exactly, and we didn't talk about the band again. Nobody talked about much. There was a lot of moving around, and I saw Pablo and Rafael a couple more times. But then once, was it two months after or three, I came to knock on Pablo's door and nobody lived there anymore. So then I was alone mostly.

One night, I found myself in the same bar again. I didn't mean to come, I really didn't want to see that place ever again, but I couldn't tell at first. It seemed to be any dingy place in

Palermo with a neon burger sign out front. It was the same neon burger sign as a couple spots I know in the city.

I sat at a low table, unreasonably low for a regular adult. It made me feel overgrown and sad. My knees hung out to the sides, bent because the seats were too close to the floor. I sat anyway and I forgot to order a burger so I had a lot of beer instead.

I must have been there for a while, drinking beer, because I began to feel very bloated. My stomach felt baggy and my knees were cramping like the table was getting even lower and closer to the ground. Yes, I must have been drunk, and the vertigo made me feel like I was falling into the floor, not like an upright person falling over, but like I was swelling and swallowing up the small furniture. So I made myself get up and go to the bathroom.

When I washed my hands, I looked up and saw the squat, oblong window and started screaming. The vertigo, or whatever it was, swelled up in me and I filled up the room. I saw the whole tiny bathroom from bird's eye view and it clearly had white tiles, and it was clearly the same bathroom as that night. I looked and even though I was swollen and giant, it was clear that the window could have fit a person through. Then I heard bird songs coming through it and a woman's voice.

“You were with him, Manu.”

It was clear that it was Maria's voice, it was Maria with the sad bird eyes, but why didn't I know it? And it became clear why the tiles were pink that night and why I spent such a long time staring at them and never forgot that they were pink. The room swelled with bird songs, with Maria's voice, and I thought I might die but then it passed. I pissed. I was sitting back on the toilet seat. I kept peeing and the room deflated, so did I, and the bird songs wrung out dry. I

smelt fried meat and remembered that I had ordered the burger after all, and that I was ravenous, so I washed my hands again and went back to the bar, which looked all the same, and it was like nothing had happened, nothing could have happened at all, not really.