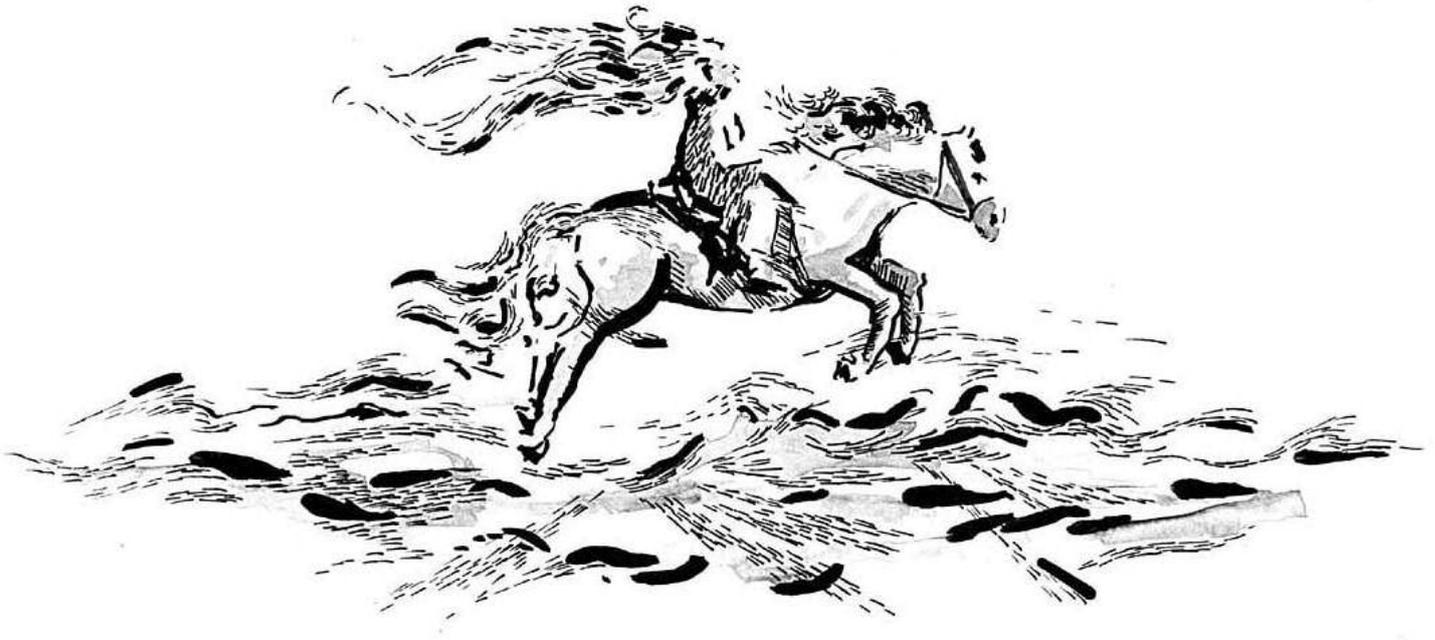


Four-Handed Story*

by Aline Petterson



To Hernán Lara Zavala

The Infanta, Doña Leonor, thought she would faint; it had already been many hours of riding under a sun that burned her blond ringlets. Her wimple fluttered like the pennants girdling the cutlasses of the men, those bloodthirsty beasts, who fled with her as their captive. Doña Leonor trembled to think about what was waiting for her at the end of the road. Two tears rolled down over her parched lips. The damsel held them with the blushing tip of her tongue and then, she drank them anxiously. The air felt thick, impregnated with the strong odor of the skin of men and horses. In the distance only the

thundering voice of the captain could be heard and, quite near, a continual buzzing as though a swarm of invisible bees were crossing there. She was enveloped by the murmuring of an infinite number of wings, the clanging of the helmets and the trembling that despite the scorching heat, shook her virginal body. With all the strength of her soul, she wanted to stop thinking about what soon awaited her. But it was useless.

Leonora raises her eyes in time and manages to escape the teacher's gaze. Her hands come up to place them innocently on the top of her desk, crisscrossed by old and new scars. Her freckled face instantly adopts a beatific expression. Silvia does not manage to escape equally unscathed. The complicit looks, the tacit agreement, the unending game of fantasy have all

* Short story printed in Aline Petterson, *Tiempo robado* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1999), pp. 123-131. The editors of *Voices of Mexico* thank the author for her permission to translate and reprint this text.

been left far behind. "Would you like to tell me what you're doing?" triggers a difficult moment, which is resolved with "Nothing, miss, I was looking for my handkerchief." Fortunately, the white waving of the Swiss cotton, with her later, convincing runny nose, drives danger away for the moment. And the girls' hands return to the clandestine underworld of the papers. The dull murmur in the classroom starts up again immediately.

The battle had been terrible; Moors and Christians fought resolutely to the death. The cross and the crescent moon were raised and lowered unceasingly. Both armies had demonstrated their unlimited boldness. But the last battle had gone against the Christians. So, the Infanta Leonor, the younger sister of Doña Urraca de Castilla, was taken by Silván-al-Hassan as the greatest trophy of the cruel struggle. The damsel would be added to the Great Sultan's harem.

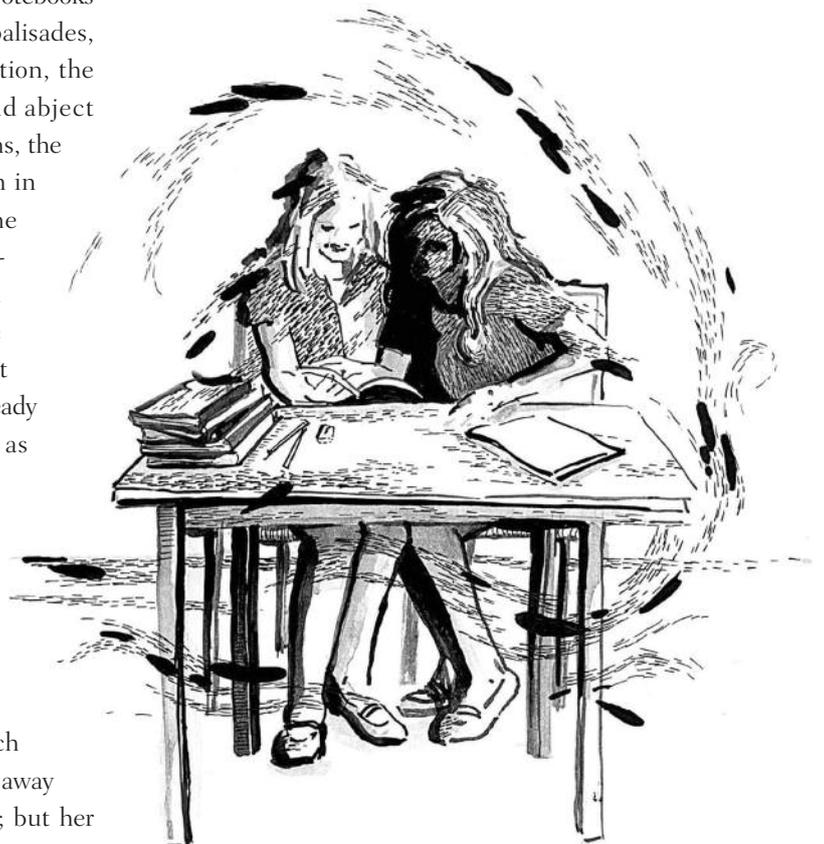
In the darkness under the shared desks, Silvia and Leonora, each in her section, have built and walled the Christian castle and the infidel fortress. The two of them have managed to design labyrinths leading to the blackest dungeons. Notebooks and books are turned into walls, dykes, palisades, that rise around the corresponding bastion, the moat, the drawbridge. Pencil stubs and abject erasers are the infantry, the stone columns, the signposts, the towers. And, well hidden in the depths dwell the main character, the beautiful captive, and two monarchs, arch-enemies, in whose defense their serfs and soldiers are willing to offer their lives. "The Cross or death!" "Blood and fire against the enemies of Allah!" But they are also ready if necessary to recover their existence as pencils, erasers, notebooks.

The heat was unbearable and the Infanta felt how the fine muslin became moist, the muslin that hid the barely blossoming rosebuds of her breasts protected by the corselette. She felt how her corollas hardened at the touch of the cloth. She wanted to touch them, calm them, smooth them out, take away their fever, erase their painful sensitivity; but her

hands were tied. Her black outer skirt ended up getting tangled between her legs as they hung over one side of the saddle. She was riding side-saddle. A strong shiver went through her; so she squeezed her thighs to stop the trembling. There, at the very center, she carried her hidden treasure.

Leonora moves around in her seat and leans first to one side, then the other. She arranges the pleated skirt of her uniform that is now beginning to be a little small on her. Then, a pleasant itch starts between her legs. She wants and doesn't want to feel it because her hands are still busy organizing the line of erasers and pencils in an attack strategy. The other two hands are similarly busy underneath the other desk. At that moment, someone is about to be called to the blackboard to read. The murmuring rises in volume with the wait. The two girls bend their heads down as far as possible, shielded by the bodies of those in the front row. They must not be discovered!

It was going to be Silván-al-Hassan himself, the Great Sultan's completely trusted, faithful lieutenant, who would take the captive to kneel at his



feet, and, after the preparations were finished, to the royal bedchamber.

Silvan-al-Hassan galloped swiftly to the front of the victorious army while his cape waved proudly in the wind. He wanted to arrive as soon as possible to prostrate himself at the feet of his sovereign and lay before him the treasures he had wrested from the enemy: coffers of gold and silver coins; precious stones and strings of beautiful pearls; silks and brocades; swords tempered in the river of the purest waters.

But, above all, he wanted to present him with the supreme treasure: the Infanta, Dona Leonor, with whom the powerful sultan would share his bed for a night. The damsel would be at his mercy, and he could enjoy her as he pleased. The sovereign would do with the Infanta what his royal will dictated, and, if he sometimes behaved with virile sweetness, other times he was hard and cruel. But every night, without exception, a virgin had to be waiting for him between the sheets, covered with veils.

Suddenly, Dona Leonor’s gaze met Silvan-al-Hassan’s for an instant and the beautiful young woman felt that a fever rose up inside her from between her legs.

Under the desk top, the drawbridge is raised, displaying its blue-black

grooves. Silvia’s long-fingered hands lower the bridge and the notebook cover at the same time to make way for the undefeated army. Little yellow pencil stubs and blue and white erasers are lined up along the books and notebooks. The smallest are shoved between the pages to give the palace volume. To raise up the walls. A folding and folded metal glass is used as a sorter. There, around that, the four hands flutter; they almost seem to fly to where the harem is located, guarded by the pink eraser eunuchs. “Leonora, what is wrong with you today? I’m talking to you. Come up front to read.”

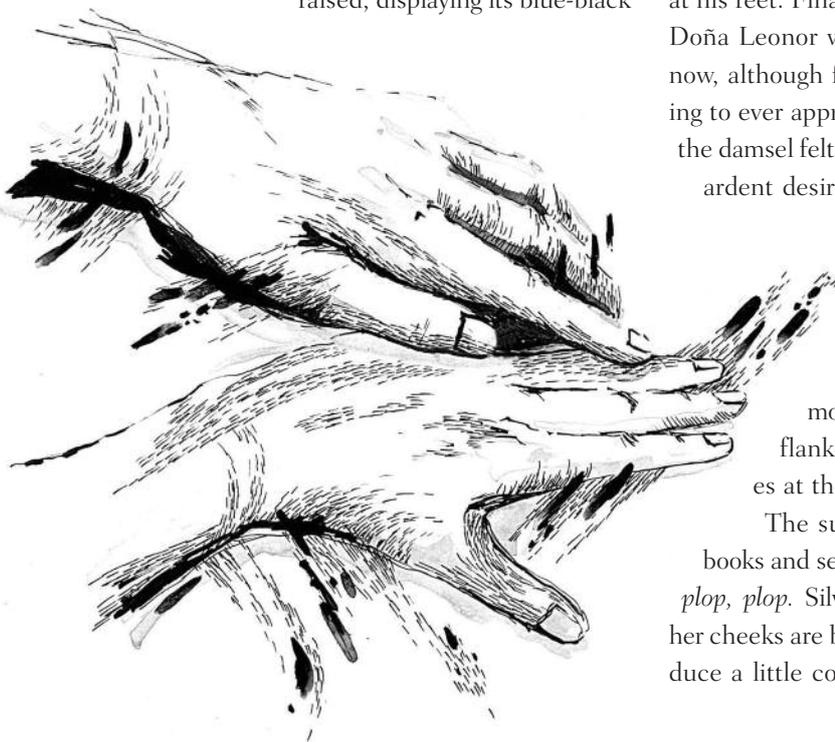
Panting like her mount, that Silvan-al-Hassan was now leading by the bridle, Dona Leonor trembled as she heard the beast’s shoes pounding on the strong tree-trunks of the drawbridge. *Clop, clop, clop* went its hooves and, with her hand on her chest, the pounding of the Infanta’s heart.

At the back of the inner patio, the Great Sultan was seated on a golden throne adorned with large emeralds, sapphires and rubies. Two enormous Nubians with strong backs, as jet black as the night, wearing beautiful turbans inlaid with gold and silver thread, held the scimitars crossed over the sovereign’s crown.

The slaves placed the splendid booty of war that Silvan-al-Hassan had torn from the enemy at his feet. Finally, the turn came for the charger Dona Leonor was riding. A page was leading it now, although far from the throne, without daring to ever approach the Great Sultan. However, the damsel felt the piercing gaze of the monarch’s ardent desire. When the display finished, he

withdrew to his chambers together with his vizier and ministers to listen to the military details. A strong, completely blind slave helped the Infanta dismount at the doors of the gynaeceum, flanked by large eunuchs with cutlasses at their waists.

The surprise makes Leonora move the books and several pencils roll to the floor. *Plop, plop, plop*. Silvia bends down to pick them up; her cheeks are bright red but she manages to produce a little contrite smile. Leonora, with shin-



ing eyes, takes her notebook and walks nervously to the blackboard. The story had been going so well....Sitting at her desk, the teacher prepares to listen to her.

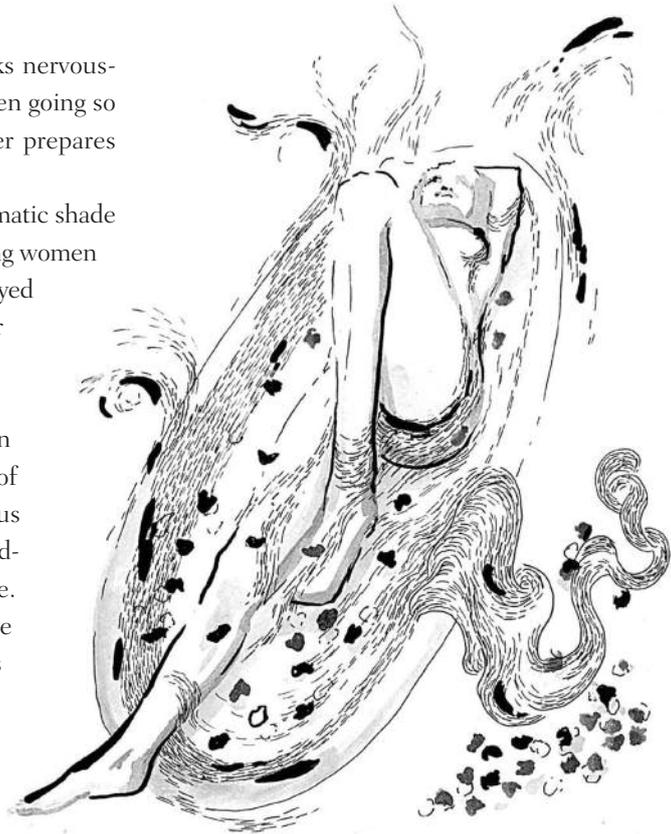
Around the fountain, under the aromatic shade of the flowering orange tree, some young women dressed in transparent veils sang and played and laughed. Doña Leonor lowered her eyes to her thick woolen garb as a shiver went through her. Was that her destiny?

The slaves took her to a chamber; in the center was a large marble tub full of perfumed petals. A slave with enormous hands took off her wimple, and her golden hair tumbled down over her bodice. The eunuch put his fingers in between the strands of her hair, and then the fingertips spread with warm oil softly caressed her head. The damsel closed her eyes to keep in the sensation of restfulness that the fingers were lavishing on her.

So, with her eyes still closed, she felt how the hands undid the ties of her bodice. Her breasts immediately were on guard, tensing up. Along this same road, very soon the hands came to the crumpled muslin that covered the damsel's tremulous flesh. Again, a drop of oil meandered sweetly through the white doves of her breasts, by the dark crown, by the two tiny peaks, upright and hard like dagger tips. And at that precise moment, the slave leaned over a delicate earthen bowl of rose water. And, with his lips moistened in the liquid, he deposited a kiss on each of the thirsty peaks, which, despite themselves, trembled with pleasure.

"Well, Leonora, you read very badly. Are you hoarse? What's the matter with you? You haven't raised your hand a single time. So what are you thinking about? The pot at the end of the rainbow?"

The breathing of Doña Leonor, the Infanta, began to speed up. She seemed to be drowning in the perfumed vapors wafting up to her from the water. The slave's hands traveled to her waist in an attempt to quiet her. At the slight pressure, the pair of doves became feverish. The hands then rose very slowly to the swan's neck. The tips of



his middle and index fingers began wandering, arriving at her lips, which parted. His fingertips touched her ivory teeth until they separated. Once inside, they played with the humid, shy tip of her tongue.

Back in her seat, Leonora breathes deeply trying to catch her breath again. First she closes her eyes, and then she opens them again and sees Silvia, who at that moment is looking at the teacher. Silvia's hands and Leonora's hands rest almost inertly on the desk tops. Leonora's legs are pressed tightly together trying to retain the smart, pungent pain. The air in the classroom is very thick.

Doña Leonor has let herself be led to the cushions spread out on the floor. With the security of one who knows what he is doing, the slave took off her black outer skirt that twisted like a serpent to the feet of its owner. Then he continued untying the drawstrings of the first inner skirt, the second, the third. Three dunes of the finest sand were piled on the floor. And there, in the middle, emerged, shining, the fearful nudity of the Infanta.

The whole classroom is bent over their notebooks. A few minutes to turn the Arabic figures



into Roman numerals. The V for victory and then three soldiers at attention. The cross leaning against the likewise leaning crescent moon. Silvia and Leonora's pages quickly fill up with capital letters of rather doubtful accuracy. Later, the two pairs of hands descend cautiously into the darkness.

In a blink of the eye, the slave's hand pushes her softly, very softly, onto the cushions. It was the last part of the purification, before helping the maiden to lower herself into the warm perfumed waters of the marble tub.

Leonora joins her hands by the wrists while the palms open up trembling and the fingers remain together flanking the entryway. Silvia's index finger enters wisely. At the two girls' agitated wriggling in their seats, their knees knock against each other. This also takes the two of them by surprise. Their breathing is labored, panting.

The slave's expert hands separated her thighs, and again he let a few drops of oil mixed with musk fall onto his right hand as it rose, little by little, extremely gently, to the center, barely guarded by docile golden down. His fingers followed the path as they purified the entrance to the treasure. Doña Leonor remained still for a good while, her heart beating at the contact of that hand that was readying her for the Great Sultan.

Silvia's finger squirms in the exact place where Leonora's hands join. Both close their eyes and began to move in their seats to renew the intense tickling.

Suddenly the slave picked up a little alabaster amphora and held it over the place where he had put his other hand. A thin trickle of honey began to drip down until it touched the dark, timid berry hidden in the lawn that the slave's hand had uncovered. Then, he bent down and his lips and tongue cleaned the spilled sweetness. At the end of the room, the myrrh-drenched steam in the tub awaited Doña Leonor's trembling body. Nearby were to be found the transparent veils that would cover her. And then...

Silvia withdraws her hand from her friend's and puts a honey candy in the palm of her hand as she puts another into her mouth. For the first time, the childish armpits exude a strong pungent smell. The game is about to be over. Tomorrow, Silvia will be the Russian princess Silvinka and Leonora, the Lion of Damascus, but also the slave Muley-el-Kadel.

Suddenly, next to them there is a disagreeable, dissonant shriek, terrifying them. Their four hands jump in unison. But perhaps they do so too late. **MM**