

The Claw

José Emilio Pacheco*

The things you must have heard in the confessional. Father, and here in the sacristy....You're young, you're a man. It will be hard for you to understand me. You don't know

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how sorry I am to take up your time with my problems, but to whom can I trust myself if not you? I really don't know how to begin. It is a sin to find joy in the misfortunes of others. We all do it, don't we? Just look, whenever there's an accident, a murder, or a fire. Everyone is so glad because at least one of all the evils of the world did not happen to them.

You weren't born here, Father, you did not know Mexico when it was a

small city, beautiful, so comfortable, not the monstrosity that plagues us now in 1971. Then we came into the world and left it in the same place, without ever moving from the neighborhood. We were from San Rafael, Santa María, or La Roma. Nothing will ever be the same....I'm sorry, I'm just rambling, aren't I? I never have anyone to talk to, and once I get started....Oh, Father, I'm so ashamed, if only you knew, I've never





dared to tell anyone about this, not even you. But here I am. I'll feel more at peace afterwards.

You see, Rosalba and I were born in buildings on the same street, barely three months apart. Our mothers were very close. They would take us to the Alameda and to Chapultepec together. They taught us to speak and to walk together. Ever since we started school Rosalba was the prettiest, the funniest, the most intelligent. Everyone liked her and she was nice to everyone.

It was the same in elementary school and junior high school. She was the best student, she got to be the flag-bearer at ceremonies, she would dance, act or recite on special days. "Studying is easy for me," she'd say. "I only have to hear something once to learn it by heart."

Oh, Father, why are things so badly distributed? Why did Rosalba get all the good things and I the bad? Ugly, fat, dumb, uncongenial, rude, selfish, bad-tempered. Anyway... You can imagine what happened to us in high school,

when so few women got that far. Everyone wanted to be Rosalba's boyfriend. As far as I was concerned, you could throw me to the dogs. No one was even going to look at the beautiful girl's ugly friend.

In a small student newspaper they printed, "It is rumored that Rosalba hangs out with Zenobia all the time so that the contrast will make her unique, extraordinary, incomparable beauty shine all the more." Of course, the article wasn't signed. But I know who wrote it. I have never forgiven him, although more than a half century has passed and he is an important man now.

It is so unjust, don't you think? Nobody chooses their face.

If you're born ugly on the outside people find a way for you to become ugly on the inside, too. At fifteen, Father, I was already bitter. I hated my best friend and I couldn't show it because she was always good, kind, affectionate to me. Whenever I felt sorry for the way I looked she would say, "Don't be silly.

How can you think you're not pretty, with those eyes, and the lovely smile you have." But that was doubtless only youth. Who doesn't have a bit of charm at that age?

My mother had grown aware of the problem. To console me she would talk about how much beautiful women suffer and how easily they become lost. I wanted to be a law student, even though then people would laugh at the idea of a woman meddling in men's business. We'd been together all our lives, and I didn't have the courage to go to college without Rosalba.

We still hadn't finished high school yet when she married a rich boy she met at a charity fair. He took her to live on the Paseo de la Reforma in a very posh home that's long since been demolished. She invited me to the wedding, of course, but I didn't go. "Rosalba, what would I wear? Your husband's guests will think you brought your maid along!"

I had such high hopes but from the time I was eighteen I had to go to work, first at the Palacio de Hierro and then as a secretary at the Ministry of Finance. I was stuck in the apartment I was born in, on Pino Street. Santa María lost its turn-of-the-century splendor and got run down. By then my mother had already died after terrible suffering. My father had gone blind from the vices of his youth. My brother was a drunk who played the guitar. He would write songs and yearned for the fame and fortune of Agustin Lara. My poor brother: all his life he wanted to be worthy of Rosalba, yet he was murdered in some dive in Nonoalco.

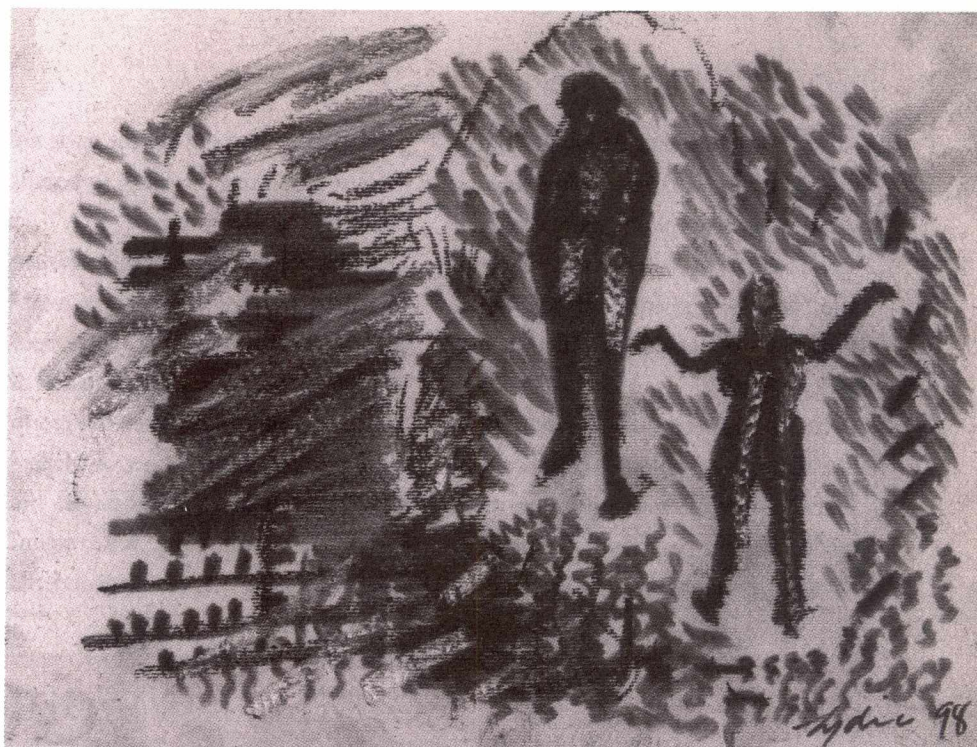
We went a long time without seeing each other. One day Rosalba came up to

the lingerie department, said hello as if nothing was amiss, and introduced me to her new husband, a foreigner who barely understood Spanish. Oh, Father, believe it or not, Rosalba was more beautiful and elegant than ever, in her prime, as it were. I felt so rotten inside that I would have liked her to drop dead at my feet. Worst of all, the most painful thing was that, for all her wealth and beauty, she was still as kind, as open as ever.

I promised to go see her at her new home in Las Lomas. I never did. Every night I prayed to God I would never see her again. I would repeat to myself: Rosalba never comes to the Palacio de Hierro, she buys her clothes in the United States, I don't even have a telephone, there's absolutely no chance of us bumping into each other again.

By this time almost all of our friends had moved away from Santa María. Those who remained there were fat, saddled with children, with husbands who shouted at them and beat them and would go off to fool around with all sorts of women. It was better to never marry than to live like that. I never married, although I wasn't lacking for opportunities. However down on your luck you are, there is always someone behind you, picking up what you discard.

The years passed. It must have been around when Avila Camacho was president, or maybe it was Alemán, when one afternoon, while I was waiting for the trolley in the rain, I spotted her in her big Cadillac, with an uniformed chauffeur and everything. The car stopped at the light. Rosalba picked me out of the crowd and offered me a lift. She was married for the fourth or fifth time, incredible as that may seem. In spite of the passage of time,



thanks to her efforts she was still the same: her fresh, girlish face, her svelte figure, her green eyes, her auburn hair, her perfect teeth.

She chided me for never visiting, although she had sent me Christmas cards every year. She told me that next Sunday the chauffeur would come and pick me up for dinner at her place. When we got to my apartment, out of courtesy I invited her in. And she accepted, Father, she accepted! Just imagine how ashamed I was to show her my home, to her who lived in such luxury, in such comfort. Although it was clean and neat, it was the same poky place that she had known when she was poor, too. All so old and miserable that I nearly cried with rage and humiliation.

Rosalba became sad. She had never come back to the place she had left. We talked about old times. All of a sudden she got to telling me how unhappy she was. And that is why, Father, and look who's telling you this, we must never feel envious. No one escapes its clutches. Life

is just as terrible for everyone else. Rosalba's tragedy was not having children. Men would catch her eye for a moment. Then, almost immediately, disappointed, she would turn to any of the other number of men who courted her. Poor Rosalba, they never left her alone, in Santa María or in high school or in all those rich and sumptuous places she went to later on.

She didn't stay long. She was going to a party or some affair and had to go home and get dressed. On Sunday the driver showed up at my door. He kept ringing and ringing the bell. I peeked out the window at him but didn't answer. What would I ever do in those rich surroundings? I was the ugly one, the fat one, the old maid, the spinster, the working girl. How could I let myself be compared with Rosalba again? I might be a nobody, but I have my pride.

That meeting is carved on my soul. If I went to the movies or sat down to watch television or to leaf through a magazine, there were always beautiful women

like Rosalba in them. At work I often waited on some girl who looked slightly like her, and I would be nasty, I would invent obstacles, look for some way to humiliate her in front of the other employees so I could feel, "I'm getting back at Rosalba."

You will ask me, Father, what Rosalba ever did to me. Nothing, really, as far as I can see. That was the worst thing, what made me the angriest. Remember, Father, she was always good and kind to

me. But she ruined my life, she made me less just by existing, by being so beautiful, so rich, so everything.

I know what hell must be like, Father. But, even so, people always get what's coming. That meeting must have been in 1946. So then I've waited a quarter of a century. And finally, Father, this morning I saw her on the corner of Madero and Palma. At first she was far off, but then I saw her up close. You wouldn't believe the sight, Father! that wonderful

body, face, legs, eyes, hair, were lost forever in a tub of lard, bags, spots, wrinkles, double chin, varicose veins, gray hair, make-up, blush, mascara, dentures, false eyelashes, inch-thick eyeglasses.

I hurriedly went to her and kissed and embraced her. What had separated us was past. Everything that came before didn't matter now. We would never be the pretty girl and the ugly one. Now Rosalba and I are alike. Now old age has made us the same. ■■■

JOSÉ EMILIO PACHECO

José Emilio Pacheco, novelist, short story writer, translator and editor, is one of the most outstanding and prolific writers of twentieth-century Mexican letters. Born in Mexico City June 30, 1939, Pacheco studied at the National Autonomous University of Mexico's Schools of Law and Philosophy and Letters. He went into publishing in 1956, making a name for himself particularly as managing editor of the magazines *Universidad de México* and *Diálogos*, as well as the "La Cultura en México" supplement of the daily newspaper *Novedades*, and as a writer for the cultural news program *Cine-Verdad* (Cinema-Truth).

His first book of poems, *Los elementos de la noche* (The Elements of the Night), was published in 1963, followed by *El reposo del fuego* (The Repose of Fire) (1966), *Irás y no volverás* (You Shall Go and You Shall Not Return) (1973), *Desde entonces* (Since Then) (1980), and *Miro la tierra* (I Look at the Ground) (1983), among others.

Part of his vast body of poems has been included in several anthologies, among them, *Ayer es nunca jamás* (Yesterday Is Never Ever) (1978), *Fin de siglo* (End of Century) (1984), *Alta traición* (High Treason) (1985) and *Selected Poems* (1987).

Among his books of short stories are *La sangre de Medusa* (The Blood of Medusa) (1958), *El viento distante* (The Distant Wind) (1963) and *El principio del placer* (The Pleasure Principle), for which he received the Xavier Villaurrutia Award for narrative in 1973. His most outstanding novels are *Morirás lejos* (You Will Die Far Away) (1967) and *Las batallas en el desierto* (Battles in the Desert) (1981), which has been translated into English, French, Russian, German and Greek.

Pacheco has published several anthologies, among them *La poesía mexicana del siglo XIX* (Mexican Twentieth-Century Poetry) (1965), *Antología del modernismo* (Anthology of Modernism) (1970), *Novelistas ingleses* (English Novelists) (1982) and *La novela histórica y folletinesca* (The Historical and Pamphleteering Novel) (1985).

Among the many works he has translated are *De Profundis*, by Oscar Wilde (1975) and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by Tennessee Williams (1983).

During his long career, Pacheco has received many prizes and awards, like the Magda Donato Award (1967), the National Prize for Poetry (Aguascalientes, 1969), the Villaurrutia Award (1973) and the National Prize for Journalism (for the area of culture, 1980). In 1973 he and Arturo Ripstein shared an Ariel from the Mexican Cinema Academy for the best original script and the best film adaptation for the movie "The Castle of Purity."

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