

# Of Memory and Forgetfulness<sup>1</sup>

Juan José Arreola



Enrique Vilaseñor

"I have not had time to practice literature. But I have spent as many hours as possible loving it."

Ladies and gentlemen, am from Zapotlán el Grande. A town so large, they turned it into Ciudad Guzmán 100 years ago. But we continue to be so much a town that we still call it Zapotlán. It is a round valley of corn, a circle of mountains with no more ornament than its good temperament, a blue sky and a lagoon that comes and goes like a slender dream. From May until December you can see the even, growing stature of the corn fields. Sometimes we call it Zapotlán de Orozco because that's where José Clemente was born, he of the violent paint brushes. As his fellow townsman, I feel I was born at the foot of a volcano. On the subject of volcanoes, the orography of my town includes two other summits in addition to the painter: the peak called Nevado de Colima, even though in its entirety it is in Jalisco. Extinguished, the ice in winter decorates it. But, the other is alive. In 1912, it covered us with ash and

old people remember with fear that brief Pompeii-an experience: night fell in the middle of the day and made everyone believe in Judgement Day. We need go no further than last year when we were frightened by fountains of lava, roars and fumaroles. Attracted by it, geologists came to greet us; they took our temperature and pulse; we invited them to a cup of pomegranate punch, and they calmed us scientifically: this bomb we have under our pillow may explode tonight or any day in the next 10,000 years.

I am the fourth child of parents who had 14 and are still alive to tell the tale, thank God. As you can see, I am not a spoiled child. Arreolas and Zúñigas fight out their ancient domestic quarrel of non-believers and the devout in my soul like dogs. They both seem to join together in their distant common Basque roots. But mestizos in good time, in their veins flow without discord the different bloods that

made Mexico, together with that of a French nun who came into the picture who knows how. There are family stories that were better left untold because my last name is won or lost biblically among the Sephardic Jews of Spain. No one knows if Don Juan Abad, my great-grandfather, took the name Arreola to erase the last evidence of the convert (Abad, from *abba*, meaning “father” in Aramaic). Don’t worry, I am not going to plant my family tree here, nor trace the artery that brings me plebeian blood all the way down from El Cid’s scribe or the name of the spurious Tower of Quevedo. But, there is nobility in my word. My word of honor. I descend in a straight line from two ancient lineages: I am a blacksmith on my mother’s side and a carpenter on my father’s. This is where my artisan’s passion for language comes from.

I was born in 1918 during the ravages of the Spanish flu, on the day of Saint Matthew the Evangelist and Saint Ifigenia the Virgin, among chickens, pigs, goats, turkeys, cows, burros and horses. I took my first steps followed precisely by a black sheep that got out of the corral. Such is the precedent of the lasting anxiety that gives color to my life, that concretizes in my self the neurotic aura that envelopes the entire family and that fortunately or unfortunately has never resolved itself into epilepsy or madness. This evil black sheep continues to pursue me, and I feel that my footsteps tremble like those of the troglodyte pursued by a mythical beast.

Like almost all children, I also went to school. I could not continue there for reasons that are relevant but that I cannot tell: my childhood transpired amidst the provincial chaos of the Cristera Revolution. With the churches and religious schools closed, I, the nephew of priests and hidden-away nuns, could not step into government school-rooms under pain of heresy. My father, a man who always knows his way out of blind alleys, instead of sending me to a clandestine seminary or a government school, simply put me to work. And so, at the age of 12, I became the apprentice of Don José María Silva, master bookbinder, and then to Chepo Gutiérrez, printer. Thus was born my great love of books as physical objects. The other, my love for their contents, had been born before with a primary school teacher as midwife, to whom I pay homage here: thanks to José Ernesto Aceves I found that there were poets in the world, in addition to tradesmen, small industrialists and farmers. Here I should clarify one thing: my father, who knows about everything, has dedicated himself to commerce, to industry and agriculture (always small farming), but he has failed at it all. He has the soul of a poet.

I am self-taught, it is true. But at the age of 12 in Zapotlán el Grande I read Baudelaire, Walt Whitman and the cornerstones of my style, Papini and Marcel Schwob, together with half a hundred other names, both more and less illustrious. And I heard songs and popular sayings and I thoroughly enjoyed the conversation of people from the countryside.

Since 1930, I have had more than 20 different trades and jobs. I have been an itinerant salesman and a journalist; a day laborer and bill collector; printer, comic actor and baker. Whatever you will.

It would be unfair if I did not mention here the man who changed my life. Louis Jouvét, whom I met on his way through Guadalajara, took me to Paris 25 years ago. This trip was a dream that in vain I have tried to relive: I tripped the boards of the Comédie Française, a naked slave in the galleys of Anthony and Cleopatra, under the direction of Jean Louis Barrault and at the feet of Marie Bell.

Upon my return from France, the Fondo de Cultura Económica publishing house took me into its technical department thanks to the good offices of Antonio Alatorre, who presented me as a philologist and a grammarian. After three years of correcting proofs, translations and originals, I joined the company’s catalogue of authors (*Varia invención* [Other Inventions] appeared in Tezontle in 1949).

One last melancholic confession. I have not had time to practice literature. But I have spent as many hours as possible loving it. I love language above all things and I venerate those who through the word have revealed the spirit, from Isaías to Franz Kafka. I distrust almost all contemporary literature. I live surrounded by classical, benevolent shadows that protect my writer’s dream. But also by those young people who will make the new Mexican literature: to them I delegate the task that I have not been able to analyze. To make that task easier, I tell them every day what I learned in the few hours in which my mouth was governed by the other. What I heard, for a single instant, from the burning bush. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Fragment, published and translated by permission of J.J. Arreola’s widow, Sara Sánchez. Taken from *Narrativa completa*, J.J. Arreola (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1997), pp.183-185.

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