

# The Life Outside

by Carlos Vásconez

trans. Eric Gelsinger

## Translator's note:

**What follows is a series of excerpts from Carlos Vásconez's novel *La Vida Exterior* (Corredor Sur; Cuenca, Ecuador; 2016). Ellipses are used to indicate transitions from one excerpt to another . . . Together, I imagine them as a kind of movie trailer for the novel. The series begins at the novel's beginning.**

*Wednesday, March 5*

Today at last I have published my latest novel. Will Adriana come to the party? All I know is she'll read it posthaste. Before she does, she'll pace around, book in hand, chewing her nails. With unhurried grace, she'll pose it on a table made of English oak. I know: I can see it. She'll think how my natural musk must be that of oak, and proceed to orbit the book as if it were a fire on a freezing night. Then furiously, without thinking, she'll pounce, dying of hunger.

I see the way she's passing the tip of her index finger across her tongue to expertly –sensuously –turn the page. I foresee bags under her eyes: the result of indulging her artistic appetites through the night and into the morning, gluttonously sating her hunger. I foresee her dragging her delicious feet toward the door to turn off the lights at long last. I watch as she looks back to contemplate the handsome chaos that reigns in her world and grasps one last time that fugitive figment –that miniscule sliver of a suspicion she'll never share with anyone else –that I, Belmondo McGuffin, am a genius.

I do foretell some disappointment at certain passages, but it will be nothing compared to her exaltation –I see it now –as she comes to the middle of the book and understands it was written all for her. Written so she could fulfill her destiny as my greatest reader: the reader we all await, those of us who embark on this ruinous work of writing. A reader whose beauty cleaves to the light in her eyes and justifies the effort of swearing off alcohol a few days, of giving up our chair at the nightly cenacles, of leaving off the friendships forged in the brilliance of our talent, and of dedicating ourselves to creation – that vanity which usually yields ooze. But for Adriana, my novel will be –plain and simple –the measure of all things.

Of course I don't expect she'll follow the instructions to the letter. The novel, like so many others I've embarked upon, is inflated with virulence and the characters wander around the suburbs and the protagonists see their lives turned into empty lots in which to find themselves: multiplied and alone. Like me.

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In the vastness of my imagination I've sketched portraits of Adriana and then studied them with scholarly devotion. It's a constant source of happiness to imagine her in three-quarters view, smiling while her hand holds down her white skirt, frustrating the gusts of the wind and my lechery. Even now I caress the frame of that imaginary portrait. My erotic leanings make me the most melancholy of men.

To my mind, Adriana possesses all the qualities of a woman permanently on the threshold of ecstasy: the gracefully awkward gait in which she leans into her progress –it's the walk of so many women made beautiful by their isolation, women who take advantage of holidays so they don't have to leave the house; and it should be said in passing that it's a cruelty to deprive the world of their beauty: for they know the world's beauty is congenital.

Many times last night, or this morning, I imagined her mouthing that exact sentence before the mirror, shaking out her hair, spreading powder on her cheeks until they're so flush with heat the rouge is redundant, moving her lips as if each letter were a delicacy. She's speaking to herself when her mother interrupts, calling from the other room, "who are you talking to?" as if the answer weren't always "a ghost." She'll then return to my inventions, to some prosaicism or other: like the man who dreams he exits from the final door but finds nobody waiting for him in the ineffable reality, nobody with whom go in search of some Eden, so that after slumping his shoulders he nearly manages a smile and turns back around.

More than once I've imagined her taking possession of me by night, going back through the book made haggard by so much handling. It's not difficult to guess how much care she put into dressing herself up, choosing just the right outfit so she could be utterly herself. To be Adriana strikes me as the most incredible of all feats –even for Adriana. And how I've imagined all my possible reactions! Myself crossly interrogating her with the dignity of an artist catapulted to the Nobel: how could she ever take pleasure in such dogshit. Myself humbly acquiescing but telling her I don't deserve her praise. Or myself furiously storming off that red-hot barstool which I haven't been allowed to leave throughout the course of the release, and kissing her like I want to devour her, without a thought to my wife who trembles there in the audience, who insults me, but who deep down thanks me for an act that will make me famous and will bring in plenty of money: that cliché of the writer who runs off with some young thing whose face and shoulders are sprinkled with freckles and pimples.

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My editor is back to playing games, but this time I wield a significant advantage: I don't care what happens with my book: whether it sells, whether the critics deem it worthy. All that matters is what Adriana can do with it. And so it falls upon me to perform a different kind of labor –very different indeed. I have to play the bloodhound. To track her every step. I have to discover what she makes of the book, and to learn whether if she truly understands it.

If she understands it, then I can finally rest assured my opinion of myself has been wrong all along, or that at the very least it suffers from grave errors. I can rest assured that in reality I am not just another false promise –I am a true author, a great author.

We'll see what happens tomorrow.

*Thursday March 6*

I've gone the whole day a nervous wreck. I ate badly, and drank two whiskeys to calm myself and ease lunch down my gullet. As I finished the second, I thought that some deity had given me permission to be a bad person, then that I had given myself the permission, then that I was that deity. A little later I understood I was seeking that permission from Adriana –my most beloved Adriana. How long it took me to discover all my work: inventing a story, bending it along an arc, transferring it to paper according to my own devising –was nothing other than a form of magic to draw her toward me and my obsession for total control. Strange it never occurred to me.

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*Tuesday March 11*

"Adriana Ravel woke up six-thirty. On the tip of her tongue, two names: Leonora and Bergman. She didn't know to whom they belonged, and didn't care. She rolled about in the sheets, tracing with her body an incomprehensible character, and arched her back so a soporific pleasure coursed through her veins and caused her to close her eyes again."

Could something like that happen? Could something so subjective enlist the flesh to replicate itself exactly?

I've thought about using this little diary for putting down my points of view on literature and the possibility, so certain and at the same time so remote, that literature occupies a space in real life. To materialize dreams. But in truth, it's more sensible and more comprehensive to refrain altogether, because there's no way such an exercise would yield trustworthy and verifiable results.

What is verifiable is that one might take a taxi and ask the driver to run the meter, and that the meter count from the house to the Moreno bridge and total the three dollars and forty cents it cost me when I took a taxi along the same route.

That one might trip and ask for help, near tears, from the first man to cross his path, knees scraped up, hands dirtied, overnight bag spilling out, a basket of flowers knocked over –made beautiful by accident –as he feigns one fainting spell after another

My mother has not called me. I have spent so much of the day stroking my chin it has turned into an obscene gesture.

For some time, I've neglected including the necessary minutia in order that my project result in success, but today I've taken up the task of inserting them because I remembered that I cannot and must not hope that Adriana follows what I write to the letter. It's a personal defect of mine, my bad memory, against which I battle half-heartedly, or pretend to battle given that I always allow alcohol to take charge and weaken me. My memory is a mess, and it's normal I find myself in disgusting situations.

First thing in the morning, I called Alexander Cleave, pseudonym of the great Roberto Sada, and asked whether he had begun his work. I told him (in reality ordered him) to get underway immediately, without vacillation.

Like Hamlet, Alexander Cleave derives from fiction, and, like Hamlet, he's a great actor (critics deem him "clever," "egotistical," and "a descendant of the Bard"). Perhaps in this respect, Roberto has

succumbed to the intellectual frailty of justifying himself vis-à-vis books. I don't really care; I do the same thing. Alexander controls the stage masterfully. He's a shape-shifter. A little glitter on his face, and his features change altogether. The trick's in what he makes others feel, in what he permits them to see. His own face is the perfect mask. A wrinkle in the corner of the mouth. A few extra worry lines on the brow. The stupifying difficulty of walking expressed by anxious eyes whose lids have slightly fallen, as if perpetually reading –perhaps reading the play in which he takes part.

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*Tuesday March 25*

I've seen him again today, in his wrinkled clothes. There's no doubt he's tastefully-dressed, but he doesn't always manage to be attractive, much less elegant. I never thought I'd see him in the cafeteria of a multinational chain, but there he was, constantly on the verge of losing his footing, with his bag almost coming off his shoulder as he impregnated his notebook with his palpitating pen. The three books in his hands checked his every movement. They made him innocent. They gave him an air of absurdity. In a place where things are regulated with a straight-edge, he was like an exotic insect, a flower in the concrete. He paid for his coffee by leaning in with his face –his mouth holding a bill –and the barista could not contain a smile. I didn't manage to see how they accomplished the feat of sending him off with beverage in hand.

I saw him and I knew he was thinking about work. Not only about the plot, but also about the book itself. A great author does more than consider plot; he meditates over the typeface, the dimensions of the pages, the heft of the volume in the palm, the pose in the photograph on the flap, the summary on the back cover, the gloss and weight of the paper, and through these daydreams which give the book life before it has life, he makes subtle changes to the story, he adds nuances, he shifts the narrative's course, he adapts the form, he stylizes. He insists his book take its proper place in the newly-discovered world.

To think about a book, especially if it is fiction, is to think a little about a death, and that's why writers continually think: to be less alive –because they are cowards and prefer to inhabit little by little the realms of the dead to have a better chance of rebirth later on.

Other days when I look at him he seems younger and sharper, more like his grandfather. Today he's a gray blur. A walking disaster. I can see, at this morning's sunrise, waking with headphones in his ears playing a melody by Zbigniew Preisner that follows him throughout the day but with insufficient force to dislodge a song by Nick Cave and a terrible thirst that compels him to drink from the faucet of the bathroom before he retreats back to bed to lie for hours wide-eyed and alert because, contrary to his own imagined insouciance, he waits helplessly and desperately to hear news of his book sales and to know whether he's met his advance. And his editor doesn't call. His editor keeps him in suspense – diabolically –and convinces him –diabolically –that the devil works to torture souls by making them wait. Later he spreads the newspaper over the table and receives a species of shock: nobody's talking about him in the paper. For days it's all that's gotten him out of bed: to see himself praised by third parties who give direction to his existence with a trailwork of laudatory phrases that vanishes like skywriting.

And that's why he's working on a plot. He's sworn to stop lazing around. Success doesn't come out of nowhere and his pointed responses to the probing questions of the critics have already come and

gone. His interviews have already been read, his answers have already been heard on the television. He had the attention of the public, and he spent it shrugging his shoulders—a gesture pre-rehearsed and so not entirely a mistake.

Sometimes I get the impression he was born while his mother was asleep. It's not only his half-closed eyelids. He appears (*to appear* is very common for him) to be in a state of weightlessness. What's remarkable is that at first sight I can't find the slightest resemblance to Alexander. Alexander is a Don Juan from head to toes. He dances with one hand on the small of your back and with millimetric pressure obligates you to turn like a swan curving its neck against shameless interrogation—with each twist closing the distance between its beak and his own croup. And he makes it so that we women want it to happen: he looks at our lips when we talk, he knows how to use make-up, he doesn't burden us with details of his work-day (which he must consider top-secret considering how little he reveals about his latest role) and he cooks a hell of a breakfast—one that serves to replenish strength before another bout of love-making that leaves us sucking our fingers for oral release. He's clever in bed and leaves us convinced he's the one who's been taken advantage of and deserves vindication. He uses his entire body to give and receive pleasure. His arrow usually hits its mark: the woman falls in love. One day I'm going to go see him perform (I'm sure if sees me sitting there in the fourth row, the fright will cause him to break a leg). He thinks I'm intimidated by him and, considering the circumstances of our meeting, why wouldn't he? I behaved like an airhead who cries because she drops her basket of carnations and who in bed concedes a man's every whim with the mute gestures of a drug addict. I still suffer from the loss.

(Now that a few days have passed, I'm glad to see my actions in a new light and I realize there's nothing complicated about forging an apparently fortuitous meeting in which every detail is controlled. You only need to have the patience of a thief, to find out when a new book will be published, to study routines, to slide a falsely defamatory letter under the door, to mention, let's say, a sexual indiscretion, and: lights, camera, action.)

I followed him from a discreet distance. But first I conducted a test. I got close enough to know there was a real person there: a humanity with which I'd have to negotiate if I wanted to reach for the sugar. He looked at me bitterly from the corner of an eye injected with sleep and blood. When he passed a few centimeters behind me, I moved so that his desperation not to be touched became obvious. Ideally, he would have spilled his coffee on himself or dropped his books, and I would have graciously helped dry him off or pick them up, making him feel like an old man. It's obvious he doesn't retain the slightest memory of me in spite of all the times he's seen me during the past week as if I'm all over the place at once. It's impossible to express the fury that comes over me upon not being seen! In any case, he managed to dodge me; they say about him that he's not only a thinking machine, but that he also knows how to move that unkempt corpse of his. He didn't even brush my skirt.

He spread birdseed without care or symmetry. Where did he pull it from? He didn't manage to attract many pigeons. Can you imagine him driving down the freeway with the same unraveling incompetence with which he does everything else, plummeting over a precipice but by some miracle freeing himself from the car with the last of his strength, breathlessly clinging to a smooth boulder bleached by the climate and lifts his gaze to see a magnificent spiral of vultures?

His novel is so damn good, and he doesn't even know it! Maybe he'll never know and he'll only be pushed harder to seek a yet more perfect form, but it's so good that it's forced me to illustrate it in flesh and blood. It's downright criminal, which is to say it's capable of eliciting in the reader the

jouissance necessary to spontaneously assault someone, abduct them, imprison them, and wait for Stockholm Syndrome to take effect.

He whistles. It must be Preisner.

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*Sunday March 30*

My family home, La Casa de Belmondo, boils with activity. It has turned inside-out. As with fruit, a skin presents a consistent exterior while inside all is juicy and lush. Each person makes a house in his own image. Every person raises his house with what he carries within. There's so much in life that comes from *outside* (as when an unknown yet ordinary man storms into your apartment); the irreparable drip of the kitchen faucet; the tattered slippers become home to an insect colony. It's that *outside* which waits to enter but not before it hears an invitation. Everything is justified: books arranged in collections, favoritism and fancy, a wrapper from Bonito Banana—even the Belmondo name itself in its pre-iconic age, which sees itself in the mirror and finds its reflection no longer moves with it, for in its eyes shine the eyes of all the others, exhausting the image with their misfortunes and their quarrels.

The time has come again for me to make love.

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