

**SERGIO CHEJFEC**

**FROM BARONI, A JOURNEY**

**TRANSLATED BY MARGARET CARSON**

A minuscule white town, Jajó lies hidden in the heights. At that moment it looked empty, so much so that it wouldn't have disconcerted me to know, for example, that for some mysterious reason it had just been evacuated. One had scarcely a hint of anyone's presence in the houses, and along its narrow and steep cobbled streets one saw no recent signs of human activity, either. I'm a bit embarrassed because someone may think I do it on purpose, but I must say that once again I found myself confronting a habitual, all too frequent, situation: wandering like an essentially aimless stray through silent, unpeopled towns, whose meaning is as hidden as the sense of my perseverance. At the town's highest summit I found the Plaza Bolívar, obligatory, and the Cathedral; both empty. (In Venezuela the main plazas always bear Bolívar's name, with the exception of a minuscule spot lost in the depths of the country. Every village, town or city has its Plaza Bolívar, and the attributes of the Liberator's statue are also foreseeable, depending on the status of the place.) I took a seat at one end of the plaza, on a slate-colored bench near some formal gardens crossed by paths of the same color. A short time went by, from the depths surrounding the town came murmurings of wind, or perhaps they were merely, as they say, the songs of the siren of the heights. Until at a certain point I was about to end up stunned by the immovable quiet of the place. I felt that my thoughts were being wiped out and a mild drowsiness was transporting me to another place. Then I stood up and confronted the local walk.

In Jajó, as in other Andean towns, you feel immediately moved by the balance of the proportions. I guess there must be some rule of the minimum when faced with the material limit on expanding and making improvements in nearly inaccessible places. Thus, the height of the houses and the width of the streets, for example, combined with the exclusive white coloring of the walls, alongside the surrounding physical monumentality, present the picture of a human scale adapted to the natural setting, with no desire to impose itself. Unlike other places, nothing here gave me an impression of imbalance or of neglect; on the contrary, even the most incidental details seemed to respond to a simple logic and to a day-to-day organization that is, let's say, straightforward. Owing to the altitude, things in general took on a special clarity, which, considering the predominant emptiness and the bright colors of windows, doors and roofs contrasting with the white façades, gave the whole of the town

a touch of measured elegance, or at least of composure, in no way dissonant with the great backdrop of peaks and high plains, with their even colors and uniform desolation. And as tends to happen, the moment arrived when so much harmony brought on an inescapable feeling of discomfiture, also of distrust.

I toured a radius of two or three blocks in the vicinity of the plaza; after the second corner the uniformity dissolved: in certain parts you could see neglect, or some façades were not in agreement with the general norm. But what struck me more was learning Jajó's limited boundaries, because when I went two or three streets farther along, I could see a plowed field, not too large, barely more than a vegetable patch, from which all the immensity of the region prevailed. There not only did the town end in the sense of houses clustered and organized, but the plateau ended as well, for on the field's far edge began the quite steep drop of one side of the mountain. You then began to descend and you found cultivated terraces, but you couldn't take that into account when it came to considering the town. Permanence and fleetingness; it seemed to me that both ideas were combined in this place alternating their habitual roles; there was no apparent contrast or conflict, what was constructed bowed to the physical command of the territory.

I returned to the Plaza Bolívar by means of a roundabout of streets. And at various corners it occurred to me to observe practically the same thing, that the actual space, the visual amplitude and the almost zenithlike, shall we say, perspective, practically began a few meters from there, without the presence of transitions or mediations as are habitual on the outskirts, underscoring the straightforwardness or the candor of what was constructed. I emerged into the plaza at a different point from that one I'd entered by. The world remained as silent as before. It turns out not to be easy for me to describe the strange amalgam of silence that inhabits this town; Baroni herself when talking about Jajó stresses the silence that reigned when she happened to live there, and which obviously persists. So I emerged into the plaza, and from this angle my curiosity was aroused by a bakery situated on the sidewalk opposite, to the right of the Cathedral, with its exterior walls white and painted in quite large blue letters, the name: *Virgen de Talquito*. I didn't know that it referred to the local Virgin. I was moved by the diminutive *-ito*, of a straightforwardness I considered

surprising, otherwise similar to that of the town, accentuated in some way by a material, talc, that I imagined implausible in a Virgin. (It seemed to me that a Virgin of talc would be overly threatened, even more so if it were a matter of a little talc.)

I've kept a photo of the bakery, taken from a few meters off, where the name that takes up almost the entire width of the façade is readable. The door is open, but as a result of the brightness of the day and the dimness of the premises, the interior is darkened and it's impossible to make out anything. All the same, I have a memory that effectively compensates for the darkness; when I paused to look, a man leaned over the counter and craned his head toward the street, trying to see me. I distinguish his face peering out and just recognizable as if he were in the photo every time I see it, but in reality he doesn't appear. It's also as if the photo were speaking, because whenever I see it I remember clearly when the man said, surely responding to a question somebody asked him, "He's looking," doubtless referring to me. His face displayed some very partial reflections of the outside light, especially in his eyes, just enough to notice, like those subdued ensembles of Japanese interiors, organized around progressively indirect and ever weaker aftereffects of light.

Later on, when I was back home and the interval in Jajó was another digressive point on my journey through the region, associated with the other places under different categories of things (photos, as I said, some paper with notes, an object or a simple souvenir), I learned that the Virgin of Talquito became the patroness of that town in 1936, when around Christmastime she appeared in some fine sheets of talc to a young girl who was working over them while making a Nativity. Very rarely have religious motifs interested me; therefore I don't know whether this apparition represented a common episode within the panorama of the other apparitions of Virgins. I do imagine that she did it in a time and in a way compatible enough with the condition of the place; that it was an obliging apparition and resulted in an evident but discreet presence, without sensationalism; as they say, she hit upon the right means for the town. I imagine the townspeople, all of them half related and gathered around the crèche, celebrating an apparition so chancy it could have failed at any moment, just with a higher than normal wind. The talc-sheet girl was at that moment wearing a yellow-flowered apron, she was a guest, she had arrived from another

town, but surely she also had some kinship with the hosts, who I presume were involved in commerce or the transport of goods. When the apparition of the Virgin took place, Baroni was just a little over a year old and it would probably be just a few years until she lived in Jajó, where she remained until she was married, at age eighteen.

After my walk, while I was sitting in the plaza nobody went into or out of the bakery. Nor did I see people in the adjoining streets. And yet saying the whole place was deserted wouldn't be exactly right, because you sensed life carrying on according to its own normality. It was getting to be time to leave, my sleepiness came on once again, so that I was just about to resume my journey. Right at that moment, as I was getting up, I heard the noise of a motor that seemed to be slowly approaching, downshifting because of the climb. Outside of its script lacking in action, finally Jajó was offering me something new. Life on the periphery thrives on sporadic journeys; that was probably the only one of the day or the afternoon. A school bus promptly made its appearance and slowly came to a stop by the edge of the plaza. I was already feeling very knowledgeable about the place, but not until the noise stopped did I notice the cloud of silence that surrounded the town; only at times broken, at that point in the afternoon, by the wind that, depending on its force and direction, was bringing the murmuring of a ravine, as it seemed to me. The driver got off the bus, took a few steps and when he saw me was first surprised and then raised a hand to greet me. I returned his greeting, as was only to be expected; and as I did so I noticed that he had no passengers. The man would have been about fifty meters from where I was watching, he had on a white shirt that shone too brightly in the sun. For a brief moment he seemed bewildered, it occurred to me because of my presence, but in the end he raised his eyes to the sky, performed a few stretching contortions and afterward went back to the bus to sit in the stepwell, where there was shade. A richly deserved rest, I thought. I believed I barely caught some music, as if he were listening to the radio, but this turned out to be something I never could verify. And even if at the time it wasn't an interesting enigma, I occasionally surprise myself remembering that line of music, as now, and would like to know if it came of a mistaken impression or if he in fact he had the radio on.

It was curious that I felt like the sole inhabitant and virtual owner of that place,

being a stranger who within the next half hour would leave Jajó, probably forever after having been there a brief span, equivalent to a blink, or less than that, considering a normal lifetime. I'm not saying I felt like an actual owner, but something resembling a mental boss, abstract. I was looking all around and everything came forward as a landscape that was available and ready to be occupied at will. I was thinking, this lofty and hidden town, so adamant at the summit, by now physically integrated into the mountains, is nonetheless as yielding and malleable as the most insecure particle of reality.