

RAUL ZURITA

THE NIGHT'S BOATMEN

WITH LINOCUTS BY VALERIE MEJER CASO

TRANSLATED BY VALERIE MEJER CASO AND MAC TEST

Night, the wet nurse of guilt

Shakespeare

With gale-force the silhouette of the first boatman arrived a little before dawn, cut out against daybreak's vast aridity. Below, the flank of a boat becomes visible, and above, his figure rose when he rowed backward, as if something had made him turn abruptly. He lifted one of the oars as if to strike with it, and the gigantic white emptiness of his face seemed to scrutinize the currents. Further back, the blurry contours of a shoreline, and above it, the blurry weave of what might be some cities, and then some mountains suspended in the endlessly arid sky. All of this in a second; his arm lifted one of the oars and I screamed, hiding myself. An instant later, shattered cities and mountains floated by as if they were tiny bits of paper in the river. Toward the bottom, the first clouds of dawn condensed and where the sky descended below the waves they began to darken like blood clots. Touching the horizon, the river was a single mass of blood. Daybreak arrived and Abel just came from killing Cain out of jealousy for a mother's love.



2

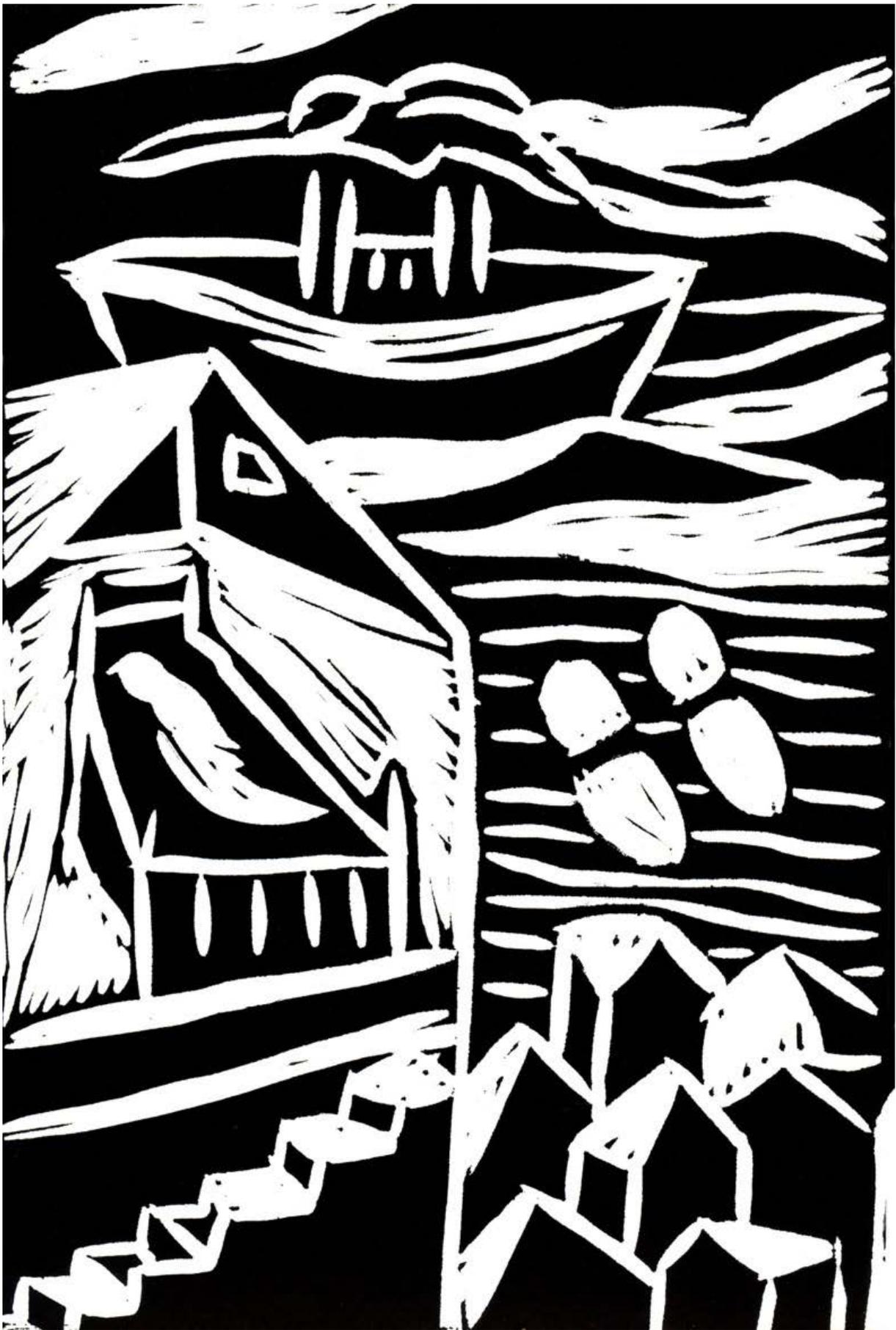
The sky fell over the horizon and the silhouette of the second boatman stood out softly against the sky, smooth as an enormous white stain. He crouched, with his head turned downward and his arms seemingly petrified in the instant of picking something up. Further ahead, also roughly traced, a wooden pier came into view, reflections of water, and further down the indescribable: rivers and rivers of blood, infinite torrents of blood, volumes and volumes of blood. This time I awoke screaming. The outside had recently become clear and I returned to sleep almost right away. When I awoke, it was already morning and I could only retain these images: a pier and the silhouette of a boatman gathering my remains on the bank of a river of blood. His figure poured into the sky, an indiscernible sky that could be either morning or evening. At first I didn't realize that I was dreaming. You also don't know if you dream; you turn in the bed sleepily groping for my hand. Dawn's darkened sky appears through the venetian blinds and the night's boatmen also await daybreak: the endless bloodied rivers of a land in which you and I will wake up. It is the 15th of October and is already late: you watched television in one room and I remember that I screamed, but then I returned to sleep again, almost immediately. I remember this P and write these lines in the bitter front of night.



3

Above, the figure of the third boatman appeared horizontally as if he were a giant void piercing the sky, meanwhile a little forward, to the side of what seemed like a dock, the diffuse outlines of the boat became visible. He turned around and the whites of his eyes bulged out of his face as if someone had called him. Lower down, the footprints of his shoes outlined the dock and later against the lower strip of sky; even lower down, as if they were enormous wells, his footprints continued marking the blood-soaked land, blood-soaked streets, and cities pooled in blood. I live in one of these cities overflowing with blood and I wrote these notes while P sleeps on the floor above. She told me that I should not make noise going up and then I recalled that the third boatman was standing up in the vast sky, and turning his face, the sockets of his eyes fixed on me like two white blots, like two vapor trails, empty and sweet. I also remembered that footprints were being cut out beneath the horizon, one behind the other, like long warts soaked with blood. As I climbed up, P repeated to me that I should not wake her up.

P then, I write the final instructions here for the third boatman of the night: 1. That we will wake up,
2. That our mouths are two cities filled with blood.
3. That we will wake up atop cities pooled in blood.



Below, over the bloodied land, the enormous fragments of cities and shattered mountains piled up all over the place as if they were dead animals. Above, the sky's blue background contrasted with the desert-colored silhouette of the fourth boatman. He pushed the oars forward and he wasn't alone; emerging from the stained waters, countless beings climbed over the rubble trying to reach his boat. During the entire night we heard the beating of the oars moving us further away: at daybreak we saw leveled regions, country-sides overflowing with blood, multitudes drifting by in the current and at dawn we saw him. The boatman's silhouette covered the sky completely and the smudge of his arms seized the oars, sending them steadfastly out over the horizon with an incarnate fury. Much lower, the clouds appeared like crabs closing over the dawn. When I opened my eyes, the forceful thrust of his oar had pushed me to the side and crushed my heart. It's late. The oars sink down from the sky, sweeping the earth and very soon they will break the windows and walls of this small room where I write to you. You sleep. Outside the night is a river of blood where Abel kills Cain and where the fourth boatman sweeps me aside with his oars, destroying me. My name is Raúl Zurita. I write this dream here, P, because you are the night's fourth boatman.

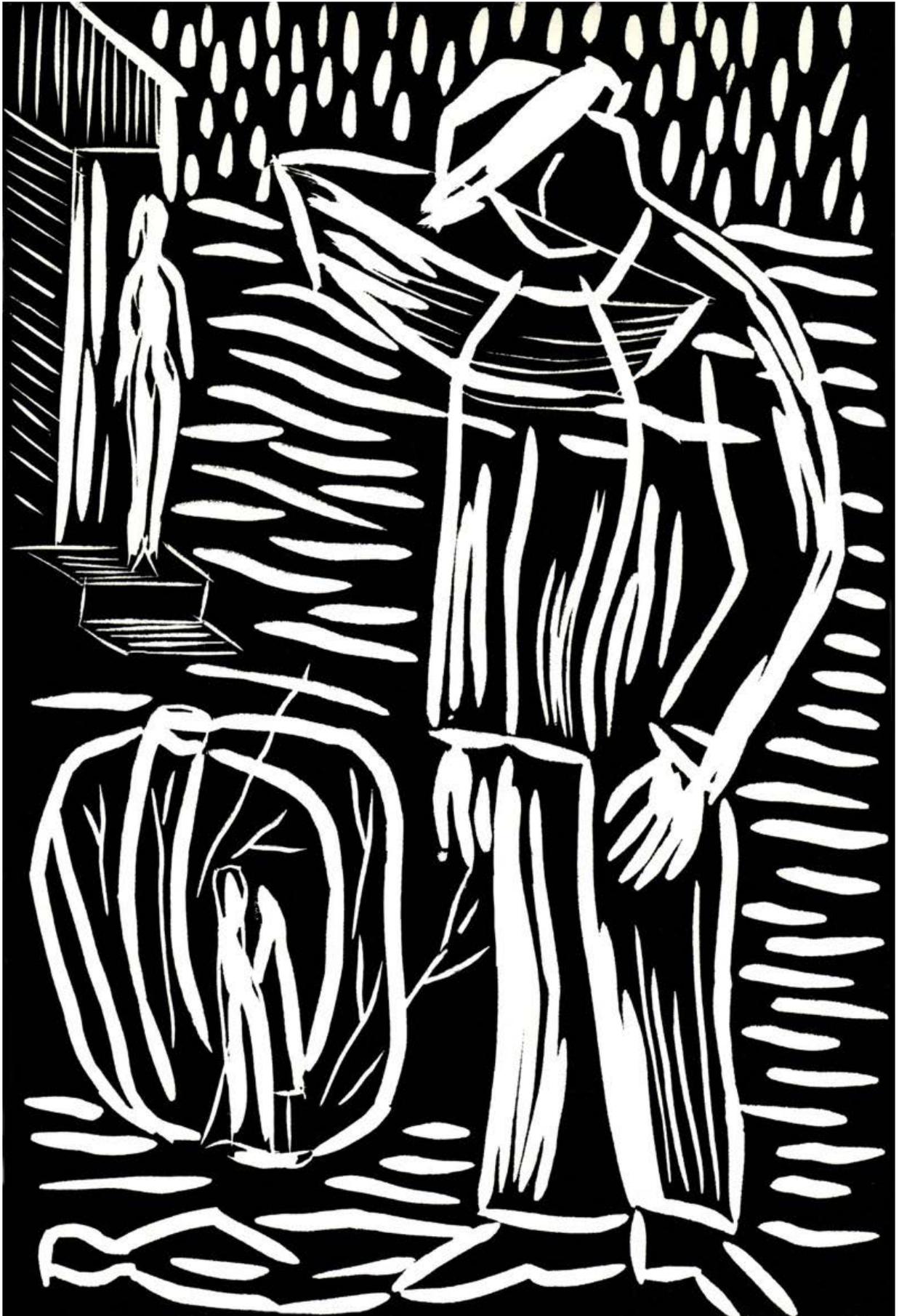


His features kept on fading into the distorted plain of sky while a little lower down, also crossed by morning light, the wooden planks of the boat could hardly rise out of the bloody waters. It was the night's fifth boatman. His upturned face seemed to scream, and behind him the other group of silhouettes piled up at the stern, squeezed so tightly together as if they were coats for each other. Little by little, the diminishing haze began to blend figures together, and when they disappeared entirely the naked sky opened like an infinite and white emptiness. A little before dawn, I managed to see him: cut out against daybreak, his hands had just abandoned the oars and the boat was about to capsize in a curdled river of blood. We were six and I squeezed against the boatman's back. During a few hours our features poured onto the sky, but arriving at midday only a contrasting horizon and the sun's brilliance blinding the earth remained. When I tried to grab you, P, your outline had been erased.

I tried to cling to you desperately while the waves dragged you onward, the clotted waves of the night's bloodied river, and all the land swollen. At the end, I dropped the oars. When the sun emerged, our boat had sunk. Now it is morning and you have awoken. You come down the stairs half asleep, glance at these notes and later tell me to lie down. I rise from a shipwreck and go up with you. I enter. There is the bedroom. There is the plain of the exorbitant sky.



Suddenly, the night's sixth boatman drew himself against the back light of dawn. He stood erect and left the oars on the boat flanks. He wasn't alone. On the bank, a couple of women and a man looked at him and he raised his arms as if he wanted to hasten the encounter. P also looked at him. She made me look at him this time and then she returned to sleep. The soft contours of the river descended, fusing with the early morning clouds below, which expanded near the horizon as if the entire sky wanted to empty itself onto the land. I felt the sudden impulse to cry, asking him, telling him all that I missed in his absence, but I knew he wouldn't turn around to listen to me, but rather signal that I sat with him. The oblique red tones of sunrise evoked the wrath of blood and the figures drawn in the sky seemed to enlarge. At my side, my mother squeezed my hand and my sister moved closer to me. The sky appeared against the white smoke of our silhouettes and beyond that the indescribable. Father, I wanted to tell him, why now. I don't remember much more. Her arms stretched out to embrace me and rather than tell my father that I would have waited for him, I got rid of these traces of smoke and ran. I ran and ran. When I stopped it was clear. A sharp pain shot up my chest, choking me, as if I had something stuck in my throat. It was my heart. I spit it out. It began to rain and P looked at me.



7

It is dawning. During the night, the slap of oars over the water sounded far away, as if they had arrived from high above, but close to dawn they came faster, resounding, and I remained awake until daybreak. Before falling asleep I saw him: partially covered by morning clouds, the silhouette of the seventh boatman stood up erect against the first light of sunrise. Underneath, you could see the curved bow of his boat and the entire scene appeared as a gigantic bas-relief engraved in the sky's dense thickness. The river currents descended, blending with the sanguine red of clouds, and lower still, covering the earth's debris, the reflections continued sliding down as if they were serpentine lines of blood. Afterwards, when the clouds stopped clearing, the emptiness of his sky-drawn silhouette stood out suddenly as if someone had sunken it even more.

The sheets are disordered and the two bodies have separated a little. P is lying on her back, she has her face inclined and one of her hands covers her pubis slightly. I am on my side, turned toward her and my left arm rests over her breast. I then note that I am dead and P is also. We had decided years ago that the image would look like this. Above, sinking in the brilliant platform of sky, the oars sound with less force, as if they were moving further away. Lower down, barely over the horizon, the dawn appeared as a sea of blood.

