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Translation Tuesday: Colonel Lágrimas by Carlos Fonseca - extract

In this excerpt from Suárez's debut about the final project of an enigmatic mathematician, a colonel's life is considered and mined for meaning

By Carlos Fonseca Suárez and Megan McDowell for [Translation Tuesdays](#) by [Asymptote](#), part of the [Guardian Books Network](#)

Carlos Fonseca Suárez

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Today we present an extract from Carlos Fonseca’s dazzling debut about the demented final project of a brilliant mathematician. Recalling the best of Bolaño, Borges, and Calvino, Colonel Lágrimas is an allegory of our hyperinformed age and of the clash between European and Latin American history.

—The editors at [Asymptote](#)

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The colonel aspires to have a thousand faces. The file endeavors to give him only one. Now that he’s sleeping we can remove the folder from the cabinet where it is stored, remove the blue band that protects the file, and thumb through it at our leisure, study the case history hidden behind this tired man’s dreams. On the first page in this heavy, grayish folder, we find the fundamentals of an identity: a name, date of birth, and place of origin. Strange inflexibility for a man who dedicated his life to being many, to seeking happiness through a schizophrenic multiplicity of personalities. The colonel inhabits his century with the anonymity of a fish in water. And, nonetheless, a name and a date bring continuity to the archive. Clearly, the sleeping man is only one. We are left with the magic of perspective, looking at him from a thousand different angles, drawing a kind of cubist portrait of this tired man. At times, asleep though he is, it would seem that the colonel is posing for us: he turns to one side, he turns to the other, he changes positions as often as he changes dreams. We tell ourselves that we must look at the file with the flexible gaze of one who catalogues dreams, we must analyze the colonel’s masks from the elusive position of happiness.

■ *The colonel inhabits his century with the anonymity of a fish in water.*

In the midst of war, the weight of his heritage upon him, the little colonel learned to play with his masks. We find in the file, in almost indecipherable handwriting, a note that

establishes the precise moment of what would be one of the great realizations of his life: to don a mask was to refuse a destiny. Dated in 1943 and signed by a certain Jacques Truffaut, psychoanalyst at a Parisian orphanage, the note is summarized in the following lines: “The boy refuses to answer in his mother tongue. He rejects Russian with an alarming rage. He seems to want to annul his origins. On the other hand, he caresses Spanish with an angelic fluency.” Truffaut knows little of those rainy Chalco afternoons. For him, Mexico calls up ideas of erotic barbarism, of adventure and expeditions with no return, and so, in an attempt to feel at home, he chooses to write, on the line for birthplace, the French name, Mexique. But the little colonel doesn’t like homes: he prefers a theory he discovers in a French copy of

National Geographic, in an article about the tribal use of masks in northeastern Africa. He prefers to think that civilization originated with the simulacrum, feigned identity, anonymity with a face, endless flux. He thumbs anxiously, happily, through the article that tells of a certain Johann Kaspar Lavater, father of physiognomy, who thought he had discovered the moral outlines of personalities in people's faces. The colonel sketches precise and fantastic drawings in which different faces are juxtaposed with animal physiognomies: a man with a pointed snout compared to a long-nosed dog, a man with a small nose beside a buffalo. He laughs in the midst of war, and his laughter is the first of many masks. Years later, the colonel will find in his love of butterflies a kind of final mask, a homeopathic remedy for this, his solitude of grand, dramatic laughter.

We need only return to his Parisian years to find the first signs of the colonel's adoption of anonymity. In the dawn of war, this boy with small hands and straight hair took on the palest, most profound orphanhood. Left behind, immersed in a nation of barbaric whispers, were his mother's Russian lullabies and the anarchic memory of his deceased father. In a Spanish sanatorium, a widow would spend the war buried under a different kind of anonymity: the brave anonymity of madness would save her from the atrocities of this horrible theater, so different from the one that, in another country and in other times, she had loved. For her, the war will be a long summer of white geraniums and demented delusions, of small, pallid afternoons adorned with the tiny red points of a light forgetting. For Chana Abramov, one war—the one that snatched her husband away from her, which she lived through in a language that she still associated with Mexico—would be enough. The year is 1943. Finding himself alone, the colonel decides to leave behind his childhood, devise a tabula rasa, and start everything over. A period follows that is as dark and forgetful as the war itself. We won't hear from him again until after the war's end. The war – “that long night,” as he will call it later in his letters – is a kind of black hole in the archive, an empty space whose negative gravity we have to circumnavigate until we come around again on the other side of the story. When we see him again, he no longer has his straight hair; it's now cut short, an ill-timed gonzo style that will be his distinctive look during the postwar years. The colonel has survived the war to become many, with the will to be always a little outside of time, prophet of the future with an anachronistic face.

His willful anachronism will guide him on his path through the century until it brings him here, to this bed where he now sleeps. The colonel enjoys one of the sweetest pleasures, though almost extinct: on this five-degree afternoon, while the lash of the cold front moves away northeastward, the colonel enjoys the

anachronistic pleasure of a siesta. In one of his letters to Maximiliano, he puts it in writing:

The century in which we are living, my dear Maximiliano, is the age of work. The nineteenth century was merely a harbinger of what was headed our way. Man has lost the ability to take a nap. And, I tell you, the wars are the accumulated energy of a century that, worn out, decides to explode over itself. If only we knew the value of a siesta, the pleasure of the hours lost to leisure, we would understand that history needs to seek the counterweight of its energies in its respite. Or perhaps all this is to tell you to take your naps, that the moments of creation are different from those of work.

Now that he is taking his anachronistic nap, now that he again turns his torso in search of the perfect posture for dreaming, we might think that this was merely a retrospective excuse, a way of settling in more comfortably on his soft pillows, a legitimizing document that he invented when he saw that his energies were no longer enough and exhaustion was bearing down on him. Perhaps. But we, the ones who believe in that guilt that is also his salvation, we think differently. The colonel's excuses are always valid jokes that hide the passion of a belief. In this, his prolonged and monastic withdrawal, the colonel devotes himself to paying homage to the most anachronistic of positions: that of honesty.

In the little book of aphorisms that a small and timid Republican militiaman gave to Chana Abramov after her husband's death, the following question appears: "How does one depict honesty in this age of disenchantment?" The father's question returns us to the son's dilemma. Because, though he doesn't know it, we have surrounded the colonel with secret cameras and microphones, we have inundated him with mirrors in a final attempt to reproduce a cubist portrait of his anachronistic honesty. And, nevertheless, there is something we do not see, something hidden behind one of the stories and behind the multitude of faces, something sharp and latent; we feel a presentiment, the worst kind of malaise. Now that time is running out, we search among the dozens of faces the photographs display, search among the cameras that surround the colonel, and for just a moment, however brief, we believe we see something.

For example, here: a grimace emerges in the middle of a dream. A solitary hand dips into the archive, fumbles about for a few seconds, and rises to the surface again holding a photograph. If we turn it over, we see that it has a place and date: Hanoi, 1969. It shows a man with the look of prison, a gaunt, cadaverous face in midgrimace: his eyes wide open as if posed in madness, his baldness already apparent, and his tongue to one side in a mocking gesture. We see a chalkboard behind him with symbols we can't make out, and still further back,

in what seems to be but is not a fake background, the verdure of the mountains. The hand sinks again into the sea of documents and reemerges holding another photograph. In this one, we see the same man, this time with a certain pleasing, New Age aura, less awkward in his pose this time, surrounded by a strange and sectarian assortment of what seem to be hippies and monks. A certain intellectual atmosphere mixes here with the deepest counterculture of Rastafarian braids, round spectacles, and enigmatic monks. Amid the sect, a woman with somewhat Asian features stands out. The man doesn't look at her, but she seems to be looking at him. In these surroundings so of their time, the man at the center, with his glasses and his haunting gaze, seems so in his element that we sense he is a man who has finally managed to coincide with his age. But then we see, on the second look, in a third glance, the idiosyncratic grimace that characterizes him. The colonel's grimaces deny the stability of faces with the same comic force with which they agree to disappear behind masks.

Did he love her? It's a valid question. If we look carefully, if we get out the magnifying glass and observe the details in a kind of anachronistic and cautious close-up, we can discern a certain tenderness in his gaze. It isn't clear, however, from the position of his face, whether it's her he is looking at, or if he's looking beyond her, his gaze lost in a cloudy Asian sunset. Perhaps, we think, his love was something written in code on chalkboards made wet by the misty rain of war, something written on that chalkboard where we can just make out an equation. Love, something like this:

$$\Omega_X^q(*Y) \cong \varinjlim_n \text{Hom}_{\mathcal{C}_X}(\mathcal{J}^n, \mathcal{E})$$

Behind the symbols, a mocking love. The colonel hides secrets on chalkboards that he scatters over a landscape of war. The joke, the grimace, and the laugh—the colonel doesn't distinguish between possible comedies. But there she is, undoubtedly her—almond-shaped eyes and dark hair—in the line of his stubborn vision. Now that she has entered this story, there is no way to omit her, her presence stays with us, forcing us to pose again the impossible question: Did he love her? The voice of reason demands the following: we can only love that which exists in tandem with us, at the same time as us. The colonel's anachronism seems to

condemn him to the deepest solitude. And it's in the middle of that populous solitude that we see a hint of the first grimace of drowsy pleasure. We'll have to tell the curious team to hurry up their work. The colonel is slowly beginning to wake up.

Translated from the Spanish by Megan McDowell

Click [here](#) for more information about the book.

Carlos Fonseca Suárez was born in Costa Rica in 1987 and grew up in Puerto Rico. His work has appeared in publications including *The Guardian*, *BOMB*, *The White Review* and *Asymptote*. He currently teaches at the University of Cambridge and lives in London.

Megan McDowell has translated many modern and contemporary South American authors, including Alejandro Zambra, Arturo Fontaine, Carlos Busqued, Álvaro Bisama, and Juan Emar. Her translations have been published in *The New Yorker*, *McSweeney's*, *Words Without Borders*, *Mandorla*, and *VICE*, among others.
