

THE CITIES AND THE DEAD

Viviane Vives



Viviane Vives is a filmmaker, actor, photographer, and writer. She is a Fulbright scholar for Artistic Studies at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, and her translations, poems, and short stories have been published internationally. Her work has been published in *Litro Magazine*, *The Write Launch*, *Burningwood Literary Journal*, among others. She was a finalist for the 2018 Philadelphia Stories' Sandy Crimmins National Prize in Poetry, and a semi-finalist of the American Short(er) Fiction Contest.

We inhabit the cities of the dead and their ideas inhabit us every day.
—Jorge Majfud

Barcelona, 23 de Noviembre, 2013

The battery will live, he will die.

You keep leaving in my mind, cancer in your mind. You ask me to drive the car so that the battery won't die. You don't want to give up, shuffling down the hallway, hanging on to the nurse, worrying about your car.

Vinga, va, "Vee-ves!"

I love driving it. I lose myself in it. I know where the luxurious Rover will take me: our old house, an exact replica of a movie star's house that you photographed during your trip around the world. Pedralbes, the Beverly Hills of Barcelona.

I turn off the engine. I sit in my metallic-green magic carpet; sheer cost is such an invisibility cloak, no need for a spell. Two children arrive, dropped off by some mother who's not theirs after playing some type of sport, probably tennis or polo. It's what we do. I pray that when they open the gate, walk up the grey steps, the god of the house, in all its blackness behind the white walls, will not swallow them as it did us.

I want them careless behind the windows with their fleur-de-lis, one after the other, oh-so-hollywu, that you built for your Bambi, our *maman*. Your love went hiding, waits; maybe each scream still bounces off the walls, desperate to get out. Does the wind that began here still swirl around the feet of these new children? Or has some new and powerful muttering calmed it down?

From the inside, the walls melt, dream by dream. So white she is, so chic, so taut, the house of Bambi and Alberto, where white doves think themselves invincible and gradually lose their light, grow easy to trap. White doves don't die on the tree anymore, but in the basement of the house, and the smell climbs up. I do not see any shoulder where death came to cry, but it's because of all the dead that my upside-down mouth slurps life mixed with ashes, because of the day Bambi whispered in my ear that *el avi se ha muerto*.

Muerte. Uno.

Your protector prince decides to leave the ballroom. You are nine, you stay numb and waltz loneliness, wrap yourself in shades of dark blue silk curtains with a Piaf background, the image of the hands of grandfather tattooed on your chest, lit cigarette and all.

Often, the front gate didn't work, would not open for us; that should've told someone something. I do not feel anything. I wasn't expecting that. The gate closes. I look at the wall that remains tall, long, white, still with its crown of ivy, still plunging down the street, alone, as silent as ever. Where it ends at the garage, still waiting, with a stiff neck, for her to arrive, for the garage door to open, the caged girl watches on, whispers:

What hurts is not the absence of them, but the reigning in of your love.

I blast the luxury radio, fill everything, let the music think for me. The car smells like cold cigar. I think of fuchsia curtains, the room where she abandoned you for years. No more cold-cigar smell. You puffed her away, the whole damn bedroom, the whole damn world—and me. The music screams. In a few weeks, you will die; she will die three years later. That's not what I expected, but I should have. The little whores stabbed me in the back, took it all, and disappeared.

I wanted to be a socialist . . . but only I remain.

Is war something like this, Uncle Al-bert? All of us there. Then, somehow, all are lost in the struggle—you don't know how, but when the dust settles, there is nothing, only the music in the car that purrs.

There are dead in every city, Viviane, and if you're lucky, you leave them behind every time you leave, but where most our dead are, Viviane, is at the bottom of the sea and floating in the air between Barcelona and Veracruz—one million.

There are, Great-Uncle Al-bert, many more. Do not forget that all the dead souls, souls of the living, died a little back then. And we were born from them, half dead, without knowing why or how. A bad history lesson in school, my own sorry tale of the fleur-de-lis house are not enough to explain what remains inside my blood, whispering betrayals to my ear. No one spoke of you, Uncle. I know how much this hurts, so I found you on the internet, together with a pile of Mexican cousins.

Muertos. Dos. [Two Al— —bErts.]

Un Millón de Muertos by Gironella on the library shelf, inside the house. I'm the only one that reads. *Ay Alberto, papá, tú eres mi más muerto*. You left me there singing in the car *que la teva mort* is sadness, but also relief, of the pale ghosts that float over the almond and the olive trees in Tarragona that Uncle Mercadé painted. You played underneath, arms in airplane, loving them, only to forget them, until they came back to you as forest, as I breathed in the spectacle of black pearls in your brain. Wandering Jews—Bambi saw them, talked to them, wrote their words in her notebooks. Some leaving, some converting, condemned to conceal their ideas, their betrayed tribes, treetop to treetop, still whispering incomprehensible beauty that no one but she and I records.

They hide behind poetry and chemistry. They sing soft songs, sigh to sigh, while they let the breeze help them sleep. Their constant tears make white flowers bloom in spring, when it's still cold, as they ride the low clouds of the dry fields of Tarragona. They go to Barcelona, then to Veracruz, and always remember how the pines smell when the Mediterranean shines. Blue and fragile souls from so much traveling, their minds broken from waiting for the others; I left for the USA and they whispered:

no!

These were your people (I did not know) pushing me, surrounding me with sea foam tugging at my boat.

You never told me about Uncle Al-bert or the others, only that they called you Alberto—EN ESPAÑOL, ¡CATALANES CABRONES!—after him, and that when you told me a little smile escaped the corner of your mouth. You wanted to be a socialist, didn't you? The war killed so much more than people. You just became rich. Or tried.

Maybe one day, when Catalunya is free, we will come back.

