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The Warrior of Saint John
by Javier Vásconez

Translated by Martin Connolly

He seemed a little older than the last time those soldiers had seen him…
Italo Calvino

As a child, soccer or hopscotch held no interest for me: play-acting was the thing. And not just any role: I was Julius Caesar, no less. With armor fashioned from old cardboard and a piece of hard leather for a shield, I would sweep from room to room in all fury, banging away at my tin-drum, rushing headlong through parlors and corridors and bedrooms. That was how I got on –for years on end, even. At least until that incident with Ramón, our black servant. I was nine. It was my first set-back, my first disappointment.

I could assume my role at any time, but public holidays and church days were best, when I could battle away endlessly with my imaginary enemies in the half-light of the Blue Room. The family portraits –part of the luxurious décor throughout our grand house– played their role as enemy too: they had to put up with my assaults and my fierce battle cries. I remember one portrait in particular: to the side of the old walnut writing desk loomed the unmistakable presence of The Venerable Bishop Castañeda. Ancient, with

his stark, onion-white complexion, he would visit my dreams like some kind of goblin –a spectral being, hunting for anything precious to take.

Mother named the rooms according to the color of the curtains and carpets in each, a general tone which would alter slowly in the dying light of day, and then again in the glow of the gas lamps lit by our maid, Petamaría. In such light, the faces of The Most Serene Saints, or the countenances of various noblemen and pious ladies, would glimmer with a bluish glow or olive-green tint. Of course, being a child, these subtleties were lost on me: all I could think about was myself, my other self, as Julius Caesar, Emperor of the Romans, in command of the West Alps. I went forward with confidence, Petamaría's broom, transformed into a highly-strung Andalusian bay, pawing the ground and prancing towards the statues... In the garden, I would happily stamp around, frisking in and out of the statues of Saint Sebastian and Saint Anthony. Yet I always kept my distance from the statue of Saint John, legendary accomplice of my malady, despite carrying the onyx amulet to ward off the aura before an attack…

Was Mother, I still sometimes wonder, somehow to blame for my behavior –why I'd walk around all day dressed up like a Roman, challenging the other kids in the neighborhood with my lances and wooden cutlasses? I soon familiarized myself with the art of war. I was Don Quixote, tilting at windmills, delivering blows with sword and armband against my foes: the wardrobe, the folding screens of the Gold Room, handed down through generations, and the great vases, into which flowed –I told myself– the waters of the Danube. I soon learned how to rain down brutality on my schoolmates. It didn't matter that the plump Valdés wasn't really a Norman shire horse, or that Ramirez wasn't actually a deserter from the Battle of

Tapso: they still deserved their punishment. It was even worse for the freckly Murieta, who only had to see me marching toward him with my sword raised before he'd scream, *You win! You win!* Anything to stop me from taking his lunch from him at recess.

No doubt thanks to Mother's generous donation toward the completion of the football field, Brother Manuel began to afford me his protection, to look out for me. That's when I saw the link between power and money: you can only be truly Roman if you have money, or illustrious bishops behind you. It was an arrangement that suited everyone, so they indulged me, letting me prance around, dressed as an Emperor, for four long years. Ramón the Negro warned me, *Watch out, kid, watch out, the others are going to beat you up someday.* But I didn't pay any attention to him. Convinced I was untouchable, that I was Julius Caesar, no less, I happily rushed around the playgrounds in the school –undeterred by the illness of Saint John, which at that time was never far away from me.

Petamaría always kept a watchful eye on me. She saw my play-acting as a phase I'd pass through soon enough: I wouldn't spend the whole of my childhood exacting punishment on my enemies, slitting the throats of the infidel azaleas and little flowers, as though they were really Gauls. And yet, I never let up, never gave pause to my campaign against my enemies, whoever or whatever they were: *guaba* trees or cypresses –I crushed their very shadows. And I would always leave the weeping willows to the last, before lunchtime, invading their cavern-like arches to make havoc. Yes, Petamaría looked on, observing my games, my assaults, my skirmishes, with something like horror. From the kitchen, stirring the pot for dinner or making pineapple dainties, she watched as I carried out my attacks, leaving the garden in ruins

in no time at all. Even at midday, as the glass screen-partition did its best to stop the sunlight from penetrating deep into the interior rooms, I still hadn't given up. Indeed, it was then I was at my most imperious, sat upon my lofty mount, surveying all and demanding drinks of mulberry or *granadilla* juice. The innocent victims of my attacks lay all about me in their agony, clamoring for justice; the hydrangeas swayed like old cripples, and, in my fevered imagination, the once-sturdy and brave roiled, vomiting blood into the placid waters of the garden stone pool. Over the dirt paths, the red roses lay, stampeded under by the hooves of my trusty Andalusian bay, the geraniums, too; the poppy-soldiers in their flared doublets and the dahlias, now more like bloodstains, wallowed in their death throes, mercilessly savaged in the flowing ruin of war. The demolished bushes, blue flower-domes and Moorish marigolds melded into one huge pile of waste, stretching from the sloping alley at one end of the garden to the corner at the other end, where the little statue of the saint stood. To my eyes it was not just a garden in ruins, but a town, an entire town put to the sword. Poor Petamaría, devastated herself, gave voice to her thoughts: *No-one's to blame, no-one's to blame… It's not superstition, and nothing to do with Saint John. Some skeleton in the family cupboard more like, poisoning the blood, poisoning the roses…* Mother told her to shut up –the mere prattle of an old servant with nothing better to do than air her own demons in public. She said no-one was listening to her. Mother withdrew from the scene, withdrew, as she always did, into her world of fine embroidery, shifting her attention onto her lace inserts before she would ever get round to calling for me.

In her hands, the needles worked and purled with such repetitive energy as to look more like the pistons of an engine than the fine handiwork of a lady. On the lace border a garland, a tulip or angelic flower would soon be born –to

take the place of the one I had so wantonly destroyed in the garden that morning. Mother was well aware of my crimes, and my cruelties. But she kept silent, and wrapped herself up in her craft. She would keep a passive eye on me though, as she worked away in her rocking chair. She would remain silent. Silent, even as I laid traps for the birds between trees. She never told me off once. Sometimes a sparrow might get caught in my trap. When that happened, Mother concentrated even harder on her embroidery, so as not to have to scold me. Even as I senselessly plucked feathers from the little bird's body. I can still remember how I pressed down on that small lukewarm body, feeling its heart beating under my fingers, its impotence one with my own, the sensation of helplessness that always preceded my fits, my convulsions. Even now I can see Petamaría washing my hands, washing off the feathers, washing off the blood… And yet, I remained untouched. I would glimpse myself in the mirror: I was still Julius Caesar, with my cardboard armor and my tin-drum, beginning the ascent of the staircase, my Pyrenees, under Mother's indulgent gaze.

Shortly after, however, my world suddenly fell in. It happened on a Tuesday, just after playtime: brusque, adult hands took hold of me. It happened so quickly, I had no idea what was going on, and no way to understand what Father Adorno was doing, that he was purifying himself with holy water and words from the Liturgy, as a prelude to taking the Host in his hands, the Sacrosanct Body of Jesus... I was helpless to stop the spectacular descent of the moon, and the serpent from hell, the fall of the ruddy-faced cherubs hand in hand with the Holy Blessed Virgin. And the world directly before my eyes was falling too: the chasuble of the priest, the cruet in his hands, the stole on his shoulder were shattering before me into a thousand colors. Some bestial, unstoppable force had taken control of my body. With precipitous haste the

convulsions, in the midst of my anguish, grew stronger and stronger. Overwhelmed by an infinite space, objects within my field of vision and grasp moved ever away, away from my aching hands, those hands which loved destroying so much… my fingers rubbing, again and again, the little body of the broken sparrow as if it were really my own tongue, and my face then pushed violently up against the praying-desk in the school room. It was like an unending game of mirrors, like a dance whose central figure is always in motion…I can never forget that it was a Tuesday. From that day on, my school mates associated my illness with Tuesday Mass. From that day on, I'd feel the solitariness of the epileptic. From that day on, once my fits started there'd be a race to the door, screams, and Alvarez shouting *He's possessed, he's possessed!*

Upon waking, I felt a great vacuum enveloping me. In through the open window I could see the last stubborn glimmerings of the dying day. Eventually these faded, retreating from the carpet they had illuminated, and the mirror, now eclipsed with a cloth. Upon waking, urgent shadows grew, enveloping the faces of Gaspar, Melchor and Balthasar over the fireplace. At that moment, all objects around me –curtains, table, mirror– seemed drained entirely of meaning. My sense of emptiness increased as, each moment, the darkness grew, transforming and solemnizing the demented gaze of the face of Bishop Castañeda. In the tones of a prayer, Mother kept repeating *It's the evil of Saint John, the evil of Saint John,* sobbing from time to time. In the doorframe stood Ramón, silent, turning his old worn-out hat round and round in his fingers. Mother thanked him several times for having taken me home, passing him a couple of banknotes in the process. I caught the phrase: *May God repay you,* as I managed to fix my attention on the portrait of Bishop Castañeda. The Righteous, Noble and Illustrious Prelate, throwback

to the colonial days, was looking down on me, judging me, judging me with his little rat-like eyes… Suffocated by strange premonitions, I forced myself to get up, against the shouted advice of Petamaría.

For quite a long time, Mother had made efforts, in her own way, to 'understand.' She searched the texts of the mystics, like Isaac the Blind, and the Rabbi Abufalia, whose knowledge of syncope, according to Father Adorno, was unique. But to no avail; what revelation could there be? The pattern was inevitable: Saint John, the illness of Saint John, attracted the rich and powerful. Bishops, the illustrious gentlemen of Orleans and Castille, generals who had conquered the world –and me among them, as Julius Caesar, with my cardboard armor and my leather shield–, the queens, like Margaret of Navarre, who, even in the midst of her worst convulsions gallantly tried to strum the Italian lute, the mandolin… Poor Mother! Convent-raised, and knowing more about embroidery than people, had directed me unconsciously into what I became, a play-actor, more at home as Julius Caesar than as her son. How she loved to declare that her family name, Castañeda, was every bit as famous as that of, say, Margaret of Navarre! And of course Caesar himself, falling from his nag in the middle of the battle of Pharsalus.

Yet I was far from discouraged. From that day forward I did not wait for holidays to don my disguise: I began attending school dressed as a Roman. Riding my broom, I drummed up a fine imitation of a bucking pony, or a plucky Andalusian bay, letting myself go, stamping around in fine fettle. The almost-clockwork interlocking steps, like tap dancing steps, revealed that it was indeed a fine pedigree stallion. Yet, my fellow students were more interested in football, hopscotch and playing games than watching me

stamping around on the lawn. I was ignored, and that gave me a sense of unease, a sadness not even the love of my mother could dispel. Desolated by the indifference, even to my armor, my regalia, I had no choice but to declare all-out war on them. A Roman General, complete with his magnificent Andalusian bay, was not something to be taken so lightly. After all, I told myself, I was superior to all of them. I was from an illustrious family and, as a mark of our elevation above the masses, I had the privilege of suffering from fainting fits. Who was the freckly Murieta to one such as me? Without doubt, a mere pauper next to me –so poor he didn't even have enough money to buy penny toffees. I rewarded myself in my exclusion by imagining I was king, lord and master, Emperor over all.

I was so busy attempting to recruit soldiers from the Third Grade, I neglected the words of Ramón: *Watch out, boy, watch out, they're going to lynch you someday… What rubbish*, exclaimed Mother one day, *What would a stinking black like him know?* I ploughed on, oblivious to what anyone might say, continued putting on a show of my bravura, even on occasion throwing stones at those who played hopscotch or football. In my mind, my cries of military proclamation resounded throughout the school like the howling of some wolf. In fact, my leader's cries resounded without raising anyone's eyebrows. I would tell myself I was a feared ruler, and even secretly admired. I did not leave the First Graders alone; I hounded them every day. The battle was always fierce; each one of my attacks would leave me with a black eye, a grazed knee or some injury. I was unperturbed: I was Julius Caesar, with my cardboard armor and my leather shield. I was Emperor, Lord and Master of the school, until, suddenly one morning, one dreadful morning, Ramón collapsed on the patio. He collapsed like a stone on the floor, which quickly became smeared and filthy with his blood. He writhed

on the floor, wrought by violent, sickening convulsions, biting the dust with that purple, sick Negro tongue of his.

I cried for days afterwards in my room, cried thinking that neither the Castañeda family, nor Julius Caesar, would ever, ever again exist for me.

Postscript

'The Warrior of Saint John' is my translation into English of a Spanish-language short story entitled 'El Caballero de San Juan' by contemporary Ecuadorian writer Javier Vásconez. This translation has been personally approved by the author. I worked from the text of the story which appeared in the 2004 collection *El Secreto y Otros Cuentos* ('The Secret and Other Stories'), published by Colección Cuarto Cresciente (subtitled Campaña Nacional Eugenio Espejo por el Libro y la Lectura), based in Quito, Ecuador. 'El Caballero de San Juan' has most recently been included in a 2009 collection, entitled *Estación de Lluvia* (which approximates to 'Rain Station' in English), published by the Madrid-based Veintisieteletras.[1)]

Javier Vásconez (born 1946, Quito) is not yet so well known in the English-speaking world, but he is certainly keenly appreciated in Spanish and Latin-American circles, and has had stories and chapters of some of his novels translated into French, German, English, Italian and Swedish.[2)] He has received high praise for his work, and considerable critical attention.[3)] His narratives have been described by some as belonging to the tradition of Faulkner, Camus, Onetti and Dostoyevsky.[4)] Lately, his work has been recognized by inclusion in *The Ecuador Reader,*[5)] published by Duke University Press, and, this year, by a review in *World Literature Today* of a

critical edition of his first major novel *El Viajero de Praga* (approx. 'The Traveller of Prague').[6] His literary career began in 1982 with the publication of his first collection of short stories *Ciudad Lejana* (approximating to 'Distant City'), one story from which, 'Angelote, Amor Mío', was singled out for praise the following year in the Mexico-based literature journal, *Plural*.[7] He has since produced a further four collections of short stories and has become one of Latin-America's most respected practitioners of this literary art-form. In parallel, his four novels have been well received, notable among them *El Viajero de Praga*, and *La Sombra del Apostador* (approx. 'The Shadow of the Gambler'), which was among the final selections for the award of Premio Rómulo Gallegos, one of the most prestigious prizes given for literature in the Spanish language. Indeed, one of his most recent novels, *Jardín Capelo* (2007), was also a finalist for this prize. The author is also a noted editor, working in literary publishing houses in Quito, Ecuador.

Regarding the translation itself, early on I realized that too literal an approach would result in a kind of compromised English, so I opted for a rather more idiomatic translation, sensitive to the texture of English. This resulted in a freer translation than that sometimes suggested by the friends and colleagues who advised me; fortunately, however, their feedback on reading the whole piece was very positive.[8] The very opening of the story provides a glimpse of my approach. From the original Spanish-language opening sentence, I decided to create no less than three shorter sentences, and, at the same time, to improvise and adapt freely on the principle that an English-language reader would require more in the way of introductory information. The initial sentence in my translation, therefore, is simply not present in the original; yet, according to the sense which moulded this project, all agreed that this approach was essentially justifiable. Great care

Photograph of Javier Vásconez by Carlos Morejón, 2010.

was taken, of course, to translate as carefully and precisely as possible, in essence and in detail.

More information, along with the details to which I have made mention above, can be found on the work of Javier Vásconez at his Spanish-language website:

www. javiervasconez.com

Notes

1) As there are no official titles in English, as far as I am aware, for the various titles mentioned I am writing my own approximate equivalent translation after each title throughout.
2) See Spanish-language website *ConoceralAutor.com*, dedicated to Latin-American writers, for a variety of biographical information on Javier Vásconez http://www.conoceralautor.com/autores/ver/MjU4 Accessed Aug 20–31, 2010.
3) At the official website of the author there are a variety of interviews and articles on

his work by a number of leading scholars of Latin-American literature, among them: Carmen Ruiz Barrionuevo, Christopher Domínguez Michael, Wilfrido Corral and Orlando Pérez. See http://www.javiervasconez.com/pagina1.htm Accessed Aug 20–31, 2010.

4) See catalogue description of *Estación de Lluvia*, 2009, published by Veintisieteletras.

5) *The Ecuador Reader: History, Culture, Politics,* eds. Carlos de la Torre and Steve Striffler (Duke University Press, 2008). The book contains an English translation of 'Angelote, Amor Mío', as 'Big Angel, My Love', trans. Wilfrido H. Corral, pp. 388–395.

6) *World Literature Today: A Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma,* LXXXIV, 6 (November-December, 2010, pages unassigned as yet).

7) See http://www.conoceralautor.com/autores/ver/MjU4 Accessed Aug 20–31, 2010.

8) I am indebted to Pat and Martita Rice (my former teacher of Spanish and his wife, who is Ecuadorian) for help with the language at the earliest stages of translation. Their advice was extremely helpful, and I am also indebted to them for starting the whole process in the first place, by presenting me with a copy of the short story collection in which I found 'El Caballero de San Juan'. I also wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of Prof Wilfrido H. Corral of California State University, Sacramento for his excellent suggestions and for his varied correspondence regarding the work of Javier Vásconez. Any errors or imperfections in the translation are strictly my own.