TENDER IS THE FLESH

A NOVEL

AGUSTINA BAZTERRICA

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY SARAH MOSES

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For my brother,
Gonzalo Bazterrica

What we see never lies in what we say.

GILLES DELEUZE

They nibble away at my brain,
Drinking the juice of my heart
And they tell me bedtime stories . . .

PATRICIO REY Y SUS REDONDITOS DE RICOTA

TENDER IS THE FLESH

ONE

. . . and its expression was so human that it filled me with horror . . .

LEOPOLDO LUGONES

1

Carcass. Cut in half. Stunner. Slaughter line. Spray wash. These words appear in his head and strike him. Destroy him. But they're not just words. They're the blood, the dense smell, the automation, the absence of thought. They burst in on the night, catch him off guard. When he wakes, his body is covered in a film of sweat because he knows that what awaits is another day of slaughtering humans.

No one calls them that, he thinks, as he lights a cigarette. He doesn't call them that when he has to explain the meat cycle to a new employee. They could arrest him for it, even send him to the Municipal Slaughterhouse and process him. Assassinate him, would be the correct term, but it can't be used. While he removes his soaked shirt, he tries to clear the persistent idea that this is what they are: humans bred as animals for consumption. He goes to the refrigerator and pours himself cold water. He drinks it slowly. His brain warns him that there are words that cover up the world.

There are words that are convenient, hygienic. Legal.

He opens the window; the heat is suffocating. He stands there smoking and breathes the still night air. With cows and pigs it was easy. It was a trade he'd learned at the Cypress, the

meat processing plant he'd inherited from his father. True, the screams of a pig being skinned could petrify you, but hearing protectors were used and eventually it became just one more sound. Now that he's the boss's right-hand man, he has to monitor and train the new employees. Teaching to kill is worse than killing. He sticks his head out the window. Breathes the thick air; it burns.

He wishes he could anesthetize himself and live without feeling anything. Act automatically, observe, breathe, and nothing more. See everything, understand, and not talk. But the memories are there, they remain with him.

Many people have normalized what the media insist on calling the "Transition." But he hasn't because he knows that transition is a word that doesn't convey how quick and ruthless the process was. One word to sum up and classify the unfathomable. An empty word. Change, transformation, shift: synonyms that appear to mean the same thing, though the choice of one over the other speaks to a distinct view of the world. They've all normalized cannibalism, he thinks. Cannibalism, another word that could cause him major problems.

He remembers when they announced the existence of GGB. The mass hysteria, the suicides, the fear. After GGB, animals could no longer be eaten because they'd been infected by a virus that was fatal to humans. That was the official line. The words carry the weight necessary to mold us, to suppress all questioning, he thinks.

Barefoot, he walks through the house. After GGB, the world changed definitively. They tried vaccines, antidotes, but the virus resisted and mutated. He remembers articles that spoke of the revenge of the vegans, others about acts

of violence against animals, doctors on television explaining what to do about the lack of protein, journalists confirming that there wasn't yet a cure for the animal virus. He sighs and lights another cigarette.

He's alone. His wife has gone to live with her mother. It's not that he still misses her, but there's an emptiness in the house that keeps him awake, that troubles him. He takes a book off the shelf. No longer tired, he turns on the light to read, then turns it off. He touches the scar on his hand. The incident happened a long time ago and it doesn't hurt anymore. It was a pig. He was very young, just starting out, and hadn't known that the meat needed to be respected, until the meat bit him and almost took his hand off. The foreman and the others couldn't stop laughing. You've been baptized, they said. His father didn't say anything. After that bite, they stopped seeing him as the boss's son and he became one of the team. But neither the team nor the Cypress Processing Plant exist now, he thinks.

He picks up his phone. There are three missed calls from his mother-in-law. None from his wife.

Unable to bear the heat, he decides to shower. He turns on the tap and sticks his head under the cold water. He wants to erase the distant images, the memories that persist. The piles of cats and dogs burned alive. A scratch meant death. The smell of burned meat lingered for weeks. He remembers the groups in yellow protective suits that scoured the neighborhoods at night, killing and burning every animal that crossed their paths.

The cold water falls onto his back. He sits down on the floor of the shower and slowly shakes his head. But he can't

stop remembering. Groups of people had started killing others and eating them in secret. The press documented a case of two unemployed Bolivians who had been attacked, dismembered, and barbecued by a group of neighbors. When he read the news, he shuddered. It was the first public scandal of its kind and instilled the idea in society that in the end, meat is meat, it doesn't matter where it's from. He tilts his head up so the water falls onto his face.

What he wants is for the drops to wipe his mind blank. But he knows the memories are there, they always will be. In some countries, immigrants began to disappear in large numbers. Immigrants, the marginalized, the poor. They were persecuted and eventually slaughtered. Legalization occurred when the governments gave in to pressure from a big-money industry that had come to a halt. They adapted the processing plants and regulations. Not long after, they began to breed people as animals to supply the massive demand for meat.

He gets out of the shower and barely dries himself off. In the mirror, he sees there are bags under his eyes. He believes in a theory that some people have tried to talk about. But those who have done so publicly have been silenced. The most eminent zoologist, whose articles claimed the virus was a lie, had an opportune accident. He thinks it was all staged to reduce overpopulation. For as long as he can recall, there's been talk of the scarcity of resources. He remembers the riots in countries like China, where people killed each other as a result of overcrowding, though none of the media outlets reported the news from that angle. The person who said that the world was going to explode was his father:

"The planet is going to burst at any minute. You'll see, Son, it's either going to be blown to bits or all of us are going to die from some plague. Look at what's happening in China, they've already started killing themselves because there are so many people, there's no room for them all. And here, there's still room here, but we're running out of water, food, air. Everything's going to hell." He'd looked at his father almost with pity because he'd thought he was just an old man rambling on. But now he knows his father had been right.

The purge had resulted in other benefits: the population and poverty had been reduced, and there was meat. Prices were high, but the market was growing at an accelerated rate. There were massive protests, hunger strikes, complaints filed by human rights organizations, and at the same time, articles, research, and news stories that had an impact on public opinion. Professors and researchers at prestigious universities claimed that animal protein was necessary to live, doctors confirmed that plant protein didn't contain all the essential amino acids, experts assured that methane emissions from cattle had been reduced but malnutrition was on the rise, magazines published articles on the dark side of vegetables. The centers of protest began to disperse and the media went on reporting cases of people they said had died of the animal virus.

The heat continues to suffocate him. He walks to the porch naked. The air is still. He lies down in the hammock and tries to sleep. A commercial plays again and again in his mind. A woman who's beautiful but dressed conservatively is putting dinner on the table for her three children and husband. She looks at the camera and says: "I serve my family

special food, it's meat, like I've always served, but tastier." The whole family smiles and eats their dinner.

The government, his government, decided to rebrand the product. They gave human meat the name "special meat." Instead of just "meat," now there's "special tenderloin," "special cutlets," "special kidneys."

He doesn't call it special meat. He uses technical words to refer to what is a human but will never be a person, to what is always a product. To the number of head to be processed, to the lot waiting in the unloading yard, to the slaughter line that must run in a constant and orderly manner, to the excrement that needs to be sold for manure, to the offal sector. No one can call them humans because that would mean giving them an identity. They call them product, or meat, or food. Except for him; he would prefer not to have to call them by any name.

2

The road to the tannery always seems long to him. It's a dirt road that runs straight, past kilometers and kilometers of empty fields. Once there were cows, sheep, horses. Now there isn't anything, for as far as the eye can see.

His phone rings. He pulls over and answers the call. It's his mother-in-law, and he tells her he can't talk because he's on the road. She speaks in a low voice, in a whisper. She tells him that Cecilia is doing better, but that she needs more time, she's not ready to move back yet. He doesn't say anything and she hangs up.

The tannery oppresses him. It's the smell of wastewater full of hair, earth, oil, blood, refuse, fat, and chemicals. And it's Señor Urami.

The desolate landscape forces him to remember, to question, yet again, why he's still in this line of work. He was only at the Cypress for a year after he'd finished secondary school. Then he decided to study veterinary science. His father had approved and been happy about it. But not long after, the animal virus became an epidemic. He moved back home because his father had lost his mind. The doctors diagnosed him with senile dementia, but he knows his father couldn't

handle the Transition. Many people suffered an acute depression and gave up on life, others dissociated themselves from reality, some simply committed suicide.

He sees the sign, "Hifu Tannery. 3 km." Señor Urami, the tannery's Japanese owner, despises the world in general and loves skin in particular.

As he drives along the deserted road, he slowly shakes his head because he doesn't want to remember. But he does remember. His father talking about the books that watched over him at night, his father accusing the neighbors of being hit men, his father dancing with his dead wife, his father lost in the fields in his underwear, singing the national anthem to a tree, his father in a nursing home, the processing plant sold to pay off the debt and keep the house, his father's absent gaze to this day, when he visits.

He enters the tannery and feels something strike him in the chest. It's the smell of the chemicals that halt the process of skin decomposition. It's a smell that chokes him. The employees work in complete silence. At first glance it seems almost transcendental, a Zen-like silence, but it's Señor Urami, who's observing them from up in his office. Not only does he watch the employees and monitor their work, he has cameras all over the tannery.

He goes up to Señor Urami's office. There's never a wait. Invariably two Japanese secretaries greet him and serve him red tea in a transparent mug, not bothering to ask if he'd like any. He thinks that Señor Urami doesn't look at people, but instead measures them. The owner of the tannery is always smiling and he feels that when this man observes him, what he's really doing is calculating how many meters of skin he

can remove in one piece if he slaughters him, flays him, and removes his flesh on the spot.

The office is simple, sleek, but on the wall hangs a cheap reproduction of Michelangelo's *The Last Judgment*. He's seen the print many times, but it's only today that he notices the person holding flayed skin. Señor Urami observes him, sees the disconcerted look on his face, and, guessing his thoughts, says that the man is Saint Bartholomew, a martyr who was flayed to death, that it's a colorful detail, doesn't he think. He nods but doesn't say a word because he thinks it's an unnecessary detail.

Señor Urami talks, recites, as though he were revealing a series of indisputable truths to a large audience. His lips glisten with saliva; they're the lips of a fish, or a toad. There's a dampness to him, a zigzag to his movements. There's something eel-like about Señor Urami. All he can do is look at the owner of the tannery in silence, because essentially it's the same speech every time. He thinks that Señor Urami needs to reaffirm reality through words, as though words created and maintain the world in which he lives. Silently, he imagines the walls of the office slowly beginning to disappear, the floor dissolving, and the Japanese secretaries vanishing into the air, evaporating. All of this he sees because it's what he wants, but it'll never happen because Señor Urami is talking about numbers, about the new chemicals and dyes being tested at the tannery, and telling him, as though he didn't already know it, how difficult it is now with this product, that he misses working with cow skin. Although, he clarifies, human skin is the smoothest in nature because it has the finest grain. He picks up the phone and says something in Jap-

anese. One of the secretaries comes in with a huge folder. Señor Urami opens it and displays samples of different types of skins. He touches them as though they were ceremonial objects, explaining how to avoid defects when the lot is wounded in transit, which happens because human skin is more delicate. This is the first time Señor Urami has shown him the folder. He looks at the samples of skins that have been placed in front of him, but doesn't touch them. Señor Urami points his finger at a very white sample with marks on it. He says it's one of the most valuable skins, though a large percentage of it had to be discarded because there were deep wounds. He repeats that he's only able to conceal superficial wounds. Señor Urami says that this folder was put together especially for him, so he could show it to the people at the processing plant and breeding center and it would be clear which skins they have to be most careful with. Señor Urami stands up, gets a printout from a drawer, hands it to him, and says that he's already sent off the new designs for the cuts of skin. They still have to be perfected, though, because of the importance of the cut at the moment of flaying, since a poorly made cut means meters of leather wasted, and the cut needs to be symmetrical. Señor Urami picks up the phone again. A secretary comes in with a transparent teapot. He gestures to the secretary and she serves more tea. Señor Urami continues to talk to him with words that are measured, harmonious. He picks up the mug, takes a sip, though he doesn't want any. Señor Urami's words construct a small, controlled world that's full of cracks. A world that could fracture with one inappropriate word. He talks about the essential importance of the flaying machine, how

if it's not calibrated correctly it can rip the skin, of how the fresh skin he's sent from the processing plant requires further refrigeration so that subsequent flesh removal is not as cumbersome, of the need for the lots to be well hydrated so the skin doesn't dry out and crack, of having to talk to the people at the breeding center about the importance of following the liquid diet, of how stunning needs to be carried out with precision because if the product is slaughtered carelessly it'll show on the skin, which gets tough and is more difficult to work with because, he points out, "Everything is reflected in the skin, it's the largest organ in the body." His smile never fading, Señor Urami exaggerates the pronunciation of this sentence in Spanish, and with it ends his speech, following it with a measured silence.

He knows he doesn't have to say anything to this man, just agree, but there are words that strike at his brain, accumulate, cause damage. He wishes he could say *atrocity*, *inclemency*, *excess*, *sadism* to Señor Urami. He wishes these words could rip open the man's smile, perforate the regulated silence, compress the air until it chokes both of them.

But he remains silent and smiles.

Señor Urami never accompanies him out, but this time they walk downstairs together. Before he leaves, Señor Urami stops him next to a tank of whitewash to monitor an employee handling skins that are still covered in hair. They must be from a breeding center, he thinks, because the skins from the processing plant are completely hairless. Señor Urami makes a gesture. The manager appears and proceeds to yell at a worker who's removing the flesh from a fresh skin. It seems he's doing a poor job. To justify the emp-

loyee's apparent inefficiency, the manager tries to explain to Señor Urami that the fleshing machine's roller is broken and that they're not used to manual flesh removal. Señor Urami interrupts him with another gesture. The manager bows and leaves.

Then they walk to the tanning drum. Señor Urami stops and tells him he wants black skins. Out of nowhere, with no explanation. He lies and says that a lot will be arriving shortly. Señor Urami nods and says goodbye.

Whenever he leaves the building, he needs a cigarette. Inevitably an employee comes over to tell him horrific things about Señor Urami. Rumor has it he assassinated and flayed people before the Transition, that the walls of his house are covered in human skin, that he keeps people in his basement, and that it gives him great pleasure to flay them alive. He doesn't understand why the employees tell him these things. All of it's possible, he thinks, but the only thing he knows for certain is that Señor Urami runs his business with a reign of terror and that it works.

He leaves the tannery and feels relief. But then he questions, yet again, why he exposes himself to this. The answer is always the same. He knows why he does this work. Because he's the best and they pay him accordingly, because he doesn't know how to do anything else, and because his father's health depends on it.

There are times when one has to bear the weight of the world.