

## **In Between the Sheets**

I don't know how it all started. My hands were wet, the sea algae fell from the bucket and spread on the linoleum floor, the large squares of tiles in the kitchen completely covered. I put them inside so they could unfreeze fast. But the *alça* was uncomfortable, how do you say this word in English. Something to hold onto, she translates. Yes, I say, and it slipped from my hands. So as I was trying to get to the stove, I noticed how the living creatures were all connected, my pulsations tied to them too, like mirrors. I wanted to splash, *espalhar pelo chão*, as if I dying.

Do you often think about that, she asks me. Death? I respond. If I didn't own the restaurant, I would have been fired, even after cleaning everything. So yes, I do. After it happened I became paralyzed and wet. You said it was like dying, she insists. The algae were dead, and their inert bodies had an effect on me. I washed and served them anyway. That's gross. Yes, but the memory still lingers in my *nariz*. It is the perfect world, isn't it? Dissolving into algae, like magma? I wait for her comment but she is no longer listening, tying her hair into a ponytail.

Sometimes I wonder what I have to do in order to get your attention and I feel hyped whenever you don't look back. Are you there? I ask. Yes, I am here, but I know the ending of your story. It is like a dream and the meaning is fusion, distortion. But that's not reality. That's not what happens. People have different and separate bodies, she tells me. Something similar, you must experience something similar, I reply. No, I don't. Really? Really.

My imagination is vivid but when I think of someone *junto* I know the difference between life and fantasy. What is your point? I interrupt. In the end, she resumes, you cleaned the floor and didn't die or disappear into seawater, the womb, etc. Long hours in the restaurant make you sleepless and your ideas are over stimulated. All I am saying is that we don't even know where our body begins or ends, I argue. My extremities are extremely sensitive. Your fingers? She asks. *Sim, meus dedos*, I reply. Only when they touch something concrete, life makes sense.

Did you sell a lot of seaweed that day? She asks. No, I reply, it is a meat restaurant. Fish is not popular and strangely distractive. I look at her and realize she is already naked. Are sea alga plants? They live in the ocean, don't they? she suggests. I don't like the sea smell because it makes me think of tequila and how many times I've been drunk in the past. You must be kidding, I say, looking at her body. At that moment I smell her sex and I know what to do. Licking her is so much more pleasurable than cleaning the kitchen.

Are you ok? she asks, after I am finished. I hate this feeling of numbness in my tongue but I can't stop myself. I know she has oddities too. It happens whenever I have too much of something. I see, she says, sitting up in the bed. Do you always orgasm? I ask. It happens to me at night, when I can't really sleep. During the day is impossible, she explains. Do you have sex in the afternoon too? I ask. Her gaze is curious. My body becomes restless when I am not excited. Do you know what time it is? she asks. I check my phone. 3 a.m.

There is a television in the room next door and I can hear an infomercial about an electric chair for elders, or is it a stairwell? One day I won't be able to walk either and someone will have to push me down the steps.

There was a murder in this room once, did you know? she informs me. I want to ask her if she is still in love with me, despite my inability to stop old age and the wrinkles that are beginning to appear on my face. Are you? I ask, not hearing myself speak until she repeats my question. Are you in love with me? I look at her blankly. Are you serious? I repeat. It was not like a real murder what happened here, she continues, but an accident. It is like my love for you, I don't really know what it is, but it occurs in ruptures, like the sound of thunder.

Do you like Faulkner? The writer? Yes. *Light in August* is a good title. I am sad. She is pensive. The space we share is minimum. The room is not much bigger than the *dispensa* in my kitchen, where we keep all the food. I also forgot a book there by Machado de Assis, the unrecognized Brazilian writer. I had a girlfriend once who loved obscure literature, I say. I am not your girlfriend, she tells me. Kafka was her favorite writer. The smell of this bathroom is like acetone, pungent, the duck disinfectant accentuating my pores.

How is your husband? I ask, hoping he is maybe leaving her. She has a smart smile, which recurs after we have sex. I have to pick up my mother in the rehab, I tell her, but she is already playing with her phone in the room. I don't want to know about your life, she says. These are the rules. Let's talk about the janitor.

Who? I say. In the article, she says, the police said the man killed himself in this motel. I thought you had stopped this, I say. In the last place we went someone had killed babies. It is horrible but I need to understand death, she says. I have my vices too, but you are really something else, I assert.

It is morbid to think about death all the time, I say. It is not all the time, only when I come to see you, she explains. I make you come and there is death. Is that

logical? I am confused. I don't find logic important. Death and sex are so close, there's no escape, she explains. In these matters, I like to be ignorant, I tell her. Why? she questions. Why do you like dead alga? She continues. It is not the same thing, I protest. Wouldn't it be nice to have a normal date? I ask. You are not normal, she affirms. I'm not normal, I repeat.

She laughs and that makes me uncomfortable, as if my insides are exposed. I imagine a hyena, and the lost dog that lives near my house. I am going to pick up my mother tomorrow morning, I repeat. I wish I had your life, she tells me. She is going to be released from rehab, I say, more loudly. You are not following the rules. No personal stories, she reinforces. Ok, I say. I'm starting to forget my Portuguese, I tell her. The truth is that nobody knows any language for too long, she says.

It is true, I agree. The rehab is between Caravelas and Porto do Sol, near the ocean, I say, changing the subject. My mom liked it. Do they have sea alga there? She asks, attentive. I don't know, I answer. Maybe you should go for a walk on the beach when you see her, she suggests. Are you happy with your own husband? she asks. Happy? I question. Yes? she asks. I like the way she puts her boots when she is naked and looks at herself in the mirror, as if her body is a mannequin, waiting to be dressed. It doesn't matter, I say. I can't expect too much.

Do you think suicide is a kind of murder? she inquires. I don't know, I say. The police said the man was involved with drugs, selling them to the kids in high school, and one of them overdosed, she reads from the article, looking at her phone. So he took his own life, I say in return.

People act on the edge and things happen, she says, calmly. How can you be so realistic? I ask. Maybe this is all that is, she says. The television is on mute but the

glow in the room makes the walls look asphyxiated. My days are uncreative, I say. This is what makes people sad, she comments. I think he killed himself because he was bored, I tell her. I'm tired sometimes, I affirm. We just made love, she says. Sort of, I affirm, promising to be better next time.

Do you want some pot? I ask, lighting the toke I have between my fingers. You know, I am pregnant, she tells me. The bucket falls on the kitchen again and my legs tremble. I thought you had a thing for death, I say. I think we should stop seeing each other, she tells me, white as a dove. Inside of my jewelry box, I kept my first wedding ring, the one I never used, I tell her. Someone loved me once too, I confess.

I never promised you anything, she says. I know. And I can't continue doing this, meeting you in motels where people have died once, I conclude. Do you need help with the baby? I ask. I need help with the baby, she says. I don't know why you are so white, I tell her. I can't believe you still smoke pot, she comments. Yes, I do, especially when it is raining, I respond. The drops are hitting the window and I wonder where the mosquitoes go when it is drenched outside.

Are you hurt? she asks. It would be so easy to kill her, I think, the pot starting to work. The thing I like most about your hair is its brilliancy, touching it softens my nerves, like a horse's fur. Do you mind? I ask, passing my hand, *minhas mãos*, on them. My husband would never say something like that, she says. When we have arguments, I close my eyes and pretend I am not there, holding his silence, she tells me. I don't understand, I say. Because I can't talk, she admits.

Sleeping with the enemy, I say. My husband is my imaginary fortress, she realizes, even though I don't really tell him my fears. What time is it? I ask. 5 a.m. I wish I had been in the kitchen when the algae fell, she says. In a way you were, I

explain. Sometimes it is better not to be everywhere, I tell her. What are you going to do now? She asks. Living is enough, I say. I will go back to the restaurant. There is a special dish with lettuce, figs, and cottage cheese that I think you would like, I reply.

I got to go, she says, when the sun begins to peek through the curtains. Dressed to kill, with lingerie, my mouth is dry for hers. Blindly sucking at each other's parts, we make love again, no longer caring who we are. Maybe the algae was never there, I mumble, and close my eyes, sleeping over the sheets. When I wake up, she is having instant coffee in a paper cup. It's been quiet for the past six minutes until a vacuum cleaner starts outside.

Good morning, I tell her. Rooms like this make you think time is frozen, don't you agree? I ask. Perception is everything, she says. I brought you a book, she tells me, sitting on the bed. Who is Roberto Bolaño? I ask. I think he is Chilean, she tells me. It was on my husband's shelf. It has been there for a while but he never read it. I don't think he understands the unordered sequence of narrative. Would you like me to read it to you one day? she asks. She is holding the book with one hand and the paper cup with the other. The thrift store chair makes her sex appears enlarged, as if the vanity mirror is enjoying her from inside.

You pubic hairs look like my algae, I say. She looks down. I feel very close to myself when I see her naked. It is like a bus speeding by. The wind hits me hard. The book is heavy, and rests between us. My umbilical hole is just a few inches up.

I am still wondering how long it will take me to read this book when she says, there is so much I don't know about my body, caressing her belly. Thanks for the book, I reply. Take care of your baby. I will, she says. So can I call you soon? she asks. I thought you didn't want to see me again or ever, I reply. Did I say that? She

repeats. I must have forgotten, she says. When the alga fell, time slowed down for all of us, so we forget things, I explain. Everything is different now, she tells me. I will be ok, I respond.

Her warm skin brushes against my arm, feminine, and her gentle gesture reminds me of myself. In return, I caress her back. Oddly, someone starts to play Elvis Presley outside. Don't get sentimental, she affirms. Your eyes are so circular when they are in a constant stare, I say. They are watching the passage of time, she ends, before finally leaving. I don't know if people mean what they say when they leave the room in a hurry. I walk into the bathroom and feel the smell of disinfectant burning my nose, my feet becoming wet, the puddle and the sea alga on the tiles again. Moments later, I am gone too and the car is vibrating on the asphalt.

The waves force the wall inside of my chest. My mother is not in rehab, but I wish she would be. Complaining is her addiction and she doesn't want to solve her problems either, only talk about them. I have a husband who doesn't know I spend the nights alone in motels and keeps telling me our baby will learn Portuguese, even though he barely understands it, lost in our marriage of languages. This week he is away for a conference in Bahia and said on the phone that he liked Brazil a lot. It made him know me better. Really? I said, unsure about my own being.

When I get to the restaurant, it is busy as usual, and I check the barbecue, the salad, the chicken slaw, and lots of *farofa*. Strange day, the waiter observes, as the rain stops and a rainbow is reflected on the windows near the buffet. There is a long line-up outside. The roast beef, pork sausage, chicken and tongue are my favorite dishes. I have the impression I have lived this day before, in another time. Politely, I greet the guests, unsure if my skin is still wet, or if the walls in the kitchen are

dripping with ocean water, and put the book back in the shelf at the reception, hoping someone will read it one day, because I don't know if I can. And I start to work.