

El Cuerpo de Giulia-no

(Section 17)

Jorge Eduardo Eielson

Translated and annotated by Dorota Biczal

El Cuerpo de Giulia-no [The Body of Giulia-no] was first published by Editorial Joaquín Mortiz in Mexico City in August 1971. The following section is translated into English and published with the permission of Il Centro Studi Jorge Eielson in Florence, Italy. All the notes in the text are by the translator.

As much a novel as poetic prose, *El Cuerpo de Giulia-no* is one of the two novels by Peruvian poet and visual artist Jorge Eduardo Eielson (Lima, 1923-Milan, 2006). Written in the 1950s, the first of many decades that Eielson lived in Italy, *El Cuerpo de Giulia-no* tells the story of a kind of romantic triangle between the narrator, who can be considered an alter ego of Eielson himself; a mysterious, beautiful Venetian woman named Giulia; and another, wealthy Peruvian expat in Europe, Giuliano—"a manufacturer of ice cream and chocolate".

Nonlinear in structure, the book is full of flashbacks to the narrator's youth in Peru. What is of interest in the excerpt below is an extremely condensed and evocative image of Lima at a tipping point when the city—according to many of its inhabitants—started "going to shit." Following World War II, Lima experienced an uncontrolled (arguably still ongoing) demographic explosion, mostly due to internal migration from the rural areas of the country, which irrevocably changed its social and ethnic makeup, as well as its urban landscape. In section 17 of the book, Eielson sets up an irreconcilable tension between the old criollo Lima and the new indigenous Lima of the migrants; between the "white" (white dress, white shirt, white house, white lady, white Cadillac) and the "yellow" embodied by the clay from which the peripheral slums are constructed; between the progress envisioned by criollo capitalists,

such as Giuliano, and the miserable poverty lived by indigenous peoples, such as Mayana, the protagonist's romantic interest during his adolescence spent on a rural coffee plantation. It is a pessimistic vision in which the solution to the problems of the city is not a reform or development but a total cosmic catastrophe: a new flood that will clear the foundations for a new city.

The image of Lima that Eielson conjures in his book precipitates to some extent another famous archetype of the city: Lima, the horrible (Lima la horrible), coined by Eielson's contemporary, the renowned journalist and intellectual, Sebastián Salazar Bondy (Lima, 1924-1965):

(Deserted streets of Lima. A desert of streets without rain. Uninhabited balconies over the deserted land. Deserted rooms. Deserted gardens. Deserted temples. Deserted residents. Sand cliffs over the sea. Seas of sand. Rooms of sand. Gardens of sand. Castles of sand. People of sand. Sand. Clay houses in the starved periphery. Districts sunken in the mud. Built of huts of cans and fruit boxes, which every night fill with rats and nauseating smells. A cemetery of yellow-paper airplanes. Shitty paper in the air. Fat buzzards. Yellow worms. Yellow faces. Yellow Rímac.¹ The longest rivers of asphalt. Opulent gardens. Brilliant temples and palaces. Thousands and thousands of cars, towards the sea. Empty residences on the sea of skeletons. Mummies with jackets and neckties. "Excuse me, does Giuliano, the manufacturer of ice cream and chocolate, live here?" A white dress. A white shirt. A large white house. A white lady. A white Cadillac. "The desert makes you thirsty, darling. What an idea! And your kids?" "In the United States." Will the bones of an Indian in the desert also be white? Buzzards of the parish, do you know? Children playing in the shit, do you know? Balls of crap, skulls of scabies, do you know? Burnt bones, greenish faces? The desert reduces them to ashes. It's hot, isn't it? Shall we have ice

¹ The river Rímac runs through the Historic Center of Lima and has its mouth near the port of Callao. To this day the river is the most important source of potable water for the city.

cream? It would be cool in the Nazarenas.² We would pray to the Lord of Miracles.³ Don't be stupid, why pray to him? Steal his candle and stick it up your ass. What else do you want, you shitty cholo?⁴ Giuliano says: "I can't complain. People respond. Imagine, next year I open a factory in Santiago. An honor for Peru." An ice cream factory. Seven ice cream factories. Seventy-seven ice cream factories. Ice cream and chocolate, don't forget. The shit arrives at the sea in the wrapper of luxury. "Shit made in Peru." What a concept! And your kids? Thousands and thousands of cars. To the sea. Guano birds,⁵ white buzzards, to the sea. And you, Mayana, you who have never seen the sea? You will never see it. The grey sky of Lima, stars of Lima, are made of rags. The flag, do you understand, the flag? You will wrap your son in it and you will no longer be a Peruvian or a savage⁶ or nothing. For a ridiculous, exemplary cost of \$600 you will have your white son. He will work on the Experimental Base Coffee Plantation of Venus. How come man is the only coffee consumer in this world? A white son with green eyes, do you understand? It is not the same as a green son with white eyes. Eaten by scabies. It is not the same as a toy of earthen clay. As a toy of shitty paper. As a foul-smelling smile without teeth. As ten black nails above. Ten black nails below. And in the middle a toad's stomach full of earth, haunted, flattened, trampled. No, it is not the

² The Sanctuary of Las Nazarenas, whose present building dates back to 1771, is located in the Historic Center of Lima and is a site of the cult of the Lord of Miracles (El Señor de los Milagros).

³ The Lord of Miracles (El Señor de los Milagros) is a highly venerated mural of crucified Christ in the Sanctuary of Las Nazarenas, whose procession is said to be the largest Catholic celebration in the world. Attributed to the descendent of black slaves, the mural—painted on the adobe wall—survived a massive earthquake of 1655 that left no other walls standing, giving rise to its widespread cult. The Lord of Miracles, the patron saint of the City of Kings (old name for Lima) since 1715, was declared the patron of Peru by president Alan García in 2010.

⁴ While today the denomination *cholo/chola* can be both affectionate and offensive, depending on the context of its deployment, it was first used as a derogatory term to describe indigenous Peruvians, mostly migrants from the rural areas to the cities, who adopted the customs and dress of the criollos (Peruvians of Spanish descent).

⁵ Guano is the excrement of seabirds, bats, and seals. As an effective fertilizer and important source of nitrates for gunpowder throughout the nineteenth century, it became a highly contested commodity of the Pacific Coast of Latin America.

⁶ Eielson uses the Quechua word "chuncha" that during the Incan times was used for jungle communities.

same. The touched President of the Republic will embrace the first Indian converted into a white. The Lord of Miracles in the White House, finally! Down with tuberculosis! Down with syphilis! Long live television and cinema! Skyscrapers of plexiglass... the moon of nylon! To the sea, deserted streets. Deserted balconies. To the sea, clay houses. Stinking vice-kings. Trashy counts and marquises. To the sea, filthy dive bars. Pigeons covered in lice. Alleys full of cries and dysentery. Chifas⁷ with rat's meat. To the sea. To the sea, potbellied merchants. Factories of ice cream and chocolate. Sold politicians. Painted fags. Human dung-heap. To the sea, poisoned palaces and gardens. Prostitutes of some status. Stealing bureaucrats. Social climbers without soul, to the sea. To the sea. To the sea, you shit.

One day Limeños will wake up crying and the entire city will disappear in a sea of mud. Only then will take place the miraculous Foundation of Lima.)

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⁷ *Chifa* is a word used to describe a type of Chinese-Peruvian cuisine and the cheap traditional restaurants that serve it.