

The Girl Who Wanted to Live in a Greenhouse

By César Valdebenito

Translated by Toshiya Kamei

WHY WE LIKE IT: *There's a Kafkaesque thread to this dystopian morality flash that happens at the end of the climate war we are in the midst of fighting today, but we also sense the strong presence of Latin American, 'magic realism'—Borges, Garcia-Marquez. Anguished characters in torturous predicaments bereft in blasted landscapes that waver trance-like in the imagination like curtains hung by Mephistopheles. It is akin to fourth dimension reality with an edge of naivety. The author's abrupt, minimalist prose delivers a strong message that here and there startles with luminous beauty. Quote: 'Cities that disappear as if by magic are replaced by toxic cyclones' and 'I mean the idea of getting drunk with a stranger to make the planet disappear exudes a wonderful naiveté. In the old days one could afford to be naïve.'* Translated from the Spanish.

The caravan starts rolling again, clattering through the dunes. The engine roars, and Pablo notices some commotion in the camp, which rises some three hundred meters above him. A toxic fungus explodes at the foot of Cerro Caracol. People come out of the camp, getting out of carcasses of cars dragging children. Thirty meters ahead a driverless car rolls across the road. Pablo slams on the brakes and skids to a sudden halt, hurling Pamela right through the windshield. When Pamela opens her eyes twenty minutes later, she finds herself in Pablo's arms.

"All we need is a chance," her voice says.

"We'll leave this planet and fly somewhere else."

"And where is that?" Pamela asks.

"We must go around the airport and there we will see."

"Are we going fifty-fifty?"

"Fifty-fifty."

"Aren't you afraid I'll kill you?"

"Why do you go there again, Pamela?" Pablo smiles. "I could kill you."

"There will be vegetables, plenty of fresh air. The persecution will end. So will traps, bullets, crazies. Cities that disappear as if by magic and are replaced by toxic cyclones. We won't have any more worries," says Pamela.

"Yeah."

"Do you really think we can get out of here?"

"Of course."

"Is there really pure air on that other planet?"

"Listen to me. I promise you."

"Okay."

He hears the whistle he has heard so many times. When he looks up toward the camp, the vision has turned into an atrocious and painful fantasy; men, women, children, and old people fly through the air. Pablo goes to the car, returns with a half-full bottle, looks for a match, and lights a cigarette. They drink and smoke for a while. Without a word. Thinking about the future. Pamela is barely breathing. From a cluster of neo-Gothic apartment buildings on Cerro La Pólvara people start screaming like hyenas, two long rows form down the hill, and their hyena-like howls are mixed with a chorus pleading to heaven. One hour later, the multitude of protruding heads is fifty meters away. Pablo stands in the middle of the road.

"My father's name was Juan Carlos Sutterlan," Pablo shouts, and the crowd stops. "I was named Pablo Carlos Sutterlan. My father made his reputation at an advanced age by inventing 'sonic hyperesthesia.' It's not that he hasn't invented other things before then. But at

first, before becoming famous as the mad scientist who blew up the planet, he always put his reputation first. He tells me the story a dozen times. He's on a subway train, somewhere between Hualqui and Chiguayante, sitting next to a man named Santos Chávez. Santos Chávez pulls out a bottle, and he and my father get wasted. He tells my father a good story. Santos Chávez is on the verge of making a great discovery. Old Chávez says what he needs is time and enough funds to cover the costs. He explains the details of the experiment. *I have a great experiment in hand, but I'm not exploiting it as I should.* And after those words, my father takes out a pencil and begins to draw on a piece of paper. He sketches a battle scene, with ships, rockets, an arsenal, hundreds of troops, and a large flag fluttering over the battlements. Next, he draws a single line under the image: Santos Chávez, the new Einstein. Finally, and this is the best of all, he tells Santos Chávez to give him the formula. And it works. It becomes the most lethal weapon in the entire history of the planet. That's how things were done in the old days, boys; drunk as skunks on a car on the south subway line. In my opinion, it exudes a pleasant naïveté. I mean, the idea of getting drunk with a stranger to make the planet disappear exudes a wonderful naïveté. In the old days one could afford to be naive."

He becomes quiet. Silence cuts the air like a knife. A scrawny man comes forward from the crowd. Pablo thinks, *he's leading the flock.*

"Do you believe in war?" the leader asks him.

"No."

"Do you want to go to war?"

"Yes."

Pablo has the crazy idea of moving toward them until they beat him to a pulp.

The leader remains silent for a while. Then he looks up.

"Of course. In two more days we will go hunting again, but first we will offer up a prayer to the sun. Will you come?"

"No."

"Okay, you don't have."

"Where?"

"Pablo, you didn't think we would understand you, right?"

"I guess."

All that makes the mass of creatures believe that they are seeing an apparition. First their faces look incredulous, then horrified, and in the end disappointed. Little by little, the herd slowly retreats and retraces its steps. No doubt they believed they were facing a ghost. Pablo fixes his gaze on the river. What was once an expanse of water is now a sea of white dunes extending to the horizon. He looks toward the empty city and hears the whistle of the wind making the doors, gates, and windows of the buildings creak. Pablo turns around and looks at Pamela. He caresses her petite body. Her white, shrunken face gapes at Pablo with blind eyes. **She seems to him an image of his own destiny.** Then he remembers Pamela two days ago. They enter a deserted supermarket, Bigger or Santa Isabel – he doesn't remember. Pablo puts the newspaper on a counter and takes off the thick glasses he wears. He serves himself a drink, picks up a five-thousand-peso bill, drops it, then reaches for a cloth, passes it across the counter, and then sits in a folding chair under a photo of an overcooked steak in which a bridegroom appears with his best man. He turns and takes out a bottle and a glass from a shelf.

"What are you drinking?" Pamela asks.

"Whiskey."

"It's fascinating to watch it. The ice cubes gleam. It seems as if tiny things explode.

Like explosions everywhere."

"Why do you want to live in a greenhouse?" asks Pablo.

"I want to live in a humid and huge greenhouse where grass grows. Grass growing in all the pots. It would be great. And anyone who wants to live there could do it. There would be a natural slope and you could eat fruit ice cream. It would be just great."

This last conversation with Pamela is the one Pablo likes to remember for the rest of his days. At times, he keeps thinking about the calm he felt when he closed his eyes as she let her fingers slide through his hair. He kept thinking about the delight of those fingers in his hair, which was beginning to grow again.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'The Girl Who Wanted to Live in a Greenhouse' is part of a trilogy of short stories that form a complete unit but also stand alone. In the story presented here, translated by Toshiya Kamei, I was interested in capturing a very vivid image of characters that lived in an apocalyptic future. This story started from an idea that consumed me. I wanted to delve into the conflicts of the human race subjected to the great pressure of a world that falls apart. I wanted to create a story where I could be ambiguous yet perfectly clear. I was also captivated by the idea of creating stories that conveyed certain nervous dismay and that characters should be aware of their painful wounds from the past. Maybe it is because it entices me to explore human beings and the conflicts they hide in the deepest chambers of their soul when they live on the edge. My influences come from all the authors I have read: Carver, Ray Bradbury, Philip K. Dick, Chekhov, Hemingway, Mario Levrero, Bolano, Kafka, Kierkegaard, Saint Augustine and many others.*

Author's Bio: Born in 1975 in Concepción, Chile, Valdebenito is a poet, fiction writer and essayist. His books include the novels *La vida nunca se acaba* (2017) and *Una escena apocalíptica* (2016) as well as the short story collection *El bindu o la musa de la noche* (2017) and *Pequeñas historias para mentes neuroticas* (2018).

Translator's Bio: Toshiya Kamei holds an MFA in Literary Translation from the University of Arkansas. His translations of Latin American literature include *My Father Thinks I'm a Fakir* by Claudia Apablaza, *South Exit* by Carlos Bortoni and *Silent Herons* by Selfa Chew.