

AMILCAR BETTEGA

Translated by Alison Entrekin

from *BARRIER*

Look, and her arm made a long, slow movement, reaching out little by little as if a wave were leaving her shoulder and awakening her elbow joint, passing through forearm, wrist, hand, finger, guiding bones and muscles into a fluid and more or less horizontal line pointing at a large window that, immediately after the brusque movement of the webcam, came to occupy my whole computer screen, a dark rectangle against the white wall showing a grainy image, completely unreal in its saturated colors and distorted contours where I should have seen, in real time, the city she was discovering, the city hidden for so long in stories that once existed only to give body and meaning to a past that I believed worthy of the name, watertight, still capable of being a reference, of affixing itself to an identity and begging of it some little physical or character trait, but nothing more than that, nothing more than a false memory, a soup of volatile memories, some black-and-white photographs and bizarre-sounding names with weird spellings, all reheated in the sometimes-more, sometimes-less inventive stories of the older generations and repeated to exhaustion at family reunions until they became legend, as in fact all pasts are, look, she repeated, right after those lights is the Haliç, and she said *alitch* trying hard to make it sound natural though her accent was typical of one beginning to learn Turkish, and further on, she continued, on the other bank, are Balat and Fener, I went there this afternoon, I walked a lot, I walked just for the sake of feeling that I was there, to feel myself walking those narrow streets, to feel my body inhabiting a space that until then had only been a name, a dream or something imagined, look, she insisted, look how it's all almost palpable from here, suddenly a bunch of familiar images materialize in front of me without me recognizing them as being all that familiar, I think that's why I took so many photos, not that I wanted to capture the moment to eternalize it, as they say, nothing like that, if a photo has some purpose that certainly isn't it, what I felt there was the need to at least try and get an outside view of something that I was seeing from the inside,

maybe I wanted to protect myself, it's quite possible, but I know that every time I look at each of these photos again what I am going to see is myself, as if I weren't behind the camera but in front of it, look, look, I heard her say many more times, but I couldn't see anything, just the dark rectangle of a window with a view of nothing, through which I couldn't see a thing, where I couldn't, despite all my effort, recognize absolutely anything simply because you can't recognize something that no longer exists, or better, there is no way to see again something that was seen by someone who no longer exists, no, I can't see anything, I wanted to tell her, there's no point, I can't see anything, I wanted to make her understand it once and for all but bit my tongue when I heard the enthusiasm in the voice that came to me somewhat metallic and disfigured because of the poor quality of the speakers, I bit my tongue when I saw the movement of her arm, evasive and suspended in the snapshot of an image truncated by an unstable connection, a movement that still seemed to continue, now and forever, as if the arm never stopped reaching out, slowly and for a long time, shoulder, elbow, forearm, wrist, hand, finger, and even after the finger, in the prolonging of the gesture that insisted on travelling beyond the dark rectangle, into something that must also have been moving, at that exact instant, on the other side of the window, no, I couldn't see a thing, but the mere thought that there might have been something beyond that window, that there might have been a city hidden in the darkness plastered across my computer screen, the mere thought made me giddy and I had to run to the window of the small room that served as my office to see, with great relief, that the sun was sweetly setting behind the palm trees of Avenida Oswaldo Aranha, that the buses were crossing the avenue with the same clatter that had always made the windows jiggle in their frames, that a green mass full of reflections stretched out beneath my eyes down below and that this was my favorite view of my city, Redenção Park skirted by the avenues Oswaldo Aranha on one side and João Pessoa on the other, the winter sun descending obliquely between the leaves of the trees and the certainty that behind the chain of buildings to my right the Guaíba ran silently and almost imperceptibly along Mauá Wall, slid around the old gasworks and composed, over near Beira-Rio Stadium, with the same sun setting over the palm trees, Porto Alegre's postcard *par excellence*, that was what I saw and it was enough, I didn't need

any other image to perceive my city or to describe it, in fact I've never needed to describe or tell Porto Alegre as I have had to so many times with Istanbul for Fátima deep in concentration, following with goodness-knows-what images in her mind every street mentioned, every description of a district, of a market, of grocery stores, dry goods stores, of all the places my father had once taken me tugging me along by the hand as he poured out details about the eras of the buildings, the waves of migrations, the origins of the districts and the founding of the stores we passed, where he would stop to drink tea with the owner, whose story, and that of his family and establishment, he would begin to tell as soon as he had finished the tea and bid the owner goodbye, that was when we'd set out again, heading back into the streets and then the sounds of the city would mix with his voice, muffling it at times, superimposing it with the nervousness typical of urban sounds but without my ever ceasing to hear it or to allow myself to be guided by it and the jumbled flow of stories, which to be honest didn't interest me all that much, or rather, it wasn't exactly the succession of events that held my attention, truth be told the stories didn't have very precise successions of events or endings and would run into the story of the next acquaintance we came across a little further along, names and dates mixing into a single torrent of information that to me always seemed to belong to a world that had nothing to do with the Ibo that I was, oblivious to anything that wasn't part of the small everyday world of his toys and protected by the concentrated bubble of here-and-now that we call childhood, where physical and temporal distances are always too big to connect us to something that isn't right there within reach of the senses, and the things that he, Ibo, could see and feel weren't in what he was told but in the voice that told them and in its capacity to move ever forward as if powered by complex engineering whose own movement generated the fuel needed to keep it moving, extending itself, prolonging itself, a little like the movement of Fátima's arm that I now saw, suspended and fluid, amplifying the space far beyond her physical extremity, gathering a force that at some point appears to detach itself from the initial impulse, ceases to be effort or intention and becomes autonomous, given over to the simple desire to carry on (the gesture), to continue speaking through the gesture (look), to continue telling (the voice) and to pile up detail on detail with an urgency that his torrential discourse made evident,

as if he (my father) had known that one day it would all disappear and that I (his son) had to learn everything all at once, as if it were necessary to memorize every street, every corner, building, façade, post, sidewalk, sign, traffic light, every stone, every material element that was part of the city, but also every sound, every smell, every light, every shade of color, every molecule of the city in order to establish the definitive private map of this (other) city that we could then roam, and not just with our feet but also with our ears, eyes and all of the other senses, no matter where we were, no matter where we later found ourselves, after the disappearance, because deep down that was it, that was what he was telling me deep down, when I look back now and see Ibo in the middle of the crowd getting off the boats in Eminönü, holding hands with his father, who points at Galata Bridge and tells him something before they cross the street and walk among the pigeons that are squabbling over leftover food, pistachio shells and corn kernels scattered about the large paved area in front of the New Mosque, when I see them walk around the outside of the Egyptian Bazaar and turn down a narrow alley where, according to his father, one can find the freshest fish in the city and which they will take with them rolled up in a piece of paper similar to those used by itinerant simit salesmen, which we zealously collected, cutting them into four-by-four-centimeter pieces and gluing them into a notebook where he wrote down the day, hour and place where we had bought that particular simit, paper whose soft texture and delicate drawings formed yet another map of the city we were traversing, a codified map, closed to others but which opened itself up to us in a series of connections that were sparked by a simple touch or look and which could transport us as often as we wished to a precise point in the city, any point, any one, like the one they were in now for example, not touching the silky, colorful paper of the simits, but feeling in their hands the not-quite-as-soft texture of this other type of paper, thicker and resistant enough to keep their hands dry during the walk back to the apartment in Kasımpaşa that will receive them in its dark living room, where they will sit and read something together as his mother cleans the fish and cooks Sunday lunch, when I now look at this six- or seven-year-old boy kneeling on the chair reading with still-faltering skill the sentences indicated by his father's finger as it moves down the page as if it were pulling them, as if he were inventing them right then and there,

on the page and at the moment in which he uttered the first syllables of the words and waited for Ibo to complete them, when I try to decipher what these words have to say, what these phrases have to tell, what the book open on the table is about, I am unable to conjure an image that goes beyond the dark living room, the table, the open book and the finger accompanying the reading, since the six- or seven-year-old boy is still incapable of traversing a city or the lines printed in the pages of a book without the help of an adult, without the adult lending him his footsteps and his eyes and revealing to him the things that he is still unable to decipher, to translate, to read, to see or whatever word you want to use to talk about the meaning that the thing you are staring at may have for someone, that is why when I see the glassy eyes of that man clutching little Ibo's hand more firmly than usual, as the two of them stand before the police barrier that separates them from a mountain of fallen beams, subsided walls, whole floors collapsed in a chaotic pile of pieces of concrete and twisted steel, and fabric, leather, plastic, glass, imitation gemstones, chains, necklaces and an infinite quantity of other materials, all melted and carbonized forming a single black mountain of debris and ashes that give off a strong smell and smoke billowing into the air that five days later, with the fire out, will continue to rise into the Istanbul sky, when I realize that at this precise moment the voice, which had already become a kind of breathing or heartbeat, something already incorporated into my inner self and part of my existence, that the voice is quiet now, when I realize that what appeared to be never-ending is now suspended, almost as if expecting an even greater tragedy, when the smoke and burnt smell emphasize with incredible, one might say material, clarity, the absolute silence into which everyone crowding around the police barrier has sunk, a silence punctuated only and occasionally by the crackling of the wood that is still burning without flames deep within the ashes and the dull sounds the firemen make as they drag their feet and shovels and batons and a whole paraphernalia of instruments about amidst a layer of dark dust that rises up to the tops of their boots as they search for survivors, when in the destitution of this almost religious silence I look at my father and see in his eyes the reflection of what is before us, it is only there, a long time after it all happened, that I understand the urgency of that account imposed on Ibo as they wandered the entire city, unconsciously it was the account of a disappearance running beneath that

torrent of words, the disappearance of a geography, a history, a language, a whole city that ceases to exist, that will be replaced by another without the vacuum of its death being filled by something different and more constructive than the somewhat pathetic feeling of absence that later accompanied my own accounts and the descriptions of Istanbul that I told Fátima deep in concentration, myself moved by an undisguisable urgency and a certain commitment to pass on something of which for better or for worse I was the living depository, the big difference being that I was telling her after everything had already disappeared, when it was no longer possible to feel a kind of familiarity with what was being told that could make the account and the desire to tell it authentic, because it wasn't her I was talking to after all, it wasn't for her that I was describing Istanbul, she listened, of course, deep in concentration and forming for herself goodness-knows-what image of the city, but she must have known that I wasn't talking for her sake, no Fátima, I'm not telling this whole story for your sake, it isn't you who needs to invent the past to justify what you are now, no Fátima, you had no way of knowing it wasn't for your sake, you were just a child and to a child everything is present and reality, when I told you about Istanbul there was no longer a real Istanbul, no matter how hard I looked for it all I could do was repeat the clichés petrified in history books and travellers' tales overflowing with easy exoticism, I understood early on that I could never reproduce for you the truth of the voice that, without avoiding the quaintness that inevitably sticks to all stories repeated over time whether at home, in school or in guided visits to museums, spoke to me, that touched me so deeply that even today I remember what it was telling me, about when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans, for example, and the Sultan Mehmed II rode his horse into the Hagia Sophia, splashing through the layer of blood on the marble floor, picking his way through the dead bodies piled up by the walls covered in Byzantine mosaics, because I can remember, and I do, every last detail of the story told right there in the basilica itself, but I am incapable of recognizing a single photograph of its interior that isn't the classic angle in which one sees, looking up, the magnificent dome levitating over a crown of arches as if floating on the light that comes pouring through its windows, I can't remember a single detail that isn't one of those obstinately reproduced over and over in tourist brochures, travel guides and documentaries

on the architectural beauties of Istanbul, I remember what I heard but not what I saw, I remember that I listened and not that I saw, as I now hear you say look, look at the New Mosque and the Süleymaniye and Bayezid mosques lit up, look at the boats crossing the Bosforo day and night, look at the lights of Eyüp further over to the right and the Blue Mosque with its enormous minarets on the other side, look at the Hagia Sophia and Topkapı Palace, I hear you repeat look, look, but I can't see anything, I change the subject and ask if it's late there, I can never remember what the time difference is, Fátima, and she confirms, it's late here, it's very late but you can still see it, look, and I say no, it's no use, I can't see anything, she doesn't understand, but I can't see anything but the movement of her arm, even though it is no longer on the computer screen and they are now, the arm and Fátima herself, just the continuation of her gesture, it is this movement and this voice that I see and hear, as if they were inseparable, look, and her arm reached out little by little as if waking from an ancestral dream, stretching, shoulder, elbow, forearm, wrist, hand, finger, and beyond, further on, making way further on with the voice that insists, look, look, Father, look.

That was the last time I saw my daughter.