

Catalina Barroso-Luque

Berta Esmeralda

Berta Esmeralda is a New World parrot. A child of the pet trade born on the rocky ridges of the Huasteca Potosina. Berta's world is the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. The macaw lives in a brass cage with an enormous wire cupola that towers over three flights of stairs, leading to passages and sleeping quarters and swings in an open space dedicated to her exercise. The cage sits on the Patrón's terrace surrounded by bougainvilleas. The thorny vines turn and twist round the intricate brass curls, fuchsia buds intertwined between the metal love hearts, creating an insulating layer away from the sun and the occasional winter frost.

Spring mornings give way to long arid afternoons. The sun cuts through the azure sky and pours in through the terrace. Berta half closes her eyelids, hiding two pale yellow irises from the scorching rays. A flicker of light trickles through, diaphanous shades of white and yellow blurring everything in her view—the Patrón asleep in his rocking chair, his head buried between yesterday's newspaper, the papery pink flowers, the artificial tree trunk, the zoo netting suspended a several feet above a crowd of blue-eyed children who stare at the military macaw in full regalia as it struts down a metal rod, wings spread eagle, parading its turquoise tips and golden tail.

Kaw! Berta opens her eyes. The stark light hits her pupils. *Kaw kaw!* The bare skin between those fine black feathered lines on her cheeks burns red! The commotion wakes the Patrón up. He stirs. Lifts his head from between the crumpled newspaper. Grumbles. Takes a deep breath. Exhales. Raises his body out of the chair, hand forming into a fist. *¡Ay cállate!* He hollers. *¡Kaw kaw kaw, kaaw!* Berta responds. *¡Pinche guacamaya ruidosa!* he yelps, punching the arm rest, *a la verga*, echoing behind. Their honks resonate louder and louder and louder and louder, until the Patrón gets tired.

He stands up and walks inside the house. Returns a couple of minutes later, his hands filled with guavas. He squeezes the small tropical fruits through the brass railings; the soft encasings explode with hard and gooey bits. Berta devours the mush in the space of five minutes. Her hooked black beak pierces the thin canary peel, pulling the pink flesh apart and revealing a soft fruity interior filled with tiny yellow seeds. Her exceptionally strong beak cracks the pips and then her boned tongue presses the sweet bolus upwards onto the palate, sieving through it, looking for fatty stone pieces.

A year passes and Berta has eaten so many guavas that she's begun to lose her tail feathers. Her fluorescent sheen has turned into an opaque olive green. The Patrón worries. His avian jewel is growing into just another common

bird and will soon no longer be considered a catch. Hatching a plan, he decides to arrange a rendezvous with Doña Gertrudis, who is renowned for her macaw collection. Hyacinth, Azul Oro, Paraba Barba Azul, Scarlet Ara Macao, even a mestizo Catalina macaw would be an appropriate suitor for his sweet palomita.

It's eight in the evening and '*A toda máquina*' is playing on the cable. Pedro Infante's virile voice streams out from the open window and into the street. Doña Gertrudis is asleep, away dreaming she is Aurora Segura, completely unaware of the time and of the Patrón, who is waiting outside.

Tap tap tap! The Patrón knocks on the burly wooded zaguán. The hollow sound shakes the old lady out of her sweet slumber. Blinking, taking in her surroundings, the Doña finds herself in a different body. Her skin is no longer taut and pearly and her luscious brown locks have turned into a receding mat of dull grey hair.

Sleepy. Disappointed. She gets up.

A continuous tap reaches its crescendo as she approaches the house's entrance. The Doña replies with an indiscernible mutter and slowly makes her way towards the zaguán.

Buenas noches Patrón, she yawns, opening the door and welcoming her guest.

The Patrón steps through the doorway and into the reception. Together they walk from the front room to the interior terrace, past the broken fountain and into the parlour, where a huge mint-coloured birdcage hangs in the room's far right corner.

Te presento a Paco, La Doña announces, pointing towards a handsome scarlet macaw with royal blue wings perching inside the cage.

The Patrón stares back with a blank expression, distracted by the music blasting out from the TV.

The old lady reaches for the remote control that's sitting on a coffee table, turns the volume down and continues explaining: *Paco is a big banda music fan. Besides tunes from Los Angeles Azules, Los Tigres del Norte and La Sonora Dinamita, the macaw also knows an array of jarabes, sones and huapangos.* She puts on the pair of thick leather gloves sat next to the remote control, while describing how every morning she turns on the record player and does household chores to the sound of '*Bésame Mucho*', '*Mi Cariñito*', '*Corazón*', and Paco's favourite, '*Dicen Que Soy Mujeriego*'.

The Doña opens the gate and reaches into the bird cage. Paco immediately hops onto her extended arm, lured by the soft ululation that flows from her lips. *Ay, ay, ay, she sings, canto al pie de tu ventana. Pa' que sepas que te quiero, tú, a mí, no me quieres nada.* To which Paco responds, *pero yo por ti me muero*, claws softly holding onto the leather gloves, head swaying a little.

Dicen que ando muy errado, que despierte de mis sueños. Paco carries on, *pero se han equivocado*, oblivious of the old lady who has pulled him out of the cage. ¡*Porque yo he de ser tu dueño!* bellows the Patrón, interrupting the duet and holding a small wicker cage wide open, ready to push the bird in. Paco attempts to flap his wings, wriggling vigorously, moving back and forth, fighting against the Doña's hands as they press down and enclose his body. He plunges his beak into the old lady's fat fingers, piercing through the leather but failing to do any serious harm to the wrinkly flesh beneath. He pulls his beak out. Hurls it back down. Misses again. The gloved hands smush him into the back end of the tiny cage, make a swift retreat and close the gate.

The old lady props the cage on the coffee table. Turns to the Patrón who is staring silently at the red macaw. He hesitates. Reaches for his back pocket. His fingers fumble against the denim. After a few seconds they emerge holding a mustard-coloured envelope. The Doña removes the gardening gloves and sets them back down on the coffee table. Her fingers dive between the ochre paper and reappear with a bunch of folded bills. She then licks her right index finger and begins to count. One, two, three...twelve five-hundred pesos bills. Six-thousand pesos to be exact. Sold!

Berta sits perched on a branch, camouflaged against the green. She prunes the bougainvilleas with methodic precision. Over the years, the thorny canes have grown so big that they've melded into a labyrinth of heart-shaped leaves and hardy vines coiled over the brass bars, emerald pockets lined with papery pink, orange and cream.

The thick bract offers enough shelter from Paco's voice booming from the opposite side of the cage. Balladas, cumbias and rancheras warble out of the scarlet macaw's beak, feet shimmying up and down a brass pole, head bobbing to the beat: *Es callada, tímida, inocente*, bouncing, *tiene la mirada*, hopping, *le tomo la mano*, jiggling, *y siente algo extraño*.

La abrazo, me abraza. Y empieza a temblaar, blurts Berta, landing on a pole that is jiggling jerking tata tata tata ta, *¡a temblaar!*, claws clinging to the slender piece of shaking metal, finding her balance, tweeting, *de miedo. Diciéndome que nunca, había sentido sensación así*, chirps Paco a little louder. *¡En su vidaaa!* his voice rings a little higher, *así*, the two birds chant together, *¡en su vida!* They nod their heads in unison: *que si eso es el amor, que si eso es el amor, que si eso es el amor, que si eso es el amor, que si eso es el amor, que si eso es el amor, que si eso es el amor, que si eso es el amor*.

Paco climbs on top of Berta. He thrusts back and forth as Berta wriggles, squirms and yanks to the sides. Paco clasps harder onto her neck, biting a bunch of lime green feathers and pulling them out. *Kaw!* Berta screams. She tries to bite back as Paco's left claw latches onto her lower side, right

foot holding tight to the brass pole, their tails caught against each another, cloacas rubbing, skin chafing, fluids spurting. Two minutes seem like twenty. Twenty could be an hour. Then Paco casually steps off.

A few days later, Berta lays three perfectly white eggs. For one...two...three...six...nine...twelve...fifteen days she sits...eighteen hidden between the buds and the bract...twenty-one hardly moving. When she needs to piss or stretch her wing, Paco takes over. He shuffles his body weight. Rearranges the eggs. Huffs. Puffs. And after five minutes squawks: ¡*Gorda, apúrale que ya me duelen las nalgas!* Signalling to Berta to return to the nest.

Hours soften into days, wakeful hours melting into twilight as the summer heat turns thick and viscous. Berta is in a haze. Her crown shines with a blinding fluorescent green that washes into turquoise just below the nape. A mass of fair-headed children coo with awe at the bird's exotic beauty, their sapphire eyes affixed to the ruby patch that announces where the beak starts. Dark. Powerful. With the strength of a dog. Five-hundred to seven-hundred pounds per square inch pummelling down upon a piece of wood or a twig as wide as a child's finger. Curved and with a pointed tip, the beak can inflict not just a nip, but pierce straight through the skin.

The macaw withdraws its bill, the pointed tip latches onto the ivory flesh, ripping through it and cracking the egg. Berta opens her eyes. Gapes immobile at the mustard goo as it mixes into a clear slime that oozes from the shell. Heart palpitating, pumping, racing with adrenaline, she shuffles the broken egg towards the ledge and knocks it off, darts over to the other two and kicks them like footballs. The heavy eggs stagger a couple of inches forward before rolling onto their sides. Berta tries using her beak. Clumsily snaps at them. Fails. Decides on using her claws. She pierces the shell with a talon, dragging one egg after another onto the ledge and pushing them out of the nest, watching them as they plunge the ground and splatter.

The shattering sound catches Paco's attention. He swoops down to inspect the scene. The yolk and the whites appear scrambled. A web of inky veins forms a net round the half-developed embryos which are swathed in some sort of translucent goo. The contents, however, don't smell rotten. The dry jerky-like innards give off a meaty odour reminiscent of *huevos con machaca*.

Paco reaches down and takes a nibble. He raises his head. Looks inquisitive. Lowers it again. Reaches out for a second bite. Then another. Followed by another and another and another. Nibble by nibble, the scene disappears. The floor is wiped clean. The cage cleared.