

***The Deathless Game* by Fernanda Ballesteros**

Fictional piece commissioned for the solo art show
"Common Ground - Archibald Apori",
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Translated to English by Margalit Berriet

Only by winning will you get out of here, announced the old merchant of living shoes - creatures that feed by the sweat of the soles of feet, and whose publicity praises the massages provided by its multiple small soft toes.

You smile at her and walk, away from her, the market, the church of the nine goddesses, and into the forest.

You tell yourself there must be another way. Another way to escape.

Earlier, you were eating a dish of soba noodles, cooked in the broth of discouragement. You don't remember, or you have forgotten. You were once told: Study well the flavors of defeat. You were so sure of yourself when you signed up for Tosca, a Matrix-style virtual game. Physical education to strengthen your mind. Sports, martial arts, world history, botany, gastronomy, training in every possible discipline necessary for surviving Tosca, identifying hidden traps - like that strange taste you thought you perceived in your soba but mistook for a spice. Here, in Tosca, you were eating soba noodles in huge leaves that served as a plate, and over there, on Earth, you were eating through a probe; your body lying in a padded box, a kind of technological sarcophagus, a computer that envelops you and carries you away into a virtuality so close to the tangible that the greatest risk of the game, you are told, is confusing reality with fiction, Earth with Tosca.

I've read so many books about Tosca I could find my way around it blindfolded, you said, before even setting foot on the dashboard.

You'll lose your mind in there, your mother said. You saw what happened to the kid from the Flores family, your auntie Laura's neighbor. He never leaves his room anymore.

I could never, your friends told you.

Come back soon, your brother urged you.

You need to study more, said your ex.

Your ex. Your workout partner. You had imagined enlisting together, combining your skills to defeat the monarchy on Tosca, the only way to beat the game.

You, the so-called the expert on rules, you're leaving this relationship without respecting the slightest human rule, he wrote to you.

You've left me in the misery of your silence. Have you already forgotten what you told me, draped in the four sheets under the five-hundred-year-old chestnut tree; with knotted arms, legs, roots and tongues? Was that all fake? When you told me that our influx was one, the two of us in the flanks of the waterfall, engulfed by the violent caress of the stream and green moss? You're leaving me, as if you were dead, in incomprehensible mourning?

How to discuss death with him ? How to have a conversation with a narcissist who controls language in such a way ? He takes your words, the present ones, the former ones, the ones you uttered years ago, the ones you uttered at another time, the ones that just slipped out, the private words and the public ones, and

he spits them out in his favor like a shower of little swords that he throws at your eyes. To blind you, at all cost. In order to manipulate you, at all cost, to caress you from head to butt and tell you don't worry, I'm here, we are two castaways catching our breath on the same raft. And then you feel frail and supported, and he feels strong in your weakness and then frail and comfortable when you recover and you tell him you are there for him, you ask him to forgive you for having made him suffer by simply existing.

You'd rather be lost, lonely, thirsty, locked up in a boundless virtual world than live in this one reality, caught up in a game where you're just a circus monkey in your ex's brain and, by extension, in your own. How to break this fusion that you have been feeding for so many years? This fiction mixed with reality, a horror fiction embellished with the glitter of sex and the juicy flesh of his words ?

A sound from the forest brings you back from the past into the present, from a piece of fiction on Earth to the fiction in Tosca. What do you hear ? A deer ? A human with hooves? With the blades of your fingernails, you trim the branches that separate you from the sound of galloping. You joined the game because the concept fascinated you. A world where death doesn't exist. The jeans you are wearing breathe, so do your bra, your panties, your shirt and socks. The amputated branches turn into snakes. Instant mutations, without reprieve, accelerated cycles.

Behind the branches, instead of an animal you find a hole, a luminous slide. What do you risk by throwing yourself in? To fall to the bottom of a well, from which death would never deliver you? Excessive thinking leads to failure: one of the first precepts in Tosca's guidebook. The fall goes on, lasts, you have time to tell yourself that if the slide is also alive, you are probably sliding down the mouth of a monster, straight into the hell and gases of its stomach. It is not an esophagus, no, the water you fall into is fresh, there is a current, a tide, and you let yourself be carried, and by opening your eyes you discover the red and orange trees, their leaves interacting like beings, speaking the language of the wind and when they brush against each other, they burst into a glitter of laughter.

The cold water neutralizes the effect of the broth of discouragement. Now you understand, it was poisoned. The old shoe merchant? The prepubescent girl dancing in the restaurant? The cook, the one who told you about his life on Earth? No, it couldn't be him. You felt an empathy for him that you had never experienced in the game. You talked about grief. He grieved for his brother, you grieved for your father. An empathy familiar perhaps to everyone here, in this game without death. You get out of the water and on the soft sand, you say to yourself:

I need to write, to get my thoughts straight.

Wherever you pass, the sand changes color and starts to smell like lavender. With your nail-blade you write on the sand. As they gain meaning, the sentences swell and incarnate into frightened ants, fleeing, annihilating your message. After a few seconds of frantic wandering, they come into contact, organize themselves and start their anthill. You watch them organize, with their bodies as their tools, their bodies as part of a larger, flexible organism, with connected brains. That's what you need. To unite with your opponents, to form a single force of opposition against the queen.

How to inspire empathy in others? Which language to reach them ? The spoken word, you think to yourself. The sung word. You swallow birds to capture their talent and gradually begin to compose your own song, in your head. Walking activates your thoughts. You carry out your mission under purple suns and blue moons, reaching out to the highest point of Tosca, to the hump of the giant camel. After a night spent humming, you see from far away the birth of a green sun. The sign you were waiting for. You inhale the dew of the landscape and exhale it in a song, in the melody of the dozens of chewed birds.

Your hymn awakens the people. It is impossible to control the welcome they will give your words; these living things, independent from you, transform, according to the ear that receives them, sometimes into rats and sometimes into angels. The revolution breaks out; the people, gathered in an assembly on the square in front of the church of the nine goddesses, all demand the Queen's head. The human mass convulses, determined. You observe the spectacle from your mountain, one woman volunteers as the executioner, the shouts of approval of the crowd resound, the axe falls, the head rolls in the middle of the crowd, and while congealing, the blood transforms into two enormous living red wings. In the middle of the crowd, someone tries to seize it but the head of the queen is already flying towards the top of the hump of the artiodactyl, towards you, and lays on your lips the kiss which brings you back on Earth.