

SUSAN MANCHESTER

Floating World No. 3: Down, 2020
Oil on wood, 8 x 8 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

GEORGE EASTBURN

Barça Taxi

You look at the sky. It's blue. And it's early. Shadows across the avenue. Gaudí's avenue. At the bottom of the walkway: Sagrada Família. And you can almost feel, behind you, Hospital de Sant Pau. The calm sound of the fountain is behind you, too, and gives the morning a peace that renders a sadness to your last morning in Barcelona. This time.

You wanted to stroll here from the top of the avenue . . . Gaudí's . . . before morning boils into the activity of a Barcelona morning.

The avenue's walkway is smooth and glistening, off a surface of a night's rain. The Sagrada Família's high towers catch the rays of the sun like a golden gift. People begin their morning movements here and there up and down the walkway.

Now you turn out of Avinguda de Gaudí and turn your head toward Hospital de Sant Pau and the magnificent work of another Catalan architect. It burns pink in its tall, delicate design.

The pair, Sagrada Família and Hospital de Sant Pau, will stay in your memory, a photo of the mind.

Now back to the hotel to take a taxi. To take a taxi, and then you'll disappear from this city. You walk with light steps, there's something about the air, the mixed atmosphere between the solid and the spirit. Then, the first moped arrives on a street off Avinguda de Gaudí. And another. And another. And the air buzzes with the sound of giant hornets. And now the cars. Now the trucks and buses. Barcelona awakens.

The air feels fresher than usual after the rain last night.

You arrive back at the hotel. You smile . . . the last stroll. A little dramatic. The day shines a little sadly on your leaving Barcelona.

You push the glassy door and you're in the hotel lobby. You tell the clerk behind the counter, "I'm back."

He turns, leans down, reaches to take your bags, carries them over to you.

He tells you that the taxi driver's here. Outside.

The driver comes into the lobby while you take the bags and turn to leave. And the driver is R, your coincidental Barcelona acquaintance and guide, first met in Port Vell, then out in Montbau, like a travel ghost. You turn to the clerk, ask, "Him? He's the driver?"

R tells you, "At your service. I'm a friend of the management."

You say, "Perfect. Why not? . . . My traveling compañero."

You walk through the doorway, R carries a bag, you carry the other. In front of the hotel, he points toward his yellow-and-black taxi across the street. You cross the street after a moped buzzes past you.

You tell R, "A perfect goodbye, the smoke and sound from one of those devil cycles."

R says, "They're forever arriving down from our Mount Tibidabo, the Mount of Temptation."

* * *

Now you're in the taxi. R turns his head, says, "El Prat?"

You ask, "What?"

"El Prat. The airport."

"Yes . . . if we must go."

"Yes, it's your time to go."

* * *

The taxi tours the rising streets out of Barcelona on the way to the hills between the city and the airport.

"Would you like one more story?" R asks.

"Sure. I've got time, tell it."

"It's a story about a Latin American man named B. He came to Barcelona in his youth. Came from a South American country.

"B used to say that he didn't remember his history in his native land. Only remembered that his life was dark and dangerous as if he were living in a raging sea. After a time in Barcelona, he remembered more of that distant life, he wrote the details in stories and novels of protest against a military government, resistance against assaults on his human rights, of arrest at the hands of police with steel fists; his books are full of the details of that life . . . But at the beginning, B arrived in Barcelona out of the darkness, as if he'd come through a tunnel at the bottom of the sea. He lived in the Barri Gòtic neighborhood, with its little narrow, dark streets. He found work for enough money to rent an apartment and buy his food. First, he worked as a cleaner and busboy in a flamenco café in El Raval. Then worked as a clerk in a flamenco shop owned by a famous dancer. And he worked as his life came into

more kinds of certain freedom, with a little more money, too. Then he worked as a clerk in a jewelry shop on Portal de l'Àngel, near the Plaça de Catalunya. And he wrote poetry in little notebooks. Then he wrote stories when he learned that it's possible to make a little money through short story contests in Spain.

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"For a while, he drove a tourist bus and acted as guide and he told the history of Barcelona by microphone on tours. But after too many traffic accidents, particularly when he turned on narrow Barcelona streets with that enormous bus, he lost that job. But his supervisor told him that his oral narratives of Barcelona and its glorious stands for human freedom and artistic expression were excellent, fascinating.

"Okay . . . B then lived on his salary as clerk in the shop on Portal de l'Àngel . . . and some money from the writing contests. He lived well enough, lived in the apartment in the Barri Gòtic. And he bought a camera one day.

"On Sundays, and sometimes on Mondays, B visited Park Guëll, Gaudí's wonderfully strange terraced park with the curvaceous buildings and the magical landscape.

"In particular, B liked the park's little dragon, the blue-tiled dragon, with a bit of white and orange on its skin, like a mosaic statue in the heart of the park. It seems that this little dragon, without teeth, or without many teeth, seems always to be emerging from a ceramic cave and the waters of life flow freely from its mouth. B liked to take photos of Gaudí's little dragon statue from different angles. A problem nearly every time was that someone or another would be standing between B and the little dragon and his view of the water that flows like liquid light from its mouth.

"One day, however, maybe a magic day, B had a clear opportunity for a photo of the little dragon. He put the camera to his eye to take a perfect photo and, how strange!, he looked through the viewfinder and found a woman, wearing tinted glasses, black hair like the smoke of an intense fire, wearing a blouse somewhere between the colors red and pink, a little provocative, only a little, with some of her upper self showing. And she smiled at him, through his viewfinder, she smiled at him. A perfect smile, friendly, lovable.

"So, B lowered the camera. This smile was a surprise. A stranger smiling through his camera.

"B called to her on the other side of the fountain, 'Excuse me . . . your smile's perfect. But . . . what for? I don't understand, señorita.'

"She told him, 'I like to bring a good feeling to strangers.'

"B walked over to the other side of the fountain and offered his hand to her. They shook hands. The music of Casals, 'The Song of the Birds,' I believe, floated through the air. Someone was playing a cello in Gaudí's temple in the park.

"Her name was Z.

"On their first date, or maybe the second . . . they walked Las Ramblas of Barcelona. They didn't go to the cinema, or to a flamenco show, or a concert of whatever kind of music you might imagine, no. B and Z wanted to get to know each other better . . . and the same on subsequent dates, their strolls. On Las Ramblas.

"On one date, they walked over the artwork of Joan Miró on the ground. They discussed the design of that circle with the small blue and red circles inside the larger circle. With a yellow triangle. And something looking like a broken black arrow inside the circle, too. B and Z explained to each other the possible intent of Joan Miró, that great Catalan artist. Z, as a proud Catalan, told B more than once, that the red, blue, and yellow colors, beyond doubt, had something to do with the importance of FC Barcelona football, Fútbol Club Barcelona. And each time she told him that, she made B laugh quietly, with head down as if he didn't want her to see his vulnerability. But she did.

"Another time, on their strolls, they were walking over the ancient Roman pathway Portal de l'Àngel, with its expensive shops, but attractive, too. B told Z, 'I'm going to buy you boots of Spanish leather here.'

"Z told him, 'There are no boots of Spanish leather here. They're boots of Catalan leather.'

"B smiled as if all the light of a Mediterranean morning had fallen over him in that moment and he said, 'But there is "the coast of Barcelona," no?'

"In a moment, like a flash, she hugged him, said, 'You know the great Bob Dylan's words, too! "Boots of Spanish Leather"!'

"Yes.'

"Z and B married a little later in Barcelona. They lived for a while in the apartment in the Barri Gòtic. Later,

they moved to the town of Sitges on the Mediterranean coast, south of Barcelona. They lived in a little house not far from the beach and the sea. They had two children, named Bob and Sara. They lived happily together as long as they could . . . B passed away, it seemed before his time, well-known as a writer in the Spanish language with great stories of Barcelona and of ironic misadventures in his native South America. Ironic stories, as many of Bob Dylan's songs are ironic."

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You're now standing beside R's taxi, on the sidewalk of the airport terminal. R gives you your bags. You put them down, move toward R to embrace him, your arms extended. He moves a step back, tells you, "Oh no, I'm much too light, too fragile. Just remember me and Barcelona whenever you read B's stories. There's even one with the ironic title 'Boots of Spanish Leather.'"

You pick up your luggage, turn to walk into the airport terminal to catch a flight to head back home. You look back and notice R pull a cigarette out of a pack in his sport coat pocket, put the cigarette in his mouth, unlit, open the taxi door, and look back and forth suspiciously, as if he was on guard against something unseen, somewhere far from Spain.

George Eastburn writes for space in life, writing to fill space with meaningful words. He has had fiction and poetry published in *Rosebud*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Friends Journal*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Quaker Life*, and *Clear Creek*.