

ED SMILEY

Land of the Space of Today, 2013
title based on a phrase from *Finnegans Wake*
acrylic and acrylic transfer on canvas, 30 x 24 in



courtesy the artist

ANA MARÍA SHUA

Meet the Author

He was tired, and it was very cold, but at last he arrived at Zorzales de la Frontera after a seven-hour journey. The cigarette stench in the bus was nauseating. The windows, as usual, were hermetically sealed. But wasn't smoking forbidden? Apparently neither the passengers nor the driver had violated that rule, yet the odor remained, omnipresent, oppressive. Gustavo gratefully inhaled the frigid air at the tiny village station. Had someone been smoking in the vehicle while it was parked? Did buses really park? Or were they in constant motion, wending their way along the nation's highways? At the garage: that was the answer. The bus had been at some repair shop, and before or after checking the engine, the mechanics had taken refuge inside the vehicle to drink their *mate*, talk, play cards—and smoke.

Gustavo had quit fifteen years ago, and even back then, when he was a big smoker, he couldn't stand the smell of a cold butt in an enclosed space. Wasn't it true that it doesn't take much to saturate one's sense of smell? He remembered a TV program on the Discovery Channel that explained it all so clearly: odors were represented by differently shaped blocks that fit into spaces corresponding to olfactory cells, and they sealed them up, causing a saturation effect. Then, after a brief period of exposure to the odor, the person stopped noticing the stink. The brightly colored animation reminded him of the game of *Tetris* and how the pieces fit precisely and neatly into one another, and yet here he was—Gustavo Manzone, seven hours later, trapped in the poorly heated bus, wiggling his toes inside his shoes to warm them up—still breathing that stale, sickening smell that gave him a headache.

Two people boarded the bus in Zorzales; and then two more, a mother and her baby, got off along with Gustavo. The woman's husband was waiting for her. There was no one else at the station. He took out his cell phone and called the numbers he'd been given. Rule number one: always ask for a phone contact. No, don't be silly, what for, we'll be right there waiting for you, people would say. But Gustavo had had too much experience with icy, deserted, windswept stations at dusk. (He refused to travel at night.) One number connected him to an answering machine, and no one answered at the other. It must have been the city government office; everybody was probably gone for the day.

Luckily there was a rickety taxi with a fat, jovial driver who took him to the only hotel in town.

“So, what brings you here, if you don’t mind my asking?” the driver inquired.

“I’m a writer. Tomorrow I’m giving a talk to the school kids.”

“A writer! That’s terrific! I don’t read a lot. Well, in fact, I don’t read at all. Haven’t read a book since I was in school. So, are you very famous?”

If he were very famous, Gustavo thought, if he were really famous, he wouldn’t be here. He’d be stepping off a plane in Paris. His publisher would have sent an entourage to meet him—the managing editor, most likely, eager to find out if he’d enjoyed his trip. And the editor in chief. They’d have taken him to a four-star hotel, at the very least. That night he’d have feasted on *foie gras*. “I lived here for a while, many years ago. I was very poor. I used to stare into the windows of the *charcuteries* and do the math in my head, but I never had enough for *foie gras* with truffles.” That’s what he’d have told the managing editor (a charming woman, so French, a little on the chubby side, but with a gamine haircut and almond-shaped eyes) as he blissfully savored his *foie gras* with truffles at the brasserie, rejecting the toast points (to the astonished disapproval of his French hosts)—the better to concentrate on the glorious flavor of the pâté itself.

At the Hotel Austral (dirty, gray, peeling paint; torn carpet) there was no reservation in his name, but fortunately there was a room available.

“Lucky for you,” said the boy behind the counter. “Now that business is picking up in the countryside, we’re almost always full.”

The four-star Parisian hotel would surely have had special rooms, maybe even entire floors, reserved for nonsmokers. The room at the Hotel Austral efficiently reproduced the same stench of cold cigarette butts that had accompanied him throughout his trip. Gustavo trembled at the thought of spending the whole night with his nose planted in a pillow that reeked of stale smoke. He never unpacked his little travel kit. The only things he took out and placed in the bathroom were his toothbrush and toothpaste. He was doing just that when they arrived to pick him up.

The Commissioner for Cultural Affairs, a very young man with a slightly old-fashioned mustache, obviously cultivated to make him look older, apologized profusely: a

miscommunication, he explained. The responsible party would be reprimanded.

“What an honor for Zorzales, what a thrill! I can’t believe I’m shaking hands with the real Gustavo Manzone!”

And for one moment the universe found its axis again. At the French publishing house, they would be used to dealing with many famous authors from around the world; in Zorzales, they had never met a “real” writer. As usual, the local talent would be there; he’d meet them tomorrow. They’d look at him with envy and a touch of hatred; they’d show him their books—pitiful self-published editions. For a few days they’d wait hopefully for some e-mail comment from him; later they’d resign themselves once more to their marginalized fate. It’s because we don’t live in the capital, they’d tell themselves yet again, to avoid admitting the truth, to avoid acknowledging their lack of ability.

Zorzales was part of an agricultural region, and Manzone’s visit had been sponsored by a local dairy company

“Forget the hotel,” the commissioner told him. “We have something much nicer for you. The company guest house.”

It was, in fact, a very lovely house, right on the plaza. As it hadn’t been used in months, it was freezing inside. Someone, whom the commissioner cursed out familiarly, probably the same person who had forgotten to meet Manzone at the station, had also forgotten to turn on the lone heater in the living room. They dialed up the heat before they left.

The Commissioner for Cultural Affairs drove him around for a quick tour of the town. There wasn’t much to see. Lately these trips to the heartland had come to represent a significant portion of Gustavo’s income. He traveled quite often, and these towns, all so much alike, ran together in his mind. To avoid this problem, he practiced a sort of literary exercise: he tried to find some unique, differentiating element, a little flash card with which to incorporate a mental photo of the town into his memory album. In this case it was easy: the church was a hideous modern cement-block structure with iron railings poking out from unexpected places. The architect or whoever was responsible hadn’t factored in the effects of bad weather: rust from the iron railings had leached into the concrete, and the net effect was dirty and depressing.

“You’re going to love our little barbecue place,” the man said. “I’m awfully sorry I won’t be able to join you, but tonight’s my niece’s birthday party. Someone will pick you

up tomorrow morning at seven sharp. We’re celebrating the school’s anniversary, and it means a lot to us to have you here.”

Gustavo found it hard to understand why people in these small towns took their cars to go three blocks. It was equally hard for him to understand why, if everyone was so excited about his presence, no one took it upon themselves to invite him over for dinner or even to take him out to a restaurant. They dropped him off at the door of a sad little barbecue joint with plastic chairs, Formica tables, and vinyl tablecloths. Gustavo had long since dismissed the notion that humble barbecue joints were the best. They served him a few pieces of dried-out reheated steak, which he chewed absentmindedly, concentrating on his reading. Although he could no longer recapture the magical spark that literature had ignited in his childhood, at least reading still served to help him escape from those places where he had no desire to be. He was treated better when he didn’t collect an honorarium. In Zorzales he had asked for a reasonable fee, paid for by the dairy company.

He returned to the guest house hoping that his exhaustion would let him fall asleep right away. It was amazingly cold. The heater built into the living room wall barely managed to warm the room, but the bedroom was arctic. Fortunately there were several blankets, but in any case he went to bed with his clothes on. The managing editor of the French publishing house (ever since he spotted her at the airport with that slutty little face of hers, he knew it was bound to happen) kept him company for a while and helped heat the bed, as narrow and cold as a coffin.

He had set the alarm for six thirty and woke with a craving for a tasty dairy breakfast. In the refrigerator he had noticed some of the local company’s products. The cold discouraged him from getting out of bed, but once outside the bedroom it was more tolerable: the house had warmed up a little. The cookies he found in the cupboard were old, soggy, and moth-eaten. He couldn’t find any spoons. He helped himself to a glass of milk and then opened a container of Roquefort-flavored cream cheese. He ate as much as he could with delight.

At precisely seven o’clock, as arranged, the principal of the school, which was a block-and-a-half away, arrived to pick him up. She was quite a remarkable woman, around sixty, in high heels and a beaver coat that hung nearly to

her ankles. Her lips were painted an orange shade. Inviting and imperious.

“I’m not going to wash my face for the rest of the week,” she exclaimed as Gustavo pecked her on the cheek. “Kissed by Gustavo Manzone!”

“How long will the event take?” Gustavo wanted to know.

“Two hours.”

“Out on the patio?”

“Of course—there are lots of us.”

“Do you need me there the whole time?”

Madam Principal looked at him, offended.

“That’s what we invited you for!”

By which she meant, that’s what we’re paying you for. At least it was a sunny day. Manzone didn’t mind these chats with the kids, in spite of their repetitiveness. However, he was fed up with the custom many schools had of inviting him as a decoration for special occasions. They’d leave him sitting there like a privileged spectator, but also in order that the parents and students could stare at him. They enjoyed the honor of having a recognized author at their choral recitals, their humble presentations, the readings of prize-winning texts, the speeches.

“Wait till you see what a fantastic job the children have done with your stories.”

Manzone had no interest in seeing what the children of Zorzales had done with his stories. Ruined them, most likely. For some reason, the teachers were never satisfied with the stories as they were; they always felt obliged to introduce some sort of improvement. He especially loathed the idea of spending two hours on the patio at that time of morning.

“It’s cold,” he ventured to suggest to the principal.

“Oh, if that’s what’s bothering you, don’t give it another thought. The patio’s not the worst place. The whole school’s like this. We’re always planning to install central heating, but every winter something more urgent comes along. But it’s better this way, don’t you think? Less artificial. The kids grow up healthier.”

Everything passes. During the ceremony, while a boy read the interview he had conducted with an old man who had been the school’s first janitor, Gustavo took off his shoes and rested his feet against the patio tiles, warmed by the winter sun, so he could receive their warmth directly on his insteps, which were covered by the socks he hadn’t

changed since the previous morning. The principal shot him a look of utter contempt.

At ten the ceremony ended, and Gustavo Manzone, the almost-famous writer, in any case much more famous than any of the local scribes, was ushered into the library, where he was to chat with the sixth and seventh graders. The seventh-grade teacher was a fat woman in her fifties, heavily made up. The sixth-grade teacher was young and pretty, limped on her left foot, and looked like she had just swallowed a spoonful of balsamic vinegar. But the librarian was rather cute, and Gustavo smiled at her with a certain amount of relief: something on which to focus his weary eyes. It was true: the library was just as frigid as the patio, but the entrance of seventy students soon warmed the room, as Manzone had predicted.

The instructors and the parents, who sometimes participated in these strange ceremonies, always listened rapturously to the children's questions. Aren't they clever? they would ask him afterwards. Weren't you surprised? Yes, he would say, they're clever, they're amazing, they're so unpredictable, these school visits do me so much good because contact with the kids helps recharge my batteries, *I'm* the one who learns from *them*. In fact, the children always asked the same questions. Everywhere, the length and breadth of the entire country and probably throughout the world (Manzone had been to a few schools in other Latin American countries), children imitated the behavior of their elders. They acted just like those TV reporters who blurt out rapid questions because they don't have the slightest notion of whom they're interviewing. The children invariably would ask him how he got into writing, why he writes, how long it takes him to write a book, how many books he's written, if his family supported him when he decided to pursue a career in literature, what he'd like to be if he weren't a writer, why he writes, what his first book is called, where he gets his ideas from, how long it takes him to write a book, how many books he's written, why he writes, what he'd like to be if he weren't a writer, how long it takes him to write a book, and so on, repeating themselves over and over because they didn't pay attention to what others had asked or even listen to Gustavo's replies, but rather lurked in wait for their own chance, for that moment of glory when they could formulate their question aloud.

Gustavo asked the instructors not to rebuke the chil-

dren who asked the same questions he had just answered (he knew from experience that it was impossible to prevent), and he tried to offer a different response each time: that, too, had been a literary exercise at first. Over time it had become routine, just like the rest of it. The three or four stock responses he had for each question were stored in the hard drive of his memory, and he needed only to press the button to make them appear, lively and enthusiastic, with the necessary rhythm, energy, hesitations, and pauses to make them seem spontaneous and fresh.

"Why do you write?"

"Well, when I was a boy I liked to sing, draw, and write. But whenever I drew something, the teacher and my parents would say something vague like 'Oh, that's lovely, dear.' Whenever I sang or played the guitar, everyone would get up and tiptoe out of the room." (General laughter.) "But when I wrote, everyone was amazed, something happened, something very special... and, well, I decided to concentrate on what I did best."

"Why do you write?"

"To be perfectly honest, I think I do it to please my readers, so they'll praise me and love me more."

"Why do you write?"

"There's something I try to achieve with words. It's hard to explain—I want to mold them, do whatever I feel like doing with them, invent things that come out perfect—you see? To write a story, a little poem that's like a tree..."

As he spoke, trying to provide short answers that would interest most of the audience, Manzone identified the typical characters that attended these ceremonies: the Boy Reader who dreamed of becoming a writer and almost certainly never would be; the Ones in Back, garrulous troublemakers; the Pleasant Little Fatty; the Popular Girl, always so annoying, surrounded by a female retinue that sometimes raised their hands in order to turn the floor over to their queen. (Excuse me, sir, they would say when he called on them, let's see, you over there, you haven't had a turn yet, excuse me, sir, but my friend here has a question.)

The children, God bless them, wanted more than anything else in the world for the talk to end quickly so they could get his autograph. They'd brandish a ballpoint pen in one fist, and those who owned a copy of the book would already be waving it in the air. Others had their notebooks ready—his autograph! A fearsome moment: Gustavo was

a little frightened whenever the junior rabble closed in on him—an autograph, an autograph! They wanted his wonderful, holy signature, God knows why, on the palms of their hands or sometimes on their school uniforms; the media had taught them that nothing on earth was as important as the signature of a famous person. It was an awkward situation, and Manzone asked the teachers to help by organizing the throng; he asked them, above all, to make sure each child left the auditorium as soon as he or she had collected the signature. Otherwise they immediately realized they could get back in line. If they had nothing to offer him but a piece of paper, they'd ask him to sign the back, or else they'd fold it or cut it into pieces and ask for an autograph for Mom, one for their little brother, another for their cousin or for an absent classmate. They wanted autographs, autographs, autographs, who knows why or for what, piles of signed scraps of paper that in a few days would get buried in the depths of a drawer or a pocket.

"How much do you make from your writing?" asked one of the boys, slightly taller than the rest and with a few incipient pimples on his forehead—precisely four red little pimples in the form of the Southern Cross.

Manzone felt relieved: that question only surfaced when his presentation had been a success, when the kids felt comfortable and trusting. It was a question that arose from genuine personal curiosity, one that the teachers immediately tried to suppress: what a rude question, it's personal, it's none of your business. However, it was one that Gustavo loved to answer.

"Like nearly every writer, I earn ten percent of the cover price—that is, the bookstore price. Those are called author's rights. For example, if you pay ten pesos for a book, one peso goes to me."

Generally that explanation would be followed by an astonished silence followed by whispers and other questions.

"That's all? But why do you get so little when you're the one that makes up all the stuff it says inside?"

"Well," Manzone explained, "I invent the stories but I don't put up the money to publish the book. That comes from the publisher. And the bookstore keeps a pretty good portion. For every ten pesos you pay, the bookstore keeps three, or sometimes even four. Booksellers have a lot of expenses: rent, their employees' salaries. And the publisher also has to pay for paper, personnel, publicity..."

"But you—how much do you make?" insisted the tall pimply boy. Manzone then explained that when an author became well known, he didn't have to wait for the book to sell in order to collect his share. When he submitted the book to the publisher, he signed a contract and they paid him an advance. They were twelve- and thirteen-year-old kids, so he challenged them to solve a mathematical problem. If he received ten percent in author's rights and they gave him an advance representing the rights for three thousand copies, how much did they pay him for a book that cost ten pesos? I've always been bad at math, he told them, provoking more laughter and good will. At this point there would generally be a long silence as the children tried to solve the problem, and then after a while the answers would begin to come forth, some of them right, most of them wrong.

But this time one of the girls stood up. She was a brunette with earth-colored skin, straight hair, and long, polished nails, in twelve-year-old-girl fashion. "What I want to know," she said, "is how much you make a month."

The conversation had taken an unexpected turn. This was something he had never been asked before, and he had no desire to respond. Of course he wasn't obliged to tell the truth, but he couldn't quite come up with a figure that would satisfy his audience's expectations—a number that would make them think that although he wasn't a rich man, he was no pathetic failure, either; a number that would have some sort of harmonic relationship to the salaries their parents earned. Gustavo smiled uncomfortably, trying to buy time; he always hoped for some new question to deviate from the routine, but not this one. If only there could be a distraction, if only something would happen to prevent him from answering.

Then one of the children on the left side of the semi-circle surrounding him stood up and pulled his hand out of his pocket, but what he had clenched in his fist wasn't a ballpoint pen. It was a gun. There was nothing unusual about the boy, nothing to attract attention, but now, with the gun in his hand, he had suddenly become the center of the universe, and Gustavo noticed he had a coffee-colored stain on his white school smock and a scratch on his cheek.

He started shooting immediately. The next day the newspapers would report the make and caliber of the weapon, emphasizing the youth's excellent aim, but at the moment no one was paying attention to that detail. Time crept

slowly, very slowly, as when someone trips in the street and manages to remain conscious of each one of his movements, anticipating the precise way his body will hit the pavement, even to the extent of predicting the parts of his skin that will be scraped by the friction, the endangered bones, the size of the bruises, and yet be unable to avoid any of it, the die is cast, the fall is interminable, yet everything happens in an instant. The first shot hit the girl who had asked the question, the little brunette, surely because she was standing. A thick red stain began to spread beneath her body. Next Gustavo fell: he felt no pain, only the impact on his thigh; a teacher yelled “Get down,” which wasn’t a good idea because the boy aimed at her and then downward, toward some of the bodies that were already prostrate on the wooden floor, but luckily not everyone obeyed the order, the screaming was fierce, piercing, deafening, in an enormous wave the sea of children ran toward the door along with the teachers and the librarian and a few parents, the boy with the scratched cheek stopped to reload, the others piled up in the doorway, many managed to escape, the shooter continued his work, shooting randomly at the crowd of bodies that pushed against each other at the library door, and when he stopped to reload for a second time, what Gustavo heard was not silence, but rather the sudden, startling reduction of noise, now one could hear only sobbing and the cries of the wounded, the word *Mama* repeated many times in different voices, in an astonishingly short span of time everyone who could had left the library, soon the police would arrive, and with his gun operational once more the shooter approached each of the wounded and finished them off with a shot to the head. The little brunette, who was no longer screaming or crying, shook with the impact. The teacher tried to say something but had no time. The detonations didn’t sound like explosions at all; they produced a dry, quiet noise. With each shot the boy rebounded, thrown backwards.

Gustavo Manzone felt the dull throb in his right thigh like a rhythmic hammering of blood. He pressed his hand firmly against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding. He attempted to stand, but his leg wouldn’t support him. He imagined the bullet had fractured his femur. He must be in shock, he thought, because the pain wasn’t terrible; it was there, present, but it hadn’t yet taken over completely. Somehow he managed to condense all his personal charm into a smile, and when the boy looked his way, he addressed

him in a voice that attempted to be firm: “It seems you didn’t like my stories much,” he said, trying to give his tone the sparkle and levity of a joke, even a touch of admiration.

The boy looked at him curiously.

“You’re the author,” he said, as if he’d just thought of it. “The author Gustavo Manzone. The one who wrote *Tales of Terror*.”

“Right,” Gustavo said. “That’s me.” And his smile grew even more dazzling.

“Yeah, in fact, I read one of them,” said the boy, his weapon still aimed straight at Gustavo. “It was good.”

“How’d you like to be a character in one of my stories? Wouldn’t you like me to write a story with you as the main character?”

The boy looked at him curiously.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I never thought about it.”

He walked over to where Gustavo half-stood, supporting himself with his arms. He placed the gun against his right ear and fired.

—Translated from the Spanish by Andrea G. Labinger

Ana María Shua (1951-) has published over forty books in numerous genres: novels, short stories, poetry, drama, children’s fiction, books of humor and Jewish folklore, anthologies, film scripts, journalistic articles, and essays. Her writing has been translated into many languages, including English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, Korean, Japanese, Bulgarian, and Serbian, and her stories appear in anthologies throughout the world. She has received numerous national and international awards, including a Guggenheim fellowship, and is one of Argentina’s premier living writers.

Andrea G. Labinger has published numerous translations of Latin American fiction. She has been a finalist three times in the PEN USA competition. Recent translations include Lili-ana Heker’s *The End of the Story* (Biblioasis, 2012), Ana María Shua’s *The Weight of Temptation* (Nebraska, 2012), and Guillermo Martínez’s *Borges and Mathematics* (Purdue, 2012). Labinger’s translation of Alicia Kozameh’s *Eni Furtado Has Never Stopped Running* is forthcoming from Wings Press.

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The Magic Mountain, 2013
title based on the book by Thomas Mann
acrylic and acrylic transfer on canvas, 24 x 20 in



courtesy the artist