

LINDA CHRISTENSEN

Blue Dress, 2012
Oil on Canvas, 35 x 35 in



courtesy: J.Cacciola Gallery

LILIANA HEKER

Travel Fatigue

Heading out, it occurred to Señora Eloísa that getting a ride back to Azul was a lucky break. The sales rep who worked for her daughter's future father-in-law picked her up at the hotel right on time and seemed like a decent person. He carefully placed her lizard-skin suitcase on the backseat and even apologized for all the merchandise crammed into the car. An idle apology, Señora Eloísa thought. Those initial conversations with strangers always struck her as pathetic. Yet no sooner had the car taken off than she felt herself obliged to make some trivial remark about the suffocating heat, which led to an exchange of opinions about low barometric pressure, the likelihood of rain, and the benefits of that rainfall for the countryside, an opinion that drifted smoothly into a discussion of Señora Eloísa's husband's properties, the trials of land ownership, the joys and woes of being a sales rep, and the various attributes of many other professions.

By the time they reached Cañuelas, Señora Eloísa had already discussed—first cordially, then with growing indifference—the personalities of her three children, her eldest daughter's imminent wedding, the cheese platter for the wedding banquet, good and bad cholesterol, and the most suitable food for a cocker spaniel; and she in turn had become acquainted with certain facts about the man's life, facts that, even before arriving at San Miguel del Monte and after a blessedly prolonged silence, she could no longer recall.

She was sleepy. She rested her head against the seat back and closed her eyes, lulled by the dull, soporific hum of the motor, like the sound of cicadas at siesta time on smoldering afternoons. *Mind if I smoke?* She heard it as if through a haze of oil. She struggled to open her eyes.

"No, please. Go right ahead."

Languidly, she gazed at the driver. No way could she remember his name: Señor Ibáñez? Señor Velasco? Professor Belcher? General Mayhem?

"It's great company when a person's driving."

This time she opened her eyes, startled. Who? Who was great company? She looked around for a clue, but nothing, nada: just the man smoking away, with his eyes open a little too wide. The cigarette, of course. She tried hard to sound animated:

"Everyone tells me it's amazing how smoking clears the mind."

A state of alert within her dream? Possibly provoked by the spluttering of the first drops.

No one had ever told her such an idiotic thing. It had been a mistake not to take the bus back. By now she would have been able to stretch out in the seat and sleep in peace. She half-closed her eyes and thought that she just might be able to do the same here. Rest her head against the back of the seat and fall asleep. Mmm ... lovely. Just like that: let herself drift off and not wake up until *So lucky*. Had she heard right? Had that man just said *So lucky*? Would he ever shut up?

"... because the truth is, this mugginess makes me sleepy."

A spark of joy ignited inside Señora Eloísa.

"Terribly sleepy," she agreed. Now, she thought, the man would realize that she needed to sleep.

"And it's not just the mugginess, you know?" he continued. "Last night I couldn't get a wink of sleep. Because of the mosquitoes. Did you notice that invasion of mosquitoes?"

Please just be quiet, she begged silently.

"It's the heat," she said. "If we don't get a good rainstorm ..."

"The storm is coming—look," the man said, indicating with his head a dark cloud that was approaching from the south. "In two minutes we're going to have a nice little storm, let me tell you."

"Yes, a nice little storm."

Now her drowsiness had become a painful sensation she no longer wanted to fight off. Almost obscenely, she leaned her head once more against the seat back and allowed her lids to droop heavily. Gradually she forgot about the heat and the man and surrendered to the monotonous clattering of the car.

But when I'm rested the rain doesn't frighten me. She let his words wash over her, barely registering them. *The thing is, I don't know why, but today I'm afraid I might fall*

asleep any minute. A state of alert within her dream? Possibly provoked by the spluttering of the first drops.

"Can I tell you something? If I hadn't found such good company to chat with today, I wouldn't even have dared go out."

"I'm not sure I'm such good company."

Her fury nearly snapped her into awareness, but she wasn't about to give that man the satisfaction of a conversation. She'd pretend to sleep. Just then she heard the rain pouring down like a demolition. For a few minutes that was all she heard, and gradually she really did fall asleep.

"Please, talk to me."

The words penetrated her sleep like a scream. Señora Eloísa struggled to open her eyes.

"What a downpour," she said.

"Awful," said the man.

Now it was her turn again.

"Do you like the rain?" she said.

"Not really," said the man.

He certainly wasn't giving her much help. All he asked of her was to talk to him so that he wouldn't fall asleep. Some small favor!

"Well, I like it, I really do." She suspected that this direction might lead nowhere, so she added hurriedly, "But not like this."

In a garret, dying of hunger, where I would be—a painter? A dancer? And a gorgeous bearded man would be making love to me like I'd never imagined anyone could make love, with the rain beating down on the metal roof.

"Not like this," she repeated vigorously (she needed to buy some time in order to redirect the conversation; drowsiness was leading her down a dead-end street). Impulsively, she added: "Once I wrote a composition about the rain." She laughed. "How silly of me. I mean I must have written lots of compositions about the rain; it's such a trite subject."

She waited. After a few minutes, the man said:

"No, not at all."

But that was all he said.

Señora Eloísa cautiously searched for a new topic of conversation. She said:

"I used to like writing compositions." Luckily she was starting to feel talkative. "I had an artistic temperament; one of my teachers once said so. Originality. The compo-

sition I'm telling you about, it's strange how it's suddenly come back to me. I mean, it's strange that I told you, 'Once I wrote a composition about the rain'—don't you think?—when I really wrote so many ... (the secret was to keep talking and not stop) ... and I didn't have the faintest idea why I said it when I did, but now I do. I mean, I don't know if you can understand this, but now I'm sure that when I told you 'Once I wrote a composition about the rain,' I specifically meant the one about the beggars and not any of the other ones."

She stopped, feeling proud of herself: she had brought the dialogue around to an interesting point. She could now predict that the man was about to ask her: Beggars? That would no doubt make things easier.

No, the man didn't seem to have noticed. At any rate, she certainly had hit the mother lode because now she recalled the entire composition precisely. That was the important thing: a concrete topic, something she could keep talking and talking about even when she was a little sleepy. She said:

"Just imagine, how peculiar: in that composition I said that rain was a blessing for beggars. How did I manage to come up with an idea like that?"

"How peculiar," the man said.

Señora Eloísa felt encouraged.

"I came up with a pretty logical explanation for myself. I said that beggars spend their lives baking in the sun. You see, I guess I imagined it was always summer for them—I mean, after all, they baked in the sun, and then, when the rain came, it was like a blessing. The beggars' holiday, I think I called it."

She leaned her head against the seat back, like someone giving herself an award. AZUL, 170 km, she read through the cascading sheet of water. She sighed with relief: they had managed to talk for a good stretch. The man's head must be clear by now. She closed her eyes, enjoying her own silence and the hypnotic litany of the water. She allowed herself to be carried off gently into sleep's hollow embrace.

"Talk to me."

It sounded at once imperious and desperate. She thought of the man and his weariness: could he possibly be as sleepy as she was? My God. Without opening her eyes, she tried to recall what they had been talking about

before she fell asleep. The composition. What else could she say about the composition?

"You're probably thinking that ..."—it was hard for her to pick up the thread again—"that is, the teacher thought ..." Now she felt she could detect another trace of the memory. She said firmly: "She drew a red circle. The teacher. She drew a red circle around 'blessing,' and in block letters she wrote a word that I didn't know at the time: INCOHERENT." She glanced at the man uncertainly. "It wasn't incoherent. You're probably thinking it was incoherent, but it wasn't."

"No, of course not," the man said. "Why would I think that?"

"Yes, of course that's what you're thinking because I myself realize that it seems incoherent, but there are things ..."—What things? It wasn't so clear to her anymore why it wasn't incoherent. Anyway, she should have kept on talking about something, anything, before the man ordered her to. "I mean, sometimes heat is worse than ..." Against her better judgment, she glanced at the road sign. A mistake: knowing exactly how many more kilometers she needed to keep talking gave her an anxious feeling, like tumbling down a well. "There are times when the heat can be overwhelming, especially if ..." She groped for the words, panicking. What if she never found another topic of conversation? For the briefest instant she had to suppress her urge to open the door and hurl herself into the road. Suddenly, she said:

"Once I saw a beggar woman," and she was surprised by her own words because the image wasn't in her memory or anywhere else: it had just emerged from nothingness, crisp and precise beneath the suffocating Buenos Aires heat: a young woman, her hair disheveled, a little dazed among the cars. "I don't know if she really was a beggar; I mean, I don't know if that's the best way to describe her. She was blonde and very young, that I'm quite sure of, and if she hadn't been so unkempt and skinny and hadn't had such a defeated face ... That was the worst part, her face, the impression she gave that she would keep on wandering among the cars day after day as if nothing in the world mattered to her."

She paused and looked at the man. He nodded slightly, encouraging her to go on.

"There were cars—did I mention that there were cars?"

“But still, I felt the weight in my legs, and my skirt sticking to me, and on top of it all my little girl crying as if she’d been...”

A traffic jam or something like that. I was in Buenos Aires with my husband and my ... Oh, sorry, I forgot to tell you that it was terribly hot; if you don’t know about the heat, you won’t understand anything. The car was at a standstill, and the sun was beating down, so I poked my head out the window to get some air. That’s when I saw her, looking at everyone with terrifying indifference. My husband didn’t see her. Or rather, I don’t know if he saw her because he didn’t say anything to me; he doesn’t notice things like that. She was well dressed, you know what I mean? A threadbare skirt and blouse, very dirty, but you could tell right away that it was quality clothing. There she was, among the cars, and she didn’t even hold out her hand to beg. That’s why I don’t know if it’s right to call her a beggar. It was as though one day, dressed like that, she just closed the door of her house on everything that was inside: her husband, the little silver serving bowls, the gatherings with all those idiotic people, everything she hated—do you know what I mean? Not the child, no, you could tell she didn’t really hate the child. He was too much of a burden to her, and especially in that heat. But hate him? No, she didn’t hate him. After all, she’d brought him with her.”

“Sorry, but I think you’ve lost me.” The man seemed more awake now. “There was a child?”

“Of course,” said Señora Eloísa, annoyed. “I told you at the beginning that she had a child—if she didn’t, what would’ve been so terrible about it? The woman was standing there, surrounded by cars, with the child in her arms and looking at us with that face like ... A huge baby, very blond, blond like the woman, and fat, too fat to carry around in that heat, do you get what I’m trying to say?”

Don’t tell me that you do, that you understand; I know you can’t, no matter how hard you try. You think you can, you think you understand perfectly, but you’d have to carry a kid when you’re tired and hot to know what it’s like. And I was sitting, not like the woman—sitting comfortably in the car. But still, I felt the weight in my legs, and my skirt sticking to me, and on top of it all my little girl crying as if she’d been ...” She glanced uncertainly at the man, who looked as though he was about to say something. She didn’t give him time.

“But the woman wasn’t even sitting, and I can imagine how her back must have ached. She didn’t look like she was in pain; she looked indifferent, and yet I understood that the baby was too heavy for her.”

She grew silent, a little absorbed by her own words. The man shook his head. Suddenly he seemed to have discovered something that made him happy.

“Life is strange, isn’t it?” he said. “I’ll bet she was the one who’s about to get married.”

Señora Eloísa looked at him, confused.

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

“Your little girl. I thought that the crying baby you were carrying in your arms ...” The man laughed good-naturedly. “How the years fly by! I’m sure that must’ve been the same one you’re about to marry off now.”

“I never said that,” she replied fiercely.

“Excuse me. I don’t know. You said she was crying, and so I thought ...”

“No, you didn’t understand me. The baby wasn’t crying. I told you quite clearly that he was very heavy and that the woman’s back must have been hurting. But I never said he was crying. Yes, he might have burst out crying at any moment. I admit that. I didn’t say so specifically, but I admit it: they all cry. Haven’t you noticed how desperately they cry even when you think they’ve got everything they need and you can’t figure out what’s wrong with them? It was hot that day, unbearably hot. And the sky was so blue it hurt, a blue that might have made a person happy if she was alone, or with someone very—” She turned her head toward the man. “If a person didn’t have to lug around a baby that was crying for no reason ...” She swiped her hand across her face as if she were brushing away an insect.

“The woman didn’t move a muscle. She just stood there with that lost expression of hers, but I knew right

away that she was filled with rage. She wanted to get rid of the kid, throw him against something, but not because she hated him. She wanted to get rid of him because he was very heavy for her and it was hot, don’t you see? That suffocating heat, and the weight, and the terrible fear that the baby would burst out crying any minute.”

Then she stared at the rain as if she had never said a word.

The man shifted in his seat. He cleared his throat.

“And what happened then?”

She turned toward him, irritated.

“What do you mean, what happened? That’s what happened. Don’t you think it’s enough? An exhausted woman and with such pretty clothes, I don’t know, as if one fine day she realized she’d had enough. Then she grabbed the child, locked the door behind her, and left. As simple as that. I know it’s hard to understand, but that’s the way things happen. You can be perfectly calm, drawing the curtains or eating a cookie, and all of a sudden you realize you can’t go on anymore. Do you know what it’s like to have a baby that cries night and day, all night and all day? A baby is too heavy a thing for a woman’s body. Later on, with the others, you get used to it, or rather—how can I put it—you give in, I suppose. But with the first one, it’s so exasperating. You try, believe me, you try, and every morning you tell yourself that everything is fine, that you have everything a woman could dream of, that other women might even ... No, I’m embarrassed to admit it, but it’s true: you even start thinking about the others, I mean, about how they must envy you, with that husband of yours, so attentive, and your lovely, comfortable home, and your plump little baby girl. You have thoughts like that in order to hold yourself together. But then one day, I don’t know, something comes loose. The baby won’t stop crying, or the heat, I don’t know, how can you remember all these things if afterward they don’t let you talk about it, right? Don’t, they said, don’t. They knew their lines: I was sick and it wasn’t a good idea for me to talk ... They concocted an elaborate story, an accident or something like that, I think, but I don’t know if it was the best thing to do. All I wanted, all I needed to tell them was that I didn’t hate her. How could I have hated her? I loved her with all my heart. Can you, at least, understand me? I just smashed her against the ground because she cried and cried and she

was so heavy, you can’t imagine. She weighed more than my body could bear.”

She was very tired now and thought that she didn’t have the strength; she simply didn’t have the strength to keep talking the rest of the way.

“I want to get out,” she said.

The man hit the brakes. He must have been in a huge hurry because only once did he glance back at her, standing at the side of the road in the rain, before he took off. He didn’t even remind her about the lizard-skin suitcase lying abandoned on the backseat. Just as well. It was much too heavy.

—translated from the Spanish by Andrea G. Labinger

Liliana Heker is one of Argentina’s most accomplished living writers. She is the author of various collections of short stories, including *Los que vieron la zarza* (1966), which received Honorable Mention in the Casas de las Américas competition, and *Las peras del mal* (1982). Her novel, *Zona del clivaje* (1987), was awarded the Premio Municipal de Novela in Buenos Aires. With *El fin de la historia* (1996; published in translation by Biblioasis as *The End of the Story* in 2012), Heker established herself as a thoughtful, controversial commentator of the uncertainty and horror of Argentine life during the dictatorship. In 2001, Alfaguara published a collection of Heker’s stories, titled *La crueldad de la vida*, and another short story collection, *La muerte de Dios*, in 2011.

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 Ángela Pradelli’s *Friends of Mine* (Latin American Literary Review Press, 2012) and Ana María Shua’s *The Weight of Temptation* (Nebraska, 2012). Her translation of Liliana Heker’s *The End of the Story* (Biblioasis, 2012) was included in *World Literature Today*’s list of the “75 Notable Translations of the Year.”