

ROBERT BLITZER

Particle Harmonizer, 2017
Acrylic and oil on canvas, 51 x 51 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

MONICA HILEMAN

Unexplained Phenomenon

N. was a student in his first year of medical studies when *Estudios Psicológicos* published that article by Robles that so provoked the establishment. Now that Freud's writings were widely translated and discussed, Robles, their trailblazer, was being welcomed back with open arms. That evening he would give the year-end address at the institute, a long overdue honor for a man whose daring ideas had exiled him to Santiago for two decades.

N., a native *porteño*, was in town for the event, enjoying a stroll down Avenida Córdoba, contemplating a rumor he had heard that there would soon be an opening on the faculty there at the University of Buenos Aires. He had a comfortable post at the medical school in Rosario, yet each time he came to visit, a wave of nostalgia and a desire to be more at the center of things made him long to move back.

Oh, how the city changed, ever more rapidly. He held onto his hat crossing the avenue—with all the automobiles jockeying to speed past, you took your life in your hands. On his way to his mother's for lunch, his mind was on *morcilla* and fish cakes, when a man coming toward him on the sidewalk seized his attention. The man was very short, his hips low to the ground gave him a choppy gait reminiscent of that sausage-shaped dog N. had seen on his trip to Europe. The juxtaposition of his large head of graying hair on a child-sized body was disconcerting. A black fedora pulled low over intent dark eyes, the grim suggestion of a mouth surrounded by an unruly mustache and beard—the face had the effect of a sudden storm blowing in. Adding to N.'s disequilibrium was a hazy sense of a previous encounter, perhaps in a dream he could not now clearly remember. Someone yelled out the window of a passing automobile, "Señor Robles." N. recognized the Berliet belonging to Francisco Beltrán y Ortega, a board member of the institute. And the man who smiled and waved back, the odd-looking man on the sidewalk coming toward him—this was Robles.

In three heartbeats N. would be toe-to-toe with the man he so admired. All his admiration could not be funneled into a brief remark and in the blink of an eye, they passed each other as strangers.

They were actually acquainted through a correspondence N. had initiated after *Sobre Los Pasajes Oscuros*

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was published. Not only was the premise of his treatise startlingly bold, the prose itself breathed with the vitality of lived life and intuitive knowledge. N. delved into the book. How true, he muttered. Yes, I believe it. The same notions were in him, amorphous; each chapter gave them form and detail. He was jubilant and grateful, as one would be to a musician who expressed one's deeply held emotions.

N. would later tell his colleagues that his awe of the man incarnate robbed him of speech. He lied to them and, at first, he lied to himself. Right before they were within arm's length, N. could not overcome his aversion to the figure that was so incongruous with the idea he had of Robles. He turned to watch the back of his idol disappear into the crowd, frozen to the spot by shame and regret. So unflattering to his self-concept was this narrow-mindedness that he pretended to be mystified. That ignoble event would haunt him, become an emblem, a portent, a point from which he could trace backward and forward the failures and disappointments that marred his career.

To ward off that dark knowledge, he resolved to make amends later that evening. The rest of the way to his mother's, phrases he might use popped into his head and he made comments to himself. No, too obsequious. Ah, that's clever. No, too clever. No, too flowery. That sounds glib. A matronly woman turned around and frowned at him. The exact words he still had to assemble, most important was the appropriate tone and manner. He would

be composed and speak plainly, one man of science to another, and set things right between them. That became the purpose of the evening.

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His mother might have found a smaller place after Papa died if her sister Hermina, also a widow, hadn't moved in. N. was glad she kept the house. The family had lived there since he was very young; it was the house of his childhood. He walked up the familiar street, under the shade of the tall oak and sycamores, past the curling wrought iron fences and balconies to the front door; the two small, square windows above the brass knocker like the eyes and nose on the face of an old friend.

"Oh, here he is," said his sister Isabel, as if he were terribly late. She sprang from her chair and he inhaled an unusual perfume as he kissed her cheek and wondered at the price of the green silk she wore so extravagantly trimmed with black lace. Both his sisters were attired in the sort of dresses his wife sighed over paging through the latest issue of that magazine she borrowed from their neighbors. His mother tilted her cheek toward him. He clasped both of his aunt's outstretched hands. They were in the parlor, waiting for him before they took their seats in the dining room, his stepfather, Carlos, with whom he maintained an uneasy mutual tolerance, at the head of the table. N. sat between his mother and Aunt Hermina, across from Isabel and Josefina.

Most people were fascinated with the field of psychology; there were so many unexplained aspects of life it could illuminate. Strangers he met were full of questions and speculations, but his own family seemed to avoid the subject. He mentioned the occasion of his visit and was met with not a glimmer of curiosity. His mother turned to his sisters and asked about "the boys," Sergio and José. Her grandsons, incredibly now in their early twenties, were both married and having children. Sergio was a mechanical engineer and José a building contractor. Neither had shown any interest in the professions. Like all young people today, they wanted to make things: automobiles, radios, blocks of apartment buildings.

As if they were playing a hand of cards, one sister told what her eldest son was doing and the other would lay down her card of her son's recent achievement. José's wife

was expecting. Sergio had been hired to design a new factory in Montevideo. José's firm was chosen to work on the reconstruction of the Camino Real. Sergio was considering a move to a bigger house, near Parque San Martín. N. found himself trading sympathetic glances with his stepfather and consoled himself with another bite of *carbonada*, made as only Ana, the old cook, could prepare.

N. and his wife had not produced any offspring, so he was exempt from the contest. Whenever he heard the remark, "Oh this is something to tell your grandchildren!" he had learned to merely smile and nod, ignoring the sardonic voice inside that said, "Before there can be grandchildren, there must first be children." As a youth he was quick with clever rejoinders and wisecracks. His professors at the university were not amused and he found that a sharp wit wielded recklessly could cut one's own throat. Like all hard lessons, once learned he did not forget. Now his smart reply was silence; so versatile, it served many occasions.

His attention wandered to the spritely black-and-white cat that had been a gift to his mother from his eldest sister. The cat pranced about, batting the air, pursuing something only it could see. Then, unaccountably, it was manically running in tight little circles. "Oh look," said his mother. "He's chasing his tail." Everyone watched and laughed. Josefina called out, "Felix, you silly rascal."

N. put down his fork. It was disturbing, not funny at all. He wanted to go over and smack Felix on the head to make him stop. There was something so futile and ridiculous—how could the animal not know what he was doing?—yet he kept going round and round.

"Isabel, what a lovely dress," said Aunt Hermina, taking advantage of the pause in conversation. His sister answered that it was from a new shop on Lavalle and the rest of the meal they spoke of shopping. His stepfather was much more lenient; his own father would not have sat and listened to what he called "idle chatter." Papa, who had studied in France and also spoke English, had prided himself on his intellectual rigor. A great reader of philosophy, particularly the empiricists, if he'd had a motto, it would have been "Show me the results." No doubt that was a phrase much in use in the laboratory where he'd tested and devised formulas for the chemical firm Bunge y Born. He'd had little patience for religion, faith healing, spirit guides, superstitions. All things that were not verifiable

he'd lumped together as foolish and backward. Though his wife maintained her churchgoing, she in some ways adopted his outlook and was herself disappointed that N. didn't become a surgeon or a researcher who would invent a new vaccine. All this hocus pocus with dreams and unconscious urges was murky and outré, maybe salacious; the less she knew of it the better, and his sisters agreed.

N.'s sense of isolation began early in life. When he was eight his favorite uncle dropped dead in front of him. Tío Fredrico toppling over never to get up would have been enough of a shock, and then there was what happened later that night. N. had watched the undertaker's wagon disappear at the end of the street and spent the rest of the day sitting under the pear tree in back where Tío had been showing him the techniques of pruning. At bedtime he cried so many tears that his eyes ached and he couldn't sleep. He was alone in his room and then he was not alone—he had the distinct sense of someone else there with him. He looked over at the armchair by the window. There in the silver moonlight his uncle sat calmly with his pipe in his mouth. N. was not at all afraid. He went over, leaned against the chair, and breathed in that cherished smell of tobacco. Dressed in his good suit, his hair in need of combing, as it often was, he spoke to N. in his usual jocular manner. "Some things can't be helped, *mijo*. It was time for me. You can't stay forever." He gestured with his pipe and the boy understood that he should go back to bed. His head touched the pillow and he quickly fell asleep.

In the morning he sat up and saw the chair and he remembered. It wasn't a dream. He went down to the kitchen before breakfast and told Ana, the cook. She was the only one he could tell.

Ana set down the mixing bowl she had cradled in her thick arm. She took his hand and gazed down at him with loving comprehension. Spirits were real to her; he knew that without her having told him. Back in Galicia she had seen the ghost of her older brother Renaldo, who had died out at sea. One night in her room she felt his presence so strongly it was as if he spoke to her about the man her father had chosen for her to marry. She was not resigned to the match and wanted to ask her brother's opinion. The voice said, "Don't marry him. He's a bad man." So instead, she and another brother found work on a ship and sailed to Argentina.

Perhaps now was the time for him to sit down at his desk, get organized, and polish off those drafts. The one dealing with the experience of various unexplained phenomena—yes, he should get back to work on that.

N. had no name for the unconscious; he only knew—though he couldn't see it or touch it—that there was another dimension to reality. Many years later, when he remembered what Ana had told him, it was the intimacy of sharing what others would have scoffed at or not understood that stayed with him. He didn't rule out the possibility that it may have been the mind conjuring up his uncle, or, in her case, confirming what she thought she should do. Since neither could be proved (or disproved), either might be true.

He had once been obsessed with the idea of stealing Ana away from his mother so she could come and cook for him and his wife in Rosario. He found out what his mother was paying—too little—and decided upon a much more generous salary. He tried to gauge if Ana was happy there, if she had ever thought of living elsewhere. The day he was planning to make his offer, he was walking in Parque Centenario. He came to his favorite tipa tree and he realized as much as he loved the tree, he wouldn't dream of

pulling it out of the ground and taking it to plant in his own yard. That tree was one of the joys of visiting the park and if moved, he would miss seeing it there in the place where it belonged.

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After lunch he went down the back hall to find Ana at the kitchen table slicing pears for a cake. "Mijo," she said, taking his hand, as she always did, and smiled up at him. "Delicious meal. I wish my wife could cook like you. Or maybe I shouldn't wish that," he said laying a hand on the paunch that was beginning to show. The afternoon sun fell on the bench by the back entrance where he used to sit; the smells and sounds of Ana's domain made it a congenial hideaway. Then as now, they had few words between them. He had come for her touch, to have her look upon him and to see her, still the same solid figure, her slightly gray hair pinned up in the style she had always worn.

He surprised himself by saying, "I might have the chance to move back to the city."

"Don't tell me," she said, giving his hand a squeeze.

"Shh." He raised a finger to his lips. "Too soon to say."

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N. entered the imposing white stone front of the institute, still feeling sluggish from having eaten too much at lunch. In the atrium he greeted two of his old chums from his school days and found his colleagues from Rosario that he had traveled with on the train. They filed into the salon past the bust of Ramos Mejía and took their seats midway up the rows of straight-backed chairs. Sanchez Ferrer made opening remarks and launched into a long-winded tribute, mentioning the honoree's every publication and accolade, as if making reparations for the years of neglect. Robles had a bold new approach at a time when a bold new approach was needed. Sanchez Ferrer spoke of what it had personally meant to him. N. found this surprising, since he had seemed to be the only person back then who had appreciated what Robles was saying.

The man of the hour rose amid hearty applause. N. feared the podium might cut him off at the neck and was relieved that his head and shoulders were fully visible and that there was no ripple of surprise through the audience.

In a warm, resonant voice he spoke casually, as if engaged in conversation. His first topic was the current debate in scholarly journals over the wave of violent crime—not just in Buenos Aires—blamed on recent arrivals, mostly rural people. Separated from home and family, they worked in harsh conditions and lived in squalor. They were no longer subject to the vicissitudes of weather and the seasonal cycle. "Nature takes but also gives back. Now they have to endure the constraints of city living and the relentless machines of the factory."

N. understood that the scowling face that had startled him that afternoon on the street was severe concentration: Robles gathering his energies and focusing his mind so that he would be at his best that evening. He reminded them of the restorative powers of the natural world. "Not everyone can take a hydrotherapy cure at a spa, but one can go to a park and sit under a tree or by the water. Nature exists for everyone and we should ensure that it is maintained and accessible."

There were murmurs of agreement. Theirs was a brotherhood concerned with the human condition, not just the workings of the mind. Though their pursuits were little understood (sometimes mocked) and their achievements overlooked, they were as significant as the builders and industrialists. In a more enlightened future the public would recognize their worthiness.

As time healed all wounds, time ensured that inspired thinkers would find their due. N. had made attempts over the years to put pen to paper. Perhaps now was the time for him to sit down at his desk, get organized, and polish off those drafts. The one dealing with the experience of various unexplained phenomena—yes, he should get back to work on that. Ripples of approval refocused his mind on the speaker at the front of the room. Robles was talking about the split between those who emphasized the medical versus the therapeutic; those who saw mental illness rooted in the brain versus those who focused on the influence of family and environment. "They are wings of the same bird, do not negate one or the other."

With praise for the work being done by various colleagues present, Robles concluded his remarks. Sanchez Ferrer thanked him after the applause died down and invited everyone to stay for more discussion and refreshments at the reception. N. stood and felt a twinge of indigestion,

or perhaps anxiety. He and his colleagues filed into the adjoining room, N. watching for Robles, only half listening to their conversation. Too distracted to take part, his mind was feverishly working on what he would say. Something casual. *I saw you out walking this afternoon and hesitated to stop you.* That was how he would redeem himself for not acknowledging the learned man on the street. Out of respect. He didn't want to impose.

There was Alonzo Schmidt, renowned for his study of psychosomatic illness, talking to Juan Hernandez Fajardo, the elderly professor who was rumored to be retiring, the man N. had hopes to replace. No sooner had N. approached the pair than Robles was standing there, brought over by Sanchez Ferrer to meet the venerable professor. Sanchez Ferrer introduced the two men to Robles, adding that Dr. Schmidt was the new chair of the department. Then he politely turned to N. so he could tell them his name.

This was his opportunity to meet, not only Robles, but the chair of the department. What strange sensations he felt: his skin became prickly, a wave of heat broke within, and his vision altered so that there was an odd sort of shine to the room and everyone in it. The rhythm of his heart accelerated like a motor revving and that horrible feeling of falling through empty space came over him, though he was surrounded by men and on his feet, upright among them. He barely squeaked out his name before his throat, like a faucet, shut off completely. Even if he had been able to speak, not one of those phrases he'd thought of was present in his mind.

Robles seemed not to expect him to say any more. He gazed at N. with infinite compassion, as if he were one of Dr. Schmidt's patients, and then turned and looked at the doctor, one man of science to another, silently acknowledging the challenges they faced.

Monica Hileman's stories have appeared in *The Baffler*, the *Chicago Tribune's Printers Row Journal*, and *Arts & Letters*, among others. A story published by *Flyway* was nominated for Best of the Net. She has just finished a novel she would like to see published.