

**1 Distant Star  
(excerPt, 1996)**

**by Roberto Bolaño**

In 1974, hallucinations were not uncommon. The following account of the photographic exhibition in the flat is, however, accurate.

The first guests arrived at 9:00 in the evening. Most of them were old school friends who hadn't seen each other for some time. At 11:00, twenty people were present, all of them moderately drunk. No one had yet entered the spare bedroom, occupied by Wieder, on the walls of which were displayed the photos he was planning to submit to the judgment of his friends. Lieutenant Julio César Muñoz Cano, who years later was to publish a self-denunciatory memoir entitled *Neck in a Noose* relating his activities during the early years of the military regime, informs us that Carlos Wieder behaved normally (or perhaps *abnormally*: he was much quieter than usual, to the point of meekness, and throughout the night his face had a freshly washed look). He attended to the guests as if he were in his own home (everyone was getting along splendidly, too well, in fact, writes Muñoz Cano). Wieder was very pleased to see his friends from the air force academy, it had been such a long time; he had the good grace to comment on the morning's incidents without according them, or himself, any particular importance; he cheerfully tolerated the jokes (unsubtle at best and often in frankly poor taste) that are invariably told at such gatherings. Now and then he disappeared, shutting himself in the spare bedroom (and this time he did lock the door behind him), but he was never gone for long.

Finally, on the stroke of midnight, he climbed onto a chair in the living room, called for silence and said (these are his actual words according to Muñoz Cano) that it was time to plunge into the art of the future. He had changed back to the Wieder they knew: imperious, self-assured, his eyes somehow separate from his body, as if they were watching from another planet. Then he made his way to the door of the spare room and began to let them in one by one. One at a time gentlemen; the art of Chile is not for herds. According to Muñoz Cano, he said this in a jocular tone of voice, looking at his father and winking first with his left eye, then with his right. As if he were a boy of twelve again, giving a secret sign. Calmly, Wieder senior smiled back at his son.

The first person to enter the room, logically enough since she was the only lady present and had a headstrong, impulsive temperament, was Tatiana von Beck Iraola. Tatiana, writes Muñoz Cano, came from an illustrious military family, and was, in

her own slightly mad way, an independent woman, who always did as she pleased, went out with whom she fancied and held outrageous opinions, which were, in many cases, highly original if often contradictory. Years later she married a pediatrician, went to live in La Serena and had six children. In a passage whose melancholy tone is subtly tinged with horror, Muñoz Cano describes Tatiana as she was that night: a beautiful and confident young woman who went into the room expecting to see heroic portraits or boring photographs of the Chilean skies.

The room was lit in the usual way. There were no extra lamps or spotlights to heighten the visual effect of the photos. It was not meant to be like an art gallery, but simply a room, a spare bedroom temporarily occupied by a young visitor. There is, of course, no truth to the story that there were colored lights or drum beats coming from a cassette player hidden under the bed. The ambience was meant to be everyday, normal, low-key.

Outside, the party continued. The young men drank as young men do, like the victors they were, and they held their drink like Chileans. The laughter, recalls Muñoz Cano, was contagious, without the slightest hint of menace or anything sinister. Somewhere a trio began to sing, arms around each other, one playing a guitar. Propped against the wall in groups of two or three, other guests talked about love or the future. They were all pleased to be there, at the aviator-poet's party; they were pleased with themselves and pleased to be friends of Carlos Wieder, although they weren't sure they quite understood him and were aware of the difference between him and themselves. The line in the corridor kept breaking up; some guests had finished their drinks and went back for more, others got caught up in reaffirmations of eternal friendship and loyalty, a providential surge of fellow-feeling sweeping them back into the living room, from which they returned with flushed cheeks to take their places in the line again. The smoke was thick, especially in the corridor. Wieder stood firm at the doorway. Two lieutenants were arguing and shoving each other (but gently) in the bathroom at the end of the passage. Wieder's father was one of the few who patiently kept his place in the line. Muñoz Cano, as he admitted in his confession, kept pacing nervously back and forth, filled with foreboding. The two surrealist (or super-realist) reporters were talking with the owner of the flat. As he came and went, Muñoz Cano caught snatches

of their conversation: travel, the Mediterranean, Miami, tropical beaches, fishing boats, voluptuous women.

Less than a minute after going in, Tatiana von Beck emerged from the room. She was pale and shaken—everyone noticed. She stared at Wieder as if she were going to say something to him but couldn't find the words. Then she tried to get to the bathroom, unsuccessfully. After vomiting in the passage, Miss von Beck staggered to the front door with the help of an officer who gallantly offered to take her home, although she kept saying she would prefer to go alone.

The second person to enter the room was a captain who had been one of Wieder's teachers at the academy. He remained inside. Wieder shut the door behind him (the captain had left it ajar) and stood there smiling, with an air of growing satisfaction. In the living room, some of the guests asked what on earth had got into Tatiana. She's just drunk, said a voice that Muñoz Cano didn't recognize. Someone put on a Pink Floyd record. How can you dance when there are no women? It's like a fags' convention here, someone said. You're not supposed to dance to Pink Floyd, it's for listening, came the reply. The surrealist reporters whispered to each other. A lieutenant proposed they all go and find some whores straight away. Muñoz Cano says that at this point he felt as if they were outside, under the night sky, deep in the countryside, or at least that is how the voices sounded. In the hallway the atmosphere was even more tense. There was hardly any talking; it was like a dentist's waiting room. But who, wonders Muñoz Cano, has ever seen a dentist's waiting room where the *rotten teeth* (sic) are standing in line?

Wieder's father broke the spell. He made his way forward politely, addressing each officer by name as he excused himself, then went into the room. The owner of the flat followed him in. Almost immediately he came out again, went up to Wieder, seized him by the lapels, and for a moment it looked as if he would hit him, but then he turned away and stormed off to the living room in search of a drink. Now everyone, including Muñoz Cano, pressed into the bedroom or tried to. There they found the captain, sitting on the bed. He was smoking and reading some typed notes that he had torn off the wall. He seemed calm, although ash from his cigarette had dropped onto one of his trouser legs. Wieder's father was contemplating some of the

by Dora García

hundreds of photos with which the walls and part of the ceiling had been decorated. A cadet who happened to be present, though what he was doing there no one could explain (perhaps he was the younger brother of one of the officers) started crying and swearing and had to be dragged out of the room. The surrealist reporters looked disapproving but maintained their composure. Muñoz Cano claims to have recognized the Garmendia sisters and other missing persons in some of the photos. Most of them were women. The background hardly varied from one photo to another, so it seemed they had all been taken in the same place. The women looked like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins in some pictures, although Muñoz Cano could not rule out the possibility that up to thirty per cent of the subjects had been alive when the snapshots were taken. In general (according to Muñoz Cano) the photos were of poor quality, although they made an extremely vivid impression on all who saw them. The order in which they were exhibited was not haphazard: there was a progression, an argument, a story (literal and allegorical), a plan. The images stuck to the ceiling (says Muñoz Cano) depicted a kind of hell, but empty. Those pinned up in the four corners seemed to be an epiphany. An epiphany of madness. In other groups of photos the dominant mood was elegiac (but how, asks Muñoz Cano, could there be anything “nostalgic” or “melancholy” about them?). The symbols were few but telling. A photo showing the cover of a book by Joseph de Maistre: *St. Petersburg Dialogues*. A photo of a young blonde woman who seemed to be dissolving into the air. A photo of a severed finger thrown onto a floor of porous, grey cement.