

She Lived in a Story

Guillermo Samperio

Guillermo Samperio (Mexico City, 1948), author of eighteen books, has won several important literary awards. His collections of short stories include Lenin en el fútbol (1978); El hombre de a penumbra: el hombre de las llaves (1985), from which "She Lived in a Story" is taken; and Miedo ambiente y otros miedos (1986). His book of short prose pieces, Cuaderno Imaginario (1990), contains "Free Time" (see page 378).

to Fernando Ferreira de Loanda

*When we believe we are dreaming and we awake,
we experience vertigo of the mind.*

—Silvina Ocampo and Bioy Casares

During the evening hours, the writer Guillermo Segovia gave a lecture at the Preparatory Academy of Iztapalapa. The students of esthetics, under the direction of the young poet Israel Castellanos, were enthusiastic about the detailed presentation by Segovia. Professor Castellanos did not neglect to thank the lecturer and praise his work in front of the students. The one most pleased was Segovia himself; even though, before beginning, he felt a little nervous, when he began explaining the notes he had prepared two days before, his words flowed with strength and ease. When a young man asked about the creation of characters inspired by real people, Guillermo Segovia was secretly disappointed that the emotion and confidence that had filled him had not been displayed before a more sophisticated public. Such a vain idea had not kept him from enjoying a certain giddy taste for creative and sharply defined words, that space in which his theory and examples converged in a dense and, at the same

time, simple discourse. He allowed the phrases to intertwine without being too conscious of them; the interaction of terms produced an obvious dynamic, independent of his voice.

Guillermo Segovia had just turned thirty-four; he had three books of stories, a novel and a series of newspaper articles published domestically and abroad, especially in France, where he had received his degree in literature. Returning to Mexico six years before his speech at the Academy, he had married Elena, a young Colombian researcher, with whom he had had two children. On his return, the writer took a job at a newspaper, while his wife worked at the National University of Mexico. They rented a small house in old Coyoacán,* where they lived comfortably.

Now on his way home, driving an '82 VW, Guillermo could not remember several points from the end of his presentation. But it didn't bother him too much; his memory was prone to sporadic lapses. However, he was excited about one part that he did remember and that he could use to write a story. It had to do with that witty comparison that he had made between an architect and a writer. "From the creative point of view, the designing of a home invariably takes place within the realm of the fictitious; when the bricklayers begin to build it, we are now witnessing the fulfillment of that fiction. Once finished, the owner will inhabit the house and the fiction of the architect. Extending this line of reasoning, we might say that cities are fictions of architecture; for that reason the latter is considered an art form. The architect who lives in a house that he designed and built himself is one of the few persons who may live in his own fantasy. From his own perspective, the author is an artificer of the word, he designs stories and sentences so that the reader may live in the text. A house and a story should be solid, functional, necessary, lasting. In a story, one might say, movement demands fluidity, from the living room to the kitchen, or from the bedrooms to the bath. No unnecessary columns or walls. The different sections of the story or of the house should be indispensable and created with precision. Literature is written and homes are built so that man may live in them in comfort."

"To live in a text," Guillermo went on thinking while his car traveled through the night down Iztapalapa Avenue. He paid attention only to the stoplights, without noticing the sordid panorama of that part of the city. Not even when the traffic became heavier around Calzada de la Viga did he notice the change in direction. "To live in a text," he insisted, despite

*Coyoacán: a middle-class part of Mexico City, centered on an historic village containing sixteenth-century buildings

his mental blanks. The idea of inhabiting words overwhelmed him; all of a sudden he wanted to create a story around that idea. Imagining the way to frame it, he thought he would try to avoid the literary solutions of similar problems. Out of the blue, he said to himself that a woman would be the appropriate character. In a clouded manner he visualized a woman living in a story created by him. "She lived in the text" was the first transformation. "Now I'm already in the domain of the story; the sentence itself is literary, it sounds good."

He remembered several women, far and near, but none of them met his requirements. He went back and began by imagining her activities. He created a small catalog of professions and tasks, finally leaning toward actresses. He wondered about the reasons for his selection as his car sped away from the Country Club neighborhood and headed toward Miguel Angel de Quevedo in order to cross the Tlalpan bridge. He gave full rein to his thoughts in search of an answer or a justification. "In one way or another actors live in the text. They live the part they were given to play and they also live the text; they do not embody anyone at all. In the theater they live in literature for a brief moment. In motion pictures, some of their moments endure with a tendency toward the infinite. Dramatists have written plays in an attempt to approach the ancient dream of the fiction writer: that human beings live in their texts. Thus, artistic creation transcends the imaginary level in order to achieve reality. In regard to my own concept, the movement is reversed; that is, reality moves toward the imaginary."

Guillermo Segovia's car turned onto Felipe Carrillo Puerto, advanced a block and turned toward Alberto Zamora; thirty meters farther along he came to a stop. As he shut off the engine, he decided that the woman in this story would be a young actress whom he admired, for her performances and her extraordinary beauty. Furthermore, the actress somewhat resembled the painter Frida Kahlo, who painted herself in the dreams of her paintings, another way to live in one's own fiction. Even though Segovia did not give a title to his works before writing them, on this occasion he had an urge to do so. "She Lived in a Story" would be the title of his tale; the woman's name, just like the actress from reality, would be Ofelia.

Guillermo got out of the VW; he went into his house; passing through the modest living room on his left, he entered his study. A small room, the walls of which were covered by book shelves from floor to ceiling. He turned on the light, he took his typewriter out of its case, he put it on the desk, at the other end of the room, next to the window, through which could be seen a few plants in the small garden. He turned on the radio of

his sound system and tuned in *Radio Universidad*. When he opened the top desk drawer, Elena appeared in the doorway.

"How did it go?" she said, walking toward him.

"Fine," Guillermo answered, moving in her direction.

They kissed; Segovia caressed her hair and hips. They kissed again, and when they separated, Elena said again:

"How did the people react?"

"They were quite interested. I realized that the boys had read my stories. Which, of course, I owe to Castellanos... during the discussion an interesting idea came up," he explained, heading for the desk.

"The children just went to sleep... I was reading a little... don't you want something to eat?"

"No... I would prefer to start writing..."

"O.K. I'll wait for you in the bedroom."

Elena left the room, blowing a kiss toward her husband off the palm of her hand. Guillermo Segovia settled down in front of his typewriter; from the drawer that he had left open, he took out several sheets of blank paper and inserted the first one. He typed the title and began to write.

She Lived in a Story

That day, the cold wave intensified in the city. Around eleven o'clock at night, more or less, a fog settled in, brought on by the low temperature and the smog. The darkness was more intense than usual and it gave an eerie feeling even to the brightest areas. The old streets of the center of Coyoacán were reminiscent of scenes from centuries past. Even the light coming from streetlights and cars seemed shadowy; it penetrated only slightly that ancient space. Only a few people, dressed in topcoats or thick sweaters and scarves, walked along hugging the walls, trying to ward off the cold. They looked like silhouettes from another time, as if from this Coyoacán, a Coyoacán from the past had emerged and the people, failing to recognize their own century, were heading for places they would never find. With Plaza Hidalgo at her back, down narrow Francisco Sosa Avenue, Ofelia was walking. Her slender figure was dressed in gray woolen slacks and a thick black sweater which because of its bagginess seemed to hang from her shoulders. A violet scarf encircled the woman's long neck. The white skin of her face was a tenuous light that stood out against her dark hair, which brushed her shoulders as she moved. The sound of her black boots on the flagstones was barely noticeable.

Although it was impossible to ascertain from which direction, Ofelia sensed that she was being watched. On the corner of Francisco Sosa and Ave Marta she

stopped while a car turned to the right. She took advantage of this instant to look behind her, thinking that she would discover who was watching her. She only saw an old couple that walked out of a doorway and headed for the Plaza. Before crossing the street, she felt vulnerable; then she experienced a slight shudder. She thought that perhaps it would have been better if someone had been following her. Despite being alone, she started walking again, certain that the night was watching her movements. She became a little frightened, and instinctively began to walk faster. She rubbed her hands together, looked toward the trees in front of her and then all the way down the avenue that faded into the foggy mist. "It would have been better if I'd let them give me a ride," she lamented as she was about to cross Ayuntamiento Street.

Just minutes before, she had been in the old structure of the Center for Dramatic Arts, watching the dress rehearsal of a work from the Middle Ages. When the rehearsal was over and after going out into the street, one of the actresses offered to take her home; Ofelia came up with the excuse that she had to visit a friend who lived right around the corner, on Francisco Sosa. The truth was that the strange, gray atmosphere of Coyoacán had made her feel like walking; furthermore, for her the foggy atmosphere was a continuation of the staging of the play and it brought to mind the time she had spent in England. She said goodbye and started walking, while all the others got into their cars.

She first felt the impression of being watched while walking down the avenue. Now, realizing that nothing special was happening to her, she found no real reason to be afraid. The phenomenon should have had an explanation, but for the moment she couldn't figure it out. This idea was comforting and, somewhat more encouraged, she warmed her hands by blowing on them. Nevertheless, this sudden ease of mind heightened her perceptive abilities. There were, no doubt, eyes attempting to look inside her; eyes whose function seemed to be of a tactile nature.

Fine, it was impossible for her to separate herself from life's experience, but she still wanted to understand. Were these feelings new and therefore as yet undefined? What were those searching eyes after? Seldom had she experienced the feeling of being threatened: she accepted a certain amount of insecurity given the violence of Mexico City. She moved cautiously; now that she really was exposing herself, no one was threatening her. The people in the few cars that were passing by paid no attention to her at all. Then she remembered the intensely lit spaces on the stage, when the glare of the spots prevented her from seeing the audience, who in turn were looking at her. She knows that a multitude of eyes are out there in the dark, moving to the rhythm that she establishes; lots of eyes, a great concealed eye, a giant eye fixed on her body. Trying to bolster herself with the memory of this, Ofelia told herself that perhaps it had to do with her skin's memory, foreign to her mind; in that murky landscape, perhaps it had returned

to her body and was gradually possessing it. Eye-network, eye-space, large eye coming toward her, growing eye; Ofelia wanted to escape the sensation by shaking her head. The effort, she knew all along, was useless; now devoid of strength, she abandoned herself to her fate and felt herself sinking into the depths of night. All of a sudden she found herself walking in total darkness, losing her sense of place, still with some certainty that she was facing no danger.

When she turned into the alley where her house was, she could feel the enormous eye on her hair, her face, her scarf, her sweater, her slacks. She stopped and felt a kind of dizziness similar to what you experience in a dream where you float unsupported and without any way of coming down. Ofelia knew that she was only a few meters from her house, in Coyoacán, in her city, on the Earth, but at the same time she could not avoid the sensation that this was a dream, and while she experienced vertigo, it was a pleasant feeling because a dreamer, in the end, knows that there is no danger and he throws his body into the darkness like a zeppelin that descends when it is watched. Ofelia remained standing in the alley, trying to understand; in a quiet voice she said to herself: "This is not a fainting spell nor a psychological problem. This does not come from me, it's something outside of me, beyond my control." She moved slowly toward the wall and leaned her back against it. The sensation became heavier in her thin body, as if the fog in the alley were resting on her. "It's not that they're still watching me; it's something more powerful." She raised her hand to her forehead and repeatedly passed her fingers through her hair; alarmed, suddenly understanding the situation, she said to herself: "I'm inside the eye." She lowered her arm slowly and, following the idea in what she had just said, she continued: "I'm inside the gaze. I'm living inside a stare. I'm part of a way of seeing. Something forces me to walk; the fog has descended and its murky fingers reach out toward the windows. I'm a silhouette from the past sticking to the walls. My name is Ofelia and I'm opening the wooden gate to my house. I enter, to my right shadow-theater figures appear in the garden, and from among the plants out jumps Paloma, eagerly greeting me. Her white coat is like an oval ball of cotton suspended in the darkness. She barks at me timidly, comes up to my legs and rubs against my calves; then she stands on her two hind legs inviting me to play. I pet her and gently push her aside; she growls mournfully, but I am already walking among the plants along the path made of stones from the river. The entryway light is on; I open the door, I close it. I want something to eat and I head for the kitchen. I stop and I feel obliged to retrace my steps, I continue on toward the living room. I turn on the floor lamp, I open the bar, I grab a glass and a bottle of cognac. Without closing the bar door, I serve myself and, after taking the first drink, I realize that I still want something to eat, but the taste of the cognac captivates me and, against my will, I decide not to eat. When I lift the glass to my lips a second time, Plácida appears, she greets me respectfully and

asks me if she might get me something. I tell her she should go to bed, explaining that tomorrow we have to get up early. Plácida leaves with a slight bow of the head, and I finish my drink. Between my fingers, I am carrying the bottle and the glass; with my free hand I turn off the lamp and, in the dark, I cross the living room and climb the stairs. The door to my bedroom is open and I enter. I turn on the light, I approach my dressing table, I place the bottle and glass on it. I sit on the seat, open the drawer, take out my notebook, a fountain pen, and I begin to write what is happening to me."

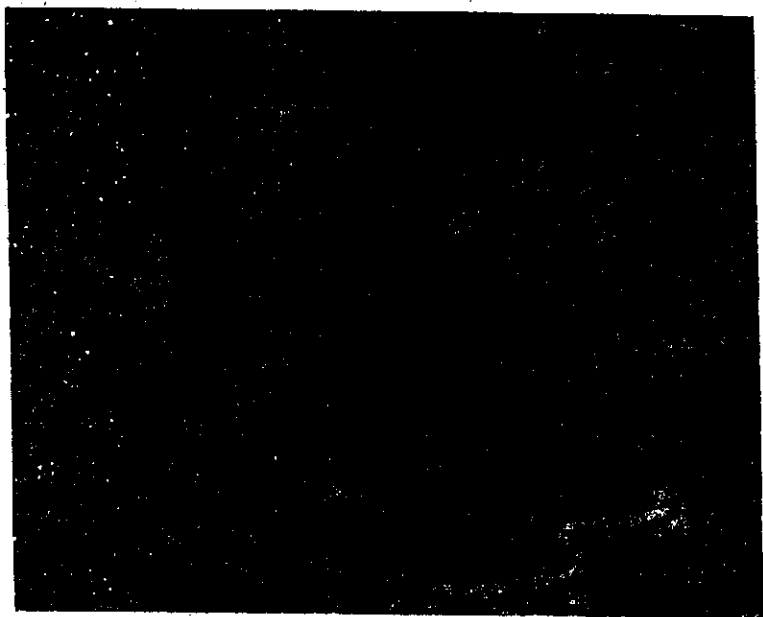
I know very well that I still live inside the gaze. I hear the sounds that are generated deep within it, like the noises of the city that rise to the top of the Latin-American Tower. I have had to move with precision and calm. My fear is disappearing; I'm surprised, but without any desperation. Now, all of a sudden, I'm upset, angry; I must write a protest. Yes, a protest, gentlemen. I protest! Men of the world, I protest. I write that I am an inhabitant, I write that my anxiousness has left me; I stop writing. I served myself a shot of liquor and downed it in one gulp. I really like my old Montblanc pen, it has a good nib. My body's burning up, my cheeks are red. I'm afraid I can't stop living in two worlds; Francisco Sosa Avenue, which seems so far away from me now, is two roads, just one large eye. In the streets of this ancient Coyoacán that I love so much, there exists another Coyoacán; I was walking through two Coyoacáns, two nights, double fog. At this moment of precipitous revelations, there are people like me who live in both Coyoacáns; Coyoacáns which coincide perfectly one with the other, neither under nor above, just one center and two worlds. Someone, perhaps a man, at this very moment is writing these very same words that are appearing in my notebook. These very same words. I stop writing; I have another drink. I feel a little tipsy; I'm happy. As if there were lots of light in my bedroom. Paloma barks at two invisible moons. It occurs to me that I should write that likely the man's name is Guillermo, he has a beard, a long straight nose. It could be Guillermo Segovia, the writer, who at the same time lives as another Guillermo Segovia. Guillermo Segovia in Guillermo Samperio, each inside the other, a single body. I insist on thinking that he writes with his typewriter precisely what I write, word upon word, only one discourse and two worlds. Guillermo writes a story that is too pretentious; the central character could have my name. I write that he writes a story that I live in. It's already past midnight and the writer Guillermo Segovia is tired. He stops writing, he scratches his beard, he twists his mustache; he stands up, he stretches his arms and then, lowering them, he leaves the study. He goes up to the bedrooms on the second floor. He enters his

bedroom and sees that his wife is asleep, with an open book on her lap. He approaches her, kisses her on the cheek, takes the book from her and puts it on the night table; before leaving, he glances once more at his wife. As he goes downstairs, he senses that he is being watched, although he cannot determine from where. He stops and turns, thinking that his youngest son has gotten up, but no one is there. "This is probably a suggestion that comes to me from my own story," he thinks while still trying to figure it out. He goes on down and the sensation becomes more intense. This change bothers him because he understands that the next step is to know that he is not being watched, but that he lives inside a gaze, that he is now part of a new way of seeing. Standing at the foot of the stairs, he thinks: "That gaze could be Ofelia's." From my way of thinking, in what I write with my beautiful Montblanc, I feel like I'm disinhabiting Guillermo Segovia's story. And he cannot pretend that my text might be entitled something like "Guillermo Lived in a Story"; now I write that Segovia, already scared out of his wits, moves toward his study at the same time that I begin to live in just one Coyoacán, while he gradually inhabits two, three, many Coyoacáns. Guillermo picks up the fifteen pages he has written, a half-written story, full of mistakes; he picks up his lighter, lights it and touches the flame to the corner of the pages and they begin to burn. He observes how the flames rise from the tale he had prematurely entitled "She Lived in a Story." He throws the half-burned manuscript into the small garbage can, believing that when it finishes burning the "suggestion" will cease. But now he hears the sounds generated deep within my steady gaze, like the sounds of the city that rise to the top of the Latin American Tower. He sees the smoke rise from the garbage can but his fear does not diminish. He wants to go to his wife so she can comfort him, but he senses that this would do no good. Standing in the middle of the study, Guillermo does not know what to do. He knows that he lives in his house and other houses, even though he is unable to visualize them. He goes to his desk, he sits down in front of his typewriter, he opens the second drawer. Overcome by the urgent need to halt his own disintegration, without knowing exactly what or whom to kill, he takes out his old .38 Colt that he inherited from his grandfather. He stands, walks toward the door; he's holding the gun at ready. As he crosses the living room in the darkness, he feels as though he is about to lose consciousness, still holding fast to the idea of the moment that he is living. Finally, in this state of confusion and anguish, he returns to the second floor. The room at the back is still lit; he heads in that direction.

Stopping in the doorframe, he does not recognize the bedroom; his eyes are unable to tell him what they are seeing even though they do see.

Through his index finger the cold reality of metal begins to flow; he senses the trigger and the grips. A pale light appears in the background of his perception, helping him to recognize the elements of his situation. He distinguishes shapes, shadows of some reality; he looks at his extended arm and raises his eyes. In front of him, seated on a pretty little bench, a woman is looking at him. Segovia slowly lowers his arm and lets the Colt drop, which produces a muffled sound as it hits the rug. The woman stands and tries to force her thin lips into a smile. When Guillermo realizes that he is not facing any danger, his fear subsides, leaving his body slightly numb. Without thinking about it, he decides to move closer; with this movement of his legs, he finally achieves lucidity. He stops next to me; in silence, accepting our fatal destiny, he takes my hand and I am willing.

Translated by Russell M. Cluff and L. Howard Quackenbush



Rocío Maldonado, *Heads* (1989, ink on rice paper)

Man with Minotaur on Chest

Enrique Serna

Enrique Serna (Mexico City, 1959) has published two novels, *El ocaso de la primera drama* (1986) and *Uno soñaba que era rey* (1989). "Man with Minotaur on Chest" is from his first book of short stories, *Amores de segunda mano* (1991).

to my sister, Anamaría

My love of the ornamental exists, undoubtedly, because I sense in it something identical to the substance of my soul.

—Fernando Pessoa, *O livro do desassossego*
(*The Book of Disquiet*)

I am going to tell the story of the boy who asked Picasso for an autograph. As everyone knows, at the beginning of the fifties, Picasso was living in Cannes and used to sunbathe every morning on La Californie beach. His favorite pastime was to play with the children building sandcastles. A tourist, noticing how much he enjoyed the children's company, sent his son to ask him for an autograph. When he heard the boy's request, Picasso cast a scornful look at the man who had used the boy as an intermediary. If he detested anything about fame, it was that people would buy his autograph and not his paintings. Pretending to be captivated by the boy's charm, he asked the father's permission to take him to his studio so that he could give him a drawing. The tourist consented with the greatest of pleasure, and half an hour later saw his son return with a minotaur tattooed on his chest. Picasso had granted him the