

JACINTO LUCAS PIRES

Gardener in a Swimsuit

Translated from Portuguese by Dean Thomas Ellis

TO UNWIND FROM HIS JOB at the bank, to shake free of the clamor of the city, and to have a little time just for himself, Manuel Benigno Lopes goes almost every Saturday to his vegetable garden out by the dam. It is a tiny parcel of land that his parents left him, where he plants potatoes, kale, tomatoes, carrots, and wild leeks. If it is a good day, he takes full advantage by diving into the dam water right alongside. Especially since Flavia doesn't look kindly upon his horticultural escapades—Manuel doesn't know quite why, maybe because she never really liked his parents, such humble, unpretentious folk, or because she doesn't think it very virile for a man to amuse himself by planting vegetables—so, if he says that he's going there to swim, the whole thing just seems more kosher. In the early days he took the kids, but now he only goes alone. Ana and Susana are busy with their studies, their friends, and their beaus (well, the older one, anyway), so he no longer bothers to ask them if they want to take a little dip out by the vegetable patch.

Today, on his way home, he hits an animal on the highway. There is nothing to be done; the thing runs right out in front of the Peugeot. Manuel slams hard on the brakes, a jolt surging through all the muscles in his arms and his legs, but it is way too late.

It is a dog.

Manuel gets out of the car on the deserted highway and looks at the animal; it lies on the asphalt, as if asleep, black blood encircling the body, a liquid shadow. A good-sized dog, with brown skin and dark eyes, whose snout could be a helluva lot uglier.

But it's dead. Manuel can do nothing for him. He gets back in his car and heads home.

At dinner (meat loaf, his daughters' favorite meal) he rehearses in his head the best way to tell them what happened. His wife is going on about a "stupendous" store that sells "extremely high end" apparel at "accessible prices" and describes the dresses down to the last detail. His daughters don't take their eyes off her. They ask her about sizes and promotions.

“You cannot even imagine, today, when I was driving back from the garden . . .” “On my way back from the dam today. . .” Naah, thinks Manuel. Perhaps it’s best not to speak of death at the table.

They go off to watch the new *telenovela* on Channel 3, and afterward the little ones head up to their rooms to listen to music and surf the web. Flavia lies down on the bed to read a novel whose cover is a photograph of a man and a woman, coiffed to the max, simulating a passionate kiss. Manuel leafs through the *Morning Tribune* on the sofa.

That night he dreams he is watching a documentary about “the natural world of Portugal.” Shots of trees, birds, fields, over which a genial voice describes the scenes as they appear: “ancient olive trees,” “herons in flight formation,” “livestock at rest.” Manuel watches the show with great delight, relishing the conflation of familiar imagery with the languid narration, which imbues him with a marvelous sense of inner peace. He hasn’t felt this good in centuries. But then, suddenly, the highway.

The camera, in a swift pan, hovers over the asphalt, until it arrives at the fallen corpse—then lingers, holding on a close-up over the snout. Flies pick at the inexplicably gentle eyes of the dog, while the voice of the narrator speaks of “spreadsheets” and “interest rates,” of “taxes” and “credits” and “margins.” The same terms, dear God, that he and his colleagues use every day at the bank: capital, risk, projections, dividends, guarantees, gross and net, net and gross.

Manuel rises at seven a.m. His wife asks him, sleepily, what he’s up to do, and he tells her he’s going for a swim. He doesn’t know why, or for what, but he has to go back there again.

“Take the garbage out with you,” she says.

The dog is no longer in the road. Manuel parks his car on the widest part of the shoulder and searches the area on foot. He finds it shoved up against some shrubs, caked with dirt. Someone must have dragged the thing over there, a farmer, perhaps, or a shepherd. Or maybe some scrupulous motorist. The bank clerk looks at the corpse. The damned, beautiful beast. Did it have a name?

He opens up the back trunk, pulls out the black sack, and turns it upside down, dumping out all its trash. The waste produced in two days by his family forms a small hill on the shoulder of the road, a tiny shrine to stench. Then he approaches the dead animal and with clinical, criminal caution thrusts it into the sack. He uses both hands to lift the weighty black bulk off the ground. It is as if he is carrying a giant, formless baby made of plastic. A frightfully heavy burden.

Just then, the sound of a motor: a Mercedes whooshes past, speeding toward the city. Manuel looks up. Fortunately it's nobody he knows.

He places, very slowly, the sack into the trunk. Above the car, the blue sky, a perfect silence.

After burying the dog, Manuel drops the shovel and lingers a moment in the garden to admire his work. He is not entirely satisfied, there is still something missing. Hmm, should he say a few words? Should he fall to his knees and say a prayer, a prayer to the god of all beasts? Without thinking, he finds himself over at the tool shed, where he snatches up some onion seeds that he's kept for just the right occasion. Today is that right occasion.

A little while later, he looks toward the plot of brown, or black, or red earth where he's planted the onions, and senses that yes, now yes, he's done his work. It seems to him fitting that here, over such an idiotic death as this, sobbing bulbs will sprout.

On the other side, the dam water: as smooth and burnished as a blade. Manuel dives in, swims a few meters in a straight line.

He climbs out, stands up, and, with a clear head, dries himself with the sun.

Finally he gets back in his car and takes the road home. He drives serenely, half-diverted by the landscape he ought to be quite weary of by now. It is never Sunday in the country, he thinks.

And when the sign for the city springs up, he doesn't turn off. He drives on, continuing this voyage to who knows where. In the Peugeot, the slightest scent of trash, but who cares? He hasn't felt this way in how long? He imagines himself stepping from the car at whatever service station, two hundred or three hundred kilometers up the road—in that flowered swimsuit and those fingernails caked with dirt—and laughs like a madman.