

LBRIS

We know
books

NOW I SURRENDER

Álvaro Enrígue

Translated by Natasha Wimmer



HARVILL

LBRIS

We know
books

BOOK I

JANOS

1836

In the beginning, things appear. Writing is a defiant gesture we've long since gotten used to: where there was nothing, somebody put something, and now everybody sees it. For example, the prairie. An endless expanse of tall grasses, the occasional smoke column signaling an encampment of the original masters of the land. There are no trees. They would never survive the wind, the torpor of summer, the swirling snows of winter. In the middle of the plain, let there be Spanish missionaries and a church; then settlers, a four-street town. Somebody decided this town was something, and they called it Janos. Maybe because it had two faces, one turned toward the Spanish empire from its raveling edge, the other toward the desert and its cactuses: Apachería.

At some point, the location was strategic. There were artesian wells. Soldiers were sent. They built a fort to give a sense of fruitful security to the settlers who had once been Spanish and were now criollo; also Negro, Keralan, Lombard, Chinese, Irish. Few female settlers came, so the men married Indian women, and their children were something else again: Chihuahuans, Mexicans, God knows

what. Then it occurred to someone that there was profit to be skimmed from the work of the ranchers, the traders, the baker, and the teacher, and they built a town hall. It was in the very center of town, though that didn't mean much because Janos was so small there were no outskirts. Or rather, there were outskirts, but they were never mentioned because they were *goteras* or *rancherías*, Indian settlements.

The inhabitants of these settlements were peaceful groups of Janero Apaches, Conchos, and the occasional Opata down from the mountains in the winter. The *criollos* called them *indios de razón* because they had given up being nomads and become integrated into the European-style productive cycle. Beyond the houses of the *criollos* and *mestizos* in the towns—beyond even the *goteras* that fed and were fed by the towns—were the *indios de guerra*: Apaches, *Raramuris*, and *Yaquis*, mostly, who were sworn enemies of each other and whose internecine conflicts had made it possible for the settlements to grow. It was they who had expelled from the region the *Comanches*, those lords of the southern plains now clustered on the far side of *El Paso del Norte*.

Janos still exists, with its church and town hall, but no *goteras*. The war there—the all-out war against the Apaches—was won, but the winners choose not to remember it, because it makes them ashamed. Today, Janos is in the Mexican state of Chihuahua.

This story begins on the prairie, a prairie that chokes the town. A land where so few people come that there are still buffalo. Let there be blue mountains in the distance, stone walls between ranches, cattle that die of thirst every few years when there's a drought. Let there be rattlesnakes, wild goats, piglike *coyametl*, pheasants, yellow scorpions the size of a child's hand, coyotes, all sheltered under the junipers and acacias of the chaparral, ratty yucca popping up here and there. In this harsh valley, suddenly a path appears, and the back of a

LIBRIS | We know books
woman running, a woman of grit, dressed head to toe in black. She glances back.

Still running, she unlaces the bodice of the black dress, pulls her arms out of the sleeves, and lets the garment drop as she advances in great strides. She trips but doesn't fall, keeps running. Underneath the petticoat, the cotton corset. She twists her body as she unfastens it, without slackening her pace. She slips down the straps of the petticoat and pulls the corset over her head, leaves it dangling from a bush, jerks the petticoat straps back up. She keeps running, now in just her light fawn underskirts, which blend better with the burnt shade of the vegetation, dry and stiff in the fall. She squats down to pull off her boots and hides them in the brush, losing valuable time, but with legs freed and feet bare she can go faster. The underskirts stick to her buttocks: she's so scared she's wet herself. She's running again, her jaw set, neck tense, shoulders braced. Dressed so lightly, she thinks, she can hide better in the brush, curling quietly into a ball. But she can run a little farther still, escape, save herself, as she has done so many times before.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL JOSÉ MARÍA ZULOAGA was a man of the hills, so he loved to receive orders sending him without timetable or pangs of conscience into his beloved backcountry. The moment he got the letter from the state capital, he put on his fringed Comanche jacket, his double-holster cartridge belt, and his curved-brim hat and closed up his headquarters, which were dusty and lonely and utterly useless for recruiting irregulars to join an expedition into the sierra. Back then, chasing a pack of Apaches was like going hunting: a chance to run wild on the prairie with friends, with a veneer of service in defense of the fledgling republic of Mexico.

He was about to mount his horse, a sorrel as tough and cocky as its master, when he returned to the office, folded the letter, and put it in his breast pocket to show his wife as proof that he was leaving on orders. He wiped the smile off his face, testing out woeful expressions for breaking the news: like all Chihuahuan women, his wife had a *temper de la chingada*. In the only photo of the two of them together, it's clear they were both handsome and fierce. He sits an inch or two behind her, his hair unruly in the way of men who enjoy themselves no matter the circumstances. She is standing: dark mantilla, severe black dress, impeccable gloves, a look of burning impatience.

The men Zuloaga usually rounded up for his expeditions were like himself, not the soldiers in uniform coats and peaked caps who had gone to defend Texas from the gringo settlers or California from a rumored invasion of the tsar of all the Russias, but ranchers in heavy serge trousers, wide-brimmed hats, flannel shirts, sharp-toed boots—needle toes, they were called, their sharpness essential for lasso handling. They brought their own rifles, bullets, and horses, enlisting in exchange for a nominal salary they knew they would never receive. Their expeditions to punish Apaches tended to be long and almost always great fun for them. Tracking their foes meant venturing into steep terrain at little risk, because except in rare cases, the irregulars could never find them. Sometimes there was a skirmish and they shot a woman or a child or rescued some captive the Apaches had left behind to sidetrack them. When they got back to town, instead of “irregulars”—or *rurales*, as they were called in the middle of the country—the newspapers dubbed them *nacionales*, an epithet they savored.

Zuloaga had the best record of his generation as an Apache fighter, maybe because his joy in the chase kept him at a remove from vulgar

clichés of justice. He didn't see himself as a champion of that predatory chimera, the National State, but as a man going out to play.

He left Buenaventura at the break of day, with no rurales. All the wives in town were long since fed up with his expeditions, which were a burden on families. The men left their ranches for periods that could stretch on for weeks, not to mention that they had to be sent with provisions, always scarce. So he was accompanied only by his father, a retired soldier who was joining him mostly because it made him sad to see his son ride alone to Casas Grandes on such a cold morning. To protect the lieutenant's vanity as a tracker with a mostly imaginary post in the army of the brand-new Mexican Republic, the old man had said he would come along for a few days so that he could stop in at La Tinaja. He had delightful relatives there, half-Indian after so many dealings with the Janeros.

In the dispatch from Chihuahua City, Lieutenant Colonel José María Zuloaga had read that the attack happened months ago, and he understood that the pursuit was, frankly, pointless. By the time he found the thieving perpetrators, the cattle they had stolen would literally be shit— butchered, roasted, eaten, and turned to pulp in some bottomless Apache stomachs.

Ain't there a fort in Janos? his father asked, putting on the black dragoon's jacket he had worn in the imperial army. It still had its flared tail, gold buttons, and braid on the chest, but it was so faded it looked like the frock coat of some gentleman come down in the world. Must be empty, like this one, said Zuloaga. What about the federal troops there? Zuloaga shrugged, considering the topic a waste of saliva.

The distance was a little over twenty-five miles. They stopped at noon on a shady bank of the Santa María River to hunt wood pigeons and roast them. The horses didn't like to be ridden in the midday sun, even though winter was beginning and it was cold. They made it

to Casas Grandes a little before dark, carrying the carcass of a young pronghorn that had crossed their path that afternoon. The idea was to barbecue it the next day. We'll buy sotol and hand out tacos, said the old man as they tied the carcass to one of the horses. There's your ten numbskulls enlisted, and I can go back to La Tinaja guilt-free.

SEEN THIS WAY, FROM THE VANTAGE POINT of the twenty-first century, running half-clad across the plains like a woman possessed, Camila is athletic, confident in her body, though the men of her time saw her as gaunt.

Her childhood was rather sad, but not lonely. She lived on the ranch of her aunt and uncle as their orphaned ward, which brought her close to the *goteras*. She slept in the master's house and ate at his table, but she played with the Jicarilla and Concho children of the ranch hands and serving girls, which was how she learned to run like a leopard and developed an ear for the tongues of the chaparral. She was always muscular and independent, as if she knew that the key moment of her life would play out in a desperate race across the plains.

Camila had married Leopoldo Ezguerra when everyone assumed she would end her days a spinster. They were married in the parish of La Soledad in Janos—a designation hardly befitting the smattering of houses that was the town in the third decade of the nineteenth century, when Mexico was a nine-year-old republic and the United States was a nervous throb on the far side of Texas.

It wasn't the most promising of marriages. Ezguerra was sixty-seven at the time and this was his third round of nuptials. I need someone to take care of me, he had said at one of the sawhorse tables that were set up every Sunday where the main plaza would have been if the town were big enough to have a recognizable center. For lack of

LIBRIS | we read
a better place, the tables were brought out into the street in front of the church. This street was called First, though there was no Second, and it was intersected by three streets that ran not into other streets but into the plain. Ezguerra needed a woman to manage the ranch that he no longer had the strength to run, until one of his sons chose to come back to Janos to inherit it.

No one had ever shown any curiosity about Camila's body, whether in the world of notaries and doctors of Casas Grandes, the town where she was born, or at the Sacred Heart boarding school in Tepic, where she became a woman among women, or in Guadalajara, where she kept the books at a Teresian school, or in Janos, where she went to work as a tutor for a well-to-do family when she was still of marrying age. Nor did she attract any interest at the big house on the Ezguerra ranch, where she never slept with Don Leopoldo, though their everyday struggles were as poignant and exhausting as a real marriage.

Don Leopoldo had liked her ever since he noticed her toiling away as a governess, trying to corral the insufferable children of the town apothecary at the tables outside the church. He found her interesting, as only a tortoise could.

She was a tall woman, her shoulders broad from afternoons at swimming holes with the children of the Indian ranch hands—a pleasure that she continued to indulge in when she could—and she had a long back that swelled into hips belying the rather virile vigor of her legs and arms. She had small, wide-awake breasts, brown eyes, a pronounced mouth that spoke of a grandmother who'd had a dalliance with a slave and lived to tell the tale, having been rewarded in the genetic lottery with a child who could pass as Neapolitan. Don Leopoldo's calculation was that this strong-armed woman would be able to handle both his failing body and the ranch that sustained him and gave his life meaning.

LIBRIS | We know books

He was right. As a girl Camila had liked working in the fields, and the apothecary's kids were making her miserable, so marriage seemed a fair price to pay to liberate herself from the incorrigible brats. Even at boarding school, she had chosen to live the way she had learned on the ranch. She picked fruits and vegetables in the convent gardens with the maids while the other boarders were being taught to weave brocades and make marzipan. No one complained: her uncle had put down a hefty deposit when he enrolled her, but after that he never paid the fees. The sisters thought it just as well that she earn her keep with the servants, even though she slept with the young ladies.

She came from an undistinguished line of criollos who still passed as white, though it had clearly been generations since they could make the claim. They were the kind of family who settled in the barren north because the one thing they did have was the sense that they deserved a better life, for the wrong reason: they weren't Indians. The blurring of the desert erased divides, which were more rigid the farther south you went. Anybody—except the original inhabitants of the plains—could be settlers. No one came to Chihuahua, after all, if not pursued by debt or a guilty verdict.

Early on, Camila was aware that if she wanted a chance in the courtship wars, she would have to seize it herself, because marriage wouldn't fall from the sky: she would have to earn it as she had earned her keep in boarding school, with her own hands. They were long, bony hands, darker than the rest of her body. She rubbed herbed oil into them in the mornings and at night; they could peel a ripe tomato without a knife.

Old Ezguerra imagined those hands rubbing liniment into the abscesses that formed on his legs and back during long stretches in bed, and the vision was edifying and dirty: after Camila's years at the con-

vent and the Teresian school, there was something nunlike about her. She had the hands of a bride of Christ.

Don Leopoldo didn't have the strength to mount a woman, let alone the vigorous Camila, but he did get some satisfaction from those hands, which every so often encircled his sex, long relegated to mere plumbing. There was a certain amount of pleasure in the marriage, then, but it was the exception to the rule, and one-sided.

Give me your hand, the old man would say when he was overcome by fear of his final passage. Touch my face, he would say when he wanted to feel alive. It was the last thing he said: Touch my face. He said it in a kind of whistle from the other side, one morning when he woke knowing that his name didn't figure on the calendar's next page. When he felt his wife's cool touch on his cheek, he grasped her hand to stop his slide toward the corncob smile of the Dark Lady. Camila didn't feel the jolt of death, but she did have a hard time disentangling her fingers from his, which gripped with a force they had lacked when alive.

CASAS GRANDES WAS AS PEACEFUL as could be when José María Zuloaga and his father arrived, despite the Apache attack, which had been reported as occurring a little to the north. Maybe everything was calm, the lieutenant colonel surmised, because the people of Chihuahua chose not to work up a sweat. His father shook his head impatiently, as he always did when his son talked nonsense. It's because nobody cares what happens in Janos anymore, he said; settle in a valley already swallowed up by Apachería and it's your funeral.

They were received by the local justice of the peace, who stood in as mayor when required. Without asking for a copy of their orders, he authorized them to roast half of the pronghorn in the Plaza de