THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

Chamberí
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Chamberí

Javier Marías

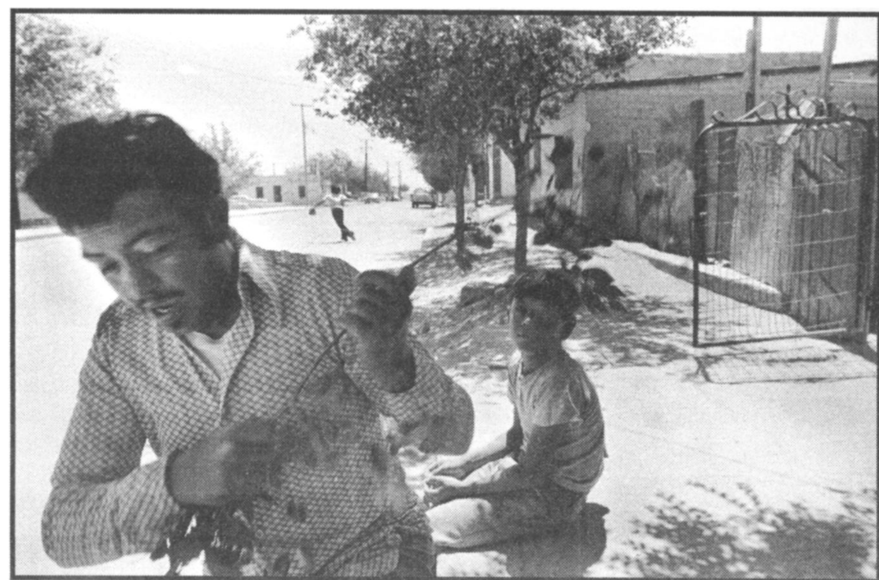
I WAS BORN at No. 16 Calle de Covarrubias in Madrid, which means that despite my reputation as a "foreignizer," a traitor to the country, and "a goddamn Anglo-Saxonist" (as one furious now quasi-academic once called me)—a reputation that has dogged me ever since I published my first novel—I come from the most genuinely *madrileño* area of Spain's capital city, namely, Chamberí. I grew up and was educated there and in the surrounding area, and when I moved apartments a few years ago, I didn't stray very far.

There are certain streets in Chamberí that I always associate with my childhood, streets that still exist and have preserved their old names, none of them particularly resonant now, or perhaps the names have simply grown inconsequential because forgotten: Miguel Ángel, Génova, Sagasta, Zurbano, Luchana, Zurbarán, Almagro, Fortuny, Bárbara de Braganza, Santa Engracia. And Covarrubias. The streets may still exist, but, in large measure, they have also been destroyed. That area, which is now home to so many banks, was once full of small eighteenth-century palaces and mansions with high doors and imperial marble staircases. I certainly didn't live in one of those, but they were the backdrop to the walk I went on most frequently with my brothers, hand-in-hand with my mother and with Leo, our highly imaginative maid, who had us believe that she was the girlfriend of the soccer player Gento (a popular idol at the time) and told us apocryphal stories about Laurel and Hardy. Or else with two worthy ladies of Cuban origin and accent, my grandmother and her sister, Aunt María, who would accompany us ironically and excitably to one of the nearby movie houses. Almost none of these remain. They all had monarchical names: the Príncipe Alfonso, the María Cristina, and the Carlos III, which still survives. Another movie house, the Colón, lasted into my adolescence, its name dating from after the Civil War, when it replaced that of the Royalty, which was clearly too "goddamn Anglo-Saxonist" for Francoism.

Younger taxi-drivers are greatly surprised when I ask them to take the "*bulevar*" route, when there has been nothing in Madrid for decades now that you could even jokingly refer to as a boulevard. But that is how we people born in Chamberí in the 1950s knew the four streets of Génova, Sagasta, Carranza, and Alberto Aguilera, which are now an indescribable flood of cars driven by hardened criminals. When I was a child, the street was a polite and respectful place, occupied by spruce, gleaming automobiles, which their owners would drive almost apologetically, and by enormous black taxis with tip-up seats—*traspontines* or *transportines,* as we children called them—that we fought over to be given the privilege of sitting in. It was, of course, also a city of trams, trolleybuses (trolleybuses!), and doubledeckers, exactly like the London ones, except that they were blue and had the entrance on the right, despite having been made in Britain, where the door is on the left. Racing up the spiral stairs to the top floor was like a daily adventure, and helped us to identify more closely with the characters created by Richmal Crompton or Enid Blyton, childhood heroes who never disappointed. Nor was it unusual to see carts drawn by mules or donkeys and piled high with boxes and battered furniture or a rolled-up carpet on end; these were driven by *traperos*—junkmen—who for some reason (whether it was mere chance or out of a desire to be ornamental I'll never know) were always accompanied by some extremely beautiful, pale-eyed, gypsyish girl, sitting with her back to the driver and therefore facing the trams or taxis patiently following behind. That's why it still always thrills me to see a female face looking out of the back of some passing vehicle, although nowadays those faces tend to lack all mystery: they're mostly gum-chewing fifteen-year-olds with frozen smiles, who always go around in a gaggle and are never alone, not like the solitary female passengers of those carts.

Madrid or, if you prefer, Chamberí was to the eyes of a child a city dominated by cakeshops and grocery stores, places of abundance and even good taste. Of the latter, the nearest, which still exists, had one of the loveliest names I have ever seen on a sign: Viena Capellanes. From another, Mantequerías Lyón, a boy came every day to the house to deliver our order, because it was inconceivable then that you would buy food to be eaten on any other day than the one on which it was bought. In the midst of all this industrious refinement, it was not infrequent to catch a very strong whiff of cow as you walked down the street. As a small child, I found it easy enough to crouch down and peer through a barred window to find a few of those illustrious mammals crowded together in a cellar. In order, I suppose, not to besmirch the city's reputation as the capital of Spain, those dairies were called *lecherías,* not *vaquerías* (naming the product, *leche*, rather than the source, *vaca*), despite the astonishing and very obvious presence of those beasts just two steps away from the trolleybuses. And so, incredible though it may seem, what with the mules and donkeys of the junkmen, the cows and horses with their riders that could also be seen sometimes trotting along certain streets (Ferraz, Génova, Cea Bermúdez), we children of the 1950s rubbed shoulders on a daily basis with creatures typical of nineteenth-century cities. My memory of that Madrid is of an unhurried, orderly city (perhaps excessively orderly, for I've never seen more policemen on the streets anywhere), and perhaps because I was a child and was more aware of other children, I remember its human landscape as being dominated by two things: by girls in blue or grey uniforms or wearing a red jersey and wrinkled socks, with books and files clasped to their incipient bosoms, as they shuffled along through the helter-skelter rush of children; and by the elegance that was expected of any woman living in that typically Madrid barrio, so much so that *piropos* (the flattering comments addressed by men to women in the street) were almost obligatory, although always decorous. I still remember something a man said to my mother one Sunday when I was walking back with her after Mass: "You're the loveliest thing I've ever seen, in miniature." My mother burst out laughing, and was, I remember, wearing one of those decorative combs Spanish women often used to wear in their hair.□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)



Chihuahua, Mexico, 1975

Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Rose (1633)

Francisco de Zurbarán

Like two
giant's hands,
shade and
gravity collude
to squeeze away
the light and leave
the clay, rued
Zurbarán. Which
means he has to
find a counter way
to paint, unless he
wants his oranges
too to stick, glued
into a lump
like candy. And
now his wife
is sick.

—*Kay Ryan*

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