

**María Cecilia Barbetta**

## **Nightglowing**

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**An evocative portrait of the spectral atmosphere hovering over Buenos Aires on the eve of a political coup.**

Buenos Aires, 1974. People have flocked to the neighborhood of Ballester from across the globe and put down roots. Twelve-year-old Teresa practices liberation theology and carries around a plastic Madonna from door to door to dispense protection. The autoshop is a hotbed of utopian thought. Men follow the news with bated breath, and the local hairdresser loses his mind over the President's death. The people of Ballester listen to the voices of the dead, sing songs, and celebrate life. Yet political turmoil, violence, and an encroaching military dictatorship soon turn the country into a deeply sinister land. Those wanting to survive must find a vision to cling to.

In virtuosic prose, the Argentine author María Cecilia Barbetta tells the story of how soaring dreams can illuminate dark times.

*“Storytelling is about moving beyond taboos and looking backward; one must search for the ghosts and the dead inscribed in a country's history. Only then, with some luck, will they allow themselves to be brought back to life.”*

**María Cecilia Barbetta** was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1972 and grew up in Ballester, the neighborhood in which this novel takes place. She studied German as a foreign language and received a DAAD-stipend in 1996 to come to Berlin, where she has remained ever since. Prior to the appearance of her first novel, she received the Alfred Döblin fellowship from the Akademie der Künste in 2007 and participated in the renowned prose writers' workshop at the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin. Her first novel, *The Los Milagros Tailor Shop*, was published in 2008, and was awarded prestigious debut novel prizes, including the Aspekte Prize for Literature and the Adelbert von Chamisso Prize. She received a fellowship for a residence at the Villa Massimo in Rome in 2013. In 2017, she was awarded the Alfred Döblin Prize for the manuscript of her second novel, *Nightglowing*. María Cecilia Barbetta writes in German and lives in Berlin.

Sample translation by Sophie Duvernoy

## Part Two

### Autopia

#### 1

What an irony of history! On Monday, July 1st 1974, Valentino Acuña was sitting in his sidewalk newspaper kiosk amidst the freshest, hottest news, when everything suddenly wilted. It was as if the fine, misty rain which had been falling on the city of the fair winds, mingling with the scent of jasmine, sweet pea, and bougainvillea, had brought an unexpected natural catastrophe with it, which spread from Buenos Aires to the rest of the country without any of its well-informed citizens taking notice. On this historic day, Valentino Acuña, who was absorbed in a serial comic, learned of the deadly heart attack of President Juan Domingo Perón with surprising delay, almost by happenstance, when a snippet of conversation drifted toward him around ten past two long after the official announcement. The statement, which had escaped from the mouth of an alarmed passer-by scurrying past his newspaper kiosk like a fleeting shadow, became an expressionist speech bubble, a drawing of a cloud. Acuña looked up from his magazine, alarmed. Everything he had placed on display on the shelf or along the walls in the conviction that its urgent topicality or timelessness would find a happy buyer faded away.

Deeply distraught by the news, Acuña closed up shop and walked hastily over the wet asphalt. He pushed open the door to Celio's business, and found the neighborhood hairdresser dissolved in an ocean of years.

Men can cry too. Men can be fountains of tears, like Celio Rachello, who had been conceived in the rustic port neighborhood of La Boca, where fearless sailors tanned by wind, salt water, and sun are occasionally washed up on land. Back then, Celio's mother had lived in a room as small as a pocket square within the damp walls of a run-down *conventillo*, a shared house in which intrepid oceanic explorers came and went in regular intervals, while the people with whom they consorted dreamed of putting down roots in Argentina. She shared this room with another woman because she was destitute and would have been unable to pay the rent on her own. Naturally, this immigrant neighborhood proved to be just as tough on her offspring. The

daydreaming boy in shorts with soft features, who loved playing at sea battles outdoors, always had scraped knees and tear-stained eyes. Every night, before Celio went to bed, his mother attended to the little scabs on his temples and cheeks that he would scratch open again as he slept. When Laura's roommate failed to come home one night, and waiting for a postcard took a toll on her wallet, Celio's mother was forced to take action and turn her life upside down. Two months later, she arrived in Ballester, a small suitcase in her right hand, a tender boy holding her left.

This neighborhood had witnessed Celio Rachello grow up and transform into the man he was today. His first grey hairs had been expertly dyed, his eyes skillfully accentuated through a streak of emerald-green eyeliner on the lash line. When a new client would ask about his age, he would respond, "What do you think, darling?" The guessing game then wound its usual course: the flattered hairdresser would wave away the stated figure, turn his back on his client for a moment, and address his mother.

"You heard it, *mamma*. What do you think?"

Laura Rachello could not comment. At some point, she had forgotten how to speak, or stopped trying. Celio, who preferred to keep his exact age a professional secret, had come to terms with this development and made a virtue of it.

The lives of those who must invent themselves from nothing are continual balancing acts. "Just keep looking forward," Laura Rachello advised her son, who obeyed her every word before she fell into silence. And since he strictly followed this advice, his eyes came to rest on the ostentatious wall mirror that separated the business from their living quarters. From then on, there was a Celio Rachello before and behind the mirror. But despite the magic which this artist could conjure by sleight-of-hand, despite the masking effects of a few easy tricks, despite all the glamour that Celio Rachello exuded, despite his dazzling get-ups, the hairdresser had to be in his forties. He largely lived in this long-forgotten decade of the twentieth century as well, for the sake of his mother, Laura Rachello, the woman to whom he owed everything and who, when she still held the power of speech, did not tire of saying that she in turn owed everything to Eva Duarte, the legendary wife of Juan Domingo Perón who had overshadowed her predecessor and her successor, as if these two women – the before and after in the life of a general and his people – had never existed. Celio, who always said what his mother wanted to hear, considered the glorious years of Juan Perón's ascent *los años felices*. After having risen quickly within the

ministerial ranks of the various military governments which had spurred Argentina onward and kept it on course, the general took over the reigns in the mid-forties. Laura Rachello reached for the stars, and was given her first sewing machine by the charitable hands of the first lady herself. A photograph above the wall mirror of the salon depicted Laura Rachello just before her great moment. She stood in front of the building of the Eva Perón foundation, hair freshly done, stiff as a soldier – behind her, a queue which snaked around the block. This black-and-white photograph marked a further turning-point in her life. The generous gift gave Laura Rachello the ability to divine and fulfill some of her son's wishes. But after making a few short-sleeved shirts and high-waisted navy pants, she realized that he wanted something quite different. Without consulting him, she reluctantly sold Evita's sewing machine and used the proceeds and her savings to buy a used *Philips* hood dryer, a top-of-the-line machine with a four-step temperature dial and an adjustable tripod stand. She placed this dryer in the front room of her house, and subsequently informed her son that she had opened a hair salon in Ballester.

Since then, Celio Rachello had become the one who called the shots at the ETERNAL BEAUTY. Laura, dolled up and dressed to the nines, sat motionless in a fashionable club chair which had been advertised as the latest rage, so that Celio had seized the opportunity to surprise her with it on an important birthday. A real stroke of luck. Artificial leather was easy to clean, red was Laura's favorite color, and thanks to the seat's rotation mechanism, Celio could easily have his mother at hand. Before Laura had given up, nothing and no one could have convinced her to rest. Business was so-so, and she had gotten it into her head that a boss who lived next to her shop should not leave it during business hours – come what may. For a long time, nobody came. On desolate days with no clients, she would stand in front of the door like a captain on deck shielding his eyes from the sun, on the lookout for the nearest coast. "Persistence is everything," she lectured Celio, her first and only officer, who would give her a wink to cheer her up. "You know what I think: only rats leave a sinking ship," she'd warn, scornful of the rodents she had seen by the horde in La Boca.

Mentally absent now, she still maintained position in her chair. Like a cat, she would often focus on a mysterious point in the air which was invisible to others. Otherwise, like a model or a life-sized mannequin, she let herself be dressed by her son in cocktail dresses which she had sewn in the late forties. Elevated beyond every fashionable innovation, she maintained

her silence even when Celio would test the most elaborate up-dos out on her, golden bobby-pins jammed between his lips. Coiled braids and towering plaits found a suitable place on her well-shaped skull. Back in La Boca, she had anticipated the birth of a girl, a Celia, to whom she could pass on her dresses, beautified with colorful sequins, her bracelets and Bakelite necklaces. After spending her entire life as a woman, she had now become a girl again. On board her ship of dreams, Laura Rachello allowed herself to be dressed and perfumed behind the ears and wrists, discreetly made-up, and her nails to be painted to match her outfit. Laura Rachello sat enthroned in the ETERNAL BEAUTY like a relic from a long-gone era, defying the odds day after day. In order that this daily struggle not rob her of an ounce of color—unlike the photographs of Evita in her shop, which attested to the course of time and thus to the career of the radio actress and movie star whom Laura Rachello had fallen head over heels for once Evita finally became the most powerful woman in the country, the blonde First Lady in Paco Jamandreu and Christian Dior, a true lady with extravagant hats from Casa Giulia and Rosé Descart, with ravishing furs and shoes, rubies at her ears and diamonds on her neck, and a legion of adoring fans she kept wrapped around her finger –, in order to nip the first signs of pallor in the bud, Celio would pick up the rouge and apply it so precisely to his mothers' cheekbones that his clients would say that Doña Laura was looking younger every day, like Dorian Gray. In addition to Celio, the many women who entrusted their care into his hands, baring both their heads and souls, would address her, as if it were Laura's true custom to participate in the things around her, as if Laura Rachello were not living in a time capsule which imprisoned her in an eternal past, not in limbo, an in-between state, which was neither heaven nor hell and in which well-intentioned coincidence reigned, a puerile authority which stood in the way of crude reality and prevented Celio's mother from being released into the here and now.

“*He's dead!*” With this dramatic exclamation, delivered with the theatricality of golden-age Argentine *radionovelas*, Celio Rachello greeted the man who had for years supplied his dear *mamma*, the faithful clientele of the ETERNAL BEAUTY, and the capillary artist himself with magazines and tabloids, but now stood there empty-handed. Seizing the opportunity, Celio threw himself into Valentino's arms to tell him of the terrible news. He began *in medias res*, as if it were unnecessary to refer to the dead man by name, as if no one could know better than the barber of Ballester how Argentina felt in such a historic moment, as if this dramatic event had

not just left Doña Laura's son speechless, but the entire nation. The following morning, Valentino Acuña would see the exact same words just issued from Celio's lips printed on the first page of the *Crónica* newspaper in a colossal font, which, symbolizing the scope of the catastrophe, took up the entire top half of the page, while their terseness conveyed the deeply unfathomable nature of the event.

"I'm heartbroken, Valentino," Celio sobbed, to lend even deeper expression to his grief. One day later, gigantic letters spelling the word DOLOR would emblazon the first page of the *Noticias*.

"I just heard the news. What a tremendous shock."

"*Mamma* thinks so too."

"Oh, forgive me, Doña Laura! I forgot to say hello. I'm out of sorts today. You look lovely. I hope you're well."

"All things considered, *caro Mamma* and I were just done for the day and the TV was on when that ghastly Martínez de Perón interrupted the program to announce the news. I really can't believe it. *Mamma* and I didn't wait eighteen years for his comeback only to lose him nine months later."

"And it's forever, Celio. None of us will be able to bring him back from where he is now."

"It's only been a couple of hours since he left us, and we already feel abandoned. Forgive me." Celio turned his head and blew his nose in a perfumed handkerchief that he had tucked in his sleeve. Then he quickly glanced in the mirror. His nose was red from crying, the dark kohl had trickled from his eyes and run down his cheeks.

"*Orribile! Spaventoso!*"

"Don't exaggerate."

"I don't mean myself, but what awaits us. It's as if we were in the wrong film, and the head of the government is a vain, would-be Evita, a cheap imitation named María Estela Martínez. I just feel like crying."

"Speaking of film, would you mind turning on the TV? To tell you the truth, that's why I burst in on you. Is that all right with you, Doña Laura?"

“Of course, darling. *Mamma* also wants to know if there’s any more news. But I’ll warn you: since the widow made her appearance, they’ve only been broadcasting music from the heavenly spheres.”

Celio carefully arranged the red club chair, stroked his mother’s porcelain hand, and walked towards the commode whose wide drawers held vitally important tools such as brushes, curlers, hair nets, and bobby pins. A little portable *Hitachi* stood on the commode, on a crocheted cover which served as a dust catcher, just like the red feather boa above the salon door. Its antenna was wobbly and had to be readjusted every two days. Celio twiddled with the power button and was disappointed to find that the various channels were still broadcasting classical music.

“If things keep up like this, I’ll lose it,” he said, and adjusted the position of the club chair so that Doña Laura could also look at the sleep-inducing test image, which served as background to the music, without straining her neck. But contrary to expectations, something happened. The sound died out, the test image disappeared; the Minister of Social Welfare had banished it. Three seconds later, his picture had morphed into a blur of static.

“*Porco cane*,” Celio swore, and gave the box a heavy thwack which restored the minister’s black and white face. This caused a delicate statue of the Virgin Mary, which stood next to the *Hitachi*, to plummet one and a half meters down. The plastic figure was a loan from Teresa Gianelli, the granddaughter of Berta Sanfratello, who visited Doña Laura once a week to deliver fresh eggs.

“*Madonna Santa!* That was too much!” the hairdresser shrieked hysterically, and crouched down to pick up the figure. “Did you see that, *mamma*? It’s as if the *madonnina* were committing suicide because of this horrible situation! There’s the proof, Valentino: we’ve been abandoned by all good spirits!”

“I appear before the Argentine people with deep sorrow to confirm the tragic news of the passing of our nation’s leader, General Perón, to eternal life.” The Minister of Social Welfare had spoken, and Celio was fuming with rage. After he had verified that the statue was unharmed, he gesticulated wildly. “What a weasel! I don’t like that man at all, Valentino. Why does this Rasputin of the pampas have to make another statement after the widow publicly announced the death of her husband? No matter how you look at it, dead is dead. Just

like Pipino remember Pipino *mamma* Pipino was our little finch in La Boca Valentino a dream of a songbird our *cabecita negra* his head neck and throat were a glistening black which contrasted with his yellow body beautifully not to mention that olive-green streak and the wonderful pattern on his wings *mamma* would buy a special birdseed mixture at the corner store we'd keep it in a baking power tin one morning..."

Celio was back to his old self. His font of tears had dried up, and he spoke like he had always spoken, without punctuation or pause. He had already forgotten José López Rega, the sorcerer, as the Minister was called by his opponents, a dark figure who had become private secretary during Perón's exile in Madrid, and had now begun the attempt to return the dead president to the land of the living by means of an occult incantation ("Pharaoh! Pharaoh! Pharaoh!") behind closed doors. Since the desired effect had not been achieved, the necromancer felt it necessary to expressly confirm the passing of the head of state. Far from publicly avowing his failures as a sorcerer, López Rega used his lack of success to appear on television and radio directly after Perón's freshly widowed spouse. By turning to the people as an official political figure, López Rega was sending a subtle message to some of his countrymen: following Juan Domingo Perón's passing, he would be the only one to endow the statements of Isabel Martínez, the legal successor, with validity.