

# BOOKS

## CHRONICLE OF A DEATH FORETOLD

By **Gabriel García Márquez**  
translated by **Gregory Rabassa**  
(Alfred A. Knopf; 120 pp.; \$10.95)

*Samuel Hux*

There's a remarkable rhythm to this novella that sends one searching through music and physics for metaphors to mix. It's like a brief song that seems to unfold as slowly as a symphony, with resonance and a depth that time must wait upon. The first sentence announces that Santiago Nasar will be (has been) killed. The early chapters tend to "rhyme," so to speak; one of them concludes with "They've already killed him," another "They've killed Santiago Nasar!" Then a curious lull. Finally a quantum leap of energy, passion, sadness, exhilaration, and the reader is all of a sudden "somewhere else," certainly no longer in a South American village. I've had this experience of a quantum transport in the theatre occasionally—for instance, at the end of Brendan Behan's *The Hystage*, when the murdered soldier arises and dances a kind of funeral jig ("Death, where is thy stingalngaling?"). But there is no upbeat "resurrection" in *Chronicle*. Santiago is dead, just dead.

Over the first three chapters we learn that the killing occurred a quarter-century before; the narrator, strongly suggestive of García Márquez himself, reconstructs from interviews with villagers the deathday of his boyhood friend. Practically everyone—excluding the victim and those closest to him—had known for an hour or two that the murder would take place. The killers, the Vicario brothers, advertised their intentions well, obviously wishing to be stopped. Alter any one of several events and they would have been. But some villagers were hung over from wedding revels; others were agitated in anticipation of a visit by the bishop (whose boat merely passes with a toot-toot and perfunctory blessings). Confusion mixed with stumblebum miscues adds up to something like fate.

It's not until the end of chapter two that we learn the reason for the killing. Bayardo San Román has wooed and won the resistant Angela Vicario. She has no love for him—and besides, she's no virgin. Since there are no virtue-attesting red spots upon the bridal sheets, Bayardo returns her to her

family on their wedding night. Who had dishonored her? She answers, "Santiago Nasar." Is it true? Maybe. Probably not. The narrator doesn't know. The villagers don't really believe it. And too many details suggest it is not true, even though Santiago is a good-ole-boy and grabber of girls' crotches. But once the accusation is made, Angela's brothers must act to save family honor. So the hesitant, awkward ambush of their friend by the Vicario brothers.

After the killing, the narrative lull. You learn what became of the brothers Vicario. You hear of the vigil of Angela, who begins to love Bayardo once he's rejected her deflowered self. In exile from the village, she woos him back with seventeen years of letter writing—none of which he reads; he's merely grown fat and lonely. By the end of chapter four Santiago's death, which we've never witnessed, is so very, very long ago it seems to belong rather to the villagers than to him. Which explains a couple of curiosities in a book that is full of them: Just before Santiago is killed outside his house, the maid, who knows the Vicarios' intentions without telling, "sees" him enter the house in safety. His mother, Plácida Linero, witnesses his death agony, but in her many retellings never remembers that. Guilt and pain revise history.

But in the final chapter, in a meticulous reconstruction of his final minutes, García Márquez gives the death back to the one to whom it belongs—and in a very moving way; it stunned me as much as a funeral jig by a dead man: Santiago gathers up his entrails, daintily flicks the dust away, and walks toward his house; he's got a couple minutes of life left. Across a stream the narrator's Aunt Wenefrida Márquez sees and shouts, "Santiago, my son...what has happened to you?"—"They've killed me, Wene child," he said."

It's no small thing—this that the novella was moving toward all along—to allow a character to place his own period, to comment upon and thereby claim possession of his own passing. "It's the least one can do for him," one thinks to oneself—the sort of thing one says before attending a funeral.

García Márquez must tire of always being explained as a Latin American writer. Faulkner was Mississippian. Once you've absorbed the significance of that, how astonishingly relevant does it remain? It remains relevant only if we read as insistent

sociologues, literary geographers, sifting texts for specificity of time and place. But the best artists, no matter how "located" their work, have always pursued the elemental themes—and performed the elemental functions. One of these is to be the sustainer of *necessary illusions*. Some of us say we'd like to die in our sleep. I doubt it. I think we'd like the chance to say something, stamp the moment with our own style, to own it. Scholars who'd prove that Goethe didn't expire saying "More light! More light!" or Henry James saying "It's here, that distinguished thing" are cads. And if we can't stamp the moment, it's nice to think that someone will. As literary anthropology, this is probably delusion; but I pretend to believe that the first poem occurred beside a grave where a friend chanted (maybe lying), "And the last thing he said was...." WV.

**SOUTH OF NOWHERE**  
by **Antonio Lobo Antunes**  
translated by **Elizabeth Lowe**  
(Random House; 160 pp.; \$11.95)

*Gerald Freund*

George Orwell's 1936 short story "Shooting an Elephant" is the classical fictional statement of the dilemma of a colonial power seeking to save itself from enslavement by those it has subjugated. A British police officer in a Burmese town in the days of the Raj must protect the community from a rampaging elephant. It is a valuable animal that probably can be saved, but because the local populace expects him to destroy it, he must do so or suffer a loss of face. In a sudden realization "of the real nature of imperialism," Orwell perceives "that when a white man turns tyrant, it is his own freedom that he destroys."

Modern democracies with misguided conceptions of self-interest may also destroy themselves in seeking to free others from what is seen as bondage. Versions of this theme are often repeated in American books on Vietnam. One of the best of these, Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, is a journalist's evocation of the mad carnage visited on those who are to be made free, and whose suffering, in turn, corrupts and demoralizes the society of their slaughtering well-wishers.

Here Antonio Lobo Antunes takes us to Africa, where he verifies the theme again in fiery images of the fourteen-year Angolan war for independence and of the incipient and finally successful revolution it set off