

# 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 Hossage*, when the murdered soldier arises and dances a kind of funeral jig ("Death, where is thy stingingaling?"). 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

in Portugal itself. Antunes, then a doctor and an aspiring writer, spent twenty-seven months with the Portuguese military in and around Luanda fighting against the Angolan insurgents.

*South of Nowhere*, smoothly translated by Elizabeth Lowe, is Antunes's first major work to appear in English. It is a bitter and sometimes overwritten political novel; in fact, it is but thinly veiled autobiography. Antunes uses the device of a long night's seduction in a Lisbon bar to set his Angolan narrative. Angola, the narrator repeatedly tells the woman on whom he unburdens himself, is "the asshole of the world." The carnage shocked him into political awareness. The eyes of all who see it are "bulging" or "protuberant." As he amputates the limbs and plugs the gaping wounds of comrades savaged in the struggle, he bears witness to the pestilences that are visited upon colonialists and insurgents alike: leprosy and despair, impotence and melancholy. Efforts at human contact dissolve, masturbation, "our daily calisthenics," becomes a political ritual. Little by little "the agents of a provincial fascism" who had sent him overseas transform Angola "into my Guernica." Speaking for the generation of draftees dispatched to suppress the insurgent Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), he declares: "It was really against ourselves that we were fighting."

"Revolutions are made from within," an army captain explains to justify his part in the war. Portugal's Secret Police, the PIDE, "the rancor of the colonial state," invades the unfathomable sleep of Africa. Natives are subdued or treated as inhuman and brutally slaughtered. But it is the Portuguese themselves who turn "into animals" and "hopeless castaways"; the hunters become "hunted beasts, pallid, ashamed, afraid." Ultimately, "the butchered Angolans are the agents who change Antunes's generation from unwitting handmaidens of provincial fascism to the revolutionaries of 1974 who "expel the cowardly scum enslaving Portugal."

Despite the outer trappings of a freer Portuguese society, that generation finds no respite, only solitude: complacency in some, anger in others. In a particularly affecting passage Antunes cries: "The bitterness and the suffering of the war changed me into a disillusioned, cynical creature proceeding mechanically through love-making with the indifferent gestures of people dining alone in a restaurant, contemplating the melancholy shadows within themselves." He envies "Hemingway's drunkards who voyaged to the other side of anguish, achieving a kind of serenity resembling death, yes, but

a serenity that is almost comforting." And the residue of war is permanent. "We are dead as they" and age gracefully. Who is to blame? The "sadistic and perverse fury of the whites"—not the soldiers, but the settlers and Portuguese leaders, "the people who lied to us and oppressed us, who humiliated and killed us in Angola, the serious and dignified gentlemen in Lisbon, the politicians, the magistrates, the police, the informers, the bishops, the people who, with hymns and speeches, sent us off in battle-ships to die in Africa." Those who, like Antunes, were once idealistic and who survived to see the independence of Angola and revolution at home, are nevertheless corrupted forever. It is too late, he says, to save their souls.

*South of Nowhere* is a very dramatic and alarming work whose power is not diminished by Antunes's occasional metaphorical excesses. Caustic humor offers some relief from the harrowing tale he spins, especially in asides about relations between men and women and in descriptions of ultra-conservative family members who cannot understand the emerging values of the young doctor and writer growing up in their midst. Neither the narrator's female drinking partner nor the members of his family are well defined, for this novel is not about individual people but about a generation. Antunes himself comes through as a provocative writer who is able to echo the centuries of puzzled despair of both colonialists and well-intentioned liberators. Standing in the

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

### A GOOD MAN IN NEW YORK

It's not often I receive an invitation to breakfast with a novelist, let alone one I admire. Truth is, there are precious few I *do* admire—among the living, anyway. So, when a call came through saying William Boyd was on his way from England and did I want to meet him, my response was automatic: Yes.

William Boyd is the young (31) author of two serio-comic novels, *A Good Man in Africa* (1981) and *An Ice-Cream War* (1983), both published here by William Morrow & Co. to considerable critical acclaim. In fact, as chance (and a good publicity director) would have it, a review of *An Ice-Cream War* appeared in the *New York Times* the very morning of our meeting. Mr. Boyd, it said, has "an elastic voice that is capable not only of some very funny satire but also of seriousness and compassion."

The object of Boyd's satire is England and the English. Whether dealing with modern-day international relations (*Good Man*) or obscure events in the British East Africa of World War I (*Ice-Cream War*), the colonial mentality nurtured and cherished by Victoria, Kipling, and General Gordon comes in for a thorough roughing up. Conse-

quently, reviewers of Boyd have rushed to compare him to those two stalwart practitioners of British social humor, Evelyn Waugh and Kingsley Amis. True, a new novelist could find himself in worse company; but does Boyd see *himself* as their heir apparent?

"The writers you really admire are the ones you try not to write like," explains Boyd. "It's very easy to slip into imitation, and so one must struggle to avoid it."

Is this a denial, then, of such influences? Not quite.

"What was it Henry James called the Dickens novel? A 'loose baggy monster'? The novel is an exceptional vehicle. You can pour so much into it; it can carry such a lot of freight."

So, presumably, Waugh and Amis are poured into the Boyd novel, leaving room to spare. Other possible ingredients?

"I'm terrifically fond of Dickens; he's very important. And of course I admire Conrad, but begrudgingly—yes, begrudgingly."

"Actually, I'm more involved with contemporary fiction, especially American. I enjoy Philip Roth and John Updike, and I've reviewed the last four or five Vonnegut books for the *Times* [of London]."

I pressed Boyd on the matter of reviewing, aware that for several years he has been writing for the *Times* as well as teaching English literature at St. Hilda's College, Ox-

wreckage they have left, he sees the arrogance and degeneracy that perverted their ambition. 'WV'

### A MINOR APOCALYPSE

by Tadeusz Konwicki

translated by Richard Lourie

(Farrar, Strauss & Giroux; 236 pp.; \$16.50)

Kevin Ransom

"Here comes the end of the world. It's coming, it's drawing closer or rather, it's the end of my own world which has come creeping up on me. The end of my personal world. But before my universe collapses into rubble, disintegrates into atoms, explodes into the void, one last kilometer of my Golgotha awaits me, one last lap in this marathon, the last few rungs up or down the ladder that is without meaning." So begins the latest novel to be published in the United States by the contemporary Polish writer Tadeusz Konwicki, who has established a reputation in Europe and the U.S. as an author, screenwriter, and director. His previous book, *A Dreambook of Our Time*, was selected by Philip Roth for the Writers From the Other Europe series published by Penguin, and *A Minor Apocalypse* has already won the prestigious Mondello Prize in Italy. Its publication in the United States

is sure to add substantially to his acclaim.

The last steps of the novel's opening passage may be read, alternatively, as the journey of an ordinary man, of the creative artist, of a citizen of contemporary Poland, and of mankind. In each of these roles the narrator seeks an elusive and perhaps non-existent meaning to life. His story can be read both as realistic portrayal of the social, political, and economic chaos of present-day Poland and as an allegory of the moral chaos of humanity.

An old Polish writer living in Warsaw is visited, shortly after he wakes, by two friends who tell him that he has been chosen to commit public suicide by setting himself on fire at eight that night on the steps of Communist party headquarters as an act of political opposition to the regime. He is, they explain, famous enough for the action to gain attention. When he questions them more closely, one tells him that he has been obsessed with death. "You have prepared yourself, and us, for your death most carefully....It's at your side. All you have to do is reach out."

The narrator/hero of the novel is clearly Konwicki; other characters are almost certainly representations of real people, objects of Konwicki's satire. The literary device of author as narrator as character is effective in inducing both a close subjectivity and a sense of reality of the setting. Konwicki is obviously interested in the duality of life as

art and art as life.

The narrator, who has not written anything for several years, decides that his last day on earth will be his "testament," a lived book that will sum up his beliefs about life. Although he tells himself that he does not have to go through with the suicide, he is still too nervous about the idea to stay in his small apartment, and he leaves to have breakfast at a favorite spot. During his epic one-day journey through the streets of Warsaw he encounters friends, old loves, and functionaries of the regime. Absurd characters abound: a high-level bureaucrat who takes off his clothes during a speech, and a young, would-be writer from the provinces who follows the narrator through the day, quoting from the old man's earlier works.

Space and time often verge upon the unreal. The "day" stretches beyond normal conception, seasons jump back and forth. Individual events are presented as separate rooms that the narrator enters and then leaves. And one detects surrealistic echoes of Dante's visit to hell, as the narrator carries his can of gasoline from a movie theatre, to a hospital without staff, to a decaying building.

With satire, irony, and self-mockery Konwicki contrasts the ordinary, even the mediocre, with the idea of a larger purpose. And though he satirizes the Communist government, he does not spare the current