

Norberto Luis Romero

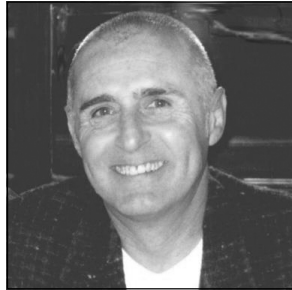


Photo courtesy of the author

Norberto Luis Romero, an Argentine now a citizen of Spain, has published several story collections, including *Transgressions* and *Cradlesong for a Domestic Fly*. Romero was awarded the first Noega Award for Short Fiction and has also published two novels – *Signs of Decomposition* and *The Moment of the Unicorn*. In addition, Romero has worked in advertising, is a specialist in animated cartoons, and has worked on films in Argentina.



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Telecita

Only the sound of the water flowing between the rocks in the river could be heard, and the murmur of the wind sheltered in the tops of the trees, lying in wait for unwary women. The rest was silence, stillness, and an implacable memory dragged through years, enclosed in resentment. Bad weather was protective to Telecita, used to living without a roof, sleeping in the street or under a bridge, and getting along half from the lies she spins, half from the fear that her madwoman's curses, her visionary dreams, and her piled on multicolored scapulars woven from goat hair instill.

You were lost in the water, the whirlpool of pure greed, *bloodsucker*, she curses, gazing at the great house and wielding in her fist a filthy, manacing scapular.

A few yards off, on the crest of the hill in the great house, is hell, with no devils and no fire. A hell of routine, genuine pain, a sign that señora Aurora is still alive and writhes in her bed trying to undo the ties which for months have bound her to pain and fever. Her heart, they say. Chagas, they whisper secretly, it will make her heart burst. In her fevers she jabbers and asks every minute for the letter, if it came, what it says.

Telecita makes toads smoke. It makes her laugh when they burst into pieces in the air. Then she gathers the scattered shreds in the bottom of a wooden box which she hides in a hollow tree trunk. Tonight the moon will be tinged with fire, she murmurs. It will turn red like these threads. Sitting on the ground in the shelter of the carob tree, she collects snail shells and with the long nail of her little finger she picks out the innards of the dried out helicoid, where she stores tiny insects: earwigs, centipedes, some iridescent green and gold necrophori, blackened vermin adorned with red.

The *vincucha* bit you, deposited its shit in your wound, you scratched it, and that's it: the poison got into your blood and went straight to that heart of yours black as a burnt stick.

When the wind blows from the north and reaches the river after



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passing through the house, bursting into the rooms like an intruder, it carries disturbing noises and whispers of death. From the boxes smelling of lavender it extracts the most hidden memories and scatters them everywhere, tosses them shamelessly to the impetus of the rose of the winds as if they were scraps of people's hearts important to no one.

The wind threatens intimacy. The confidence of the house is frayed to laments and gossip spoken in asides in corners, with the shrunken mouth of fear. The servants' ankles are entangled in the tacking of tedious gossip that they let fall during the heaviness of siesta. At night, before going to sleep in their corners, the servants disentangle their ankles and make skeins of their whispers, and keep them in perfumed chests to embroider black shawls for trousseaus, to attend wakes crowded with dark, dull flowers, corporeal as stones. When the wind comes from the north, after secretly crossing the gallery and stealing the odor of red and purple geraniums, it gathers in the treetops and there, clustered, it speaks with words that put to sleep or kill; it also conspires with the highest, darkest clouds that crown the sierras to urge them to hurry during the night and saturate the waters of the river, forcing them to overflow the valley.

Aurora de Fresneda is very good, they say. She collects orphans, collects bastards, children of the violating north wind, and rocks them in hammocks of husk and gives them bottles of thick, sweet *chañar* syrup, and carob pods to chew and entertain their hunger, although they lack nothing because Aurorita is rich and generous, she has a big heart.

Generous, yes, with an *enormous* heart—Telecita laughs like a madwoman—but you steal other people's children.

Aurora de Fresneda kneads bread round as breasts, with nipples of strawberry and the taste of bitter oranges, which she cuts in slices and distributes among the poor and widows. On trays the dough sleeps and leavens until satiated, until it doubles and triples and expands and reaches the edges of the tray.

The servants keep watch over the oven fire, all night long control the temperature, and toss rosemary and myrtle branches to perfume the bread. And when one of them falls asleep or nods, with their eyes glued in sleep, and burp those sordid little noises of old women with neither dreams nor hopes, the others poke them with a spoon, and shout wake up.

They say that Telecita, when she was a servant, burned both sides of

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her hair in one of those vigils while tending Aurora de Fresneda's oven, where the bread for the poor, the widows and orphans was baking. They say that when she went to open the door to look inside, a rash spark shot out twirling like a ringlet and incrustrated in those braids black and thick like sugar candy. They say Auororita tricked him into a child, that he coaxed her to stay with Juan Dominguito, her beloved son, conceived when the wind in the north entered her body unawares while she was pissing spread-legged in the weeds.

Telecita's hair never grew back in, from then on she was as bald as an egg. And now she always wears a black kerchief wound around her head like chocolate meringue, like a funeral jam, blackberry marmalade. And she has a grim look of resentment because of that mischievous, twirling spark that caught in her braids and made her end up an old maid. And she spends day and night on the bank of the river, poking with a stick and calling her son, who doesn't want to come out of the whirlpool. Don't you love me anymore because of my bald head, evil born? Are you ashamed to have a mother with a head like a hard-boiled egg? You should be more ashamed of that other, that shitty redhead who stole you from me only to leave you playing so close to the bank, sucking carob pods while she was writing letters to Spain. Didn't she see the flood that came from the north? Didn't she hear that noise like a locomotive that runs over everything?

And they say that Telecita loathes Aurora de Fresneda to death, that she blames her for her hard-boiled-egg baldness. Aurora de Fresneda, redheaded as copper and rosemary honey, with a long mop of fire that's a pure flame under the sun, was lovely, very beautiful, and turned men's heads although she didn't condescend to notice, not even to look at them, let alone smile pleasantly. Except to the general. And they say that Telecita always carries matches in a pocket to set fire to Aurora's hair if she crosses her path on All Saints' Day when she takes gorse and gladiolas to the cemetery for her son drowned in the flood of '54. But Telecita has a pastime: she makes toads smoke, she inflates them with smoke until they burst, that's why she always carries matches.

You're to blame, wretch. And the general's to blame too.

Telecita gazes with scorn and distrust at the great house, which no longer smells of yeast and hot breath, but of the heavy, syrupy perfume of



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the proximity of death.

The evil tongues say Aurora approached him, she wore her loose hair shining like copper and said, My general, Aurora de Fresneda at your service. And that the General, still suffering from the loss of his beautiful wife, and perhaps to palliate the fire of this wound, burned for her and returned to Cosquin on any excuse to see her secretly. And they tell that he lost sleep over her and neglected the government, she was to blame that that gorilla Rojas rebelled and overthrew him, so completely maddened was he by her red hair, so much so that he neglected the national government and forgot to keep his promises. Also rumors ran that the General, years later, once in Spain, sent a letter for her to come, which she says she has hidden away and shows to no one, only the envelope, which only shows an old letterhead from the Casa de Gobierno, and very quickly shoves it into a pocket, like this, quick as a bird, as she indicates with a pointed finger and crimson nail the sender and the stamp with the effigy of another general, (an even higher general). And if she once was beautiful and dark skinned, Aurora de Fresneda (Aurorita as those who love her call her), she long since lost the glow of her hair, the spark in her eyes, and the white smoothness she inherited from her grandmother Rosalía, and besides her hopes of regaining the General and shutting the mouths of the backbiters who every so often raise the dust of rumors more from boredom than from envy of her ancient surname and money.

That night, perhaps because of the caprices of the wind announced by the moon the night before when it turned red as a ball of fire, Telecita went from house to house as far as the other side of the river, announcing misfortunes and dead children, servants dozed as they rocked the dough in the kneading troughs and when waking discovered, horrified, that it had not risen, that the balls of dough looked like their own withered, flattened breasts. They dashed into the street, howling; they ran, terrified, through the town, wrapped in their shawls dirty with darkness, swallowing their mucus and lamenting their bad luck.

Like cinders, the bad news spread that the bread had not risen, and reached even the ears of Telecita, who as usual was weaving scapulars from goat hair on the riverbank in the light of the full moon while she cursed Fresneda aloud, wishing her all kinds of miseries, and the General too, who on the other side of the ocean had forgotten her. The evil tongues

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said that it was he, that it was the General who couldn't, but Aurora always blamed herself for being sterile, that because of her weak blood she hadn't become pregnant either on that first night that the General made her his or on other nights, for there were many over some time during which she calmed the grief of that heart until stanching it. That's why she spends her life gathering or taking possession of orphans, bringing up the homeless as if they were her own and taking them to the baptismal font, giving them all the name of her ungrateful lover.

I never loved you, whore. You were nothing more than a plaything of that General born of a wicked mother. . . How I'd like to have given him a scapular like yours, the one I gave you twenty years ago, of every color.

If the dough doesn't rise and double itself at night, bad luck, the old women say. Blame the wind, which blows through the branches of the trees and, chafing the leaves, speaks, hurls maledictions, and sours the yeast.

La Telecita sets aside her colored threads and scans beyond the river: she looks with worn eyes toward Aurora de Fresneda's great house, where a pallid light stands out in one of the upper windows. Behind those impeccable panes she agonizes. Telecita probes in a pocket with her hirsute fingers for the wooden matches and her very dry eyes water. She strokes her baldness and tries out a smile. Humming, Telecita crosses the bridge, bound for the great house on the summit of the rise, goes along the way flanked by plane trees, trampling puffs of thistledown, crushing them under her black, threadbare sandals.

Aurorita, Aurorita, she sings low as her hand strangles matches in the bottom of her pocket. Aurorita, Aurorita, the bread will come out of the oven flat and dark as cow's dung, and Juan Dominguito will come back to my arms, where he should be, and not in your house. Besides, his name is not Juan Domingo, you gave him that name, a pure whim, as if with it you guaranteed he was yours. His name is Viento like his father's, Wind.

How many years have passed, Telecita asks herself as she goes up the slope in the dark. In the withered garden, in the musty perfume of the gardenias, she stands almost without blinking, her eyes on the lighted window behind which la Fresneda struggles between life and death. From a bag she takes a toad picked up at the river, sticks a cigarette in its mouth, and lights it. How many years have I waited for this moment . . . twenty? twenty-one? . . . since I gave you the scapular, wretch. Yes, the vincucha's



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poison is slow, but it settled in your heart and made it leaven little by little,
just like the bread, until it reached your breast, and tonight, I swear by the
north wind and by my dead son, you'll burst like this toad.

Translated from the Spanish by H.E. Francis



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