

El Rebaje

*Man is an animal
who doesn't love anyone,
that's what women say
and it's true...*

'Toma jabón pa que laves'
Pedro Flores

Miguel Prado was simultaneously diminutive and hefty—it could be said that he had the body of a boiler—and he bristled hirsutely, his hair slicked back in some abundant desire to embody the style of the era, but in the end he simply and unavoidably looked like someone whose hair was standing straight up. He had also adopted the fad of growing a slim mustache that looked almost like a pencil line crowning his meaty lips, swollen and succulent; he was like a kind of darkened, wider version of Clark Gable in miniature, minus the arched brows. But even so, I fell in love with him.

There are many Prados, especially in Michoacán, the land where he was born. In the western Sierra Madre highlands town of Cherán, many people shared his last name, to the point where people say it's a kind of dynasty—like the Hirepans, the Equihuas or the Paleos—which has discreetly reigned over the fates of the Tarascos for generations before, during and after Spanish rule. The truth is that men and women with that surname have been farm workers, campesinos, laborers, students and housewives who have experienced a variety of forms of exploitation due to the simple fact of being *Indios*. But there have also been many musicians and many renowned revolutionaries, like Don Casimiro Leco, who Miguel swore was his ancestor.

As a little kid, Miguel played the bass drum in his town's band. He was quite sturdy, so he could carry the instrument without losing his balance or the beat during burials, weddings, baptisms and other celebrations—civic or otherwise—that were enlivened by the rhythms of traditional abajeños and sones. He also played guitar from the time he was a boy; with his serious, dense voice he purred versions of La Josefinita, Canel Tsitsiki, El Toronjil Morado, Male Betulia and other pirekuas, making the appropriate facial expressions, as if he understood the metaphysical drama represented by these songs, each sadder than the last. He also learned to play the clarinet with his uncle Miguel Aviléz (better known as Cutano, as he could not say the word “gusano” as a kid), to whom he owed his name.

El Rebaje, as Miguel was nicknamed starting in primary school (during Monday line-up, the boys and girls complained that his spiky hair made him look taller), was a musical boy, like his siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents—and like almost all the kids in town—but he stood out because of the great emotion he expressed as he blew into the clarinet, cooing a glissando into the reed of his wind instrument: he coaxed

many textures and great feeling out of the wood, and he set it to vibrating. This talent brought him as much excitement and opportunity in life as it did sorrow and misfortune, if I might venture, since I was able to savor his experiences up close. Children and adults, carrying with them a hunk of sugarcane, a cup of atole or a handful of capulines, would gather in the afternoons to enjoy the music El Rebaje played. As tended to happen with everyone—in the town, the region, the state, the country—the nickname, more than a joke, was a descriptive identity representing the character and humor of the person who bore it; that was Miguel Prado's fate, since his music diminished the fury of even the most hot-tempered person.

At that time, General Lázaro Cárdenas—pacifier of the post-revolutionary forces, catalyst of the ruinous attack against the emancipated Christians, liberal and internationalist politician—wanted some of the young men from his birthplace of Michoacán to have the opportunity to study abroad, under the auspices of the still effervescent Mexican state, working in collaboration with some of his contacts in countries that shared his community-minded idealism, which by that point had already become part of an establishment parallel to that of western capitalism. Thus this indigenous adolescent known as El Rebaje met with and was heard by a Russian composer who was traveling to the United States, seeking refuge in the face of the intolerant threats that had grown like a cancer in the heart of the old continent. The Soviet fellow—another not-so-handsome dwarf, who was rumored to have enjoyed the affections of the one and only Coco Chanel—thought that Miguel had promise, and thus it was that together with his cousin Librado Aviléz he was sent to study in Russia, China and Poland, where we met for the first time, at which point he abandoned the clarinet entirely in favor of me, forever and always.

We met in Krakow; it was a chilly spring, like all our springs. His thick lips savored me for the first time, as our mouths sealed that lifelong pact of complicity and infinite collaboration. We were hot for one another, and from that moment of seduction and mutual pleasure forward, we never parted, other than on a couple of occasions that were unusual, if not downright extreme. Having returned to the Soviet Union, Miguel decided to visit his legendary Uncle Cutano in San Francisco, California; through him he was introduced into a world of wildness, of delights and pleasures until that time unknown to the young p'urhépecha man. Cutano had told him about the innumerable bands he might play with to make good money, so that's how he ended up taking me there and together we experienced incredible moments of deep intensity and creativity. In Sausalito we met up with his Uncle Miguel, who wound up convincing the other Miguel we should stay there.

It was there he played his solos for the first time; written literally by candlelight in the terrible cold of the Eurasian winter, they had been inspired by idyllic luminous summery California landscapes made of words, where finally and happily we had come together.

El Rebaje ended up playing every weekend at a club in Berkeley, where on one occasion we were approached by a man who said he had a band, and said that it might be good for Miguel to play with them; my charms together with those of my companion seduced him hopelessly, and so it was that while I caressed his hand softly, El Rebaje accepted the offer to join the ranks of his conjunto, where he became popular by playing his phenomenal solo on “At the Sleepy Lagoon,” which was vastly superior to Glenn Miller’s version, where he sounds more like a mosquito you want to get rid of, whereas Miguel’s version is glorious, true, and bawdy—like me.

In one of those large-scale shows, Miguel ran into some friends of friends, with whom we smoked a joint and drank a number of bottles; they were Black folks Miguel liked because of the way they talked, moved, and dressed. These were dudes who like us lived hand to mouth traveling here and there, but especially in New York, where they sometimes played in this amazing guy’s big band. Cab Calloway wore endless suit jackets and pants, with a slender chain that easily measured two meters and hung from his belt and swung down to the cuffs of his pant legs; the brim of his hat recalled the wing of a dragonfly, with the final touch of a pheasant feather which seemed like the needle of a compass lured by the rhythmic step of his passionate dances. Many people dressed in the style of those dark-skinned fellows, but few were any match for their elegance and their fine figures—other than the pochos, among them Cutano, who though already old enjoyed flaunting his exaggerated, almost ridiculous dandyism. People who dressed that way were called zoot suiters, but the Chicanos called themselves pachucos.

El Rebaje became a pachuco overnight and had a gaudy suit made: a jacket with pointed shoulders, lapels that seemed as wide doors and reached almost to his knees, hugely baggy pants with the inseam closer to his calves than his groin, tightly fitted where his legs peeked out at the bottom, made out of checkered cloth in complementary colors—green and pink. Later he bought himself some yellow, pink, and purple ties, wide and weighty, like the crest of his pompadour held fast with lemon juice, as it was much cheaper than the greasy pomades sold at the pharmacy; at the locksmith’s he bought three meters of chain, which he then made into a keychain, a weapon for personal defense, and the crowning touch of his customized pachuco style.

He was as handsome as his comrades; one night as we were leaving a gig, we were at a bar and El Rebaje (by that point he was drinking daily and daily he would drink himself into oblivion) got caught in the sights of a blonde who was shamelessly trying to get into his pants. I wasn’t exactly jealous, but I felt the need to start something that might distract Miguel from the situation. I wished as hard as I could for something to occur, and something did occur: suddenly a crowd of Marines came in shouting, armed with clubs, and began to chase after all the zoot suiters they could find in the place. When they managed to hunt them down, they threw them out onto the street,

stripped them naked and beat them without mercy. They exhibited something more than territorial zeal—something captivated by the patently eccentric sensuality of those young men, perhaps even beyond their clothing, beyond their defiant attitude, beyond their dandyism. That was the first time Miguel and I were separated. Even when he tried to hold onto me firmly with his hand, he quickly had to transform that hand into a fist, and with the other brandish the chain so he could whip it against the mugs of those marines who en masse were beating him to a pulp. Thus I remained there, flung to the ground, not knowing what to do, wanting to yell, to run, to beat those sons of bitches, to kill them, to save my Rebaje from those miserable and foolish barbarians: they had broken his trap and for me that was a genuine tragedy.

It was in Paris we saw each other again, in a dive on Saint Michel, a hundred-and-fifty square meter catacomb teeming with crowds of musicians, waiters and young people ceaselessly dancing the boogie-woogie. The place had no sign at the entrance, but everyone knew it was La Joue, a clandestine club where the most outlandish hipsters in the city would meet. In those years, during the Nazi occupation, to dress the way El Rebaje did was almost a crime; those were times of rationing, of belt-tightening, and thus any excess represented an immoral act. The Resistance was organized inside France and outside the country, but the zazou—sort of Parisian zoot suiters—always carried closed umbrellas and wore carefully coiffed hair, platform shoes, and as an emblem, a yellow cloth armband with an embroidered star of David that said “swing.” There you could hear the music of the great bands like Johnny Hess, and once in a while Django Reinhardt himself would play. That night in La Joue I had someone put me in Miguel’s hands and—missing all his front teeth now—he smiled at me and kissed me all night, with his damp tongue, his thick saliva, and his alcoholic breath.

And no, it wasn’t in a raid on La Joue that Miguel and I were separated again. It was because I didn’t want to see him so screwed up any more, so worn down after that tour where he said he had been transformed into a zazouco—and of course that wasn’t the problem, the thing is that I had made up my mind and had demanded that he not touch me again until his heart and his mind became more clear. In addition to his customary alcoholism, he had sunk into a life of drugs, and in service to drugs he bartered me, he used me and turned me into a bargaining chip, dragging me through life like the sad companion to his decadence, his rebaje, his diminishment. But I never abandoned him; as best I could I got him to recuperate his love of music—the only form of capital he had left, though it was devastated by his addiction—even if it was just making failed attempts to blow, toothless as he was, with his wasted lungs, his fierce lack of discipline. He still got work, however, and even some good gigs, like—thanks to his compadre Paco Gómez El Glostora—when he occasionally played with the exotic group Los Xochimilcas, and earlier with the magnificent orchestra led by Rafael de Paz, from Chiapas (who was director of RCA for many years and who catapulted many singers and instrumentalists to fame, even ones as great as Beny Moré). And he

played others that were deplorable, playing guitar in cantinas at La Merced and later, even on public buses. He never recuperated his virtuosity nor his prestige.

No matter how you look at it, I saved him, and here we are, still together, in the rocky foothills of Coyoacán, these cavernous lands his relatives invaded—neighbors from Cherán, from Nahuatzen, from Sevina, from Arantepacua, from Capacuaro and from Comachuén—most living in the Ajusco neighborhood, at the edge of the pond called Huayamilpas, in whose waters the volcanic rock slowly and parsimoniously diminishes, where El Rebaje sweetly spews his transparent breath into my mouth and I lovingly give him the gift of the velvet notes of “At the Sleepy Lagoon.”

- Abraham Cruzvillegas, 2012