

Fictional characters rarely come as unmoored as Rimimi, the protagonist of this superb novel by Alan Pauls, which was first published in Spanish in 2003. A professional translator, he splits up with his partner of twelve years, Sofia, and begins afresh. He finds a new girlfriend, starts using cocaine, immerses himself in his work, and generally gives in to the pull of male entropy. Self-discovery is not on his list, though. Rather than hunt for revelations, he dissipates into everyday banality. The city of Buenos Aires, where the novel is set, fails to offer him any novelties, even when, in a dramatic scene, he ventures out in a storm to score some drugs.

No matter how willingly Rimimi wipes the slate clean, the past will not leave him alone, and his and Sofia's paths keep crossing. Together, they "had done everything. They had deflowered and kidnapped each other from their own families; had lived and travelled together; had survived adolescence and then youth together, and had raised their heads together into the adult world". So how much of themselves can survive their separation? The answer here is: not much, and then not the best part. Proust, one of Pauls's main influences,

Alan Pauls

THE PAST

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speaks of the periodic deaths and mourning of the younger self in the lovely phrase "the intermittences of the heart". For Proust the past can be "resurrected" through memory. Here, previous selves are neither living nor departed, but hauntingly undead, grotesque like zombies. Memory breeds malaise. For while a life caught in the past is a parody of itself, a life without past ties is a farce.

Sofia, a physiotherapist, falls prey to a mind-numbing New Age discourse, and founds a society called Women Who Love Too Much. Her attempts at love are a travesty of love, and at one point she nearly goes insane. Rimimi's life, meanwhile, has the bumpy texture of bad comedy: he marries his girlfriend, Vera, but she dies in an accident indirectly caused by Sofia; he is struck down with a mysterious kind of foreign-language aphasia; he marries another woman and has a son with her. But every attempt at normality seems foredoomed by Sofia's resistance to closure. At

her most disturbed, she even kidnaps his son. The child's mother files for divorce and obtains a restraining order on Rimimi. He plunges into deep depression, then recovers, thanks to a friend who, rather implausibly, turns him into a tennis teacher. He meets Sofia once more when her father dies, and as neither of them has anything left to destroy, they stay together. Their reunion is one of the saddest things in the novel, which ends on a bitter note.

The Past's emphasis is not so much on love as on obsession, starting with the obsession with another person; it is more *La prisonnière* than *A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*. But the grimness of the content is offset by the lucidity of the writing. Pauls has a talent for poised aphorism which is deftly counterbalanced by a realist's care for detail; Rimimi looks at Vera and notices "how white her childish hands were, with their chewed cuticles". The result is sensuous, delicate and controlled; it draws the reader in. In preserving this tonal variety in translation, Nick Caistor has produced a fine example of English prose, while doing full justice to Pauls's complex and intense voice.

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