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# The Departed

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**2666**

By Roberto Bolaño. Translated by Natasha Wimmer

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In [Philip K. Dick](#)'s 1953 short story "The Preserving Machine," an impassioned inventor creates a device for "preserving" the canon of classical music — the sacred and, he fears, impermanent beauties of Schubert, Chopin, [Beethoven](#) and so forth — by feeding it into a device that transforms the compositions into living creatures: birds, beetles and animals resembling armadillos and porcupines. Outfitting the classic pieces in this manner, then setting them free, the inventor means to guarantee their persistence beyond the frailties of human commemoration, to give them a set of defenses adequate to their value. Alas, the musical-animals become disagreeable and violent, turn on one another and, when the inventor attempts to reverse-engineer his creations in order to prove that the music has survived, reveal themselves as a barely recognizable cacophony, nothing like the originals. Or has the preserving machine revealed true essences — irregularities, ferocities — disguised within the classical pieces to begin with?

Dick's parable evokes the absurd yearning embedded in our reverence toward art, and the tragicomic paradoxes "masterpieces" embody in the human realm that brings them forth and gives them their only value. If we fear ourselves unworthy of the sublimities glimpsed at the summit of art, what relevance does such exalted stuff have to our grubby lives? Con-versely, if on investigation such works, and their makers, are revealed as ordinary, subject to the same provisions and defects as the rest of what we've plopped onto the planet — all these cities, nations, languages, histories — then why get worked up in the first place? Perfect or, more likely, imperfect, we may suspect art of being useless in either case.

Literature is more susceptible to these doubts than music or the visual arts, which can at least play at abstract beauty. -Novels and stories, even poems, are helplessly built from the imperfect stuff: language, history, squalid human incident and dream. When so many accept as their inevitable subject the long odds the universe gives the aspirations of our species, degraded as it finds itself by the brutalities of animal instinct and time's remorseless toll, books may seem to disqualify themselves from grace: how could such losers cobble together anything particularly sublime?

The Chilean exile poet Roberto Bolaño, born in 1953, lived in Mexico, France and Spain before his death in 2003, at 50, from liver disease traceable to heroin use years before. In a burst of invention now legendary in contemporary Spanish-language literature, and rapidly becoming so internationally, Bolaño in the last decade of his life, writing with the urgency of poverty and his failing health, constructed a remarkable body of stories and novels out of precisely such doubts: that literature, which he revered the way a penitent loves (and yet rails against) an elusive God, could meaningfully articulate the low truths he knew as rebel, exile, addict; that life, in all its gruesome splendor, could ever locate the literature it so desperately craves in order to feel itself known. Is a lifetime spent loving poems in a fallen world only a poor joke? Bolaño sprints into the teeth of his conundrum, violating one of the foremost writing-school injunctions, against writer-as-protagonist (in fact, Bolaño seems to make sport of violating nearly all of the foremost writing-school rules, against dream sequences, against mirrors as symbols, against barely disguised nods to his acquaintances, and so on). Again and again he peoples his singular fictions with novelists and poets, both aspiring and famous, both accomplished and hopeless, both politically oblivious and committedly extremist, whether right or left. By a marvelous sleight of hand writers are omnipresent in Bolaño's world, striding the stage as romantic heroes and feared as imperious villains, even aesthetic assassins — yet they're also persistently marginal, slipping between the cracks of time and geography, forever reclusive, vanished, erased. Bolaño's urgency infuses literature with life's whole freight: the ache of a writing-workshop aspirant may embody sexual longing, or dreams of political freedom from oppression, even the utopian fantasy of the eradication of violence, while a master-novelist's doubts in his works' chances in the game of posterity can stand for all human remorse at the burdens of personal life, or at knowledge of the burdens of history.

In the literary culture of the United States, Bolaño has become a talismanic figure seemingly overnight. The “overnight” is the result of the compressed sequence of the translation and publication of his books in English, capped by the galvanic appearance, last year, of “The Savage Detectives,” an eccentrically encompassing novel, both typical of Bolaño's work and explosively larger, which cast the short stories and novellas that had preceded it into English in a sensational new light. By bringing scents of a Latin American culture more fitful, pop-savvy and suspicious of earthy machismo than that which it succeeds, Bolaño has been taken as a kind of reset button on our deplorably sporadic appetite for international writing, standing in relation to the generation of García Márquez, Vargas Llosa and Fuentes as, say, [David Foster Wallace](#) does to Mailer, Updike and Roth. As with Wallace's “Infinite Jest,” in “The Savage Detectives” Bolaño delivered a genuine epic inoculated against grandiosity by humane irony, vernacular wit and a hint of punk-rock self-effacement. Any suspicion that literary culture had rushed to sentimentalize an exotic figure of quasi martyrdom was overwhelmed by the intimacy and humor of a voice that earned its breadth line by line, defying traditional fictional form with a torrential insouciance.

Well, hold on to your hats.

“2666” is the permanently mysterious title of a Bolaño manuscript rescued from his desk after his passing, the primary effort of the last five years of his life. The book was published posthumously in Spanish in 2004 to tremendous acclaim, after what appears to have been a bit of dithering over Bolaño's final intentions — a small result of which is that its English translation (by Natasha Wimmer, the indefatigable translator of “The Savage Detectives”) has been bracketed by two faintly

defensive statements justifying the book's present form. They needn't have bothered. "2666" is as consummate a performance as any 900-page novel dare hope to be: Bolaño won the race to the finish line in writing what he plainly intended, in his self-interrogating way, as a master statement. Indeed, he produced not only a supreme capstone to his own vaulting ambition, but a landmark in what's possible for the novel as a form in our increasingly, and terrifyingly, post-national world. "The Savage Detectives" looks positively hermetic beside it.

"2666" consists of five sections, each with autonomous life and form; in fact, Bolaño evidently flirted with the notion of separate publication for the five parts. Indeed, two or three of these might be the equal of his masterpieces at novella length, "By Night in Chile" and "Distant Star." In a comparison Bolaño openly solicits (the novel contains a series of unnecessary but totally charming defenses of its own formal strategies and magnitude) these five long sequences interlock to form an astonishing whole, in the same manner that fruits, vegetables, meats, flowers or books interlock in the unforgettable paintings of Giuseppe Arcimboldo to form a human face.

As in Arcimboldo's paintings, the individual elements of "2666" are easily cataloged, while the composite result, though unmistakable, remains ominously implicit, conveying a power unattainable by more direct strategies. Parts 1 and 5, the bookends — "The Part About the Critics" and "The Part About Archimboldi" — will be the most familiar to readers of Bolaño's other work. The "critics" are a group of four European academics, pedantically rapturous on the topic of their favorite writer, the mysterious German novelist Benno von Archimboldi. The four are glimpsed at a series of continental German literature conferences; Bolaño never tires of noting how a passion for literature walks a razor's edge between catastrophic irrelevance and sublime calling. As the four become sexually and emotionally entangled, the puzzle of their devotion to a writer who declines their interest — declines, in fact, ever to appear — inches like a great Lovecraftian shadow over their lives.

Following dubious clues, three of the four chase a rumor of Archimboldi's present whereabouts to Mexico, to Santa Teresa, a squalid and sprawling border city, globalization's no man's land, in the Sonoran Desert. The section's disconcertingly abrupt ending will also be familiar to readers of the novellas: the academics never locate the German novelist and, failing even to understand why the great German would exile himself to such a despondent place, find themselves standing at the edge of a metaphysical abyss. What lies below? Other voices will be needed to carry us forward. We meet, in Part 2, Amalfitano, another trans-Atlantic academic wrecked on the shoals of the Mexican border city, an emigrant college professor raising a beautiful daughter whose mother has abandoned them. He is beginning, seemingly, to lose his mind. Bolaño's genius is for weaving a blunt recitation of life's facts — his novels at times evoke biographies, case studies, police or government files — with digressive outbursts of lyricism as piercing as the disjunctions of writers like [Denis Johnson](#), David Goodis or, yes, Philip K. Dick, as well as the filmmaker David Lynch. Here, Amalfitano considers a letter from his absconded wife: "In it Lola told him that she had a job cleaning big office buildings. It was a night job that started at 10 and ended at 4 or 5 or 6 in the morning. . . . For a second he thought it was all a lie, that Lola was working as an administrative assistant or secretary in some big company. Then he saw it clearly. He saw the vacuum cleaner parked between two rows of desks, saw the floor waxer like a cross between a mastiff and a pig sitting next to a plant, he saw an enormous window through which the lights of Paris blinked, he saw Lola in the cleaning company's smock, a worn blue smock, sitting writing the letter and maybe taking slow drags on a cigarette, he saw Lola's fingers, Lola's wrists, Lola's blank eyes, he saw another Lola reflected in the quicksilver of the

window, floating weightless in the skies of Paris, like a trick photograph that isn't a trick, floating, floating pensively in the skies of Paris, weary, sending messages from the coldest, iciest realm of passion." Bolaño has been, because of his bookishness, compared to [Jorge Luis Borges](#). But from the evidence of a prose always immediate, spare, rapturous and drifting, always cosmopolitan and enchanted, the Bolaño boom should be taken as immediate cause for a revival of the neglected master Julio Cortázar. (Cortázar's name appears in "2666," but then it may seem that every human name appears there and that Bolaño's book is reading your mind as you read it.)

By the end of Amalfitano's section a reader remains, like the critics in the earlier section, in possession of a paucity of real clues as to this novel's underlying "story," but suffused with dreadful implication. Amalfitano's daughter seems to be drifting into danger, and if we've been paying attention we'll have become concerned about intimations of a series of rape--murders in the Santa Teresa slums and foothills. What's more (if we've been reading flap copy or reviews) we'll have noted that "Santa Teresa" is a thin disguise over the real town of Ciudad Juárez, the site of a dismayingly underreported sequence of unsolved crimes against women, with a death toll that crept into the hundreds in the '90s. In the manner of [James Ellroy](#), but with a greater check on both prurience and bathos, Bolaño has sunk the capital of his great book into a bottomless chasm of verifiable tragedy and injustice.

In the third section — "The Part About Fate" — this real-world material comes into view in the course of a marvelously spare and pensive portrait of a black North American journalist, diverted to Santa Teresa to cover what turns out to be a pathetically lopsided boxing match between a black American boxer and a Mexican opponent. Before arriving in Mexico, though, the journalist visits Detroit to interview an ex-Black Panther turned motivational speaker named Barry Seaman, who delivers, for 10 pages, the greatest ranting monologue this side of [Don DeLillo's Lenny Bruce](#) routines in "Underworld." Here's a bit of it: "He talked about the stars you see at night, say when you're driving from Des Moines to Lincoln on Route 80 and the car breaks down, the way they do, maybe it's the oil or the radiator, maybe it's a flat tire, and you get out and get the jack and the spare tire out of the trunk and change the tire, maybe half an hour, at most, and when you're done you look up and see the sky full of stars. The Milky Way. He talked about star athletes. That's a different kind of star, he said, and he compared them to movie stars, though as he said, the life of an athlete is generally much shorter. A star athlete might last 15 years at best, whereas a movie star could go on for 40 or 50 years if he or she started young. Meanwhile, any star you could see from the side of Route 80 . . . might have been dead for millions of years, and the traveler who gazed up at it would never know. It might be a live star or it might be a dead star. Sometimes, depending on your point of view, he said, it doesn't matter, since the stars you see at night exist in the realm of semblance. They are semblances, the same way dreams are semblances."

At last, and with the blunt power of a documentary compilation, comes Part 4, "The Part About the Crimes." Bolaño's massive structure may now be under-stood as a form of mercy: "2666" has been conceived as a resounding chamber, a receptacle adequate to the gravity — the weight and the force — of the human grief it will attempt to commemorate. (Perhaps 2666 is the year human memory will need to attain in order to bear the knowledge in "2666.") If the word "unflinching" didn't exist I'd invent it to describe these nearly 300 pages, yet Bolaño never completely abandons those reserves of lyricism and irony that make the sequence as transporting as it is grueling. The nearest comparison

may be to [Haruki Murakami](#)'s shattering fugue on Japanese military atrocities in Mongolia, which sounds the moral depths in "The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle." Bolaño's method, like Murakami's, encapsulates and disgorges dream and fantasy, at no cost to the penetration of his realism.

BY the time we return to matters of literature, and meet Archimboldi, a German World War II veteran and a characteristically culpable 20th-century witness whose ambivalent watchfulness shades the Sonoran crimes, we've been shifted into a world so far beyond the imagining of the first section's "critics" that we're unsure whether to pity or envy them. Though Archimboldi's literary career is conjured with Bolaño's customary gestural fulsomeness, "2666" never presents so much as a scrap of the fictional master's fiction. Instead the titles of Archimboldi's books recur as a kind of pulse of implication, until the conjectured power of an unknown literature has insisted itself upon us like a disease, one that might just draw us down with the savagery of a murderer operating in a moonless desert.

A novel like "2666" is its own preserving machine, delivering itself into our hearts, sentence by questing, unassuming sentence; it also becomes a preserving machine for the lives its words fall upon like a forgiving rain, fictional characters and the secret selves hidden behind and enshrined within them: hapless academic critics and a hapless Mexican boxer, the unavenged bodies deposited in shallow graves. By writing across the grain of his doubts about what literature can do, how much it can discover or dare pronounce the names of our world's disasters, Bolaño has proven it can do anything, and for an instant, at least, given a name to the unnamable.

Now throw your hats in the air.

Jonathan Lethem is the author of "The Fortress of Solitude." His new novel will be published in 2009.

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