

Daniel Alarcón's Internal Migrations

Daniel Alarcón is undoubtedly one of the finest Peruvian-born, Alabama-raised, Ivy League-educated short fiction writers under the age of thirty with whom I am personally acquainted. The week we met (in August 2002, both of us having just arrived at the University of Iowa for graduate school) I wrote in my journal, "Daniel is interesting for his ability to exude the kind of quiet confidence one imagines famous writers exuding even prior to their fame." This kind of perceptiveness is extremely rare for me but I was right on the money; the pieces he put up for workshop demonstrated that Daniel had a few things figured out. His prose had a forceful precision that obviated flashiness. His stories never cut corners despite their considerable ambition. Daniel's work was unabashedly earnest and possessed of a bare emotional honesty that I know caused many of us to hear the hollow ring of cleverness and irony in our own stories. For three years now Daniel has been a writer who has made me want to write better. The full range of his talents is on display in his remarkable collection of short stories, *War by Candlelight*, released by HarperCollins this past spring. **-Vinnie Wilhelm**

Loggerhead Reading Series: I'd like to begin with oral sex. In "City of Clowns," the second story in your collection, you provide one of the most compelling instances in recent literature of a man performing cunnilingus on a woman who is wearing stilts. I think we'd all love to hear whatever you feel comfortable sharing about the genesis of this scene.

Daniel Alarcón: In Lima I briefly dated a girl who owned a pair of stilts. I can't really say much more about it, except to add that I write fiction and have an active imagination.

LRS: Speaking of oral sex, you've just completed your first book tour. One imagines these glamorous junkets as a blurry montage of decimated mini-bars and erotic encounters in bookstore restrooms. Is that about right? Can you tell us the best and worst moments from your travels?

Alarcón: I like readings. I like meeting people, and generally it works this way: folks that don't like your book or don't like you as a person stay at home. The folks who are likely to enjoy it are the ones who show up. So of course it's very gratifying to have ten or fifteen or however many people buy your book and tell you they think you're very smart, write well, smell good, etc. Still, I can't say that I really

enjoy traveling, though these days I seem to do a lot of it. When I started the tour I'd been traveling already for three months in Latin America, didn't really have a place to live in the US, and still had books and clothes scattered in the apartments of various friends, my parents' place in Oakland, my sister's house, and elsewhere. I felt incredibly un-tethered to anything, which is exactly the wrong time to be spending nights in hotels, airports, and shopping malls: the trifecta of sad American non-destinations. They bring out the very bleakest in people who are prone to be depressed from time to time.

The best readings were in places I've lived before—New York, Iowa City, the Bay Area, Birmingham—where friends showed up and brought their friends, or where *peruanos* showed up just to say they were proud of me and whatnot. Chicago was also excellent, lots of fun. In Boulder I started my reading with two people in the audience. I introduced myself to both of them and shook their hands. The reading was fine, I think they both enjoyed it, and actually a few more people showed up by the time the story had ended. They asked me to read another story and I did. Then afterwards some dude wanted me to sign a galley, an advance reader copy, the one that says very clearly "not for sale, uncorrected proof" on the cover. He told me with an innocent smile that he'd bought it used on Amazon. I was like, *Are you fucking kidding me?* I think he expected me to congratulate him on having found such a bargain. But he was so earnest and excited to meet me that he even had his two daughters pose for a picture with me. Maybe he'll buy my next book. Or not. I don't even know why I was mad; it's not like I don't buy used books.

LRS: So your family came to Alabama from Peru when you were a child, and there's a lot of stuff in your book about Peruvians—and people from other parts of the developing world—immigrating to America. But just as much attention is paid to characters who have migrated to Lima from the Peruvian countryside. Can you talk a little about migration within Peru and why it figures so heavily in your collection?

Alarcón: That internal migration is what defines Lima. It gives the city this strange quality, this movement, where people are constantly coming and going. People have come to Lima for the same reasons they try to leave it for the U.S. or elsewhere: of course the war (the **Shining Path** and Tupac Amaru insurgencies, which lasted from 1980 to 1997) was the primary engine of displacement at one point, but the main motivation now is economic. As difficult a place as Lima is to live, the Peruvian economy is so hopelessly centralized that it's better than

living in, say, **Andahuaylas** or Corongo. Every time I go back I notice hillsides that were once empty now dotted with housing. The neighborhood where I was living and working, **San Juan de Lurigancho**, is one of those places that is constantly being fed by new migration from all the corners of the country. It is densely populated, poor but striving, and, of course, the city is straining to provide services to all the newly settled neighborhoods. In terms of infrastructure, basic economics, ecology, it's incredibly problematic. There are success stories, but generally speaking, the panorama is not a pretty one.

Culturally, though, all this is significant because in a country like Peru, which is an arbitrary creation—just lines drawn on a map—the only place where you can talk realistically about the project of the nation-state is in a place like San Juan: in these marginal neighborhoods at the edges of the city you have, suddenly and for the first time, folks from the jungle, *charapas*, living side-by-side with *andinos* (people from the mountains), *criollos* (people from the coast) from the poorer districts of Lima, folks from the North, the South, all over. It makes for an interesting and dynamic mix. Add a dose of globalization, and you have an altogether fascinating and unique blend of the modern, the archaic, the unintentionally kitschy and the absolutely mystifying.

In this current historical moment it is increasingly difficult to tell where Latin America begins and where North America ends: José is one of the most common names for newborns in California. But back in Lima, in San Juan de Lurigancho, traditional Hispanic names are no longer in fashion: my friends had names like Henry, Norbert, and Hamilton. The kids listen to trance and reggaeton, not Andean music or *criollo* music. The future is all about impurities, *mestizaje*, and so if I write about the neighborhoods of Lima, created through internal migration—because these are global processes at work—I am by implication also writing about New York, San Jose, Atlanta, Cleveland, Madrid, London and on and on.

LRS: Although you were born in Lima and have lived there as an adult, you spent your formative years in affluent American settings, attending private schools, etc. Do you ever feel like it's bogus for a highly educated, American-raised kid whose parents are both physicians to write stories about poor and working class Peruvians? Are you a poser? Are there rules about who gets to write what?

Alarcón: Of course I'm a poser. That's why I write fiction and not memoir. I don't believe there are rules about what you can write

about. Every time you write you are projecting yourself into other folks' lives, and so I think it's just as difficult to create believable voices of a different gender or age as it is to inhabit voices of another class or culture. All writing is difficult, which is also why it's fun.

LRS: Do you sometimes get the feeling that people are disappointed when they find out that your parents are both doctors, and did not sneak across the border in the trunk of **'74 Nova**? What do you make of this disappointment?

Alarcón: I asked some of my white friends who are writers if they're ever asked—in interviews or out on book tour—what their parents do, because I get asked about my parents all the time. It was a totally unscientific poll, but still, none of my white writer friends seem to have had this experience. I think sometimes Latino writers are not thought of as artists primarily. This goes back to the previous question: where a white writer might get praised for writing about characters who are not him- or herself—*so imaginative, such brave narrative choices*—a Latino writer is more likely to be praised for being "real" or "authentic." If this authenticity is lacking (as in my case) then we can get questioned. Whatever. I don't really care. The work is either good or isn't. It either succeeds or it fails, and I think this has more to do with one being (or not being) a good listener, an astute observer of people, and having the imagination and the empathy to put oneself in someone else's shoes—success or failure in this case is more about my talent (or lack thereof) than my parents' combined income vis-à-vis that of an average Latin household in the U.S., or however people want to judge my stats. If folks like it, they like it, if they don't, well shit, I really tried hard, I wrote it out of love, and that's the best I could do.

I'll admit I was a bit wary of being marketed as a Latino writer, primarily because the standard narrative about Latinos in the country is ***Stand and Deliver***, up from the barrio, etc. I wanted to be very clear that that wasn't my story, precisely because I didn't want to be accused of misrepresentation. I mean, I *am* Latino, just not the kind of Latino most (white) people commonly think of when they hear that word. The commodification of literature and art is a process that I'm only just learning about, and to a certain extent, in this country anyway (I don't know how it works elsewhere), it is often based on signifiers of ethnic identity. I'm certainly not going to be offended if someone calls me Latino, but if that's *all* I am, then that becomes limiting. I think most writers aspire to transcend whatever label their publisher's marketing department might stamp on them. It's no longer

okay, if it ever was, to call **Lorrie Moore**, for example, "a fine woman writer" or "a brave voice in female fiction." That would be bullshit, and no one would stand for it. She's a dope writer, period. It's no secret that I'd like to shed the label, be known as a good writer, or a great one, and not as "the Peruvian guy."

LRS: One thing I like about *War by Candlelight* is that it seems topical without straining to be. You don't force the issue, but this is quite clearly a book about where we are now. As the dust jacket says, "Something is happening around the globe: mass movements of peoples, dislocations of language and culture in the wake of war and economic crises—simply put, our world is changing." Did you set out to write a topical collection of stories? Did you say to yourself, "Man, here in the post-9/11 world I just can't write stories about drunk suburbanites screwing each other's spouses?"

Alarcón: I love John Cheever's stories about drunk suburbanites having affairs so much, so completely, precisely because politically and spiritually I don't care that much about those people. I mean, I don't get passionate about the problems of the suburban American white upper class. And yet, what Cheever does so well is make these people so intensely human, so flawed and wonderful, that I can't turn away. So no, I didn't set out to write a collection about the post-9/11 world or anything, I just wanted to write something as human and as humane as a Cheever story, as quietly violent as a **Juan Rulfo** story, as fiercely intelligent as a Borges story. That's the benchmark, no question. There are others, of course. My interests, my fascination and identification with Peru, the family stories I grew up with, the things I've seen, the people I've met, my background in anthropology—all of this has had an impact on the kind of fiction I've ended up writing. Why don't I write about Birmingham? The fact is there are more places in the world like Lima than there are like the pleasant, leafy suburb where I was raised. There are more people staking out a life on the peripheries of the global system than there are people like us—meaning anybody likely to be reading this interview—who bought in early, were raised in it, and who essentially have the world at our disposal. In my work, in my travels, I've been drawn to those places, to those people whose capacity for survival and hope overwhelms mine.

I lived in two neighborhoods when I was in Lima in 2001-2002: San Isidro, a very well-off part of the city where my parents have an apartment, and San Juan de Lurigancho, which was settled by land takeovers, and where, as I mentioned before, water, electricity,

security, everything is an issue. Initially I was living at my parents' place and commuting to San Juan for my job, but the disconnect between the two areas was so great, so stark, that in the end I went to live in San Juan. The hour-and-a-half bus ride to work every day from San Isidro was so gut wrenching, I just couldn't handle it emotionally. I preferred dealing with the lack of amenities in San Juan to being confronted daily by the grotesque nature of my First World privilege. Then of course, once settled in San Juan, I had the privilege of being incorporated into people's lives, being trusted by people who had no reason to trust me: it's humbling. People came to me with their stories, so much so that I never had to look for them.

LRS: You moved directly from Lima to Iowa City in 2002 for grad school at the Writers' Workshop. That seems like a pretty big change. How did things go for you at Iowa?

Alarcón: Iowa was great. I didn't and couldn't get a lot of writing done in Lima—life there was just too distracting. By the end I was deep into teaching in San Juan, and couldn't flake on those obligations. Plus I have a lot of family and made many great friends. It was frustrating because I thought I would have all this time to write and in fact, I had none. Before Lima, I had been living in New York, in an apartment I shared with between four and eight people (the exact number was constantly in flux), working in New York public schools, and writing every night unless I was too depressed and exhausted by my job.

Then I got to Iowa and all I had was time. I didn't have to teach and I thought I would miss it—at that point I'd been teaching in one context or another for four years—but I didn't. I saw that everyone around me was writing almost every day, and I knew I had to get to work. That's what it was for me: a kick in the ass. Being a writer is about sitting down and writing. And I think that's what it was for most people I met there. These were talented people who took their shit seriously. I think most of us had never met people out there in the world who really thought of themselves as writers. Sure I'd taken workshops before, but nothing like this.

Certainly one of the most boring "issues" in contemporary American literature is this: *MFA program: good or evil?* I can't tell you how tedious this discussion is to me. Can anyone seriously argue that spending two years reading a lot of books and writing a lot and talking about writing with smart people is a *bad* thing for one's development as an artist? It certainly was useful for me. Of course it's true that you

either are or are not an artist, and that you can't really teach someone how to write, but you can insulate them from (or rather postpone the worst effects of) certain pressures for two years, plunk them down in a small town with excellent bookstores, decent coffee shops, and a big-ass library, surround them with intelligent people, have every touring writer roll through town, and I would argue the combined effect will undoubtedly be a positive one.

LRS: So now you're living in sunny Oakland, working on your novel. You have a two-year gig as the distinguished writer-in-residence at **Mills College**, plus a book deal on top of that, and you recently won the prestigious Whiting Writers' Award. You're twenty-eight years old and relatively good looking, although not tall. You must really be a happy person. Exactly how happy are you?

Alarcón: I'm plenty tall for a writer, Vinnie. And yes, I am generally quite happy, though about once every six weeks I have a dark, self-pitying spell that usually lasts about 72 hours, but it passes and then I'm okay again. The following life issues have not been solved by the publication of my book:

1. I can't hold my liquor.
2. I still don't really like talking to people I don't know (unless someone introduces us).
3. Writing remains difficult.
4. My cat is somewhat violent.
5. There are no direct Oakland-Lima flights.

When these are taken care of I will be very, very happy. Currently I am 7.3 on a 10 point scale. I can't realistically ask for more.

LRS: Peru's most famous writer, **Mario Vargas Llosa**, ran for the nation's presidency in 1990 and almost won. Do you think this might happen in America anytime soon? If so, which writer would make the strongest candidate?

Alarcón: I would like to see **George Saunders** run for president. He'd have my vote. Unfortunately it is much more likely that first one of those blowhards who write the **Left Behind** books will win the Presidency and usher in his longed-for dream of a sexless, pleasure-free Christian autocracy. Of course we'll all be in jail long before this happens.

LRS: If we do all get thrown in the clink, what are some of the short story collections you'd most like to have in your cell?

Alarcón: There are a bunch. I reread *Drown* by Junot Diaz almost every year. *Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson. Recently I loved *Natasha* by David Bezmozgis, and *Lucky Girls* by Nell Freudenberger. *Lost in the City*, the Edward P. Jones collection was pretty sweet, as was *The Question of Bruno* by Aleksandar Hemon.

There are other writers I come back to again and again, always and forever: Borges, Julio Cortázar, Cheever, Isaac Babel, Julio Ramón Ribeyro, Juan Rulfo, **Bruno Schulz**, and of course, Carson McCullers 'cause I'm always repping the South.

LRS: Interesting. Who is this Julio Ramón Ribeyro person?

Alarcón: You know, every country has these seminal writers whose significance is for whatever reason confined to the national borders. Ribeyro is one of these, an important, touchstone writer within the Peruvian canon, certainly respected in the Spanish-speaking world, but not read much outside of that. José María Arguedas is another. Both have been translated, but neither has transcended, really.

Ribeyro is best known as a short story writer. He's your classic post-Boom Latin American realist, an unapologetically bleak chronicler of urban decay, who writes these beautiful, heart-breaking stories about Lima, its various underworlds, its class and racial tensions, manhood, drinking, violence, both real and metaphorical—all that good shit. He published all his stories with one title, *La Palabra del Mudo* (*The Voice of the Voiceless*, roughly, though it sounds fresher in Spanish), which he kept revising and adding to. Unbelievable stuff.

And then you have Arguedas. This guy is off the hook. For Peruvians, he's probably as important as Vargas Llosa, in some ways more so. He embodies all of our frighteningly confused identity issues. He was a white *criollo* whose father worked as an itinerant lawyer, leaving Arguedas to be raised by his uncle, a cruel landowner who sent his nephew to live with the servants. So Arguedas learns **Quechua**, the indigenous Andean language, before he learns Spanish, and really identifies with the indigenous community. Eventually he travels to Lima, studies anthropology, and dedicates himself to writing fiction in the voice of the indigenous people who brought him up. He writes this series of autobiographical novels (*Los Ríos Profundos*, *Todas las Sangres*), classic joints that deal with the issues and customs and

injustices of Andean life. All this culminates in what, for my taste, is his finest, most experimental book, *The Fox from Above, the Fox from Below*, which is a novel, an essay on Latin American literature (and his beef with Cortázar), and also a suicide note addressed to his editor. It's his first novel set in a coastal city, a place peopled by Andean migrants, American Peace Corps volunteers, *criollos*, blacks, everyone—in this sense it's a departure for him. The novel part doesn't finish; Arguedas sort of trails off, describes how it might have continued if he'd had the strength to finish it, apologizes to his editor, puts the manuscript in the mail, and kills himself.

Even without the dramatic, real-life story of a man battling depression and identity, and losing, it's a hell of a book. With that layer on top, damn—it's so harrowing, it's almost overwhelming. His struggle for a sense of self is a mirror to the Peruvian struggle. We haven't made any peace at all with the question of how to deal with the indigenous issue. Arguedas's widow later became a member of the Shining Path and was killed in a prison riot during the war.

LRS: Wow. Well, lastly, on a somewhat different note—and hopefully without getting too personal—I'd like to ask about a difficult issue I know you've been wrestling with in your own private life. Up until sometime last year you were a devoted fan of the **New York Yankees**, but this is no longer the case. Can you tell us briefly how this change came about? Do you think the shift has anything to do with your writing, or will impact your work in a significant way?

Alarcón: My uncle Alfredo once told me that you can trust a man who changes his politics, a man who changes his woman, but a man who changes his team affiliation is completely suspect. So yes, this is a bit of a sensitive subject for me, because I tend to think of my tío as usually speaking truth. Let's see: I became a Yankees fan in 1996 (like a lot of people who were living in New York at the time) but only because I bet my father (who was living in Atlanta) that the Yanks would beat the Braves in the World Series. This would seem to be the most abject bandwagoning ever, but in my defense, I made this \$50 bet after the Yankees had dropped the first two games at home. I could pull up stats as to why this was a foolish wager on my part, but I won't. The point is that we went on to win that year, and then again in 1998, 1999, and 2000. I loved those Yankees teams: Paul O'Neill, Bernie Williams, **Chuck Knoblauch** with all his wonderful and tragic *I-can-no-longer-throw-to-first-base* angst. And you can't hate on **Jeter**, dude is a winner.

So why the change of heart? The **Alex Rodriguez** trade is what made me turn in my pinstripes. That and the Aaron Boone homer against the **BoSox** in 2003. I watched that game with you, Vinnie. Do you remember the face Peter Bognanni made when it went over the wall? He looked like the sole survivor of some horrible accident. If ever there was anything generous still left in my cold, cold heart, it was stirred in that moment. I just couldn't justify cheering for the over-dog anymore. Then came the A-Rod fiasco that winter: the richest team in the league would get the most expensive, most talented player of his generation? Ach. I couldn't take it. They're doing fine without me anyway. They'll always make the playoffs. The **Oakland A's** are my team now. I live two train stops from the Coliseum. Barry Zito has nasty stuff. And I like the colors—yellow and green, just like the **UAB Blazers**, the team I grew up cheering for.

None of this has affected my writing in any perceptible way. ❖