



The Last Sign

Cristina Rivera Garza

Tr. Francisca González Arias



The whirlwind came out of nowhere. They were walking slowly toward the median strip when tree leaves, scraps of paper, and plastic bottles began suddenly to spiral upwards. The dust forced him to close his eyes, and almost immediately, to clutch the slender trunk of a poplar tree. An embrace. Afterwards, one of the passersby who saw the spectacle from the opposite side of the street said in his testimony that the image of the man hugging the tree had seemed beautiful: he was holding his briefcase while his hair and his thin, sky-blue tie rose up in the air. He added: like an orphan. The wish to stay. Something like a shipwreck.

The passerby, who spoke like a poet, said nothing about the woman.

As soon as he opened his eyes, the Tree Man went toward her. He was ready with a smile of reunion, and he wanted to tell her that when he was a child someone had told him that whirlwinds of that type - sudden, narrow, violent - meant that the devil was nearby. He thought that would prompt her to open her lips, and extract from her lungs, from the moist interior of her body, the joyful and assured burst of laughter that pleased him so much. He imagined that she'd take him by the hand and, still laughing, would lead him away from there. They'd walk together, he imagined. But he didn't find her.

He thought that the whirlwind had frightened her and that she, who had come from so far away and was unaccustomed to those climatic phenomena, would take shelter at home. He thought that disoriented by the violence of the wind she would have found refuge in a nearby doorway. That perhaps he would find her in the shop next door, looking for CD's with her eyes half-shut. He also thought, although just for a moment, that the whirlwind had taken her by the waist to the devil's house. Then he smiled again and went back to his house unperturbed.

The first time he phoned her he had the sense that even if she didn't answer, she was there with her hands under the tap of running water, washing a plate, two cups and a spoon. He liked the moderation of her movements, her way of passing among the world's objects as if they were on the verge of breaking, or of destroying her calm. Her modulated voice. The way in which she lowered her gaze before praise, flirtation, or embarrassment. Her slight steps on the floor. When he dialed her number a second time, he imagined her waist, the same narrow zone of her body that he had visualized previously within the devil's grasp. He turned his gaze toward the night sky: two entangled creatures like puffs of smoke up above. Vanishing. He drank the green tea she had brought him in a small tin box, showing him the correct way to prepare it, and then the correct way to drink it. He said her name. He said: "Xian." Then he picked up the receiver again. It was already past midnight when he began to worry.

He emphatically told the Detective who took charge of his case that he hadn't noticed anything strange in the woman's behavior on the day of the whirlwind. He had met her at their usual restaurant, a small, unassuming establishment that nevertheless served complex and subtly flavored dishes that had soon earned his enthusiastic devotion. Between bites they had chatted like always of everyday things: the weather, the traffic, the presence of pepper or of clove, the aftertaste of garlic. Then after coffee they had decided to walk, something they also did often. He picked up his briefcase; she, her handbag. They crossed the avenue, and that's where, right at the median strip with the poplars, the whirlwind formed suddenly and out of nowhere. He managed only to close his eyes, and instinctively got next to something that moments later he recognized as the trunk of a tree. He had assumed that the woman had done the same.

"Did you know," asked the Detective, looking down at the

cup of coffee, "that on that day someone close to your friend died in Hunan province?"

"Yan Huanyi?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes," she said, as she gave him a very thin piece of yellow paper that appeared to be –and this also seemed strange to him—a telegram.

"I thought they didn't exist any more," he murmured. "Telegrams, I mean." And then he stopped short, ashamed, because he could hardly believe that while he was concentrating on Xian's disappearance his mind was also occupied with such an obscure and banal matter.

The Detective lowered her gaze and the Tree Man couldn't help thinking of the parallels: he loved that timid yet scandalous motion, which in his version of the world belonged to Xian. It was a gesture that could not go unnoticed, especially in a professional woman. It was an ancient movement that in his imagination could only come from very far away, from a world on the verge of disappearing. That was, he realized, what Xian was for him: a distant world in the process of extinction. A species in danger. And now Xian had in effect disappeared. Xian had now fulfilled a promise not offered.

"Anything you may remember could be of great help," said the Detective before getting up as she offered him her card. Then she waved to him and rapidly crossed the avenue.

The only thing he could recall as he watched her disappear among the other pedestrians under the sticky afternoon light was the sound of the whirlwind in his ears. A sharp whistle. The resounding crash of small and trivial things. Dancing scraps. And further back, when fear had found its place in his stomach, the beating of his heart, the grating of his teeth. The meeting of enamel and dust and saliva. A kind of grinding. Veritable torture. He remembered himself

years before, many years before, in another place. He remembered the season of windstorms and the way he would hold on to the dark and rough lampposts to avoid what he imagined possible: being lifted by the wind. He recalled dry twigs, tricycles, and all kinds of trash gliding through wide avenues. Fear returned with that motion: his hand gripping something before the vague possibility of detachment. In the face of loneliness. In the face of this.

"Xian," he said aloud to nobody, "Xian is a strange woman." Then, slowly, he set out on the way back home.

A few days later, Xian's neighbor testified that late that day he had seen through the peephole a man in front of the door across from his. He knew him, of course. He had seen him a few times. The Man in Front of the Door took out a couple of keys from his jacket pocket, placed one of the keys in the lock, and stepped inside. He described him as taciturn and tired, a silent man. He said that judging by the absence of noises, the man had done nothing else but let himself fall into the armchair in the living room, a chair upholstered in red damask that to him seemed not only comfortable but also beautiful. Perhaps he had passed the time looking at the ceiling, although it was equally possible that he had napped. The neighbor repeated in a low voice: "let himself fall." That's what he imagined the man had done. And that, of course, had seemed suspicious to him.

He didn't know why or at what moment he made the decision, but the truth was that instead of going toward his house, he went toward Xian's. Perhaps because of the wind. Perhaps because he suddenly felt nostalgic. He opened the door with his set of keys and went in. He didn't know exactly how long he was there, but upon leaving, already night, and at the darkest point of night, he had a handkerchief in the right hand pocket of his shirt. No one who had been looking specifically for that handkerchief would have found it there,

so close to his body, in such a visible place. On his chest.

The Man Afraid of Whirlwinds knew that Nushu was a secret language. It truly was. He knew that the women of Hunan province had created it in the third century and that since then they handed it down from generation to generation like a scandalous feminine secret. He knew everything that Xian had told him about this women's writing: that it was a form of expression in a society that was otherwise oppressively masculine. That it was written on paper, or painted on fans, or embroidered on handkerchiefs; that it was part of the so-called Missives of the Third Day with which female friends and relatives sent advice to the newlywed. The woman who had gone away. He knew that Nushu was composed of thin and delicate features that seemed delightful to him. And he knew, of course, about the gulf between Hunan province and the terracotta soldiers at X'ian, and because of that he probably hadn't believed any of it. And because of that, he let her talk.

The passerby who testified some time later insisted that he had never seen a woman next to the Tree-Hugging Man. He said emphatically: "There was no woman there. I'm sure of that."

The neighbor who had remembered a few days later something he thought would be useful called and said succinctly that he missed the whispers. He said that he hadn't realized it immediately, and much less when they were there. That he only found out about the whispers when he didn't hear them any more. Conspicuous by their absence. Now that he remembered, he knew with exactitude that the whispers began in the afternoon and often they'd continue well into the night. Sometimes they even woke him up in the wee hours of the morning. He corrected himself: he wasn't awakened by the whispers, which by their very nature were not loud. What awakened him was the cold, or the sudden

movement of his wife's feet under the covers, or the spasm caused by a nightmare. Once awake, he'd hear them. Lying awake for several minutes as night returned to its previous rhythms, and after observing the ceiling for a while, he'd hear them. Two entangled voices. Two voices like two indescribably soft bodies. A lullaby. A prayer. Something that would lull him back to sleep and return him, freed from terror, to his dreams.

"I wish this story would take place in a very distant province, in a small village under gray and white clouds. On a humid day." That's what the beginning of the diary said. The diary that hours later would be entered into evidence in the case that was already by then being called the Disappearance of a Woman After a Whirlwind. "I wish you were a woman from China."

He had always liked Chinese women. Fragile dolls. Straight hair. Light brown eyes. Delicate bone structure. When he entered her, he liked to imagine that he could pierce her. He liked to imagine that piercing her was a question of time. A butterfly tacked onto a cork board. An insect perforated on a spotless laboratory table. A bead strung together with another bead: an explosion of colors. The Man Who Feared Whirlwinds didn't tell the Detective anything about this. That information would be gathered by her days later from her reading of the diary with red-orange satin covers, which against the rules of her profession lay in her desk drawer. It wasn't only that the diary contained a type of writing in two different hands that intrigued her, as an object it also struck her as beautiful. In it there unfolded a story that one of the participants wanted to occur in another place, a distant and humid place. It was obvious that the diary was the recipient where shared events came to rest. After her first reading, a hasty reading full of curiosity, the Detective couldn't help but think that the diary inscribed with the lov-

ers' desires was at the same time, and perhaps above all, the origin of new desires. A kind of motor. A machine. Ever more explicit desires. The wish for fusion. Ever more exact desires. Piercing desires. Those desires, which kept her reading the diary throughout the day and sometimes into the night, were registered on paper with a cherry-colored ink whose density and aroma reminded her of a good wine's bouquet. As she read the diary before her on the disorganized surface of her desk, uneasily and inconsolably, the Detective seemed in reality to be eating and drinking. It was clear then that lacking other food, the Detective nourished herself in this way.

A couple of days later, when the city's inhabitants were already obsessively rehashing the facts, the evening paper expressed it in this way: MYSTERIOUS WHIRLWIND. A WOMAN FROM CHINA DISAPPEARS.

"Carve your back. Mark your back. Open furrows in the skin of your back. Bite it. Climb it. Perforate your back. See the red drop that slides down your back. Suck your back. Provoke your back. Rest on your back."

"Carved signs, marked and open on my back. Signs, which are holes, on my back which is your back. That back, sucked provoked rested. A dune. A valley. An undulation. That back. (S)word. Backs. Pain-racked."

A few weeks later, the woman who used to clean Xian's apartment and who spoke with an accent said she personally washed the sheets stained with blood by hand in the stone sink behind the kitchen. It was exhausting work that often took her several hours. For this task she used lavender soap. She said that afterwards she liked to breathe in the fragrance of the sheets when they hung from the jute rope up there on the roof. Their shadows were like a slow dance among ghosts. She said that it was only then that she wondered what had happened on the sheets. What those

signs with sour and rancid smells meant. Those traces. She never found out the answer. She never asked the question aloud.

"Touch your thigh. Mortify your thigh. Crush your thigh. Brand it as dead skin is branded. "

"The heat of the iron. The force of the iron. Inscription. The cry. Sudden inhalation. Trembling exhalation."

"Touch my thigh. Brand my thigh. Crush my thigh. Brand it as dead skin is branded. Revive it."

"Thigh. Exile."

"There are two different types of writing," explained the Detective later to the Young Policeman stationed in the doorway, who was looking at her attentively. His feet crossed. Black shoes. Tight pants hugging his thighs. There were two different types of writing, certainly, but it was impossible to know which was the man's and which the woman's. It was impossible to know who did what to whom, who let the other do it, who desired, and who desired more.

"Explain that to me," answered the Young Policeman, intrigued and motionless. A statue in the doorway. Notions of Rome.

"It's the subject," was all she could stammer in response, narrowing her eyes. "It must be the subject," she repeated. Then, more for her sake than for his, she added:

"I never know who the subject of the sentence is." "Oh, that," he murmured. A sentence.

Many years later, the Man Who Swore He'd Lost a Chinese Woman wondered why he had gotten a tattoo during precisely that time. He wondered rather insistently, especially when he watched the rain through the window in the evenings, why he had that incomprehensible symbol printed on his left earlobe just at the time when the Detective and the Young Policeman were investigating the Case of the Woman Who Disappeared with what had struck him from the start

as unbridled passion.

Moments after she spied the four leaf clover on the back of his earlobe, the Detective furrowed her brow and thought that in reality she knew nothing about the Man In Front of Her. He seemed normal, like his striped shirt would have him appear, but she was aware that appearances tended to be a point of entry and not necessarily an exit. A dark tunnel between the two.

"What's that?" she couldn't help but ask him, pointing to the left side of his neck with feigned lightness.

After bringing his hand instinctively to the back of his neck, the man smiled and then kept silent. He looked at her as she suddenly became motionless. The Detective, accustomed to deciphering unexpected behavior, knew that the man really didn't know what to reply. The Man In Front of Her was surely a Man Without Answers.

At the time he chose the design he had thought of the southern seas and had heard at that moment the word "immense." An echo. Two. He had heard the word "ta-tau: marks on the body." He thought of Polynesia and of the Maori, for whom facial tattoos were a sign of social status. He noted somewhere in his mind the sign XVIII, knowing that it signified *the eighteenth century*. He imagined the ships that had brought and taken James Cook, and he desired, with a desire as immense as the one that the very idea of the southern seas had provoked in him, to go there: to go on a ship. To let himself go.

"Brand you upon me. Brand you in me. Brand me with you. Open the skin, cut the skin; penetrate the epidermis: insert ink. Brand you with ink: chew you, mortify you, bite you, swallow you. Create you with ink. Bind you."

When confronted with another whirlwind a year later, the Man Who Swore He'd Lost a Woman from China wondered if it had all really happened. He watched it from afar,

from behind the windshield of a car, protected from his surroundings. The devil, he said to himself. And then he stepped on the accelerator avoiding the sight of the cloud of dust in his rear view mirror.

When the public's interest in the Case of the Woman Who Disappeared After a Whirlwind had abated, the Detective would imagine them lying on the bed of satin, their calves peeking out from the edges of the comforter, dictating entire paragraphs to one another. One morning, she was so focused on the scene that even when opening her car door, turning on the engine, or driving through the streets of her city, she could smell their bodies' aroma: a slight mixture of semen and ink and sweat and wine. Just as she braked in front of a red light, she could perceive the stench of desire of someone imposing a sentence on oneself. Her sentence. And at that moment she had to acknowledge it: she desired them. She wanted to be one of them. She wanted to be there on the bed. She wanted to be a part of it. And to be branded by those violent, clever, playful, infantile ways. That's why she kept on reading: *"I wish you were from China. I want you to enter my smooth-mouth nakedness: a knife. I want the sting of the blow and the slow torment of laceration. A needle. A fingernail. Forceps. I want writing."* Then she thought that the sudden morning vision, which seemed incongruous and gratuitous, was undoubtedly connected to the image of the humming bird suspended in front of an open flower whose fluttering that morning had disturbed her. The incessant fluttering of its wings. A man and a woman on a bed of satin: a man and a woman who write the words of their mutual harm. Impossible fluttering: a man and a woman dictating their pain to each other, their desire, their expectation. Fluttering. That was the only explanation for the itinerant authorship of each diary entry, as she said later that same day to the Young Policeman. That not knowing. That mystery

with regard to the subject. That was the only way one could explain that the diary, the diary's writing, constituted both the most intimate revelation, and the perfect masking of the two. That was the only explanation for the whispers. Those afternoons. Those nights. And the insomniac neighbor's ear to the wall.

"You instead of me: me in your place. In-tu-it: in that place. If you were from China. A humid place: (y)ours."

"But that's not a four leaf clover!" she murmured, a bit surprised, early in the morning, at the beginning or the end of those fateful days when she still thought that she could solve the case, when she still imagined that the Case of the Woman Who Disappeared After a Whirlwind had an answer or a solution. Her long fingers of uniformly short fingernails touched the design of the figure engraved on masculine skin. A kind of fear. A long wait.

"That's true," he answered, half-asleep, but alert. "It's not a four leaf clover," and at that moment, just as he finished the sentence, he turned to look at her with her mouth open, her uncombed hair, and her anxious waiting. He realized then that the Detective was a woman as tense as a mandolin string, with the barely perceptible curvature of a tall palm tree, subject to a strange mental life. Confronted with that conjunction of speeds that was part of the Tense Woman, the Woman on the Verge of Breaking, he felt like saying the words: southern seas, Tau-tau, Maori, but he didn't.

"It's a Nushu word," he whispered close to her ear, "Guanyin." Then he moved back a little to look at her again, enjoying how the wait made her suffer. "The name of a Buddhist goddess."

"The last character?" she asked, winking her left eye at him. Hitting him back. Silence and within the silence, the blow that crashes against the Tattooed Man's cheekbone. The noise of the blow, and within the noise, the dull sound of

a head that crashes against the tiles.

"And her name really was Xian?" she inquired later: the man's body on the satin sheets: the humming bird suspended on the other side of the window. The Vengeful Woman who leaves.

The passerby who had given testimony several times said again, and as firmly as before, that he had not seen any woman there in the area of the windstorm. None, he repeated. There was no woman there.

The Young Policeman told her in one of the last points of the day's report, that according to his brief research, Nushu had indeed existed, and had also disappeared. It was a kind of secret code produced by the women of Hunan province, which from the third century had been handed down from generation to generation. Then he showed her a sheet with a comparison of Nushu and Chinese characters. With it in her hands the Detective was able to confirm that the first were square, and the second, thin and cursive. The Young Policeman then said that Nushu was found not only on parchment, but also on handkerchiefs, fans, and clothing. Domestic objects. Things in the home.

"Or on the skin," the Tense Woman stammered to herself, and embarrassed by her outburst she blushed suddenly, lowering her eyes. That gesture.

The Young Policeman then added, with a sort of compassion that the Detective could not but have noticed, that Mandarin, as one of the institutional foundations of Chinese culture, had an authoritarian, hierarchal, and solemn structure, while Nushu was for women the language of everyday life, of emotions and of spontaneity, of the natural world, of dreams and of desires.

Then, before turning away, he mentioned almost by chance that women used to write in Nushu the Missives of the Third Day, booklets written on fabric in which they con-

veyed advice about marriage to their daughters. Those letters were sent to brides on the third day after the wedding. The women who had left.

As he recalled, they had spoken about that much, much later. He remembered it after he chose the design, after he left the tattoo parlor, after the Detective's curious gaze had detected it behind his ear, even after she had asked him if Xian was really her name. The name of the Woman Who Disappeared After a Whirlwind. He remembered it one afternoon in his car. An afternoon of malfunctioning traffic lights. Wispy clouds. Smoke everywhere. He remembered that they had talked about the tattoo. Of the last word. Of the mark that would represent in the future, in an unimaginable future, the word "the end." The fact.

"The end of writing," he had whispered then, his right hand on the woman's pink nipple, his lips redolent of jasmine on her neck.

"The end of this," one of the two had said. "This."

When he began to forget her, when he himself began to wonder if her real name had indeed been Xian, the Man Afraid of Whirlwinds went into a canteen for the first time. He had been walking aimlessly though anguishedly, at moderate speed under the hot afternoon sun. He had walked for hours only to find himself as night was falling empty, spent, thirsty. He pushed open the swinging doors of the establishment and approached the bar listlessly. He ordered the first thing that the bartender with the fat stomach and black vest offered him: a mug full of viscous liquid topped with foam. He had kept silent, avoiding eye contact with the other clients. He had observed the tip of his right shoe, the stains on the large beveled mirror that reflected the interior, and the furthest corner of the ceiling. He could have spent hours like that. In that kind of motionlessness. In that stony way of being alone. Then interrupting all those hours he could

have spent alone, another man appeared. As tired as he. As stooped as he. As slippery. The Man Who Swore He'd Lost a Woman from China identified with the Parsimonious Man Averting his Gaze, and who, when he asked "You too are terrified of returning home?" thought he was addressing that question to himself. Something strange, something dark, something trivial perhaps and possibly unmentionable compelled the Stooped Man, the Slippery Man, to emerge from his silence and murmur, "What frightens me is my head."

"Do you imagine ever more terrible things?" he had asked then, with the interest that only difference can arouse. The end of identification.

The Slippery Man had lowered his gaze (that gesture) and had hidden in the silence that served as his response. His arms crossed on his chest as if he were cold.

"I imagine," he said after three or four swallows of the viscous liquid, advancing and stopping short a couple of times, his mouth open without managing to say anything. "I imagine that I kill a woman, for example," his voice inaudible at the end of the sentence.

"Do you imagine you cover her breasts with your mouth? Do you imagine the pressure of your hands, destroying scratching pressing with more force? Do you imagine piercing slitting fragmenting her? Do you imagine her last breath?"

"I imagine that the woman disappears after a whirlwind," he murmured with his eyes fixed on the viscous liquid. "That's what I imagine."

Another passerby affirmed in his declaration that there indeed had been a woman there, after the whirlwind. He said that the image was memorable because it was of the face of someone who had gone too far. He corrected himself immediately, and added: it was the face of a woman who had gone too far, and who was ready however to go even further

away. She was preparing herself for that. A long journey.

He said that he hadn't said anything before because no one had asked him.

Some time later, just when she was trying to solve one of the most difficult cases of her career, the Case of The Castrated Men, the Detective had been about to bring her hand, her fingertips, toward the mark on the body of another suspect. In that instant she remembered everything. Indeed, she experienced desire. That terrible veil. That stab. Like the sound of a windstorm that makes the body's sounds audible. That buried exclamation mark. That collision. And she remembered then the indecipherable tattoo on the neck of the Man Who Swore He'd Lost a Woman from China after a Whirlwind that had forced her to lose herself. Inside. Inside herself. Outside. She remembered the feeling of skin slit open under his touch (printed skin) (branded skin), and the dizziness, a subtle way of slipping toward nowhere, engulfed her again. Velocity: a face that disappears and reappears: against the light; skeins of air that tighten around one's neck, one's wrists and waist. They press against you. She remembered the satin bed, ice-cold feet, the scarlet ink that slid down her thighs, the corners of her mouth, her calf. She recalled the mark of a tooth on her abdomen, the imprint of fingernails on her breasts, her hair wrapped around her knuckles. She remembered hallucinating about The Same. One image after the other. One more image. A constant stabbing. How far can you go? She remembered everything, and then her hand turned into a fist, motionless in her pocket.

"The open furrows on your skin. Going inside. Ink, hand, fingernail, harness.

Writing you. Really writing you. Sign, wedge, needle. Writing you here: (y)our place.

Literally writing you. All right?"

Before, before everything happened, the Man Who

Swore He'd Lost a Woman from China stopped in front of a whirlwind. He first felt fear (a kind of dizziness) (a way of slipping toward nowhere) (that stab) and, then, almost immediately, he remembered that when he was a child someone had told him that this type of whirlwinds –narrow, sudden, vertical—meant that the devil was prowling around. Then all at once he saw: the devil, the devil's body, the devil's arms holding a woman's waist tightly. A waltz. Loud violin music. Levitating feet.

The Last Sign

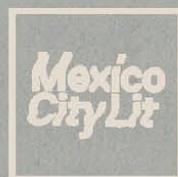
Cristina Rivera Garza

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