

The
Portable
Museum

Issue 2



 *ox and pigeon*

 FREE PREVIEW FROM WWW.OXANDPIGEON.COM

The Portable Museum

An Electronic Collection of Literature in
Translation

Issue 2

TRANSLATOR

Lucas Lyndes

EDITORS

Jason Curran

Lucas Lyndes

Katie Sedat

CURATED BY

Ox and Pigeon Digital Publishing

Lima and Boston

FREE PREVIEW FROM WWW.OXANDPIGEON.COM



First Ox and Pigeon edition 2013

Copyright © Ox and Pigeon Digital Publishing Company

"Organización de eventos," in *Del Cielo a Casa* by Hebe Uhart, 3rd edition 2012, pp. 47-55. © *Adriana Hidalgo Editora*

"La casa de pensión" used with the permission of Agencia Literaria CBQ

All other stories used by arrangement with the authors

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of the copyright owner unless such copying is expressly permitted by federal copyright law. Ox and Pigeon is not authorized to grant permission for further uses of the original selections translated in this book without the permission of their owners. Permission must be obtained from the individual copyright owners. Address requests for reprints of these translations to info@oxandpigeon.com.

www.oxandpigeon.com

Kindle edition ISBN: 978-0-9850557-2-1

ePub edition ISBN: 978-0-9850557-3-8



FREE PREVIEW FROM WWW.OXANDPIGEON.COM

Contents

THE EVENT PLANNER

THE BOARDING HOUSE

THE GIFT OF THE WORD

CONVERSATION BY THE POND

MARIACHI

The Event Planner

Hebe Uhart (Argentina)

Hebe Uhart (Moreno, Argentina, 1936 -) studied Philosophy at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. She has published eleven short story collections, three novellas, and two travel chronicles. She currently lives in Buenos Aires, where she teaches writing workshops and regularly contributes to Argentine newspapers and magazines. Her 2011 collection of short stories *Relatos reunidos (Collected Stories)* won the Premio Fundación El Libro al Mejor Libro Argentino de Creación Literaria.

The story "Organización de eventos" (translated here as "The Event Planner") first appeared in her collection *Del cielo a casa*, originally published in Argentina by Adriana Hidalgo Editora in 2003.



The Event Planner

by Hebe Uhart

I used to be on the greeting committee that took care of artists and scientists invited to speak at San Andres. The committee's run by the university and I devoted several years of my life to it without charging a cent. They chose me because I know a bit about literature and painting, but also because I'm so discreet: I may not know all there is to know, but I play my cards close to my chest. It's remarkable how people will settle for a "sure" or "of course" or "possibly." Although one time a man with a face that looked like it was carved out of stone asked, "Are you listening to me?" And I thought to myself, "Now he'll ask me what he was talking about and I'll have no idea." I don't remember how I got out of that one, but I did.

They also chose me 'cause I've got some height to me and a good eye. When one of our speakers gets off the plane, or the bus—a total stranger—I'm the one that has to find them. By the end there, I got so good that a guy would barely be off the bus, craning his neck and looking all around, before I'd say to myself, "That's him."

The minute they picked me, Nicolás di Marco started giving me the cold shoulder; he even goes out of his way to avoid greeting me in public if he can. He thought he was more qualified to be the guide because he knows more than I do about pretty much every subject, but he can't see from here to the corner and he has a propensity for making friends with the visitors. He's even invited them to his house after their planned stay is over, which is just a bad idea; you run into your illustrious guest wandering around and then you end up getting roped into doing the weirdest stuff. If it's a woman, she wants to go pick flowers in the countryside. Others

suddenly want to go to the casino even though they've never been to one in their whole damn life, and you get stuck teaching them how to play roulette. My rule of thumb has always been: "You come, you give your talk, and then you hit the road." I can't manage completely without Nicolás di Marco, though; he's useful to have around for the Q&A sessions after the lectures. He asks the best questions, there's no denying that, but he sits in the back with his tortured expression like a poor abandoned gaucho and the mere sight of him annoys me. He never comes when we all go out for dinner. I know he hasn't got any money, but he won't let us buy him anything, not even a beer.

I could write a book about all the people who've come to give lectures at San Andres. Each one is a novel. But there are some cases I'll never forget. One, who came to speak about new technologies in copper working, got off the plane drunk. Ours is a tiny airport; the one plane comes in the afternoon. When you're sitting around waiting for it, the plains go on as far as you can see. Every last detail stands out. When I saw him disembark and realized he was my guest, I couldn't believe it. He was the last one off the plane and one of his feet had to ask the other for permission to get out. If the stewardess hadn't grabbed his arm, he would have taken a tumble down the stairs. Usually our guests carry their lecture notes in a briefcase, but not this one. All he had was an old shoulder bag. Once he was off the plane, I said to him, "If you'd like, you've got time to go to the hotel and get some rest, or at least freshen up. The lecture's not for a while yet; I'll give you a wakeup call."

He didn't seem to get the hint, and I was about to add "so you can get changed," but what was he going to change into if all he brought was that shoulder bag? If it was up to me, I would have had him on a return flight that same night. He overslept and we had to push the lecture back. Half the audience left, and I had to keep the ones who stayed occupied so I ended up sending them down to the café on the corner and picking up the tab. He showed up with



his hair all wet and slicked back and his shoulder bag on. In the end, things didn't go so bad, but if it was up to me, back on the plane, over and out.

The women are difficult, and the older ones are the worst. Sometimes they're deaf, they lose their bag, the taxi door jams on them. They want to go see the river at eleven o'clock at night. There was one (she wasn't even that old) who said she wanted to see the poor neighborhoods and eat what they ate, because that's the only real way to gauge a city. I showed her a modest neighborhood, but she said that surely there must be poorer ones. I ended up gritting my teeth and just taking her to the slums. I mean, I'm not one to get off on other people's bad luck. I'd never eaten around there and I did my best to look clueless so no one would mess with me. She insisted on going to a hole in the wall with a curtain made out of bed sheets for a door. They were eating some kind of soup at the next table over—she didn't even know what kind it was—so she told the owner, "I'll have what those gentlemen are having."

It was a filthy soup with a few bones in it. The place was so small you had to gasp for breath. I made like I was eating and the two men at the next table over gave us sidelong glances when they thought we weren't looking. She was in town to give a lecture on "Integration Processes in Poly-Classist Societies." When we left, we hadn't made it three blocks before someone pelted the car's windshield with a rotten tomato. In a way, I was glad, because I thought, "That'll teach her not to go eat where she shouldn't." But she didn't learn. She just said, "When there's no development of the processes of symbolization, the basic laws governing how we perceive our surroundings assert themselves with irresistible force."

"She can go to hell," I thought. "I'm never taking anyone there again." 'Cause the thing is, not only do I have to take charge of picking them up and dropping them off; I have to check whether the microphone is working right and worry about the band practic-

ing the *murga* in the hall next door just when the lecture's supposed to start. If the crowd looks thin, I have to go find some high school kids (and they don't always want to come). What's more, people get there late because they eat first, or because of the heat; if it's hot out, they show up later. Or one of the lecturers calls me from a payphone saying he went for a stroll around the city and he's waiting for me at a café, but he doesn't know what it's called or where it is. Sometimes I have to go track them through the streets like a hunting dog and, on top of that, be like "oh, what a pleasant surprise" when I find them out buying doughnuts because they just *had* to have doughnuts. One time we had a professor from Mexico. The steering committee decided that we weren't just going to invite speakers from our own country; from time to time, we could have someone from somewhere else. That visitor caused my first flap with the steering committee. I remember her topic, because the title was so long: "Different Interpretations of the Cartesian Cogito in the Context of the Globalization Process." When she got off the plane—the distance from the plane to the main lobby is about twenty meters—I noticed her slip was showing and she had hairy legs. I'm a man, so I couldn't tell her any of that, but I mentioned it to Mimi and Chichi, who help the committee out with the decorations and that sort of thing. They told me there was no way they were going to bring it up; it was too awkward. Then Nicolás di Marco, that know-it-all, said that in Mexico women don't shave their legs. Conclusion: she didn't cross her ankles while she sat there giving her lecture and her slip ended up hanging down even more, or at least that's what it seemed like to me.

That's when I started thinking of people like little animals with certain tendencies and trying to guess what they were. When I saw a woman with a flower print dress, colorful shoes, and windblown hair who was a bit slow on the uptake, I would say, "I bet she wants to go see the river." If I saw a man appropriately dressed, but in a boring, well-worn suit, as if he wasn't concerned with his appearance beyond making sure he was decent, I would think, "Rou-



lette." And I was almost always right. But there was one who really got my attention: the sociologist who came to talk about "Tensions Inherent to Our Era." He seemed like a cool guy. He asked to see the city so we hired a car. We started talking about the rise in drug use, the power of the cartels, and the need for youths to channel their energy into sports. The guy knew his stuff. Now, looking back on it, he sounded a bit like a politician—the way they seem like they've had it all figured out since the day they were born and never doubt themselves or need to ask questions. He already had all the answers, and then some.

When we drove by a tiny pink house, I said to him, "That's where they sell drugs. They call the owner 'Chinaman.'"

He said, "You think anyone's home?"

"I think so."

"I'm going to get out for a second."

He got out, rang the bell and Chinaman answered the door. They spoke to each other quickly. When he came back, he said, "It's for research."

I don't think he was doing any research; I bet he was making a deal to swing by later. Too bad Marilu, who lives up the block, was away. Otherwise she could have confirmed my suspicions. For me, 98 percent chance he was buying drugs. And ever since then I don't believe anything they tell me; I barely listen and I'm more guarded than ever. I just say "aha" or "could be" to everything.

But not everyone who came was a disaster. After the sociologist, there was this woman—a real lady from head to toe. We considered the local women very ladylike, but they couldn't hope to compare; her hair was dyed a perfect ash-blonde, she wore barely any makeup, just some soft pink blush, and her dress went with everything. To the casual eye, the dress was unremarkable, but you knew

it was well-chosen, practical, appropriate. Even though she maintained a certain distance, she was so canny and precise in everything, like with her clothes, that I could have fallen in love with that woman, even if she did have twenty years on me. She came to talk about "Life as a Work of Art" and I remember the whole lecture, especially a phrase of Goethe's: "It is impossible to think with an unkempt head of hair." Her talk really affected us all. She said she only ate macrobiotic products (bran bread, wheat gluten, chicory coffee, and that sort of thing), so we put Mónica Gaucheron on the committee. At the time, she was the only one who ate that stuff, and from then on she was in charge of making sure it was on hand for anyone who wanted it. This caused a tiff amongst the steering committee and they used it as an opportunity to kick out Chichi and Mimi, who hadn't been doing anything lately, not even asking their birdbrained questions during the Q&A sessions. That woman was the dawn of a new age. From then on, everyone ate macrobiotic food for a while. Then they got tired of it. I started to get tired, too, especially of waiting for people at the bus station. There's always those dogs lying around there, they look like they've been there a hundred years; if it's hot out, the street sweeper makes it even hotter pushing his dirty broom around; and, I don't know why, but there are flies. When the buses come in from the countryside, all these people arrive with loads and loads of packages, as if they were carrying around everything they owned. To be honest, it all started to get on my nerves, but especially the dogs and the packages. The dogs are almost always lying down, and if they move, they only do it as a last resort. No one even knows who they belong to. And the packages got on my nerves because their owners' faces were full of such hope, like they were going to a big city, to Buenos Aires or to Paris or to God knows where else. Lately, I had started showing up to the bus station at the last possible minute. "I'll get in and get out," I would say to myself. Then I started to get tired of going to the airport too, of that single airplane in the middle of the flatlands, everything all desolate around it. And it's such



a tiny plane; it looks like a plaything. To think that when I was little I wanted to go see that plane every day. I started to get tired of picking people up and took to calling them all tools. "That tool said he was getting in at ten." And then I would wake up in a hurry, I would just barely make it or get there a little late, afraid they'd already left, and sometimes hoping there wouldn't even be anyone there. I also started calling Nicolás di Marco a tool. Even if I was no expert on that evening's subject, I could tell when he was going to ask a question before he even opened his mouth. And since I was the one they put in charge of organizing the Q&A sessions, I started cutting him off; I would let him ask three or four questions at most, and then over and out. That got me into trouble with Nicolás di Marco. He said, "It's authoritarian of you to cut off the discussion." Sure, if that's the only thing you're good at. One time they asked him if he would give a lecture and he refused, even though the poor dummy thinks giving a lecture is such a huge deal. He lost his chance and then his questions started getting longer and more complicated all the time.

End of free preview. To purchase the full story and collection, go to <http://oxandpigeon.com/the-portable-museum-issue-2/>.

About Ox and Pigeon Digital Publishers

Ox and Pigeon is a digital publisher founded by three friends in September 2010 over a round of pisco sours in Lima, Peru. Our goal is to use the accessibility and convenience of electronic publishing to share the work of great authors from around the world and provide a quality complement to traditional books and journals.

The Portable Museum, our digital journal of literature in translation, is dedicated to finding new and interesting authors and making their stories available in English. Adventurous readers will enjoy these original translations. Stay with us as we continue to curate a growing catalog of unique stories, many appearing in English for the first time.

We're always looking for translators who want to share their work with a wider audience via digital publishing.

For more information visit us online at www.oxandpigeon.com or email us at info@oxandpigeon.com



FREE PREVIEW FROM WWW.OXANDPIGEON.COM