

Sailing at the Edge of Bottomless Blue

Pedro Roa Ortega

"I want water, river, rain. I can no longer stand solid surfaces under my feet." In *Life was Long Ago* (*La Vida Fue Hacer Mucho*),¹ Marita Lopera tells the story of young Alea: adrift sailor, nimble spearfisher, stout free diver. Born on a boat, Alea becomes a non-being on land. She feels homesick, weightless, and empty, for she is a creature of the sea. She sails without maps. Alea claims allegiance to no flag, anthem, or ground but Mother Ocean: the end, the horizon, the place of a broken pact. The connections between life, decay, timelessness, and death are carefully explored throughout this book. *Life Was Long Ago* reads like a tale about the end of the world, a study of human self-destructiveness, and a portrait of nature's startling fragility and everlasting power.

Alea embraces risk. She lives a frugal life: active, fierce, and uncompromising informed-by-practice aimlessness. Fate has called her: *alea iacta est*. Like César Vallejo's *Eternal Dice*, worn round and smooth from being rolled again and again, permanence is vexing to her. She rejects pedestrian affairs: property, money, lineages, birth or death certificates. Alea dwells on the interminable fluctuation of a watery world. Places that can eat you alive. Life preying upon life. *Life Was Long Ago* has a decisive

¹ Marita Lopera, *La vida fue hace mucho* (Angosta Editores, 2022).

ecological message. However, there is no romanticism in it, no deceitful praise for a primordial harmony with the natural world. This is a book about that which is irredeemably lost, an ominous political-aquatic critique, like sailing into the open seas of despair, looking at the sinking ships of endless progress.

The novel has seven chapters: Bay, Island, Rock, Beach, Edge, Cliff, and Cape. Some were initially conceived as short stories, each with characters and situations that symbolize the vast array of human conflicts which Sigmund Freud called "cultural malaise." Indeed, the influence of Eros and Thanatos is omnipresent in Alea's journey. She navigates the affirmation of life to the point of death. The survival instincts of everything that breathes, and the inescapable return to a state of perpetual immobility. Between oceanic forces breaking through, and humanity's abysmal solitude and selfishness. Between limitless pelagic freedom and earthly fecklessness.

Without neglecting the Colombian Caribbean's incomprehensible beauty, the author breaks with the image of a tropical paradise. She makes the reader feel like floating naked amidst a strange blue warmth, the storm of history looming ahead. Fishermen, oh foolish fishermen! Are you not the cause of the very thing you blame? Have you truly become no more than bare automata? Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was right! Seduced or coerced by monthly corporate paychecks, loud diesel engines, and monstrous trawling nets, you cannot see life disappearing right before your eyes. You believed there would always be more fish. You thought nothing would ever change. And you were wrong.

Life Was Long Ago opens with a hopeless scene. It is early in the morning. Alea is *troleando* (fishing with a hook cast from her boat as it sails), but the wind is sluggish. She then tries diving, but the water is murky. Eventually, a comb fish

passes by. It is too young. Alea knows it would be wiser to let it grow older and reproduce, but hunger creeps in like knives from within. She must eat. She must kill to survive. Hunger is so prevalent in the novel that it could be seen as another character, creaking and cracking. The kind of hunger that never goes away.

Alea guts the fish. Horror! Red, yellow, and blue bits of plastic appear where only sandy, kelpy fecal matter should be. At times, *Life Was Long Ago* reads like a full-on misanthropist manifesto. Alea witnesses the magnitude of our ecological collapse; she sees coral reefs turn skeleton-like, the coastline bitten off and swallowed by the sea. She sees the mangroves no longer dancing with the waves. She sees the forest dried up, shriveled, and burning. She hears agonizing creatures begging for ultimate relief. Exhaustion, anger, sadness, and guilt: Alea experiences environmental degradation within herself.

As an inheritor of Latin American surrealist and magical realist traditions, this book has a certain atemporal rhythm. Quick, plucky, splish-splash, like childish steps in the bubbling whoosh of life that was long ago. The story unfolds over a week, but it also drags us to and fro within Alea's stream of memories. The characters we meet have split personalities and contrasting auras. Like actors in a small play, they seem to appear twice. Their words and actions hurt and heal, just like poison can be medicine.

We first meet Alea as a young woman; she has been sailing the Gulf of Urabá for over ten years, half of it alone. Her mentor, the Scientist, is gone, but his love of marine life remains with her. Alea and the Scientist established a somewhat distant but generous relationship of teaching and learning. She becomes something like a post-mortem guardian, preserving his records and correspondence across that blue stretch of living histories that some people awkwardly call "the pond." The Scientist represents the

best of old Mediterranean culture: the taste for fine wine and delicacies, the appetite for travel and knowledge.

We now go back in time. Alea is a child. Her mother, who, strangely enough, remains nameless, was a woman from the interior, the highlands. The sea terrified her, and she never learned to swim. Before dying, Alea's mother taught her to read and write, but she could never protect her from El Capi's rage. A man like too many, miserable, whose dreams had been crushed by modernity's false promises. Alea is a burden to him. He constantly throws her off the boat. The first time, she plunged like a stone. Pluck! It was as if she were born anew: nothing but bubbles. One day, El Capi tossed her over yet again, only this time, he sped off the coast. Alone, gluck-gluck, big blue. She swam.

Alea reaches Cabo Tiburón. There, she meets La Señó, an example of what loss and isolation do to us. She lives sunk into bottomless loneliness, only trying to survive. She epitomizes everything we have to unlearn about what family is. La Señó struggles to remember what it means to have someone to care for and to feel cared for. Her tone and words are cold and commanding. Her silence is anemic and thorny. It is as if La Señó has dried out, yet she does feed and shelter Alea. Why? She asks. Alea will work for La Señó for the next seven years. She will learn how to climb trees, feel the breeze, and imagine herself high at sea.

Is there a better way of escaping destiny than not having a predetermined route? Is abandonment not freedom? Gushing springs and soothing rain. Soft and strong. Water is the mirror of truth. This is not so much a book review as it is a plea to translators everywhere. For the sake of all who sometimes feel that life is like a fishbowl, *Life Was Long Ago* must be made available in as many languages as possible.