

Rafael Reyes-Ruiz, *The Ruins*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Latin American Literary Review Press, 2014. ISBN 9781891270260.

The Ruins is an interesting rumination on the joys and fallacies of a twenty-first century global identity. The protagonist is Tomas Rodrigues, or Luis Rodrigues-Ochoa, a Columbian academic of Portuguese descent teaching Japanese history and later Latin American and Caribbean studies in a Japanese university. Although married and divorced from a Japanese woman, who continues to play a big part in his life, he is haunted by the memories of a Timorese Portuguese Chinese Dutch woman he met twenty-five years ago. Yes, a Timorese Portuguese Chinese Dutch woman going by the name of Monica Caldeira-Klaseen. The story begins with him seeing a girl who looks like Monica while he is taking a break in Goa. From his email correspondence, we learn that he is disillusioned with his current job because he has not been able to progress very far in his department. Already mentally agitated by stress and a deep sense of failure, the appearance of a ghost from the past sends him on a downward spiral that culminates in a blackout at an airport terminal in Mumbai.

According to recent research, mental health problems are on the rise in academia. Claire Shaw and Lucy Ward wrote in *The Guardian* that nearly half of academics in the UK show symptoms of psychological distress, and a study in Australia that was published in the *New Scientist* claimed that the rate of mental illness in academic staff was three to four times higher than that of the general population.¹ The reason for this tendency is due to an increased blurring of lines between the personal and the professional as academics, who are often passionate about their field of study, increasingly face a marketised education system that quantifies results in terms of student satisfaction as well as research funding that is supposedly comparable on a global scale. Caught up in this system of league tables and conflicting management demands, academics suffer from a very poor work-life balance. The consequence of such an imbalance soon becomes visible in a person's physical and mental well-being, of which Tomas is an excellent example.

Tomas's temporary bout of amnesia after his blackout makes us suspicious about everything he says. This puts another layer of complexity on what is already a complicated story being told in a complex manner. The story is written in the third-person; however, the narrator is not omniscient. In fact, the narrator only conveys what is inside Tomas's head: his memories, his thoughts, his anxieties. After what occurs at the airport, we follow him on a mental loop as he tries to figure out the cause of his breakdown. Soares is the doctor who

¹ Claire Shaw and Lucy Ward, "Dark Thoughts: Why Mental Illness is on the Rise in Academia." *The Guardian* (Thursday, 6 March 2014). Christie Wilcox, "Fixing Academia's Mental Health Problems" *New Scientist* (Issue 2990, 10 October 2014).

treats and befriends him briefly in Mumbai. Coincidentally, he is also of mixed Portuguese heritage like Tomas and Monica. He sends Tomas on a wild goose chase with forged historical documents which he claims belonged to his Jesuit uncle who was a priest and at one point the director of the Iberoamerican library at Tomas's university. Although Soares and Monica seem to be on separate quests, aspects of their identity strongly echo those of Tomas's personal discoveries. Later, we realise that Soares was supposedly Monica's lover and possibly the father of a girl who Tomas thinks is his own daughter. We cannot help but question whether these characters are who Tomas say they are or just figments of his imagination blown out of proportion.

Like Tomas we are bound by his thoughts which suggest a degree of intimacy, but at the same time the story being recounted in the third person offers no real clarity. It is understandable that Tomas himself is trying to puzzle out the pieces of his past, but this confusion is magnified when we are unable to figure out for ourselves what is going on because we are twice removed and cannot trust either Tomas or the narrator. An example of this confusion is Tomas's thoughts on Monica's daughters Evelyn and Miryam. We are told that Evelyn is a young woman with Slavic or Asian features who looks approximately 25 years old, the right age to be Tomas's daughter. Miryam seems to be the younger sister who looks Latin or Eurasian, or of mixed Mediterranean heritage (74). Tomas calls Evelyn Monica's doppelganger but also says Miryam "is identical to her mother and could not be mine" (97). Later he contradicts himself, "he had seen himself in Miryam's eyes" and "[w]hat worries me now is whether I am Miryam de Voer's father" (100). Furthermore, his friend Naomi teases him about desiring "the one that looks like Monica, which means you're a pervert or something like that because she could be your daughter, not only in age but your *real* daughter" (99). Evelyn is the right age to be his daughter hence Tomas surmises that Miryam is unlikely to be his. However, Naomi refers to "the one that looks like Monica" as the "*real* daughter" who is also of the right age. But, it is Miryam that Tomas says looks identical to Monica and it is Evelyn who he says is of the right age! Indeed, Tomas knows as much as we do about Monica's daughters thus his uncertainty is not detrimental to our understanding of him as a person. It does make us question the state of his mind and reveal the neurotic aspect of his character.

Although Monica's ghost acts as a catalyst to Tomas's breakdown, it is likely that his health has been on the decline for a while. Tomas likes to think of himself as an outgoing and adventurous person, but in actuality we know that he struggles with isolation and loneliness that is part self-imposed and part job-related. He has poor relationships with the dean of his department and his colleagues; his fears over job security, lack of research funds and student disgruntlement weigh heavily on his mind. He shows signs of being depressed: he spends much of his days holed up in his apartment sleeping late and drinking

alcohol; he is often immersed in thoughts of the past and is full of regrets; he is insecure about his future but feels oppressed and helpless to change the situation; he has frequent headaches and likes to wander around aimlessly, sometimes getting lost; his only friends seem to be his ex-wife and a female colleague in another department. It is clear that a difference in viewpoints on intellectual pursuits and the academia are responsible for his failed relationship with Monica, and likewise cultural differences and opinions on acceptable behaviour in the academic environment leads to his divorce. Undoubtedly, many factors affect the outcome of his life, but his occupation proves to be an underlying and pervasive force.

The Ruins may be a work of fiction, but it is also a poignant tale of a man's suffering in a believable albeit very particular academic world. Tomas loses himself in his studies to feel a sense of purpose and find an anchor for his identity; however, he becomes so set on his path and habituated to the stifling community that it threatens to ruin him. We are able to relate to his identity crisis and ultimately sympathise with his loss. His observation of "two butterflies flying to the ground in a downward spiral, as if trapped in a small whirlwind" (49) beautifully sums up the situation. It is symbolic of how we are constantly wrestling with forces that have the potential to trap us in a fatal fall.

Works Cited

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