

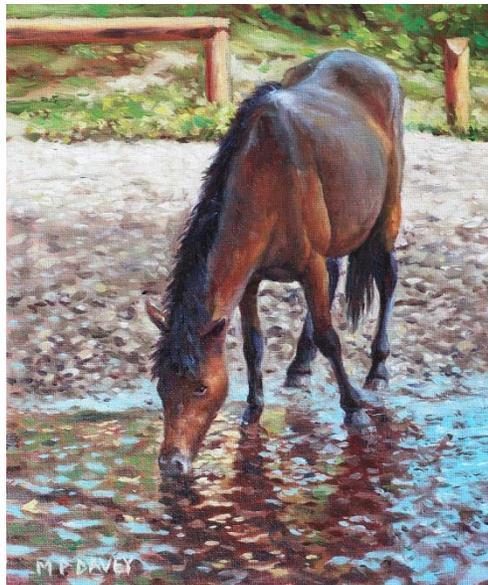
“Horse” by Hernán Ronsino

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*That anxious horse
of summer*
Haroldo Conti

1. Peaches

Polo and Cachila receive the order. Almada, leaning against the door to the shack, says, “You’ll have to go fetch the horse and bring him back before nightfall.” The horse grazes by the river. They left him there on Sunday, after the harness races. He’s a brown bay. His name is Chúcaro Trelpón. And, in a stunning upset, he won the long-distance race. Now a certain Samudio, it seems, wants to buy him.



*“Brown Horse Drinking from Stream” by [Martin Davey](#).
Image courtesy of the artist.*

The river is on the other side of town. So it’s nearly thirty kilometers there and back. Cachila soaks his head by the side of the shack, spreading his legs wide under a leaky

faucet surrounded by mud puddles full of flies. Two or three of Almada's children, their cheeks streaked with dry snot, watch Cachila soak his hair and shiver from the sensation of cold water running down his nape. Polo, shirtless, a sling hanging from his neck, waits for him in the street, mounted on the bicycle. Cachila then climbs up on the crossbar. And Almada's children push the bicycle to help them get underway. Then it is Almada's skinny, famished dogs that escort them about as far as the abandoned ceramics factory. And from that point they will ride on alone and hear, the two of them, Polo and Cachila, nothing more than the murmuring of the pigeons and a few of the birds of the afternoon siesta.

Polo strains to pedal on. With each turn of the pedals, he just barely brushes Cachila's scrawny thighs and, also, touches, with the tip of his chin, his straw-like wet hair. What does Cachila smell of? Smoke? Burnt, wet wood? Just before crossing the paved road—the main street, as they call it—he begins to sweat, to feel the weight of Cachila on the crossbar, even though Cachila is as light as a feather. Then they stop on the paved road because two trucks loaded with cargo are coming the other way. Cachila jumps off and Polo, more relaxed, rests with a leg on the ground. Polo thinks of ants. Whenever he has a moment to himself, he thinks of ants; he has been told that the queen ant is as big as a toad. An ant like a toad. The loaded trucks grumble and as they pass they let loose a shower of cereals that leap off from underneath the blue tarpaulins; the tarpaulins flap from the heavy speed of the Bedfords. Now Polo and Cachila don't have the help of the Almada children to push them off, they must manage to resume the journey on their own. And this is how they do it: Polo pedals and Cachila runs alongside and then hops on the crossbar. When they do this, after having crossed the paved road and hearing the grumbling of the trucks fade away, the bicycle wobbles a bit. But then, after a brusque struggle, Polo reins it in and regains control. And they go on.

Now they know that behind the sewage treatment canal is the Schultz farm. They also know that they haven't been by there since that late Sunday afternoon when Polo got snagged in the barbed wire and saw Schultz's face behind a tightly held carbine: one eye closed and dried out words coming furiously out the mouth. He learned then, Polo, what fear really was. Cachila managed to run away. He ran so far and blindly that he fell into one of the ditches next to the canal. It was a miracle he didn't break a leg. But now they know, both of them, that when they cross the sewage treatment canal they'll have to, for the first time since that late Sunday afternoon, contend with the Schultz farm. And this is why they feel, both at the same time, that urge for revenge.

Schultz is actually the farm's caretaker. The owner is a man from Mercedes that is never there. It is Schultz who lives and works there. That is why the farm is known as the Schultz farm. The property has a peach orchard. On late Friday afternoons, during the summer, some trucks enter and, two or three hours later, when it's almost night,

they leave with their cargo and then, on weekends, the peaches are sold on those roadside stands that also sell cheese and salami.

That place is a challenge. When they first tried it, it went badly. That's why it's a challenge. For example: it was easier to trespass on the Laviña farm. They would always sneak onto old man Laviña's property, with its plums and blackberries. But old man Laviña never said a word to them. One time he caught them hanging off of a plum tree. And Mrs. Laviña invited them into the house and took out a tray from the refrigerator and they ate some very fresh plums. And afterwards they drank water and slept under the vines in the patio. But the Schultz farm is a challenge. Because it is guarded. And also because they already tried it once and got caught.

After crossing the sewage treatment canal, a wide curve opens up and as they round it, off to the sides, the fruit-bearing trees of the Schultz farm appear, together with the soft, warm aroma of ripe peaches. So Cachila hops off the bicycle. Polo is not so sure. Polo wants to dig a hole and see the true size of the queen. Cachila, however, wants to go in and break something. That's what he says. Polo leaves the bicycle in the ditch by the road, under the shade of the trees, and makes it clear that if they go in, it's to steal peaches and nothing more. Cachila, excited, insists on breaking something. And this time Polo doesn't say anything. He looks at the ground, sitting in the ditch: if he had a bit more time, he'd dig a hole right then and there. "Have it your way," says Cachila, resigned, "but we have to see where Yul is." Polo is skilled at that sort of thing: he climbs up the nearest eucalyptus tree. There isn't a tree that is harder to climb than a eucalyptus. But Polo is like a cat. He climbs the tree with unbelievable ease. There he is: scraping up his hands and knees, ascending. As he climbs, the world changes. Its features and his perception of it begin to mutate. And so he reaches the first branch. Stuck to his skin are those dried up bits of bark that are found on eucalyptus trees. And he is smeared with their smell. It gets in his skin. Now Cachila, for Polo, is a tiny body trapped in the shadow drawn on the ground by the eucalyptus tree. He's at a good height. Five or six meters. Cachila signals from below. Says things. Polo can now view the full expanse of the Schultz farm, the sun violently hitting the land. And behind the railway bridge, toward the area of the hospital, a dark storm front approaches. Then Cachila shouts: "You see him?" Polo nods. Schultz is lying in the grass, under the shade of a willow tree, next to the house. The dogs he doesn't see. But Schultz is resting, with a straw hat covering his face, so the dogs must be near him. "You stay there. I'm going in," orders Cachila. And to Polo it seems like a good plan. He rests on a branch, watching Cachila crawl under the barbed wire and also keeping tabs on Schultz's siesta. And so things stand. Polo's gaze now contemplates some columns of white smoke rising up behind the sewage treatment sheds. Cachila moves into Schultz's territory. Polo doesn't know what Cachila is up to, but if Cachila keeps going in that direction, in a few minutes Polo won't be able to see him. That possibility begins to

worry him. One of Schultz's dogs appears under the shade of the willow tree and then lies down next to his master. Polo has lost sight of Cachila: he tracks his path by the slight movement of peach tree branches. And those movements confirm his fears. Cachila advances toward the danger zone. Polo concludes that it's too late for him to do anything about it. If he shouts, he'll wake Schultz up and alarm the dogs. He must trust Cachila. The birds, at this hour, do not sing. The only sound that can be perceived is the somewhat muted murmur of distant motors. Then, when Polo begins to think, once more, about the size of the queen ant, a scream breaks out.

Following the scream, Polo sees Schultz stir, jump up and rush into the house. The dogs run among the trees, barking. Something shoves through under the branches. Polo makes out the path of Cachila's return. Then Schultz reappears holding a carbine. He exits the house and looks out into the distance. Polo senses he's been spotted, that Schultz has seen him up in the eucalyptus tree while strident barking is heard in the background and Cachila's skinny body moves among the peach trees. Schultz aims at him. Polo, terrified, drops from the eucalyptus, hugging its trunk. He falls, scraping his entire body. Fear, at that very moment, overpowers pain. He gets on the bicycle. Cachila is about to emerge from the orchard. The dogs are also nearing the road. Polo begins to pedal. Cachila appears a few meters ahead. He yells at him to hurry. "Come on!" Cachila shouts. "Come on!" Polo exerts himself. He pedals faster. The dogs will appear at any moment. Cachila runs towards the bicycle. His shirt, stuffed and folded over, looks like a kangaroo's pouch. The dogs are at the property line but can't get through the barbed wire. They become frenzied but can't pass. That, for the two boys, comes as a bit of a relief. Cachila climbs up on the crossbar. "Let's get out of here," he says, "Go!" Polo pedals. He thinks of unimportant things, like, for instance: that Cachila's hair is now dry. He thinks of meaningless things while Cachila keeps shouting; they know, both of them, that once they turn the curve leading to the railway bridge they'll be safe. What does Cachila smell of? Smoke? Burnt, wet wood? What does he smell of? Polo thinks these meaningless things as they take the curve that will save them at full speed. A victory cry ripens in their throats. The cry rises, twisting, like the columns of white smoke behind the sewage treatment sheds that neither of them can see at the moment: but Schultz's face, next to a post, aiming at them, appears meaninglessly, like Polo's thoughts. "Don't stop!" Cachila yells out. "Don't stop!" And he half closes his eyes. Polo hides his face behind Cachila's back. "Don't stop!" he insists as they wait for the shot. Polo thinks: What is it like to get shot? And now, suddenly, he feels his body on fire. The bicycle swerves at full speed. Then they hear Schultz's voice, as they pass by, simulating two shots: "Bang! Bang!" he shouts. They feel nothing more than a brief moment of disorientation before they lose control on the curve's loose, sandy dirt. Polo ends up by the ditch; Cachila hangs on a bit longer, tottering, but he also finally falls, and ends up on top of the bicycle. A few peaches roll in the street. And

those victory cries that climbed so hurriedly up their throats, now come out softly in the pitiful form of a lament.

2. The River

The summer storm—that dark front that was spotted over the area of the hospital—strikes just before Polo and Cachila make it to the railway bridge. For that reason they have to run, because the rains are accompanied by powerful gusts of wind. But their running doesn't keep them from arriving at the bridge soaking wet. Cachila throws down the bicycle, all twisted, against the iron pillars. The handlebars are bent off-center and the wheels are broken. Polo, dripping wet, looks at the remains of Almada's bicycle. And tries to think of how to fix it. But he soon gives up. He whistles, folding his tongue up in his mouth, as a call to Cachila, who has been looking out in the distance in the direction of the area of the hospital. And he throws him two green peaches. "Eat," he says. After a while, the sky begins to clear up. A soft light appears over the sewage treatment area. The raindrops begin to fall as if wrung out. And, gradually, it stops raining. From the bridge, the smell of wet dirt invades the air they breathe.

Almada's bicycle is no longer of any use on this journey. They leave it under the bridge. The sun's reappearance imposes, gradually, a heavy, humid air. Weariness and thirst take hold of them both. Cachila is the mastermind. He's the one who always gives the orders. He now tells Polo, who sits down under the shade of a bead tree, to call at the Barrante house for water. Polo refuses. Although he's thirsty, he refuses. He says no, shaking his head. Cachila looks at him fixedly. It bothers him when his orders aren't obeyed. But his thirst is stronger than any anger. Standing before the gate of polished wood, Cachila can hear the assorted voices of the children on the other side: splashing, laughing, in short, abundance. What does Cachila imagine, there, standing under a fierce sun, before a gate of polished wood? That is what Polo wonders, crossing his legs in the shade of the bead tree. Cachila works up his courage and gives a heavy knock, with his knuckles, on the polished wood. The gate shakes. The laughing and splashing stops. He hears footsteps running on the warm, soft lawn. Everything is suspended in the silence of the afternoon. Everything is devoured by the distant sounds of cicadas and motors. But there is no response. And so Cachila insists. He raps his knuckles against the polished wood. "Please," he says, "can you give us some water?" On the other side, there is some brief restlessness. And then again the muted murmuring, the apparent calm, the quiet roar of a faraway motor. Polo, under the shade, senses something is wrong. So he gets up and heads towards the gate. But before he gets there, he sees how a sheet of water falls, violently, against Cachila's skinny body. No doubt, thinks Cachila thoroughly soaked, their polished cars are parked under the shade of the willow trees and the grown men, relaxing on recliners and drinking fresh

lemonade, are egging the kids on. That's what Cachila thinks. And looking at Polo, he takes the sling from around his neck. And he climbs, not saying anything, puffing with rage, on Polo's body. What does Cachila smell of? He waits for calm to more or less reign once again on the other side. And, when no one expects it, perched on Polo's shoulders, he leans his body over the white wall. He takes aim, threateningly, with a panoramic sweep. He sees almost everything he had imagined. The kids having fun like hyenas, the polished cars under the shade and, finally, his eyes come to rest on the house with its large window. Everything happens so quickly. The glass explodes together with screams of panic from the Barrantes.

They run. Cachila can't stop thinking of how much water he saw in that blue swimming pool. They run, while in the distance a soft rumbling clambers closer, taking possession of the afternoon air, growing louder as they approach the gravel road. They run agitatedly, their temples throbbing from the effort: Cachila thinks of broken glass, Polo only feels the small stones he steps on through his wet rope-soled sandals. The road appears suddenly and then, neatly silhouetted, the shape of a truck loaded with grease and picked-clean bones, moving, roaring. Cachila orders, "Come on!" And he keeps running with the intention of climbing up on the running board. Polo looks on from behind, tired. Polo wants to dig up the ground, to see the size of the queen. The truck, every time it accelerates, spews black smoke. Cachila climbs on, but on the rear bumper. He says, looking back, "Come on!" He stretches out his hand. Polo puts all he's got into it. He stretches out his hand, brushes Cachila's fingers. "Come on," he hears. The back smoke envelopes them. Polo, breathing in the gas oil emitted by the truck as he struggles onto the rear bumper, thinks of meaningless things, of the oil processing plant, of the smell, for example, of heaps of dried sunflowers behind the oil processing plant.

The driver is Aceituno. He's transporting the grease and bones to the meat processing plant. Polo, clinging to the back, recognizes him. And he knows the truck has to turn before the small hill, at the intersection with La Salada, and that's where they ought to hop off and then follow the path that will finally lead them to the river. Polo looks at Aceituno's head, framed by a small window, in the cabin of the Ford. He sees him as if he were a wax figure or an image on a stained glass window. An army of flies hovers over the cargo of grease. "Now," Polo shouts as the Ford shifts into low gear to turn onto La Salada. And that's when they hop off. The truck staggers to one side as it makes the tight turn. Then it shifts gears again and clambers along thunderously, releasing a puff of black smoke, towards the meat processing plant. As its rumbling fades, Polo and Cachila find the path they were looking for.

They both now know that with a sign, with a slight movement of a leg, with a simple juke even, by either one of them, the race is on. And that fills them with excitement. It's Polo who takes off without warning. Cachila, then, tries to catch him. But Polo has already

bolted. And despite the weariness he feels in his body, despite the falls and the downpour, he advances down the gravel path, stepping forcefully with his black sandals. There are two hundred meters to the river. On the sides of the path grow leafy trees and plants that spread a humid shadow. They run. The water awaits. Polo thinks that the dirt underground, like where the queen ant lives, for example, is fresh like this place. They run. The dense, brown water awaits. Now a hand reaches out towards Polo. Cachila tries to push him out of the way. What does Cachila smell of? But they struggle. As they run, they struggle. And they laugh. Now there is nothing before their eyes but the river, dazzling under the blue sky. On one side mounds of dirt. And on the other, standing very still, its head buried in the dry grass, Almada's horse, startled. They run. The river, warm and brown, like glass encrusted in the earth, finally, belongs to them.



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*In this interview aired by Radio Sur TV, Hernán Ronsino discusses his second novel, *Glaxo*:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHkonZReucM>