# "The Orange Tree" from *Contos de mentira* (2011) by Luisa Geisler

# "From Your Arms" from *Rachaduras* (2019) by Natalia Timerman

*Translated by Meg Weeks*

## Translator's Preface

The following short stories, written by Luisa Geisler and Natalia Timerman, offer a small sample of the literary prowess of a dynamic cohort of young female writers hailing from Brazil. Luisa Geisler was born in 1991 in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state, just two years after Brazil's first post-dictatorship presidential election. She released her first collection of short stories when she was only 19 years old and has since published a number of other works of fiction. In addition to writing fiction, she is a literary translator and a scholar: Geisler has translated several critically acclaimed novels from English to Portuguese and is currently pursuing a PhD in Latin American literature at Princeton University. Natalia Timerman, born in 1981, is a writer, physician, and literary scholar whose early work explored her experiences working in a prison hospital in São Paulo. She has since published one collection of short stories and two novels and has been a finalist for the Jabuti and Candango literary prizes. Timerman's training as a psychiatrist is apparent in her prose, which, rather than foregrounding plot, explores the recesses of afflicted psyches.

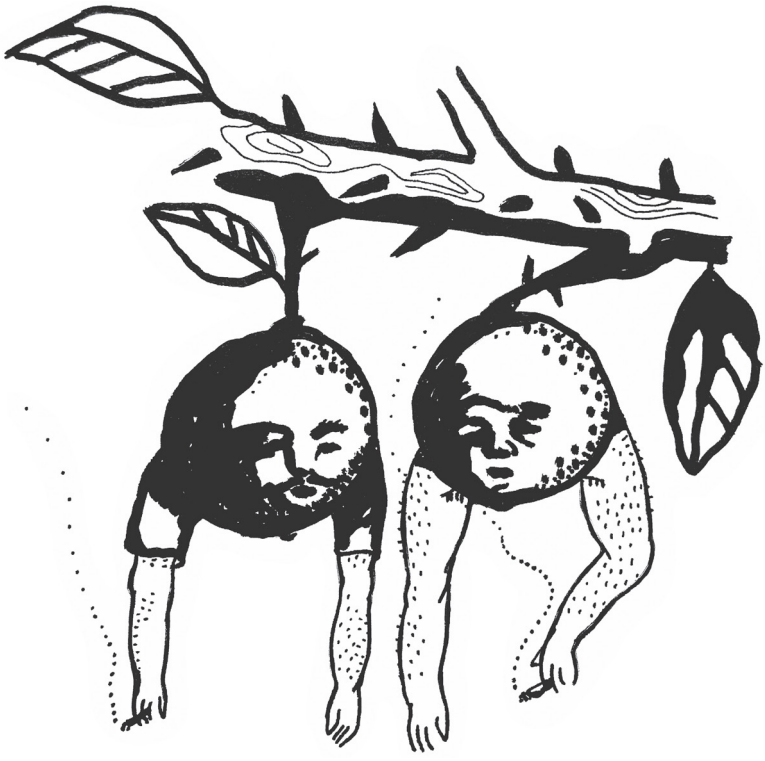
Upon reading Geisler's work for the first time, I was instantly intrigued by her coupling of minimal, stripped-down language and enigmatic plot elements. Geisler and I are around the same age, and I was interested in how a young writer approached the genre of the short story from within a literary canon very different from the one with which I grew up in the United States. "The Orange Tree," from 2011's *Contos de mentira* (Made-up stories), depicts the frustrations and coping mechanisms of two inhabitants of a provincial town, perhaps in Geisler's native southern state, as suggested by a smattering of regional slang: the intimate address *tchê*; *guri*, meaning boy; and the versatile exclamation *bah*. The story portrays a fraught friendship between two middle-aged men, each thwarted in his own way, whose geniality and rapport belies a simmering tension. Geisler offers minimal omniscience and includes dialogue not attributed to a specific character, subtle forms of opacity that were the greatest challenge this text presented to me as a translator. The themes she engages

in the story—family strife, social stagnation, financial hardship, the banality of workaday life, inexplicable violence—are timeless and not geographically specific, rendering it, to my mind, especially well suited to translation.

"From Your Arms," from Timerman's 2019 short story collection *Rachaduras* (Cracks, or Fissures), addresses the themes of motherhood, middle-age fantasies, and loneliness with an unsentimental quality that has long characterized her prose. In recent years, reviewers have compared Timerman to the Anglophone literary darlings Sally Rooney, Patricia Lockwood, and Lauren Oyler in her nuanced attention to millennial ennui. As such, she is among Brazil's most critically acclaimed new voices in the increasingly popular genre of autofiction. In "From Your Arms," Timerman plumbs the depths of the literary device of introspection, skillfully blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality. Depicting a frustrated divorcée's mid-life crisis, or perhaps simply her children's and ex-husband's panicked projection of one, this story taps into the persistent anxieties surrounding female sexual autonomy and irresponsible motherhood. In the tradition of such luminaries as Clarice Lispector, Lygia Fagundes Telles, and other canonical Brazilian authors who probed the violence and drudgery—both banal and grotesque—of intimate relationships, Timerman's story is an intriguing portrait of a woman's dissatisfaction with the trappings of middle-class life. The greatest difficulty I encountered as I translated this cryptic work was resisting the urge to subtly tie up the loose ends with which Timerman intentionally leaves her readers—to trust that the calculated ambiguity of the text be maintained in translation. Ultimately, I sought to strike a balance between ensuring that the language and plot cohered well in English and preserving the integrity of the author's decision to eschew conventional narrative resolution.

Regionalism is subtly present in both texts, with Geisler including colloquialisms from her home state and Timerman's story likely set in a large city that could easily be her native São Paulo. As Geisler's slang was difficult to translate in a way that would indicate an analogous regionalism to an Anglophone readership, I opted for geographically neutral colloquialisms: "kid" for *guri*, "man" for *tchê*, and the basic "yeah" for *bah*. The limitations of place and feelings

of entrapment pervade both texts, which depict characters hemmed in by circumstances—material, geographic, and familial. Gender is also a major theme in "The Orange Tree" and "From Your Arms," with their respective male and female protagonists acting recklessly in markedly different ways, one through senseless violence and the other through a shocking transgression—perhaps imagined, perhaps real—of the social norms surrounding family life.



## The Orange Tree

## by Luisa Geisler

Fausto's bar was located alongside the highway, but his only customers were people from town. On game days, his friends and acquaintances would gather there to watch the action on a 20-inch TV with poor reception. It was always humid inside the bar, regardless of how hot the day was. The chairs and tables were made of steel and adorned with the logos of alcohol brands. The walls and the floor were oak, the former plastered with advertisements for beer and soda. The room exhaled a permanent stink of ethyl alcohol and wet wood. The counter was enveloped in a plastic sheet, and behind it, there were shelves of bottles, a shotgun, jars of preserved food, and a large photographic menu covered in layers of dust.

One night, after everyone had left the bar, Fausto and Severo were making small talk outside. Severo had lingered because he wanted to wait for his wife to fall asleep before he got home; Fausto, because he had few people to talk to. Fausto was older than 50, lived at the bar, was single, and didn't have children. The two men talked.

"I just want you to pay for today. That's it," Fausto said. "Every night you put your drinks on your tab. Tonight I want you to pay for what you drank."

Severo didn't understand. He paid his tab when he could, when he began to feel ashamed to charge yet another drink to his account. Fausto had never before insisted he pay for his booze. Severo couldn't pay that night's bill; his son had a doctor's appointment in the state capital the following day. He had to pay for the expenses of the trip, the food, and the doctor's fee. He and his wife had spent months saving up and trying to secure an appointment with a pulmonologist who had a private practice. Severo had refused to consider getting on the waitlist of the national health service. They had traded a years-long wait for one of several months. Months of fever, cough, and bloody phlegm.

That night, Severo and Fausto had drunk the same old booze, spoken of the same old things, the same old people, the same

happenings in the same old town. The other customers had departed at the usual time, and Severo and Fausto had been left alone in the bar. They were the last two, as usual. This routine had led to a friendship between them, a certainty that they would be there for each other at the end of the night.

"I want you to pay for what you drank tonight," Fausto repeated, interrupting their routine.

Severo paused, trying to think of how many drinks he had had that night. He had stopped counting at the 11th shot of cachaça.

"But man, I'm telling you," Severo said, "I have no way of paying you! I barely brought any money with me tonight. If it was tomorrow, that would be a different story. . ."

"You can't leave without paying me for what you drank."

"But you've never done this to me before! What's going on with you?"

"I owe some money to people in town. Money from bets I lost. With the money I have in the bar I can pay off almost all of it, but I need you to pay for today."

"But why didn't you say something earlier? Now I have no way of helping you out."

"When you drink at a bar, it's your duty to pay. Paying your tab isn't helping out."

"Don't talk to me about duty. When have I ever been able to count on you?"

"I run a business here," Fausto said. "I have been your friend all these years. Today I just want you to be my friend as well." Severo let out his breath.

"OK, OK. I'll pay you. But if I'm already in knee-deep, I might as well have a few more." He extended his shot glass towards Fausto, "Serve me another."

Fausto filled his friend's glass and his own. He leaned against the bar and started talking again:

"Man, don't take this the wrong way, but I've got these debts from this betting thing. . ."

"OK, OK," said Severo. Upon downing the glass, he extended it towards Fausto once again. "One more." Fausto filled it promptly.

"How is your kid?"

"He's OK, you know, he still has that cough. Fever too."

"Yeah, that's complicated." Fausto downed another glass.

"But Marta got an appointment in the capital, at the end of the month. That woman is a saint," Severo said, looking behind the bar. "I'd do anything for those two."

"Family is everything, for sure," Fausto filled the two shot glasses again. "To family," he said while raising his glass. "And to friends, the family you choose."

"To family," toasted Severo. He drank the shot in one gulp.

They stayed silent for a while. Then Severo spoke again:

"And your family, how are they?" "They're great, man, they're great."

"How is your sister? It's been a while since I seen her."

"She's pregnant. With twins!"

"For real? What a blessing. I know how much you and your brother love your nephew. But two more children—now that'll be wild."

"Her husband was transferred about six months ago," Fausto said. "Ricardo went to help out with the kids, since the twins'll be born soon."

"So it's just you left here?"

"I stayed 'cause of the bar," Fausto turned his glass around in his hand. "There wouldn't be room for me in Rose's house, too many people. It would've been a pain for her."

"But you could help out. It'd be less of a pain. . ."

"Listen, you ever heard the story of the man who killed himself with a shotgun and a cigarette butt?"

"No way!"

"I swear to you," Fausto said. "Heard it down in the agricultural zone."

"But tell me more. How'd it happen?"

"The guy was real bummed out with his life and he wanted to kill himself. He had a shotgun, powder. . . but he didn't have a bullet. That's how pathetic he was, he was too dumb to know where to buy a bullet," Fausto said. Severo laughed. "But he wanted to kill himself. There he was, smoking, with all that sadness but no bullet. He thought, 'I'll put some cigarette butts in this gun, pull the trigger and kill myself.' And he did it."

"Come on man, that didn't happen. Impossible."

"I'm telling you that it did! I heard it from João Lauro."

"João Lauro is a liar! How do you think a cigarette butt could pass through clothes?" Severo scratched his neck. "How could you even manage to kill yourself with a shotgun?"

"Oh, maybe with a string, or with your thumb on the trigger. Ask João Lauro!"

"I will."

"Ask away, confirm it with him tomorrow morning. There's a shotgun right there! We can go outside, shoot at a tree, and see what happens."

Severo looked at the shotgun behind the bar and then at his friend's face. He agreed, letting loose an intoxicated grunt. Fausto grabbed the gun and wiped off the dust. He ducked under the bar and then placed upon it a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, a ramrod, and a pouch of gunpowder.

The area behind the building was as much for storage as it was a yard. In one corner, crates of beer and soda were piled atop one another, together with large bottles of wine. A strong smell of grapes and beer mixed with that of wet grass. Grass was visible as far as the horizon line, an open expanse. It was as humid outside the bar as it was inside. But outside, there were no walls to shield them from the chilly air. The stars lit up the open field. A single orange tree stood at the center of the yard.

Fausto carried the powder pouch and the ramrod in one of his hands, the shotgun hanging from his shoulder by a strap. In the other hand, he held the cigarettes and the lighter. With the back of one, he tapped a switch and a light came on in the yard. Fausto pulled two benches nearer to the light and lit a cigarette. He called to Severo, who sat down on the bench beside him.

When they had smoked eight cigarettes, Fausto said:

"What now?"

"Let's see if it works."

Fausto reached for the shotgun. Severo put the powder in the barrel. Then he put in a cigarette butt, followed by another, then a third. He filled the 1.5-centimeter circumference of the barrel.

"The orange tree?" Severo asked. Fausto nodded his head.

Severo approached the tree, stopping about seven steps away. He lifted the shotgun. He pointed it at the tree. He aimed.

He shot. A thud. Sparks. The smell of gunpowder.

The two men approached the tree. Severo was still holding the gun. Standing side by side, they examined it slowly, running their hands over the trunk. Intact, except for a few singe marks. Severo bellowed, drunk and proud of himself:

"Who was right? That story is a whole lotta nonsense!" Fausto ducked down. He observed the tree and the ground near the roots. "Man, let's go back inside. It's time to close the bar."

"It's early still."

"You've gotta be kidding! It's almost three in the morning, time to close up."

"You can't leave until you pay me."

"But I don't have any money."

"You can pay me just 70 reals today, that's all I need. The rest of it we can negotiate. I need that money," Fausto said. "I'm in trouble with important people. It's a matter of life and death, don't you get it?"

"It's you who isn't getting it."

Fausto inhaled and exhaled in silence. He said:

"Don't you want to try to shoot the tree again? Just to see what happens if we shoot from closer?"

"You can shoot, instead of me, but it's not going to work."

"You still don't believe my story?"

"The cigarette didn't even reach the tree. No way that story is true."

"If you're so sure that it won't work," Fausto laughed, "why don't you shoot at me? The final test."

Severo looked at his friend. Then he loaded the shotgun with powder and three cigarette butts. One step forward, and he was facing Fausto. The barrel of the gun against Fausto's chest. Before Fausto could react, Severo fired. Even though the shotgun was aimed at Fausto, Severo looked beyond him, at the orange tree.

A thud. Sparks. The smell of gunpowder. Biceps, ribcage, heart. A man remains on his feet one, two, three seconds, an eternity.

The man falls on the grass, alongside his orange tree. The man has a hole in his shirt. The shirt has a hole now seeping blood.

Severo was still holding the shotgun when he entered the bar. He went behind the counter. He placed the gun on the shelf where it had been before, in the exact place where he had found it.

## From Your Arms

## by Natalia Timerman

People's lives are always less interesting than I imagine them to be. Call it cliché, but I invent a past for people, a spectacular *why* that explains how they come to stand in front of me, laden with their bags and their gestures. This is not the case with the woman in blue, who sits in front of me at the café. Her story I know for certain.

It is the third consecutive week that I've seen her here, yet each week at a different time. The first two occasions, she sat down at a table pushed up against the wall. Today that table was occupied by an elderly couple, so the woman chose a different one, next to the door. From where I am seated I can see her well.

Even if I had deployed all my creativity to invent anything and everything when it came to her life, I wouldn't have come close to the truth.

I am discreet, I don't want her to see me looking at her bulging cloth bag hung on the chair, a piece of black lace poking out as if it were trying to escape.

Or perhaps it is she who is trying to be discreet.

Her coffee arrives, which she receives without looking at the waiter. From her forearm hangs a delicate gold chain. Resting in the hollow of her collarbone is a small pendant necklace—I can't make out exactly what it is, as I don't want to stare too intently. It looks like a lute. She holds the pendant with the fingers of her left hand and the handle of the coffee cup with her right hand. After taking a small sip—I can tell from her grimace that the coffee is scalding—she looks around her, attentive to everyone but not focusing on anyone in particular. Not even me.

She doesn't seem nervous, just tired, perhaps. Yes. Her tiredness has been with her for a long time, it weighs on her every movement, yet is kept concealed behind obvious efforts to appear youthful, her hair dyed black and her face free of wrinkles. Her careful appearance contrasts with the scar on her left temple, which I notice when she turns her face to search for something in her purse, also hanging from the chair. I learned on a television show about criminal

investigations that a pink scar like hers is young, maybe adolescent. Certainly not old, not yet. Not until it turns white.

She takes one more sip of her coffee. On her wrist, there is another scar of the same color. Some might say that it was a common burn from the stove. But a burn of that shape and size? Other than a certain asymmetry reminiscent of a seahorse, I would call it oval, meaning it is unlikely to be from the stove, which leaves smaller marks, or from the oven, which leaves horizontal ones. She looks at her phone to see if she has received messages, or perhaps to ascertain the time. I know, however, that she isn't in a hurry. And who would be sending her messages?

She had a normal life, up until a year ago. Has it already been a year? Time passes quickly. I think it has been less than a year, actually. Six months, perhaps. She is divorced, with two children who are nearly grown-up. Already grown-up, in fact. She worked, counting the days until her retirement, imagining what she would do in the lull that would come after. I don't know if, in the ordinary days that came before, she was already thinking about what was about to happen, or if she had planned it, or if it happened on an impulse, as I have heard tell. The fact is that one night, after serving dinner to her children (one complained that the sauce for the meat was too salty and that the steak was tough), after both shut themselves in their rooms—who knows if they were already asleep—she went out. Her sons didn't notice at the time. But the next morning, they found it odd that the breakfast table wasn't set. The older son went to his mother's room and saw that the bed was still made from the day before. Before he had time to tell his younger brother, who was in the bathroom, the sound of the living room door alerted him to her arrival. The older son was going to ask her where she had been, where she had spent the night, but something about her presence, perhaps the film of sweat on her skin, the invigorated look on her face, or the happiness she radiated, something stopped him from opening his mouth. The mother waited until the younger son left the bathroom, and without saying a word, went in and took a shower. She exited the bathroom and dressed for work—she had been a teacher in her youth but after having taken leave for health reasons, rumored to be depression, she took on an administrative role in the school district—she lit a burner

on the stove, heated the milk (heating it in the microwave was bad for you, she had once read), put two slices of bread in the toaster, waited for them to pop up, put two more in and ran over to turn the burner off before the milk boiled over. The younger son didn't even notice that their mother hadn't slept at home, and the older son gave up on asking or otherwise commenting on the matter.

It was only after several days in a row of the mother's absence—and by then the younger son had also realized that his mother was spending her nights away from home—that they decided to ask her where she went each evening. At the breakfast table, the older son, seated in front of his coffee with milk, after a bite of bread with cream cheese, gesticulated with his eyebrows, pulling them upwards while sticking out his chin, silently ordering his younger brother to open his mouth and ask their mother the question they had agreed upon.

It is none of your business, she responded, getting up from the table with her plate in hand, the remains of her bread lying among the crumbs. The two boys looked at each other, seeking in the other not a safe haven, but some wisdom to clarify what she had said—yet neither of them had in their repertoires of life any resources to decipher the words of their mother, their mom, who belonged only to them, for as long as they could remember. The older one, feeling the burden of his age upon seeing the bewildered face of his brother, opened his arms, his palms extended upwards as if to say: I don't have the slightest idea what this is or what to do about it.

The thing is that for a long time, they didn't know what to do. Months. They tried to pretend that everything was normal, that the fact that their mother spent her nights away from home (not every night, but almost every night) was nothing, as long as breakfast and dinner continued to be served. The younger son eventually had the idea to ask their father if he knew anything, so on a Wednesday, the day he picked them up from school (even though they were old enough to take the bus on their own), the older son sat in the passenger seat, next to his father, while the younger son, who was sitting in the back, came forward to crouch in the gap between the front and back seats, took a deep breath, and asked: Dad, do you know where Mom spends the night?

The father, who had been remarried for years to a woman whom he had met while still married to his first wife, almost crashed the car

upon swinging his head around to look at his sons, both at the same time. He returned his gaze to the road just in time to swerve out of the way of a van that honked at him, eventually stopping at a yellow light. Your mother isn't sleeping at home?

Forget about it, Dad, the younger son said, leaning back against the backseat and getting his phone out of his bag, giving up on the subject. He looked up from his phone long enough to hear his father say that their mother must be dating someone, good for her, and if she was able to keep up her responsibilities as a mother, what was the harm in that, the kids should understand, their mother was a person, after all. The older son thought that their father must think them to be idiots to not have thought of that hypothesis, but he didn't see their mother's face when she arrived home; if he had he would also suspect that it wasn't merely a new relationship.

In any case, time passed and the two boys didn't have much choice but to accept the mystery of their mother's outings, because at the end of the day, as their father had said, she didn't leave any of her tasks unattended, even though at times she seemed tired in the afternoons.

Yet one Tuesday morning, their mother didn't return home. It was time for the boys to leave for school and the kitchen table remained untouched from the night before, no tablecloth, its smooth glass gleaming and bare. The sons argued about whether it was better just to go to school or to call the police. The younger son called their father, who said: Don't even think about missing school, I'm sure it is no big deal. The boys, hungry, took the bus to school (a single bus took them all the way there, leaving them one block away from their destination).

That same day, news spread that Marco, a classmate of the older son's, had gone to a whorehouse. It was like a nightclub, he said, but the patrons were all men, and the women that worked there were practically naked and danced on the stage and flirted with the men and took them off to smaller rooms or rubbed against them right there in the main room, in front of everyone. And what are the women like? the older son asked. What do you mean, Victor? They're whores, said Marco. There were all kinds: young ones, hot ones, skinny ones, fat ones, old ones, and even busted ones. Whores.

I wonder if my mother has arrived home yet, Victor thought, worried.

Several hours later, in third period, three classrooms down the hall, the younger son, as he completed his English exercises, listened to Carina telling Elaine that her aunt had brought her girlfriend to a family dinner. My father and my grandfather got mad, she said, they even got up and left the table, but I didn't understand why, because my aunt's girlfriend was nice and pretty, everyone thought so. Samuel turned around and asked Carina how old her aunt was. I don't know, I think she is around 45, she responded.

Next week is my mother's birthday, Samuel thought, worried about whether or not she had arrived home yet.

Victor and Samuel returned home in silence, side by side on the bus. At home, each went to his room and closed the door. Their mother still wasn't home. At the end of the afternoon, the phone rang. Samuel ran to pick it up. Victor arrived right behind him. Wrong number, Samuel said, eyeing with confusion the tears that ran down his brother's cheeks, without noticing that tears were running down his cheeks as well.

Without knowing what to do, the two boys hugged each other, crying and forlorn, who knows for how long, until they heard the front door slam. They ran, Samuel followed closely by Victor, to where their mother stood, greedy for her, as if they were going to hug her both at the same time, repeating the same gesture from moments before. Mom, what the hell, where the fuck were you? Who do you think you are to do that to us? I didn't do anything to you, she said before her chest was met not with an embrace but a check from Victor's torso, and then Samuel's closed fist pummeled her face, and Victor's extended hand pushed her shoulder violently, his right foot kicked her stomach, and someone, she couldn't tell who, spit in her eye, and then came another blow, from whom she also couldn't see. She was finally able to turn onto her stomach—she had fallen on her back after the third push—and dragged herself into the bathroom, leaving behind her rage-filled children, disentangling herself from Victor, who had grabbed her left foot, shoeless by that point. She closed the door by putting all her weight against it, locking herself inside.

Panting, she let herself sink to the floor, her back resting against the bathroom door, not noticing the blood dripping onto the white tiles. She closed her eyes, rested her head on the door behind her,

and summoned energy from some remote place to imagine being submerged in water, or in Antônio's bed, where she had slept so well the previous night, so well that she lost track of time; or imagining the blood dripping into the water mixing with sweat from her body onstage, wearing no panties, her tits exposed, dancing and shaking her pelvis with her eyes closed just as they were now, her garter belt tight on her thighs, holding up her three-quarter length stockings along with her whole life; or licking the fresh river water off her lips after going down on Gorete for a long time.

She sighed. If she weren't bleeding, if she weren't in so much pain, the following night would have been different.

She orders a bottle of water and signals to the waiter to bring the bill. She takes a last sip of her coffee which is already cold, puts her cell phone in her purse, grabs the bag hanging from the chair, and leaves. She opens an umbrella—I forgot to mention that it had started to rain more than a half hour ago.

I follow her with my eyes until she turns the corner.