

she watched the gang of youngsters crossing the lawn on their way to the fields and the wadi to even the score with the nomads. We were carrying short, thick sticks. Excitement was dilating our pupils. And the blood was drumming in our temples.

Far away in the darkened orchards stood somber, dust-laden cypresses, swaying to and fro with a gentle, religious fervor. She felt tired, and that was why she did not come to see us off. But her fingers caressed the dust, and her face was very calm and almost beautiful.

TRANSLATED BY NICHOLAS DE LANG AND PHILIP SIMPSON

Isaac Goldemberg

(Peru-United States, b.1945)



Considered in his youth to be one of the brightest young Latin American writers, Isaac Goldemberg left Peru for Israel when he was seventeen. Two years later he settled in New York, where his early work earned him recognition as a rising Jewish star. He worked as a teacher, an administrator, and an editor, and penned the collection of poems *Hombre de paso/Just Passing Through* (1981) as well as the novel *The Fragmented Life of Don Jacobo Lerner* (1976). The latter is a collage of fiction and historical documents of Jewish life in Peru centering around the relationship of Don Jacobo, an entrepreneur, and a son of his mixed marriage with a Quechua Indian. Eight years later, Goldemberg published his second and only other novel, *Play by Play*, an experimental narrative structured around a soccer game between Brazil and Peru during which a Jewish player dwells on his identity. This is a more succinct, less flamboyant volume, with a tighter prose style. "The Conversion" is its opening chapter.

The Conversion

Five thousand seven hundred and thirteen years of Judaism hit Marquitos Karushansky like a ton of bricks. At the age of eight, shortly after coming to Lima, classes in Hebrew and the history of the Jews at León Pinelo School; *bris* at the age of twelve; Bar Mitzvah at thirteen when he was a brand-new cadet at Leoncio Prado Military Academy. *Bris* was the little word taken from the Hebrew and used by the Jews in Lima to avoid saying *circumcision*, which left a bad taste in the mouth and made them bite the tip of their tongues, as if to spit it out. "Never you say *circumcision*, correct word is *bris*; *circumcision* is from Latin *circumcidere*, to cut around, and has no historical weight. But *bris* means covenant and is in Bible from time our father Abruhem sealed pact with Adonai." That's how Rabbi Goldstein, with his weeping willow beard, explained it to him. *Adonai*, of course, was also a word Marcos had recently picked up. Saying *God*, which seemed to have a *cholo*, half-Indian ring to it, was absolutely out of the question. And it was really something to watch him swearing, *Chai Adonai* here and *Chai Adonai* there! whip 'em in the front and whip 'em in the

rear! Chahuee! Chahuaa! Pinelo, Pinelo, rah, rah, rah! First you've got to promise not to tell. I swear to God who is my shining light! What? To God! No, that doesn't count. C'mon, do it right. Chai Adonai! You're a liar, let's see if you can swear it's true. Chai Adonai! Swear you didn't steal the ballpoint. Chai Adonai! Marcos gradually became used to the word, it was like not swearing at all, and he got a big kick out of it.

Marquitos Karushansky's circumcision, or rather his *bris*, took place on the same day as the opening of *The Ten Commandments* at the Tacna movie theater. What's more, Dr. Berkowitz's office, where the operation was done, was only half a block from the theater. Marcos was operated on in the afternoon, some time between five and seven, and the show was to start at eight. But he and his father missed the opening. The saddest part of it, old Karushansky said, was not being able to see the film together with the rest of the Jewish community of Lima. They had to see it four or five days later, sitting among Peruvians, and it wasn't the same, it wasn't the right atmosphere, what did those *cholos* know about the Bible, anyway?

It had all started when his father announced, like a patriarch in the Old Testament: "Next year you be ready for Bar Mitzvah but first is necessary you have *bris*." Marcos remembered his eyes wandering to the smudgy windowpane, and then his voice, mocking and at the same time trying to reassure him, he shouldn't worry, they had also snipped off the foreskin of Jesus the Jew.

They showed up one day in Dr. Berkowitz's office where the physician, very professional, very freckled, explained: "*Bris* is an extremely simple operation. All it amounts to is cutting off the prepuce, the end of the skin that folds over the head of the penis and covers it. Then it's much easier to keep the glans clean. No sebaceous matter collects around it and this reduces the risk of catching dangerous infections." Marcos didn't know what he was talking about and went back with his father to the doctor's office the next day. The nurse had already left and they were greeted by a silence like the Sabbath's in the homes of Orthodox Jews. Before he knew it, Marcos was stretched out on his back on the operating table. Dr. Berkowitz was standing beside it, scalpel in hand, arm poised, and his feather, sweat running down features drawn tight in pain and disgust, his father was lying across his chest, pinning his arms, papa's chunky body on top of his, would he ask him for a camphor liniment rubdown later? Every night at bedtime the ritual of the rubdown would begin and Marcos would massage him furiously, as if he wanted to tear off his skin, as if he were trying to draw blood from the heavy body with an oval head. He would pass the palm of his hand down the slope of the thick short neck, up the incline of the shoulders with their overgrowth of hair, matted like the fur on a battered old grizzly, his body stripped of every shred of nobility, letting out low grunts, soft moans of pleasure.

His penis had been put to sleep but not enough to kill the pain from the clamp holding on to his skin as if it would never let go. Then the doctor—warning him not to exaggerate, because too much anesthetic could leave him paralyzed for life—raised the needle to eye level to make sure he had the right amount in the syringe. His whole body shuddered when the needle entered his glans. His father pressed all his weight down on his chest, and on his lips and chin Marcos could feel the rough beard, soaked with sweat and tears. Now his penis was a soft mass, a spongy mushroom, an organism with a life of its own, capable of tearing free with one jerk and slipping all over his skin, looking for a way into his body, or capable of dissolving and leaving a smelly, viscous fluid on his groin. He knew his penis was already in the open and he tried to imagine its new, hoodless look. In his mind, he compared it to the image he had of his father's member, its extreme whiteness, the perfect distribution of its parts, the scarlet crest topping the head of the sleepy iguana, with its vertical blind eye. He wanted to examine his phallus, to hold it above his eyes like a flower, to fall under the spell of the rosy calyx snug around its neck, to weigh it in his hand and stroke it warmly back to the familiarity it had lost. He was conscious of the small pincers clutching his foreskin tight: they were fierce little animals with fangs, beady eyes, and metallic scales on their backs. At the same time, he felt the pressure of his father's dead weight on him as a reproach, the embodiment of all the insults he had ever had to take. He thought about how, when he went back to school, he wouldn't have to hide from his friends in the bathroom. He would be able to piss casually now, to pull out his prick, take his time shaking it out, boldly pressing hard to squeeze the last drops out and then turn around defiantly and show it to the others, to all his schoolmates at León Pinelo, proudly, now let's see who is man enough to say I'm not a Jew.

The doctor left them alone in the back office: he told them he'd return in half an hour, they'd have to wait for the anesthetic to wear off, and Marcos watched his father nodding yes. Then the old man started to pace with his hands clasped behind him. He marched up and down next to the operating table, eyes straight ahead, without bending his knees, swinging each leg sideways slowly in a semicircle, before setting his foot down on the tiles. The controlled stiffness of his body, the deliberate halt after each about-face, before he started pacing again, reflected all the misery and resignation stored up in him. But Marcos knew every detail of this tactic his father had used, over the past two years, to put a certain amount of distance between them, to make him understand that behind this temporary withdrawal, all the things he had ever silenced were crying out, louder than words, against his bad luck and his unhappiness. If he had had any hope of crossing into his father's world, he would have asked him to come over to the table, dry the sweat on his forehead, take his hand in his, and

help him clear away the skein of solitude unraveling endlessly in his chest. But he was sure the old man would avoid his eyes, as he did whenever he pounded on him with his fists, only to feel sorry afterward and break down like a vulnerable Mary Magdalene.

His senses had become dulled. His father looked older now: his beard had taken on a grayish tint and a hundred wrinkles had formed around his eyes. He tried to think of his mother but he couldn't retain a solid image of her behind his eyes. He had closed them and felt himself rushing down a toboggan run, rolling over and over without being able to stop. Only his father was solid; all the objects in the room had melted into ribbons of vapor swirling around him, and only his father's presence kept him from turning into a gaseous substance too.

He didn't move a muscle when the doctor's voice burst into the room like a garble of voices and sounds, and asked him if he was feeling better. He nodded without unlocking his eyelids, and the doctor and his father helped him off the table. His eyes were still closed, he staggered as if whipped by a blizzard, and the weight of his nakedness embarrassed him. The mere brush of the doctor's gloved hands on his member, the slight pull of the threads sticking out from the skin under the glans, made him feel wretched and he had the urge to piss. He guessed the pain this rash move would bring on and stopped himself just in time; the doctor was fitting a jockstrap stuffed with wads of gauze on him and he had the sensation that he was pissing inward. His bladder was tightening up and his inward-flowing urine plunged through his ureters, was picked up by the renal tubes, flooded his kidneys like a winding current, and was pumped, bubbling and humming, into the bloodstream. He felt that he was burning up inside, explored by the fine probe of an intense blue flame. The doctor's voice jolted him back to reality. A sudden smile lit up the doctor's face as he put out his hand in an outlandishly formal way and made a big show of shaking Marcos's father's hand, saying: "Mazel tov, Señor Karushansky, congratulations, mazel tov. . . ."

The lights on Tacna Avenue woke him all the way. Walking to the corner, they passed the Tacna movie theater, its front covered with giant posters showing scenes from the movie: a beardless Charlton Heston, dressed as an Egyptian warrior, was giving a wasp-waisted princess a heman's hug; over to the right, Charlton Heston again, beard and wig, tunic and sandals, on a promontory, arms extended like a magician's: *abracadabra*, let the waters divide.

As they stood on the corner trying to get a cab, Marcos thought of the late afternoon when he had arrived in Lima, four years before. Through the smoke rising steadily from a charcoal pit where some shish kebab on tiny skewers was roasting and giving off a tempting aroma, he saw his father

with his hands in his pockets, coming toward the El Chasqui travel agency, where he and his mother were waiting. Then, like now, they had stopped on a corner, loaded down with bundles and suitcases, to get a cab. He looked out the side of his eye at his father, sitting cross-legged next to him; his arms were folded stiffly across his chest. Through the window on the other side of his father's aquiline profile, he watched the streetcars stretching, lumbering over the flashing tracks. Tall buildings loomed up unexpectedly, swaying like the carob trees back home, and then, with the speed of a fist coming straight at his eyes out of nowhere, the slender pyramid of the Jorge Chávez monument like an airplane full of lights—manned by a crew of graceful winged granite figures—taking off into the night.

He had seen pictures of the Plaza San Martín and the Plaza de Armas in his schoolbook and had thought of Lima as a ghost town where time had stopped without warning, freezing cars as they moved along and pedestrians as they walked. He liked to invent all kinds of stories about those unknown people suspended in midair like grotesque puppets. He had even tried to see if he could make out his father among those men in dark suits and hats. Sometimes he felt sure he had found him sitting on a bench reading a newspaper, or spotted his profile coming around a corner, and he would run to the kitchen and point him out to his mother. Without hiding her amazement at her son's fancies, she would stroke his head nervously and always tell him no, with an understanding smile. But now, sitting on his father's right, he didn't have to imagine him anymore. The city itself seemed to have come out of its sleep, happy to open the night and show him his father's world. And with all his senses set on the course of this moment so new to him, fluttering around him like a playful butterfly, he accepted that world unquestioning, wholeheartedly, as if it had always been his by right.

The taxi plunged into the warm shadows of a Salaverry Avenue studded with lights. His father was still just sitting there, his face outlined by the pale flash of the car's window, oblivious of the clusters of trees reflected in his eyes as they shot past. On the right, the Campo de Marte spread out; deserted, bleak, it disappeared for stretches at a time behind groups of houses and reappeared, somnolent and hazy. Marcos was quiet too, afraid to shift a leg that had fallen asleep and trying with his imagination to lop it off from his body and stop the swirl of bubbles climbing to his groin slowly, noisily. He let the stale air out of his lungs and sank a little into the seat, thinking That old guy is my father, I can tell by the musty odor of his clothes, he smells like dirty synagogue draperies, old velvet, damp wool, like the moth-eaten cashmere and poplin remnants he keeps in back of the store. He's probably taking the annual inventory right now, setting bolts of cloth on the counter, running his hand over them like a shepherd fondly

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stroking the backs of his sheep; or maybe he's repeating over and over the words he spit out at me this morning, "In a few hours you be at last one of us, at last one of us, at last one. . . ."

As the cab made a sharp turn, coming out into Mariátegui Avenue, its chassis seemed to bristle up like a cat; it went down the street chugging along unsteadily, entered Pumacahua Street and pulled up at the corner of the second block, where the houses came to a dead end, cut off by the Club Hípico's garden wall, a solid line of trees and wire. His father helped him out of the car. They walked the short distance to the project entrance and silently headed for the apartment at the rear.

In the bedroom his father helped him undress; he knelt to take off his shoes, and then took them to the foot of the valet clothes stand, dressed up in the rest of his clothes and looking like a silly scarecrow. He knelt down again to help him on with his pajama pants and then stood up with a heavy sigh seeming to come from somewhere far away; he turned down the covers, settled the boy in the center of the bed, and covered him with a rough sweep of his hand. "So if you want something, you'll call," he told him abruptly, going to the door. Marcos heard his father's footsteps fading down the hallway toward the living room and now, as he lay submerged in the warmth of the covers, the silence started winding its way through the shell of his ears, humming like the sea, and he could feel the solitude he had been longing for begin to take root in his spirit. He swept the room with his eyes, pausing carefully at each object, trying to figure out what hidden common bond there was between so many disparate things. He sensed that the suffocating mishmash of furniture, spread through the rest of the house like heavy underbrush, summed up his father's horror of empty rooms. Landscapes and scenes of Israel, torn from calendars, lined all the walls: the sea of Galilee (or Kineret, as his father knowingly called it), hemmed by a tight ring of hills; a street in Yerushalaim crammed with shops and pedestrians, exactly like Jirón de la Unión Street, right, Marcos? this is the capital of Israel, you wouldn't believe everyone in streets are Jewish, right? blond-dark-redhead and even real black children in a tiny school in Tel Aviv; also the vast wilderness of the Negev with red red sand and where are located the mines of King Shlomo, who was very wise; do you know story of two women are fighting for same son and going to King Shlomo . . . ? and also many pictures of Kibbutz Givat Brenner, founded in year 'twenty-eight, I was one of founders, Marcos, see how beautiful, all people glad working in fields, look how happy everybody, and in fact his father had also worked in the kibbutz, intoning *erets zavat chalav, chalav, erets zavat chalav*, humming into the wind, land of milk and honey, *erets zavat chalav, chalav ud'vash*, and in other prints there were young patriarchs, hands twirling the udders of the goats, sinking into the labyrinthine nurseries of the bees. . . .

Marcos remembered the first time he had set foot in the house. Startled by the jungle of furniture as he stepped through the door, he stood rooted to the spot; he felt as if all his bones were giving way under a sudden deafening avalanche of rocks. Then his father took his arm and almost dragged him inside toward his room, saying "Come, don't be afraid. Left standing alone in his bedroom with his suitcase beside him, he could hardly stay on his feet, a weary taste of rancid almonds in his mouth. From the back of the house his father's voice, as studied as a concierge's, reached him: "This is your room, here you will sleep. Bathroom is a few steps to your left; in front of bathroom is kitchen. You find everything there, unpack your bag, then fix yourself something to eat."

That night, as soon as his mother had gone to her room, the ritual of the bath got under way. "Am going get off all dirt from your body," his father said, rolling up his sleeves with an air of nostalgia for his ancestral past, like an old Orthodox Jew ready to wind the leather maze of phylacteries around his arm. He made Marcos climb into the tub and he let the stream of water out: it came on by fits and starts with a choking sound, then broke out in spurts till it picked up the steady murmur of an easy flow. Steam filled the bathroom with drowsiness, blurred the solid walls, and turned his father into a shadowy figure kneeling next to the tub and already beginning to soap his body with rhythmic skill, as if he were holding a newborn baby, or a body not yet born, molding its form with the nimble fingers of a Florentine goldsmith.

The scene was taking on the importance of a ceremony. The image of baptism in the son's mind corresponded closely to the rites of the biblical patriarch being officiated by his father: an initiation that would take the boy, cleansed of impurities, into his own world. Transformed now into an exterminating angel, his father seemed about to rend his flesh with the pumice stone, a primitive porous knife, without a grip, buried in the depths of his massive fist. The frenzied whirling of his father's hand had all the appearance of an act of martyrdom and Marquitos saw himself being subjected to an ordeal but felt so sure he would come through unharmed that he endured the stabbing stone, held back his tears, and smothered his pain by biting his teeth down hard. Everything else afterward—scrambling out of the tub, scampering to his room, the comforting fetal position under the covers—took place in suspended time, on the hazy verge of sleep.

TRANSLATED BY HARDIE ST. MARTIN