Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Needle in a Haystack

Translated by Jethro Soutar

Written by Ernesto Mallo

Published by Bitter Lemon Press

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

NEEDLE IN A HAYSTACK

Ernesto Mallo

Translated by Jethro Soutar



BITTER LEMON PRESS
LONDON

BITTER LEMON PRESS
First published in the United Kingdom in 2010 by
Bitter Lemon Press, 37 Arundel Gardens, London W11 2LW

www.bitterlemonpress.com
First published in Spanish as *La aguja en el pajar*
by Grupo Editorial Planeta, Buenos Aires, 2006

Bitter Lemon Press gratefully acknowledges the financial assistance
of the Arts Council of England

Work published within the framework of "Sur" Translation Support
Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade
and Worship of the Argentine Republic

© Ernesto Mallo, 2005
© Grupo Editorial Planeta, Buenos Aires, 2006
English translation © Jethro Soutar, 2010

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced
in any form or by any means without written permission of the
publisher

The moral rights of the author and the translator have been
asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs, and Patents
Act 1988

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library
ISBN 978–1–904738–565
Typeset by Alma Books Limited
Printed and bound by Cox & Wyman Ltd. Reading, Berkshire

Arts Council Logo

Needle in a Haystack

Tomorrow or the day after, catastrophe will come, drowning us all in blood, if we haven't already been reduced to ashes. Everyone is scared. Me included; I can't sleep at night, overcome with terror, nothing functions, all we have is our fear… So what does Superintendent Bauer do? He does his job, tries to create a little order and sense where there is only chaos and irreversible disintegration. But he's not alone…

Ingmar Bergman
The Serpent's Egg

1

I know that one must kill, yes
but kill who…
Homero Expósito, 1976

Some days the side of the bed is like the edge of an enormous abyss. Day in, day out, doing things you don't want to do. Lascano wants to stay in bed forever or throw himself into the abyss. If only the abyss were real. But it's not. Only the pain is real.

Lascano wakes up feeling like this today, and has done every day since his wife's death. Orphaned as a child, he seemed predestined to solitude. Life granted him an eight-year respite in the form of Marisa, a reason to go on living, a fleeting joy that ended less than a year ago, and left him stranded again in the shallows of an island where he earned his nickname: Perro; the Dog.

He launches himself into the void. The shower washes away the last remains of sleep, which howl as they disappear down the plug-hole. He gets dressed, puts his Bersa Thunder nine millimetre into its holster. Lascano goes over to the birdcage, home of the only living reminder of Marisa, and adds a pinch of seed to the feeder. He heads out into the deserted early morning. Day has yet to break. The air is so humid that Perro feels he could swim to the garage. Fog envelops everything, playing tricks with lights and shadows. He sparks up his first cigarette of the day.

As he sets off, a military operation plays out on the corner. Two olive green Bedford trucks block off the street. Soldiers with machine guns and Fal rifles. A bus with its doors open. Passengers are lined up along one side, their backs to the soldiers, hands on heads, waiting in silence for their turn to be frisked and interrogated by a lieutenant with the face of a cruel child.

Lascano passes them with indifference. A soldier looks at Lascano, turns to his lieutenant, as though seeking an instruction, then looks at Lascano again. Lascano stares back at him with a commanding glare, making full eye contact, and the soldier lowers his gaze. Slowly, dawn breaks.

As Lascano gets to the garage, a convoy of military trucks passes by. The first one carries a boy and a girl. She wears a flowery dress and must be the same age as Marisa was when he first met her. The girl throws Lascano a fleeting look of desperation, which sends a jolt up his spine like some torturous electric shock, and then she is swallowed up by the fog. Lascano enters the black mouth of the garage. The day begins.

Walking up the ramp reminds him, one by one, of all the cigarettes he has ever smoked. While the Ford Falcon warms up, he lights his second cigarette of the day and reaches for the radio transmitter.

Fifteen to base. Over. Bow-wow. Over. Quite the joker this morning I see. Over. If you'd spent the whole night here you'd be in a funny mood too, Perro. Over. What you got? Over. You're to head over to the Riachuelo river. Over. Where? Over. Avenida 27 de Febrero, opposite the lake at the racetrack. Over. And? Over. Investigate a report of two bodies dumped by the hard shoulder, on the river side. Over. Won't they be

military hits? Over. I don't know, go and find out. Over. I'm on my way. Over and out.

First gear always crunches as he sets off, and does so more each time.

One of these days I'll have to get the clutch fixed on this thing before it leaves me screwed in the middle of nowhere.

The call has put him in a bad mood.

To his left, a chemical smog rises from the Riachuelo waters, poisoning the atmosphere. Lascano drives with the window open as if wanting to punish himself with the river's stench. Through the windscreen, the landscape blurs and reappears to the rhythm of the wipers. The radio is silent, the street deserted and the tyres, rolling across the tarmac, produce the monotonous *tac tac* of a train. Movement up ahead breaks his hypnosis. A Falcon Rural estate backs out of a track on the left. It has a dent in its rear door and the plastic cover on the right brake light is broken, so giving off white light instead of red. Lascano takes his foot off the accelerator, but the Rural pulls forward and tears away. Lascano gets to the track, which leads through muddy grass to a corrugated iron hut. He drives down it a few feet and makes out some shapes on the ground. He pulls to a halt, puts on the handbrake, gets out and sees the shapes for what they are: three dead bodies. He lights his third cigarette and approaches. Two of the bodies are wet with dew. Their features have been obliterated by countless bullets, their skulls destroyed. Lascano holds back a retch. He can tell that one is a girl, one a boy, and both are wearing jeans and polo necks. The third body is that of a tall

man, around sixty, hefty, pot-bellied, thinning grey hair, dressed in a black suit and tie. He is bone dry and his head is intact, the wild scream of death frozen across his face. He wears no belt and at the top of his stomach a big bloodstain paints a flower on his light blue shirt. Lascano spots a piece of red plastic lying close by. He picks it up and puts it in his pocket. He lights a fourth cigarette and slowly walks back to his car. On the way, he retrieves a belt, which doubtless belonged to the dead man. The buckle is broken. He coils it up in his hand, then, back at the car, he sits down sideways in the driver's seat, with his feet out the door. He picks up the microphone.

Fifteen to base. Over. You there already? Over. How many stiffs did you say? Over. Two. Over. Send me the ambulance, I'm moving them to Viamonte. Over. On its way. Over. I'll wait for it. Over and out.

Lascano swivels in the seat, shuts the door, finishes his cigarette and throws the stub out the window. It has started to rain. He sits up straight, takes the wheel, sets the motor running and reverses up to the main road to make himself visible for the ambulance. He waits. A refrigerator lorry goes past. One of Fuseli's old phrases comes to mind:

You never get over the death of a child; it's something you just have to live with forever.

Fuseli knew from experience what he was talking about. Lascano was particularly struck by this comment, because Fuseli had taken good care not to reveal to Lascano that

Marisa had been two-months pregnant when she died. It was the last time either of them mentioned dead children. Fuseli knew that the scar was there, but he felt no need to lick his wounds. Both he and Lascano believe men should suffer in silence. Lascano had known Fuseli for years but until Marisa's death they had never talked of anything other than work. Fuseli is a forensic doctor, one of those people truly passionate about their job. He is short, a little fat and squat, his hair clipped, combed and gelled, face clean-shaven; everything suggests a very formal man. But when it comes to discovering a corpse's secrets, Fuseli turns into a serious obsessive. He reaches out to the dead and they respond. Nobody has an eye for tiny details like Fuseli and nobody has his patience for spending a whole night disembowelling a body. But on the day of Marisa's funeral, Fuseli dropped everything and accompanied Lascano to La Tablada, the Jewish cemetery.

The ambulance's lights start to flash in the distance.

At the time, Perro was too broken to be surprised and he accepted Fuseli's warm embrace and his few carefully chosen words like manna from heaven. They had been friends ever since, never judging one another, never competing. Not then, in desperate times, nor in their rare moments of happiness. They were also united in using fierce concentration at work as a placebo, although they didn't talk much about this either, of course. Perhaps true friendship is better expressed by what's not said than by what is.

When the ambulance arrives, Lascano signals the way. He follows slowly behind then tells the driver and paramedic to start loading up the bodies. Lascano inspects the fat corpse again. He checks its pockets and

finds only a few coins along with a business card for the Fortuna Sawmill, with an address in Benavídez, near Tigre. He moves out of the way and watches them put the body on a stretcher.

Lascano gets back into his car, sets off and is soon behind the ambulance.

KEEP YOUR DISTANCE.

There is little traffic at this hour, and a few minutes later they pull into the yard at the mortuary. While the stretcher-bearers move the bodies, Lascano heads off to the operations room in search of his friend Fuseli. Fully concentrated at his microscope, the doctor doesn't notice Lascano's entrance.

Fuseli, this is no time to be going around so distracted. Remember what happened to Archimedes. Perro! What are you doing here? I've brought you some presents, so you don't get bored. What have you got for me?

The stretcher-bearers deposit the bodies on the dissection tables and leave. Lascano lights a cigarette. Fuseli carefully observes the three bodies and moves over to the fat man.

You got your Polaroid? Over there, in the cabinet.

Lascano goes over to the cupboard and takes out the camera, while Fuseli closely examines the corpse.

Is it loaded? It should be. The two kids were executed but this one's different. I thought so too. Hello big guy. Are you going to tell me your secrets?

Fuseli grips the body's head and holds it up while Lascano lines up the camera and presses the red button. The machine hums then spits out an image not yet ready to reveal itself. Lascano wafts it about in the air.

You get crazier by the day. Even a no-mark criminal knows dead men can't talk. That's because criminals are so ignorant. The dead talk to those who know how to listen to them. Anyway, people talk to plants, don't they? Does this contraption work or what? There's nothing coming out. Try it again.

Fuseli holds up the head once more. Lascano takes another photo.

What do you reckon?

Fuseli carefully examines the corpse's hands.

This one put up a fight. Do you think he was planted there? What does it look like to you? Like it couldn't be clearer if they'd left a trowel and a watering can. The ones who are executed always show up with their faces destroyed. The old boy's is intact. Apart from these wounds. But I get the feeling he got them when he was already dead.

Lascano looks at the photo. As if returning from beyond the grave, the dead man starts to show himself.

I would say that they killed this one somewhere else. What else would you say? Come back tomorrow and I'll tell you. Done. Hey, why don't you bring me a little weed from your pals in the drug squad? You still smoking spliff? You should be

ashamed of yourself, you old hippy. I am, but then I smoke a joint and the shame passes. I'll see what I can lay my hands on. My mind thanks you in advance. Now let's see fella, where did they stick it to you?… mmm, here's the little hole where death entered and life departed…

Fuseli goes into a trance, the rest of the world disappearing as he becomes totally immersed in his work and his intimate relationship with the dead. Lascano quietly leaves the room. A light but persistent wind has cleared the sky and a sullen winter sun pokes out between the clouds. *A promising morning,* thinks Lascano, as he sits at his wheel, waiting at the mortuary gate for a fellow driver to let him into the passing traffic.