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CULTURAL WORK

Parallel Lines

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Abstract

James G. Worner is an Australian-based writer and scholar currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Technology Sydney. His research seeks to expose masculinities lost in the shadow of Australia's Anzac hegemony while exploring new opportunities for contemporary historiography. He is the recipient of the Doctoral Scholarship in Historical Consciousness at the university's Australian Centre for Public History and will be hosted by the University of Bologna during 2017 on a doctoral research and writing scholarship. 'Parallel Lines' is from a collection of stories, *The Shapes of Us*, which explores the liminal spaces of modern life: class, gender, sexuality, race, religion and education. The story looks at lives, like lines, that do not meet but which travel in proximity, simultaneously attracted and repelled. James's short stories have been published in various journals and anthologies.

Keywords

James Worner; short story; 'Parallel Lines'; *The Shapes of Us*

Marta, mi hija, you have such beautiful ... ¿how to say en inglés, 'las uñas'?

'Finger nails,' mamá. Gracias.

Where ... to, you know ... para pintarlas?

To paint them? I go to a salon in the city. We must go together while you're here.

Ah, perfecta, mi amor. Perfecta.

I have had to learn to paint my own nails. Tonight, I'm pleased with the result; as good as in a salon, I tell myself. I love the gloss of the final coat—this one: Latin Passion, a deep black-brown. A hint of burning ember. The way it clings to the base is solid; lava-like, the way it flows across a surface. I touch the brush against the bottle lip and prepare to drive across the final plane, elbows out and fingers splayed, tongue tense at the side of my mouth. The brush slides out in two slow strokes, filling the nail with the molten ooze. And there! It is done. I rest the brush and swivel from the desk, raising my hand to the light, palm out towards the bookcase beyond. Pin-pricks of light—the glow from the lamp—glint in the matte. Wet, like stars above the Altiplano or a final ferry to Circular Quay.

I stand and move towards the bookcase, as if being drawn by my outstretched hand, drawn by the magic of the authors on the shelf. *Mis hermanas latinas*. Sitting in their quiet clusters, here are all my Latina sisters. I hover my fingers across the familiar spines: here is María Luisa Bombal; there is Carmen Boullosa; hello Laura Esquivel; *Hola* Marta Brunet—my lovely namesake; *Hola señora* Allende, *profesora mía*. Of the dozen shelves that soar from carpet-line to cornice, here sits my sorority.

It is still early, though the sun has set and the evening sounds of Sydney Harbour can be heard beyond the balcony. The harbour never disappoints. I hear a ferry on approach and press myself into the curtain, pushing against the heavy drapes while listening to the landing line, thrown and looped and stretched against the back-whine of an engine; the bang of a gangplank dropping into place; the stomp of passengers crossing the narrow bridge. Rigging clangs, rocking on the wake when the action is reversed. The engine whines and the ferry pulls away.

It's while in the folds of the curtain that I realise I am happy and the feeling takes me by surprise. Is there a difference between happiness and simply no longer feeling sad? When is the moment when one thing can be said to have turned into another? Perhaps a single degree of weightlessness across the design of things. A step back into the lamplight and I see myself reflected in the darkening window glass. A tall woman, certainly, of tentative angles and unfamiliar surfaces. But my simple dress curves where I like to curve. The patterned scarf and river pearls are generous with their elegance. And from elegance there comes confidence. I practise my smiles, one after the other, different crinklings of matching black-brown lips: this one soft, demure; this one steely, resolute; this one fiery Latina. A hint of burning ember.

Yes, this is how I will make it work; this is the way to break the spell. *Perfecta*.

But the weightless feeling never lasts for long and soon the world is pressing in again.

Like the curtain at the window, I feel its pressure, smell its dust and imagine its decay.

Tomorrow, Miguel will leave this city—I believe, and hope—one final time. Tomorrow, both our lives will change forever. I don't know whether to laugh or cry. Of course I will miss Miguel. He is sweet and smart and resilient and has suffered the worst of it for both our sakes. But it's time for him to go; for me to let him go.

In my dreams, I see a train. A locomotive on a track, steaming across the high Andean plains where the sky seems close enough to touch. My outstretched palm, nails of Latin Passion, can pat the clouds; my fingers wrapped around a blade can slice the universe in two. I am in the middle of the wide expanse. The rails stretch long to two horizons; parallel lines appearing to converge—origin, this way; destination, that. The vision plays like a black and white movie—a Hollywood Western; a cinema in Santiago; Miguel hungry for the gift of English. *These here parts are Badlands, ma'am. We need to get to the other side.* But the train must cross the space where *los bandidos* lie in wait. There is no postponing either journey or assault, no outrunning racing hooves. Hiding here in silence is not an option and going back unthinkable. The question is simply how to meet the attack.

I push the thought away—that is tomorrow's struggle; Miguel will have to cope—and allow myself a sigh. It turns into a puff of air shot across my drying nails towards the books—my books, *Marta's* books, perfectly arranged on these, *Marta's* shelves. Still the words are not familiar, the name not sounding quite correct. But the shelves are sleek, and white and clean. The lines are parallel: vertical where the novels stand upright, side-by-side, and horizontal where stacked in thoughtful, counter-facing piles. The order is reassuring and calms me—telling me all will be all right; in this there's nothing unfamiliar; in this sufficient truth. I tilt my hand by degrees against the straight-backed spines until black-brown headed *bandidos* have appeared, are leaning up against a barricade. I have never been clever with words, in Spanish or in English, but here, in this room, in the company of my sisters, it seems even I have magical powers.

I reach for the wine I have placed on the desk and drum my nails against the glass. The acrylic extensions tick like a beetle. It is a pinot noir from Chile, the land of a childhood all-but forgotten: that mountain country so far from this place of water and light. I rotate the glass slowly then spin it with more force. Perhaps I've drunk too much. There is an empty bottle under the desk. The wine washes the inside of the glass with a cleansing crimson wave. How far Miguel has travelled from what might have been. I push my toes deeper into the comfort of my shoes but they pinch against my heels.

Somewhere over the Isabel Allendes, I notice the blister: a smudge of Latin Passion on the edge of the trailing nail.

'¡Pah, estúpida!'

The word explodes softly on my lips, barely audible but with a strength of emotion that surprises. I press my mouth closed to stem the spread of imperfection. A sea-wall closing on a surging tide. I knew the base coat wasn't dry when I started with the colour but had been too excited by the cruet found at the back of the dresser drawer. A beautiful bottle: tall, heavy in the hand, deeply ridged with cut-glass folds.

I find the blister with the pad of my thumb. I know my compulsions: that I will touch and worry and scratch until I dig it out with the razor of my thumbnail. For distraction, I look to the photos ranging over the shelves, between the books and travel treasures. I close my eyes to picture them, counting them one by one for I know them all by heart: Miguel at graduation in his Zegna suit with patterned tie and matching pocket square; of me with all my other sisters. It is my own face I can see, there in every one, black-brown eyes smiling from the frames on every shelf. I am proud of Miguel's achievements. And why not? If not pride, I am unsure what might flood inside. No one had thought escape for Miguel was possible, let alone a life for me. I remember the look on mamá's face when she was told the news. Her response had crushed Miguel:

Mamá, I've been accepted. They want me at the university. I'm going to Australia to be a lawyer. University? ¡Pah! No place for stupid cockroach boy like you.

At the thought of her, my gaze returns from the bookcase then drops beneath the desk. The light from the lamp does not reach there and I am overcome. The house of my earliest childhood still throws a shadow across the miles. I am emptied, my confidence sucked like an outgoing tide, exposing the delicate flats of a muddy self-esteem. I see once more the newspapers strewn in angry piles, crushed open at pages with names and photos of *los desaparecidos* marked in heavy circles; the too-loud sounds of *telenovelas* from the kitchen bench; the yellow creep of nicotine up the walls and on the ceiling; the slug-like burns around the edges of the table—cigarettes long ago lit and set and forgotten; the scorch marks no longer a protective force, as they were when I was a child, evenly deployed to defend the table perimeter. Now they are a fleeing army, contemplating leaps to the unwashed floor below.

I am breached and fill with memories of a thousand hurts. I feel with the pad of my thumb for the lacquer blister.

A sound from the kitchen reminds me I am not alone. Ronald Reagan, the ginger tabby from number five, has reappeared. He comes in through the kitchen window whenever he is hungry, eats from the bowl I've placed for him, then disappears. He has sat with me by the fountain in the garden, when I've felt courageous, and I've been pleased to have his company.

Reagan appears from the kitchen corridor and makes a line towards me, arching up against my legs in equal measures bliss and undisguised disdain. I reach to the ground and stroke his ears then pick him up to rub him as I know he likes. I press my cheek against the ginger warmth till he hums his deep vibrato.

'Hello Ronald. *Hola señor Reagan*. Did you miss me? Did you miss me *mucho*?'

Something in the ordinariness of the moment makes me pause. Ronald Reagan relaxing in my arms, and the momentary outside lull, returns me to the lurking edge. The curtain luffs and I feel a sudden heat around the throat and ears. I picture again the engine, pushing across the grassy plains. Steam shoots from the boiler stack; the whistle screams above the piston clack. I drop Reagan to the ground and reach for the pinot noir. He sulks back toward the kitchen and is gone.

In moments such as these, I glimpse but cannot hold a future for myself.

And now I have a smudge. I should not have touched the cat. Instinctively, I blow across the lacquer and shake my hand in the air. I should have waited till it was dry and now will have to start again.

My gaze returns to the shelf and I search instinctively for Isabel Allende—knowing I need more than her soothing words right now. I curl a finger over the top of the spine and claw it from its place. *Daughter of Fortune*. I almost laugh but open the cover and smooth my hand across the pretty paisley endpaper, the curlicues of my name—'Marta'. My name is Marta—smiling up over his, the one I have crossed out.

My fingers feel along the cover's hard edge and sharp corners. I bend the pages back against the spine to find the leverage I require. The pointed corner spears deep into the blistered varnish and I begin to saw across the surface, dropping black-brown specks of burning ember across the bright white surface. They spot the white like cockroach dust.

I will be perfect. I will make it so.

* * *

Miguel stepped to the window and blew gently across the surface of his coffee. It was a spectacular view and reminded him daily how far he'd travelled from what once had been his life. The morning sounds of the harbour floated in, busy already although it wasn't yet six-thirty. A trail of city workers already made for the wharf, lucky too their daily commute was a fifteen-minute ferry ride. Normally he'd be one of them but today there were other plans. The taxi to the airport would pick him up at midday. He sipped his coffee and shrugged the dressing-gown tight across his shoulders. He should look at the view more often; it was too magical to ever take for granted—even though the rent was killing him.

He sipped again and turned to the pile of unread mail on the desk under the lamp. Mostly junk, a fistful of local restaurant menus, and a statement from the bank. He pulled from the pile a coarser envelope with his name and unit number hand-written in stick-like letters, underscored by two upward angling lines, the unmistakable mark of Cilla, the neighbour from number five.

As if on cue, Ronald Reagan—Cilla's ginger tabby—appeared from around the kitchen corridor and made a line for him. He curled around Miguel's shin, mewling for attention. Miguel secretly enjoyed his company and was happy for him to come and go through the kitchen window, which Cilla knew he left ajar. Miguel reached to the ground and stroked his ears, then picked him up to rub him as he knew he liked. He pressed his cheek against the ginger warmth till Reagan hummed his deep vibrato. 'Hello Ronald. *Hola señor Reagan*. Did you miss me? Did you miss me *mucho*?'

He continued to read the letter in his hand. It was a home-printed note to all building residents, supposedly from the owners' corporation but Miguel knew enough of Cilla to know it came from her alone. This time, apparently, a stranger had been spotted around the gardens—a woman, sitting by the fountain at odd moments through the day. Was she a guest of anyone in the building? Miguel imagined Cilla behind her curtains on the second floor. Residents were warned to be on the lookout for suspicious activity. 'Please be extra conscious of building security.' This, he didn't doubt, was directed at him—and Marta—and his open kitchen window.

Miguel held the letter for a moment longer then tossed it with the envelope in the bin beneath the desk.

His thoughts stretched out across the day ahead. A business class flight across the Pacific, direct to Santiago. He'd be in Chile for seventy-two hours before the return flight brought him home. Three days were all he needed. Any time spent with his mother since he was a teenager had been difficult and this would be exceptional. But it was time for her to know. Marta needed her, deserved her, too. What kind of future might they have together? What was possible for her and Marta? His dream for Marta involved sunny Sydney days, morning coffee on visits from Chile, and trips to city salons to have their nails done together.

His gaze was drawn to the end of the bookcase, to his shelf of Latin authors. An empty wine glass and a gap among the upright spines spoiled the otherwise perfect line. One book lay across the tops of its neighbours—the letters that formed both title and author, 'Daughter of Fortune' and 'Isabel Allende,' stretching like tracks across a void.

As he put the novel back in line and lifted the empty glass, he noticed a subtle coating of black-brown specks along the white of the shelf. He looked at it remembering the night before with a hint of a smile. The smile was unrehearsed. He paused for a moment to look at his nails—now perfectly painted and blister-free, in a rich and deep black-brown. Latin Passion. A hint of burning ember.

He tore a tissue from the desktop box and rolled it between his thumb and finger pads. The day for dealing with *los bandidos* had arrived—the next step in Marta’s release. His mother would understand as well. Eventually. But, until then, it was up to him. He touched the tissue once to his face then wiped it along the length of the shelf, cleaning the black-brown dust in a single sweep.