

Verónica Gerber Bicecci

EM
PTY
SET

a novel

Translated by Christina MacSweeney

How do you draw an affair? A family? Can a Venn diagram show the ways overlaps turn into absences? Can tree rings tell us what happens when mothers leave? Can we fall in love according to the hop-skip of an acrostic? *Empty Set* is a novel of patterns, its young narrator's attempt at making sense of inevitable loss, tracing her way forward in loops, triangles, and broken lines.

"Verónica Gerber Bicecci writes with a luminous intimacy; her novel is clever, vibrant, moving, profoundly original. Reading it made me feel as if the world had been rebuilt." —**Francisco Goldman**

"*Empty Set*(ES) belongs to the set of Great Fragmentary Novels(GFN), which in turn fits plainly and simply within the set of Great Novels(GN). Verónica Gerber Bicecci writes with the modesty and care of those who may seem to belong more to the set of Visual Artists(vA) than Writers(w)—each fragment is a precious miniature that exudes subtle, melancholy humor. And at the same time, *Empty Set*(ES) triumphs where other Fragmentary Novels(FN) fail for their elusiveness: Verónica Gerber Bicecci does not shirk the narrator's responsibility toward plot, instead creating a literary artifact that operates under the rules of both the novel and the artist's notebook." —**Juan Pablo Villalobos**

Verónica Gerber Bicecci is a visual artist who writes. In 2013 she was awarded the third Aura Estrada Prize for Literature. She is an editor with Tumbona Ediciones, a publishing cooperative with a catalog that explores the intersections between literature and art.

Christina MacSweeney was awarded the 2016 Valle Inclán Translation Prize for her translation of Valeria Luiselli's *The Story of My Teeth*, and her translation of Daniel Saldaña París's novel *Among Strange Victims* was a finalist for the 2017 Best Translated Book Award.



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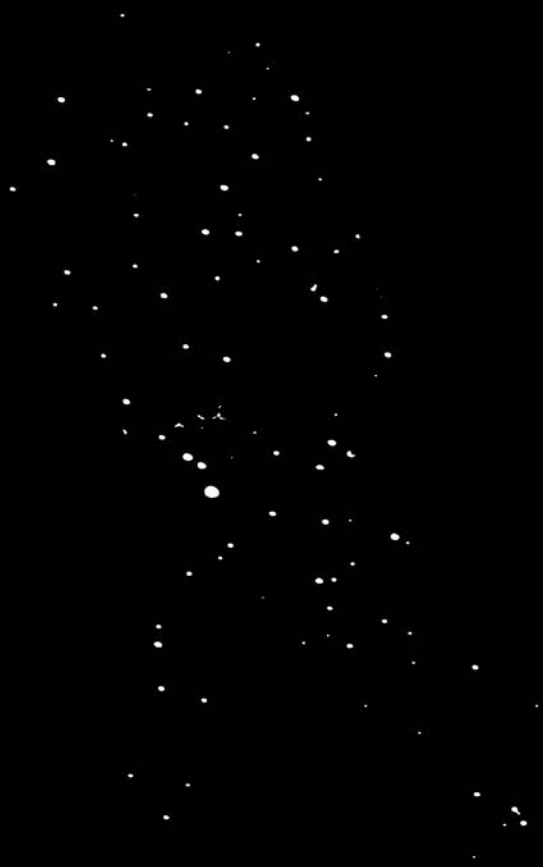
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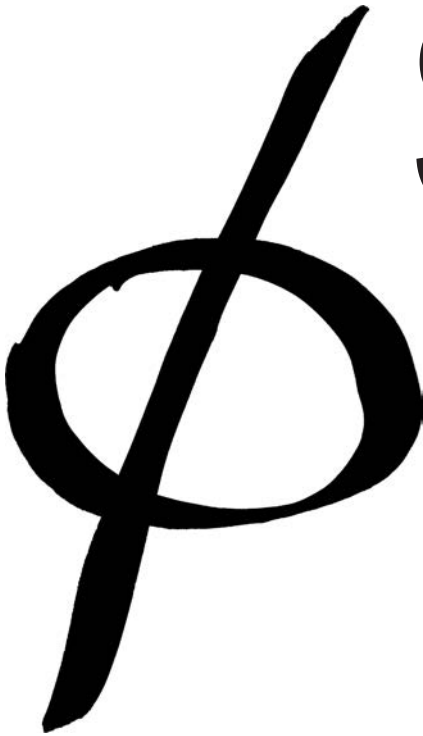
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SET**

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Translated by Christina MacSweeney



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For my brother, Ale, the other half of the empty set.

**EMPTY
SET**

The dossier on my love life is a collection of outsets. A definitively unfinished landscape that stretches over flooded excavations, bare foundations, and ruined structures; an internal necropolis that has been in the early stages of construction for as long as my memory goes back. When you become a collector of beginnings, you can also corroborate, with almost scientific precision, how little variability there is in the endings. I seem to be condemned to renunciation. Although, in fact, there are only minor differences; all the stories end pretty much alike. The sets overlap in more or less the same way, and the only thing that changes is the point you happen to see them from: consensus is the least common option, renunciation is voluntary, but desertion is an imposition.

I have a talent for beginnings. I like that part. The emergency exit, however, is always at hand, so it's also relatively easy for me to leap into the void when something doesn't feel right. To take flight toward nothingness at the least provocation. And that's why this time I don't want any preambles, my collection of outsets is already too large.

I'm tired of preludes, and the only moment it's possible to return to with a modicum of confidence is that finale, the breakup that changed everything in the first place, that turned me into a deserter, a compiler of hopelessly truncated stories.

One fine day, without warning, I woke up at the ending. Hadn't even gotten up when, from the bedroom door, about to leave for one of his classes, Tordo(T) said:

You're not like you used to be.

Spent the rest of the day trying to understand what he meant by that, unable to slip from between the sheets. Just when did I stop being like I used to be?

It all sounded strange, even suspicious.

Thought maybe it had something to do with his midlife crisis. But no. Not long afterwards, it became clear that when someone says, "You're not like you used to be," they actually mean, "I'm in love with someone else."

I broke down. Tordo(T) broke me down.

Almost overnight, I had to pack all my clothes into a suitcase, pick out a few books, write a good-bye letter no one asked me for, call a cab, and return to the only place left for me: Mom(M)'s apartment.

I'd attempted to forget that third floor. Its blocked pipes, disposable plates and cups, the communal sinks on the roof where we sometimes rinsed off the pots and pans, the beat-up domestic appliances, and the cowboy hip tub my Brother(B) and I were so accustomed to, you'd think we lived in another century. I'd stopped thinking about the apartment's unavoidable resemblance to a paleontology

lab: the honeycombs of dust; the collection of plant skeletons mounted on pots; the balls of fluff huddled together to form strange, plush baseboards in the corners; the encrusted grime patterning the walls and ceiling of the kitchen; the gray patina on the windowpanes, produced by infinite layers of dried rain; and the series of strange microorganisms growing in the bottles left standing in the refrigerator.

Even though we could have asked Dad for help, we never got a plumber, never hired anyone to do the cleaning or did it ourselves, because we were sure she'd leave some trace.

We didn't do anything.

The apartment was left suspended in time. Just as it was the day we last saw Mom(M).

In my bedroom, under my old, faithful Humpty Dumpty duvet, it soon became clear that the abruptness of the ending had brought things back to the beginning, to some beginning, or at least to the place where they were before Tordo(T). I knew this because, on opening my eyes in the early morning, I heard Mom(M) crossing the hall, speaking aloud in that strange, irascible language I was never able to decipher. My body got up automatically, looked out the bedroom door: the only thing my eyes saw was the bluish light of the computer screen illuminating the hall. She wasn't there.

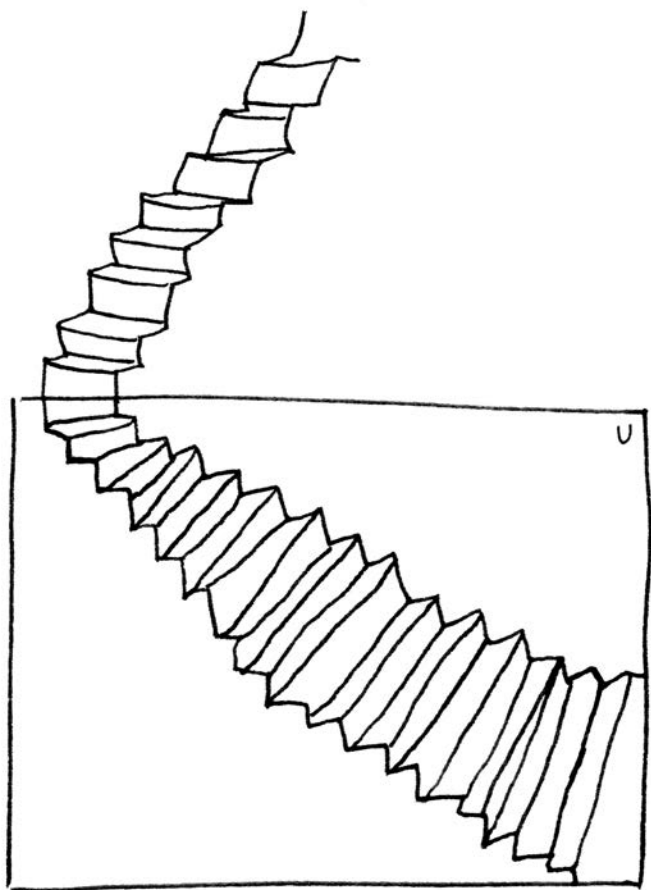
Late at night, my Brother(B) could always be found in the study. He suffered from insomnia, and it seems to me standing guard was his way of waiting for Mom(M)

to reappear. He'd improvised an internet connection from a telephone cable and the passwords the university had given Dad; he was afraid someone would discover that he was duplicating the username, so he only logged on in the small hours. I used to sleep very lightly—it wasn't a matter of waiting up for her, but I'd jump out of bed at the slightest noise. Never asked him, but it seems very likely that my Brother(B) used to hear her too. I followed the light and found him sitting at the computer, surfing the net; it was as if I'd never left, never lived with Tordo(T). Everything was just the same.

You're back, said my Brother(B).

An explanation was unnecessary. Defeat is wordless.

RANGMEBOO



How did we get here, to this point? It all goes back to two days before my fifteenth birthday. Winter 1995. At that time, I was still fourteen and my Brother(B) was seventeen, almost eighteen. It was early in the morning, we were about to leave for school, and Mom(M) said no, said it would be better to stay home. She told us not to turn on the TV, not to turn anything on. She said we had to be silent.

I never had a fifteenth birthday. We'd ordered a bitter chocolate cake for a party that didn't happen. Mom(M)'s interminable absence took away all our birthdays, raveled the passage of time.

There's no recognizable cause, only effects. Correction: only a frontier in space-time, turbulent flows, interrupted. Inter ruptured.

Only a series of scattered, meaningless clues. A set emptying out little by little. Disordered fragments. Correction: shards.

Repetition: winter, 1995.

Mom(M) starts talking about the trees in the park. She says you can see faces in the bark. Says all those faces

are looking toward the house. All those faces are looking at us.

She orders us to stop watering the plants.

If anything should happen to me, she says.

What? my Brother(B) and I respond in unison.

...

After that, we aren't able to understand what she says.

Or is it that she can't hear us?

What did you say, Mom?

That's how she began to vanish.

And in the end, we couldn't see her anymore.

August 8, 1976

Marisa,

I've decided to change your name. In my diaries, you're called Lina.

The words I've written to you, I've never written to anyone else. They all designate out-of-reach things, except for the reference to your green shoes—which is probably not true—although I haven't forgotten the stomp.

If this was just a word game, I'd go on playing to the end.

Y love you (I wrote "I love you," but added an arm to the I, no matter),

S.

We christened Mom(M)'s apartment "the bunker."

A time capsule where everything is in a state of permanent neglect.

A perfectly closed system Mom(M) constructed before rubbing herself out, one that managed to produce some kind of gravitational singularity.

My Brother(B) started university not long after, and I went to high school. It took Dad years to realize Mom(M) wasn't there—they hadn't spoken since the divorce. At times I'm not completely certain he did realize (or maybe he's much better than us at acting like nothing is wrong). Dad is a methodical man, unlikely to perceive anything outside his routine. He used to phone us once a week—on Thursdays at 2:45 p.m., because that was when he had a few spare moments—and we went to his house for dinner every Sunday. But I guess he must have suspected something, because he always had a manila envelope ready to cover the household expenses and never, ever asked about Mom(M); in part because they'd stopped talking, and in part because the girlfriend of the moment was always

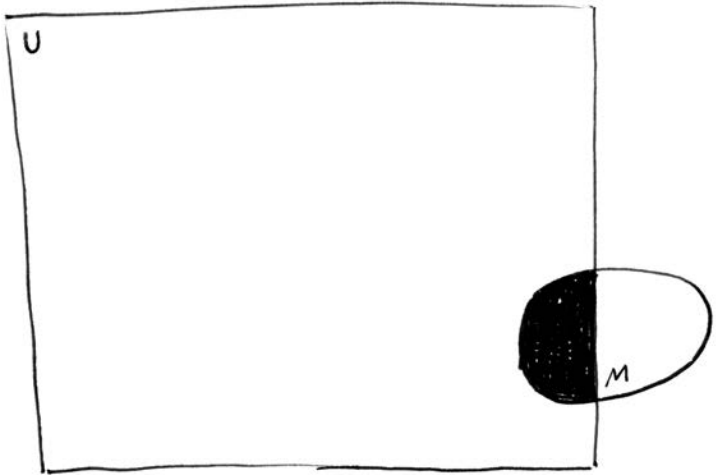
there, frowning, wishing Mom(M), my Brother(B), and I didn't exist.

It's not as if we were magicians, we hadn't even agreed upon it; the disappearing act just developed naturally. Not saying anything was enough. It's easy to let others fill the gaps. A sufficiently ambiguous expression can convert someone else's monologue into an imaginary conversation. Silence is a variable that constantly mutates, so it's the other who decides if it's a yes, a no, or any other response.

And anyway: how do you hide something when you don't know where it is?

It's surprising how little it takes to make the whole world believe your life is like everyone else's. In the beginning, they asked us the occasional question, but the fact is no one wanted to know the answers. Then they simply stopped caring, and even if they had asked, we no longer had any answers. No one remembered they hadn't seen Mom(M) for a long time. Oblivion is remorseless; it's memory that settles the accounts, the only evidence of the omission. More than a pair of magicians, we were like those two swindlers in Andersen's tale who pretended to be weavers and designed an invisible outfit for the emperor. We made them believe Mom(M) was there—despite the fact that not even we could see her. She'd crossed a frontier neither my Brother(B) nor I knew how to pass over. We made them believe our daily life was just like that of any other divorced family. The bunker, luckily, never caused any suspicion. It was, in any case, a

place no one entered for many years. The space $Mom(M)$ should have occupied was empty; she'd left us part of a hole, and all the rest was outside the visible Universe(U), in an unknown location.



Sneezes and streaming eyes. When they asked me about the purpose of my visit in customs, I opened my mouth, but my voice didn't come out. Had spent the previous ten hours thinking perhaps I'd bought Alonso(A) a ticket on another flight. But no. Considered staying there, sitting in the Buenos Aires airport for a whole week, until my Brother(B) arrived, then taking another flight or a bus to Córdoba. I could stand up to buy juice and a sandwich every so often, somehow ensure no one took my seat during visits to the restroom. It wasn't that many days. But after a few hours of looking at the floor, I decided to go into an office with this sign in the window:

GLACIERS AND THE END OF THE WORLD
FIVE DAYS AND FOUR NIGHTS
ALL INCLUSIVE

Why not? Afterwards, I'd take the bus to Córdoba and arrive at my Grandma(G)'s house the same day as my Brother(B), without a peso in my purse.

The doors of the apartment accumulated more and more bolts. The windows were covered with black canvas. That way we were safe from who knows what.

Have you seen Mom?

No. You?

I look down into the toilet bowl. Maybe the whirlpool had swallowed her up. No.

Did she go out?

No.

From the outside, the bunker is solid, impassible. Inside, it becomes increasingly unstable, unpredictable. Thought I saw her yesterday, I tell my Brother(B) . . . But no. We don't know where she is.

So when was the last time you did see her?

Don't know. You?

Don't know.

Maybe . . .

Maybe what?

We were in the breakfast room.

When?

You had a bowl of cereal.
That could have been any day.
Mom was walking to her chair.
Ah, yes. With a full mug of milky coffee.
Instead of sipping it, she took a whole mouthful and
burned her tongue.

No, that was a different day.
It was that same day.
And she spit out the coffee?
Yeah. It splattered as far as the tablecloth. The stains
are still there.

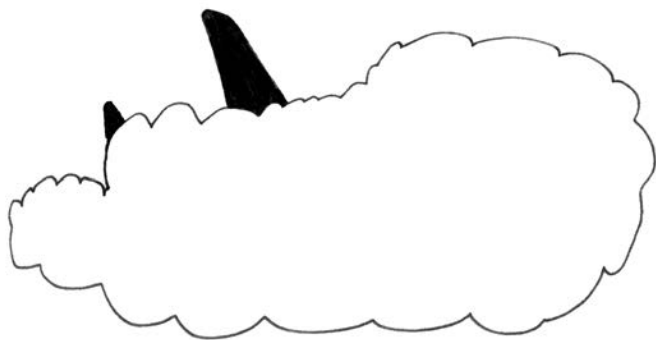
Did she say anything?
She made a gesture. Or shouted?
No, the mug slipped out of her hand.
The blue mug?
No, the one somebody gave her a couple years ago.
Ah. The one that says, *STILL PERFECT AFTER 40*?
Yeah, that's it.

Wonder where they could have bought it.
Don't know. But it's cursed.
The mug?
Yeah.
So did we eventually make it to school that day?
Don't think so.
And the pieces of the mug?

OBSERVATION SHEET III

LOCATION: Open rooftop.
DATE: October 1, 2003.
LIGHT POLLUTION (I-IO): 7, late.
OBJECT: Cloud.
SIZE: Boeing 747.
CONSTELLATION: Aeroméxico.
LOCAL TIME: 18:30.
DIRECTION: Unknown.
EQUIPMENT: Telescope.
FILTER: No.

OBSERVATION:



NOTES:

I was once obsessed with planes. They seemed the perfect symbol of my family history. Planes have separated us and, at times, brought us back together. A plane is also the nearest thing in existence to a time machine. When I land in Argentina, where my Grandma(G) lives, it always feels like another era, or a previous, scarcely remembered life.

A pair of professional *suspicionists*, that's what we'd become, according to my Brother(B). It was easy for us to believe that events always had a dark side, a shaded area we couldn't make out, one that, despite being empty, always meant something more. People often say things aren't just black or white; I'm not so sure. The white and the black are nothing more than a question of light, of totality and absence of light. The black is hollowness and the white fullness, or at least that's what they taught us at art school. Whatever. The fact is that the things we can't see don't hide themselves in the shades of gray, or in the white or black, but on the fine line separating those two totalities. A place we can't even imagine, a horizon of no return. It's at the boundaries that everything becomes invisible. There are things, I'm sure, that can't be told in words. There are things that only occur between the white and the black, and very few people can see them. Something like that happened with Mom(M): an optical illusion, an inexplicable mystery of matter. And also with Tordo(T), although, in his case, reconstructing the sequence was relatively easy.

The last thing he said to me was:

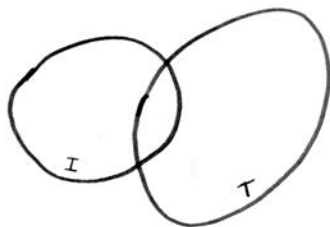
Something broke, I don't know exactly what, but we can't go on together any longer.

He didn't know what had broken?

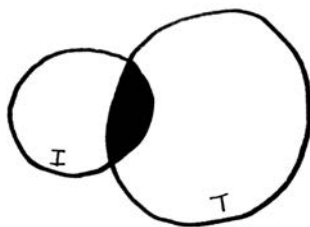
But (I) needed to find out.

So (I) went back over the sequence of events again and again, cut minutes here and there, and ended up realizing what was obvious: we're constantly drawing something we can never manage to see completely. We only have one side, an edge of our own history, and the rest is hidden. It's not worth the effort to recount the details of the breakup, but the process was more or less like this:

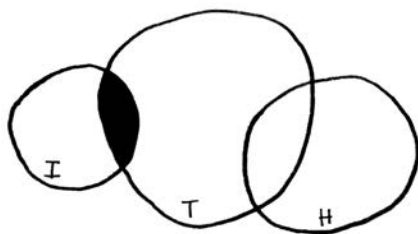
Once upon a time there was an intersection called IT



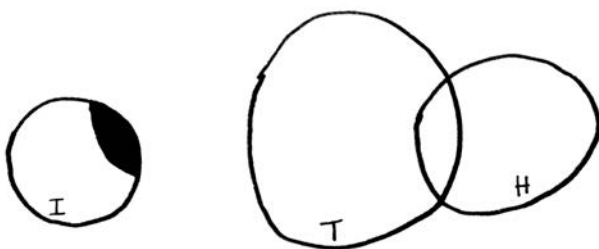
Suddenly, in the IT intersection, a void appears



In fact, the void is a symptom of intersection TH, which I can't see

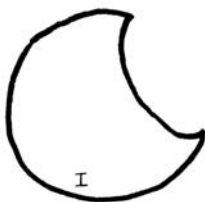


Then T moves away with H, and I is left with the hole



I am I, Tordo is T, and H is Her.

Conclusion: Nobody else was broken, and it's not clear to me if (I) still carry the hole or am missing a piece.



Judging character from a portrait seems like a bad idea to me. People do it all the time, and it's unfair: no one likes who they are in photographs. But as I didn't know him, and was wrapped up in his mother's things, there was no getting away from it. From my point of view, Alonso(A) was dulled by Marisa(M_x)'s outfit and movie-star pose, as if all he could do was bow his head or cover his face with his hair.