

**CARMEN LAFORET***Nada*

Translated by Edith Grossman

Harvill Secker, 241 pp.

During my adolescence, in the Buenos Aires of the sixties, my friends and I believed that the only worthy literature in Spanish was written in Latin America, an arrogant opinion that seemed confirmed by the wealth of the writers brought on by the so-called "Boom", such as Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez. The literature of Spain, smothered by the Civil War, appeared to have survived only in its poetry, and not at all in its fiction. Then, one day, we discovered *Nada* by Carmen Laforet, and we realized how mistaken we had been. Written quickly, in barely a few months, expressly to take part in the first Nadal literary prize (which it won), *Nada (Nothing)* took the Spanish readership by storm. First published in 1944, barely five years after the end of the Civil War, it now appears in English for the first time, in a fluid translation by Edith Grossman.

The author was twenty-three years old, and it is hard to understand how someone so young, within the isolation of Franco's Spain, should have been able to produce such an accomplished novel, so powerful in its story and so polished in its style. With *Nada*, Laforet broke Spanish literature free from the cumbersome shadow of nineteenth-century prose and the cold, censored rhetoric of Spanish fascism. Read in Argentina before the military dictatorship, it spoke to us of a state of fear and oppression that we could not know was threatening us; read in English today, it retains, within the now alien world it depicts, a note of warning and salutary unease.

*Nothing* tells the story of Andrea who, like Laforet herself, leaves her native Canary Islands at the age of eighteen, to live in her grandmother's house in Barcelona, with the intention of studying literature at the university. Besides her grandmother, the house is inhabited by her two uncles, Juan and Román, her aunt Angustias, the maid Antonia, and

Juan's wife, Gloria, plus a menagerie of cats, an old dog and a parrot. Andrea is a sort of twentieth-century Alice, fallen into a Wonderland whose characters and rules she fails to understand, and whose maze of family dramas she must reluctantly follow, beset by narrow-mindedness, poverty, violence and hunger. Gloria has been Román's mistress before and after her marriage to Juan, the straight-laced Angustias has been having an affair with her married boss, the grandmother (who never sleeps) fawns over her two sons while disdaining her daughters: three of them managed to leave the dreadful house long ago, including Andrea's mother. The maze spreads outside the house, into the post-war city, into the gambling-den kept by Gloria's sister, into the university circles of would-be artists, into the dark streets and crumbling churches. Even Andrea's relationship with her best friend, Ena, becomes another twist in the course, when Andrea discovers that Ena's mother was once humiliated by her uncle Román and that Ena's friendship serves to accomplish a terrible revenge.

Chesterton says somewhere that more terrible than a maze with a monster at its centre is a maze that has no centre. "And it came to me in waves," says Andrea when she realizes, early on, that she has walked into a nightmare: "first, innocent memories, dreams, struggles, my own vacillating present, and then, sharp joys, sorrows, despair, a significant contraction of life, a negation into nothing." At the centre of Andrea's maze lies the void that gives the book its title.

*Nada* is a story that winds and folds onto itself: the haunted house is within a haunted city and contains the haunted souls of Andrea and her kin, each coil deepening the feeling of loss and vacuity of the other. One of the earliest of Spanish novels, the sixteenth-century *Lazarillo de Tormes*, notes that "there are unfortunate houses, of ill luck, that stick their misfortune onto those who inhabit them." This is a theme that runs through Spanish literature and finds in *Nada* a sort of apotheosis. Everything and everyone in the post-war landscape is contaminated by a sense of desolate ruin, of meaninglessness. At her first sight of her grandmother's bathroom, Andrea remarks that it has the appearance of "a

witches' house. The stained walls had traces of hook-shaped hands, of screams of despair. Everywhere the scaling walls opened their toothless mouths oozing dampness. Over the mirror, because it didn't fit anywhere else, they'd hung a macabre still-life of pale bream and onions against a black background. Madness smiled from bent taps." The absurdity of Alice's Wonderland has become hideous dejection, terrifying anguish.

At the end of the novel, Andrea escapes to Madrid, but there is no true sense of resolution. Within the country, within the characters, nothing has changed. And yet, Andrea heralds the first awakenings of spiritual rebirth, of what was going to be known in Spain as *la movida*, the artistic revolution that came into being shortly after Franco's death in 1976. Carmen Laforet died almost exactly three years ago, after having converted to Catholicism in 1951 and publishing several novels and collections of short stories no doubt more carefully written, no doubt better structured than *Nada*, but lacking the fiery genius of her first, incandescent masterpiece.