

About the Author

Juan Gómez Bárcena has received the José Hierro Prize for Poetry and Fiction, the International CRAPE Prize and the Ramón J. Sender Prize. He lives in Madrid, Spain, and *The Sky Over Lima* is his first novel.

About the Translator

Andrea Rosenberg is a translator from Spanish and Portuguese and an editor at the *Buenos Aires Review*. She lives in Carrboro, America.

Praise for *The Sky Over Lima*

Winner of the Ojo Crítico Literary Prize

‘The best heartbreaker novels are the ones that sneak up on you like this one.’ *Vulture*

‘Here’s a tale with the subtlest of stings in it, dark wit and telescopic perspective aplenty. And then there’s the intoxicating folly of the games that the protagonists play with fantasy and fact, malice, tenderness, ambition, envy and other forces that strike at our most vulnerable selves.’ **Helen Oyeyemi, author of *Boy, Snow, Bird***

‘*The Sky Over Lima* has at its heart a captivating, ventriloquistic love story, not unlike the classic *Cyrano de Bergerac*. But in this epistolary romance, the woman is a fiction written by two boys – reminiscent in their way of Bolaño’s *Visceral Realists* – who come alive on the page as impeccably wrought emissaries of their time and place, while remaining incredibly relatable and engaging to readers today.’ **André Aciman, author of *Call Me By Your Name***

‘An intriguing tale of transatlantic catfishing... Bárcena grounds the literary games in a richly detailed, early 20th-century Lima and its cast of secondary characters: dock workers, prostitutes, café-haunting literati. Its lightly ironic tone darkening as it proceeds, the novel sensitively explores how a literary prank shapes the sentimental, romantic and moral education of Carlos.’ *Publishers Weekly*

‘This marvelous story is stitched together by the seduction of three epistolary lovers, distant acquaintances that together conquer reality and fantasy, transporting us to an imaginary world that is at once refreshing, comic and sublime... a monumental young author.’

Laura Esquivel, author of *Like Water for Chocolate*

‘Charming... a love letter to the creative process.’ *Kirkus*

‘Bárcena shines where so many writers stumble – his writing about art, of the artifice both in the narrative and implicit in his prose, feels alive, fresh and important. His words, which so easily could have become overwrought when translated into English, feel subtle and whimsical in Rosenberg’s deft hands.’

Sara Nović, author of *Girl at War*

‘Based on a true story, Spanish poet and writer Bárcena’s first novel transforms fact with cinematographic imagination, recreating the scenery and moods of Lima at the turn of the twentieth century with inimitable precision.’ *Booklist*

‘Anyone who has ever wept over a poem or burned to write more and better and despaired because their talent let them down will read this novel and come away feeling understood.’

National Book Review

THE SKY OVER LIMA

Juan Gómez Bárcena

TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH BY

Andrea Rosenberg



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*To the friends who accompanied me on this journey.
Without them, The Sky Over Lima would resemble
slightly less the book I wanted to write.*

*To my sisters, Diana and Marta, who know everything
about me but still know nothing about these pages.*

THE SKY OVER LIMA

I

A Comedy



At first it's just a letter drafted many times: Dearest friend, respected poet, most esteemed sir, a different opening for every sheet of paper that ends up in a crumpled ball under the desk, glory of Spanish literature, most distinguished Ramón Jiménez, peerless bard, comrade. The next day the mulatta servant will sweep up the wads of paper scattered across the floor, thinking they're the poems of the young master of the house, Carlos Rodríguez. But the young master is not writing poems that night. He smokes one cigarette after another with his friend José Gálvez, and together they mull over the exact words to use in writing to the Maestro. They've searched for his latest collection in every bookshop in Lima and found only a dog-eared copy of *Violet Souls*, which they've read many times already and whose lines they know by heart. So now they jot down grand words that a moment later sound ridiculous: Noble friend, immortal scribe, our most intrepid revitalizer of literature, might you, in your infinite kindness, offer a small courtesy to us, your friends across the Atlantic, your ardent readers in Peru — who follow your verses, Don Juan Ramón, with an admiration of which you may be unaware — might it not be too onerous an imposition on our part to humbly ask that you vouchsafe to us a copy of your most recent book, those sad arias of yours, impossible to find in Lima; might it not be an abuse of your generosity to hope to be granted that consideration even though we have not included the three pesetas that the book costs?

When their energy flags, they drink pisco. They open the windows and look out on the empty streets. It's a moonless night in 1904; the boys are just twenty years old, young enough that

they will live to see two world wars and celebrate Peru's triumph in the Copa América soccer tournament thirty-five years from now. But naturally they know nothing of all that tonight. They just crumple up one sheet after another, searching for words they know they'll never find. For with the last letter they toss to the floor, they realize that they will never acquire their signed copy of *Sad Arias*: however much they address the poet as an eminent dignitary of literature and the great hope of Spain and the Americas, they will receive not a single line of correspondence in response if they confess that they are only two young masters playing at being poor in a Lima garret. They must embellish reality, because in the end that is what poets do, and they are poets, or at least they've dreamed of being poets on many late nights like this one. And that is exactly what they are about to do now: write the most difficult poem of all, one that has no verses but can touch the heart of a true artist.

It starts out as a joke, but then it turns out it's not a joke. One of the two says, almost idly, It would be easier if we were a beautiful woman, then Don Juan Ramón would put his entire soul into answering us, that violet soul of his — and then suddenly he stops, the two young men look at each other a moment, and almost unintentionally the mischief has already been made. They laugh, congratulate each other on this inspired idea, exchange slaps on the back and two more glasses of pisco, and the next morning they meet up in the garret again with a sheet of perfumed paper that Carlos has remembered to pilfer from a sister's desk. Carlos also takes care of the writing; his schoolmates used to tease him about his feminine handwriting, the letters soft and round like a caress, and the time has finally come to put it to good use. Whenever you're ready, Señor Gálvez, he says, stifling his laughter, and together they begin to sound out those timeless

words that require only a sheet of fine paper and a writer with a womanly hand — a poem with no verses, which will appear in no anthology, but that is poised to do what only the best poetry can: name what has never existed before and bring it to life.

From those words Georgina will be born, timidly at first, because that's how they write her: a young lady from Miraflores who sighs over the poetry of Juan Ramón and whose artless sincerity makes them laugh during their pauses. A girl so ingenuous she can only be beautiful. It is she who requests a copy of *Sad Arias*, she who is so ashamed of her own audacity, she who begs the poet to understand and to forgive her. Only the signature is missing, and with it a last name, sonorous and poetic, that the two finally agree on after a debate so long that both the liquor and the pastries run out: Georgina Hübner.

And Georgina begins as simply that: a name and a sealed letter that will travel from hand to hand for more than a month, first in the bodice of the illiterate housemaid, then in the pocket of a lad who charges half a *sol* and a pinch of the maid's broad buttocks for the errand. It will then pass through the hands of two postal workers, a customs official at the docks, and a sailor, and thence to the steamship covering the Lima–Montevideo route in a sack of letters in which bad news predominates. From Montevideo, an unnecessary detour to Asunción, thanks to a negligent postman only thirty days from retirement whose eyesight is too weak to read the delicate handwriting. From Asunción, back to Montevideo by train through the jungle, and then setting sail in the hold of a ship, where it will miraculously be saved from the jaws of a rat that has left many other letters utterly unreadable in the past.

Still Georgina has not yet begun to live; she is still nothing more than a sheet of stationery that, in the darkness of the

mailbag, is already losing its last whiff of perfume. First will come three weeks of transatlantic travel in the company of two stowaways who occasionally whisper to each other in a coarse Portuguese, and then debarkation in La Coruña, train, post office, train again, a postal worker who doesn't read poetry and to whom the name of the addressee means nothing, and then Madrid, Madrid at last. It's at some point on the long journey that Georgina begins to breathe and to live—so when she finally arrives at the poet's house, she has become a flesh-and-blood woman, a languid young lady who thrums through a stream of ink and is currently awaiting a response to her letter back in Lima, at her Miraflores estate. A creature as real as the scentless letter that Juan Ramón Jiménez will read that very morning, with hands that are steady at first, but that soon begin to tremble.



Two postal employees, a customs officer who peeks inside the parcel to confirm it does not contain contraband, another sack in which bad news (deaths, miscarriages, unforeseen confinements in sanatoriums and nursing homes, a honeymoon on which the bride's jewelry is gambled away in the Estoril casino) is again more plentiful than good (a traveler who has reached his destination safe and sound, an indigenous man who accepts his mestizo son as his own). By sea to Montevideo in a hold free of stowaways and rats; from the ship to the post office, and from there to the docks once more to set sail for Lima, this time by the correct route, as the nearsighted postal worker has been pensioned and is now enjoying a humble retirement in the neighborhood of Pocitos; from the port in Lima to the local post office, and eight hands later in the leather pouch of the very same errand boy, who again charges half a *sol* and another tweak of the housemaid's haunches. Except this time the package does not fit in her bodice, and she leaves it on young Master José's desk without bothering to glance at the scribbles that she would not be able to read anyway.

This morning I received your letter, which I found most charming, and I am sending you my Sad Arias at once, regretting only that my verses cannot live up to all that you must have hoped they would be, Georgina . . .

That night in the taverns the young men celebrate their signed book and this letter written in the Maestro's own hand. They invite their friends, other poets as destitute as they, who

arrive at the pub in their horse-drawn carriages. While helping their friends out of their overcoats, José and Carlos urge them to drink, drink as much they like, Georgina Hübner is treating tonight. Then come the explanations, and the toasts, and the letter read aloud; those who believe the story and those who do not, Stop pulling our leg, Carlitos, those stilted lines could not possibly have been written by the author of *Water Lilies* and *Violet Souls*. But then they see the poet's signature and the book that can be found only in the bookstores of Madrid and Barcelona, and they begin clapping one another on the back and laughing uproariously.

Your letter is dated March 8, but I received it only today, May 6. Please do not fault me for the delay. If you keep me apprised of your address — if ever you plan to change residences — I will send you my books as I publish them, always, of course, with the greatest of pleasure . . .

Their friends insist that they must answer the letter; that they must not answer the letter; that Georgina should repay the Maestro's kindness with a photograph, or at least a few postcards of Lima; that great poets do not deserve to be mocked and Carlos and José must confess the truth straightaway; that telling the truth will achieve nothing; that they should put a stop to the joke before things end badly; that things will end badly regardless, so what does it matter. Finally it is José who proclaims, pounding the table with his fist: I say we respond, damn it. And respond they will, but that will be the next day, when the two friends return to the garret in a bleary-eyed haze, armed with the rose-scented paper they've purchased for the occasion.

Tonight, though, they prefer to enjoy themselves. To propose possible responses to the poet, which start out more or less sensible and then grow gradually worse under the counsel of alcohol and euphoria. To emerge into Lima's first light lustily reciting the *Sad Arias*, which, with a bottle of chicha in hand, don't seem so sad anymore. And afterward — and for this they must be forgiven, as by this point they are more drunks than they are poets — to address one another as ladies, loudly calling one another Georgina, pitching their voices higher, hiking up skirts they aren't wearing, and feigning dizzy spells and fainting fits, until finally they squat down to urinate, all together and dying of laughter, in the Descalzos rose garden.

*Thank you for your kindness. And believe me to be utterly
yours, who kisses your feet.*

Juan Ramón Jiménez



Let's suppose for a moment that we had to sketch José and Carlos in a single sentence. That we were allowed to proffer no more than, for example, thirteen words describing them—their existence summed up in the space of a telegram. In such a case, the words we chose would probably be these:

They're rich.

They fancy themselves poets.

They want to be Juan Ramón Jiménez.

Fortunately, no one is asking us to be so brief.



They're rich.

Both of them are, though this is less a coincidence than it is well-nigh self-evident. In 1904, friendship between members of different social classes is a sort of fairy tale, a genre reserved for the particularly naive, like children who drowsily listen to *The Prince and the Pauper* before receiving a good-night kiss.

There exist, of course, circumstances in which this principle is less stringently upheld. Nearly everyone has heard tales of land-owners who amuse themselves by granting generous favors to their peasants, perhaps in exchange for the pleasure they get from watching those peasants wait for long stretches in their parlors, caps clutched to their chests and eyes filled with fear that they might stain the rugs with mud. There are also rich, kindhearted widows who sweetly offer advice to their lady's maids, who perhaps even attempt to find them decent, sensible husbands among the footmen of the other women in their ombre-playing circle. And gentlemen who dress up like laborers to tipple in picturesque taverns, exchanging comradely embraces with men whose names they will later forget.

In none of these instances can one find any signs of true friendship, only an artificial camaraderie in which the peasant — or maid, or butler — has the unhappier role. The inferiors respond to the questions, which are often elegantly softened orders, in cautious monosyllables and, humiliated, accept the alms of attention extended by their patrons. The gentlemen, on the other hand, find these little tête-à-têtes, which are convened and dissolved with the ringing of a bell, quite satisfactory and edifying. At some point the servant will leave — *You may go now,*

Alfredo — and the gentleman will remain lounging in his armchair, the proffered glass of cognac, which the shy servant has not dared to sample, still untouched on the table, and his conscience brimming with the satisfaction of having been generous and humane.

There is, then, nothing for it but to acknowledge that both of our young men are rich. Yet there is no obligation for them to be rich in exactly the same way. The Gálvez fortune, for example, goes back centuries and is associated with an illustrious lineage of prominent national figures. And while it is true that much of the wealth accumulated by those distinguished forebears has evaporated, their descendants in 1904 still retain enough of it to enjoy a comfortable life as well as their unimpeachable reputation, which ultimately will be as valuable as the lost riches. Everyone in Lima knows that José's grandfather José Gálvez Egúsqüiza died defending the city of El Callao against Spanish troops in 1866 and that his uncle José Gálvez Moreno was a hero of the War of the Pacific. And with such letters of introduction, who could refuse to offer Master José an important post when he grows up, perhaps a diplomatic mission abroad or even a ministry of culture in Lima?

The Rodríguez family fortune, however, is embarrassingly new. Carlos's father began to amass it only three decades ago, during the rubber fever, when he achieved some success in bleeding the jungle of its resins and its Indians. Before that, he'd been a nobody. Just a door-to-door salesman of soaps and waxes who perhaps dreamed of someday becoming one of the many gentlemen who never deigned to allow him into their homes. Then came the sugar boom, and with it a plantation of four thousand laborers, and winter and summer residences, and horse-drawn carriages, and his own serving staff, so similar to those sour-faced

servants who had so often stopped him at the doorstep. There was even a botanical garden of exotic flowers and animals, along whose gravel avenues the grandee would often wander, dogged by his numerous preoccupations. Indeed, the Rodríguez family had everything but the illustrious past that not even rubber could buy: its genealogical tree was littered with little indigenous branches that had to be pruned, for that inglorious lineage is disdained in some salons, at certain splendid galas. It is why the gentlemen bow their heads ten or twelve degrees lower as they pass and the ladies offer up the backs of their hands with their noses slightly wrinkled, as if troubled by an unpleasant odor. As if the Rodríguezes still gave off a faint whiff of jungle ponds, the blood of dead headhunters, vulcanized rubber, paraffin — the paraffin that thirty years earlier Carlos's father had sold door to door at a paltry three-quarters of a *sol* per ounce.

This is the closest thing to a friendship between classes that we can find: a wealthy man from a prominent family and an even wealthier man whose ancestors were poor. Perhaps it is unwarranted to dedicate so many words to this matter, as the novel's own protagonists do not seem to take it very seriously. After all, they fancy themselves poets, and that belief keeps them hovering just above the ground, enjoying a detachment that is disrupted by anything to do with reality and its prosaic conventions. So why would they care that Carlos's family has no distinguished dead and that José's has too many? Poetry, art, their friendship — especially their friendship — transcend all of that. At least that's what they'd say if anyone bothered to ask them. We couldn't care less about that, they'd say, don't you see that we're poets? — and that answer should be sufficient.

It should be sufficient, but it is not persuasive. Because it's clear that they do care about the implications

of last name and lineage—we have already noted that it's 1904; at this time, it could not be otherwise—though they would never admit it, and may not even realize it. But that may be why the opinions of José, nephew of the illustrious José Gálvez Moreno, always seem a little more sensible than those of his friend, and his poems fuller, and his jokes about Peruvians, Chileans, and Spaniards funnier, and his girlfriends prettier; and you might even say at times that he also seems taller, except that only recently an impartial measuring tape revealed that Carlos has nearly an inch on him. It was José who created Georgina—Carlos, smiling, delighted, thoroughly inebriated, merely agreed to the plan—and he will also be the one to choose her death if one day, God forbid, something has to happen to her. And what alternative did Carlos have, then, but to agree, even if he didn't want to? He could only toss back another glass of pisco and toast his friend's excellent idea; of what use are the opinions of a rubber man's son when all of a nation's illustrious dead are arrayed against him?



The subsequent letters require more drafts than the first. Something more vital than obtaining a book of poems is at stake now: if Juan Ramón doesn't answer, the comedy is over. And for some reason, that comedy suddenly seems to its authors to be quite a serious thing. Maybe that's why they're hardly laughing anymore, and why Carlos has a solemn air about him when he picks up the fountain pen.

Yet there is no reason to imagine that the correspondence might be interrupted soon. Juan Ramón always answers in the return post, sometimes even dispatching two or three letters in a single week that will later travel together, embarking on the same transatlantic voyage back to Lima. He too seems to want the joke to continue many chapters longer, even at the cost of short and somewhat ceremonious missives. The letters are frankly boring at times, yet as fundamentally Juan Ramón-esque as the *Sad Arias* or his *Violet Souls*, and that is enough to move José and Carlos to memorize them and venerate them during many a worshipful afternoon. Sometimes the quartos arrive splattered with ink stains or spelling errors, but they forgive him even that, with indulgence, with pleasure. Juan Ramón, so perfect in his poems, so *intelligent* — with a *j* — he too sometimes scratches things out with his pen, he too gets confused, mixes up *g* and *j* and *s* and *c*.

So what do they talk about in those first letters?

The truth is that nobody much cares. Not even them. They spend many hours writing the letters, packaging them, sending them; hours exchanging remedies for the flu or discussing the cold or the heat in Madrid or Chopin's nocturnes or the discomforts of traveling by car. It is an unfruitful time that is best kept to