

DOROTHY ROBINSON

Goose Down and a Golden Egg to Go, 2017
Oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

CHUCK ROSENTHAL

La Guerra de las Flores

An excerpt from
the novel-in-progress
Trotsky in Mexico

In the next two weeks workers arrived to board up windows that faced a house across the way. Rivera had the wall surrounding Casa Azul raised and reinforced. He placed some young American volunteers, Trotskyists, to guard the gate and two more armed guards, these being Mexican, at the house's entryway. Kahlo came by only once, with Tina, for a cooking fest and Mexican speech lessons. Once again, Eulalia did much of the work, but she laughed and joked with Frida and Tina, and Sedova, too.

"The great man should go shoot us something to roast," said Tina.

Frida had found whiskey and passed the bottle with a wink at Lev, but then twirled, passed, and winked at Natalia and Tina, too. Eulalia said, no, she was working, they were playing.

By the end of the second week, Trotsky mulled abandoning his biography of Lenin for a biography of Stalin, enraged by the most recent trial in Moscow where thirteen of Trotsky's original Bolshevik allies, men who were at his side in the failed revolution of 1905 and the successful one in 1917, confessed to plotting with Trotsky to assassinate Stalin. Again, Trotsky and his son Lyova were convicted in absentia, this time of plotting with Hirohito and Hitler to overthrow Stalin and the Soviet Union. Two of his oldest original, if at times embattling, associates, Bukharin and Rykov, had been arrested and accused of training anti-Stalin terrorists.

A letter from Lyova arrived, full of despair. He confirmed that his brother, Sergei, and his wife had been arrested in Moscow. Sergei, convicted of poisoning his fellow workers, was sent to a Siberian work camp. There was no trace of his wife. "Father, it's pointless to continue," Lyova wrote.

Trotsky wrote back. "Continue or not, you'll be hunted down anyway. So fight! Send me the documents of the trials."

Sedova calmed him. "Sergei is alive," she said.

She obtained from Frida the location of a country home, owned by a friend, in a village nearby, Taxco, where they could walk; Leon could ride horses, hunt, and fish.

She said, "Even in Petrograd, in Moscow, you escaped to hunt and fish, to find the quiet."

"Yes," he said, but while she was making the arrangements, he took one of the guards and purchased a pistol and rounds.

They drove from the city, an armed guard driving, another in the passenger seat; Sedova and Trotsky sat together in the back. The cottage sat on the outskirts of the village and that evening they left the guards at the house and walked together, circling the town, through the mesquite and under the scrub oaks, the feathery coral trees and peppertrees. He held her hand.

The next morning at dawn he took a horse from the stable, sheathed a shotgun, and rode toward the hills, following a stream until he found a swimming hole, and swam. Then mounting again, he found a pond, followed its edge, and found duck scat. Found shade and waited in there until the ducks flew in. He sat, slowly counting his breaths, the moments between their life and death. He waited for them to take flight. This was the dreadful peace of hunting, of waiting for your prey, watching them on the edge of their mortality and thus being on the edge of your own.

More Mallard drakes flew in, some females, too. They squabbled at each other. Fed in the shallows, ducking their bills. Bathed. Maybe they would sit together in the water until dark and escape him. He wouldn't frighten them, hasten them into the air. And it had been a while since he had waited with a gun. Maybe they would move too quickly or wander away from where he sat, then begin their takeoff away from him and enter the sky too far away for him to take them down.

A Mallard drake bit a female's neck. She squawked, protesting, and when he persisted she took flight. The group, disturbed, followed and with two quick shots he took two of them down. Having no dog, he waded in to get them. He hung them from the saddle by their feet, and still wet, he rode home.

To be racing on horseback again, the wind in his hair, the terrain whistling by in a blur, comforted him. There, for brief moments, there was nothing but that, the ancient mountains rising in the distance, a brace of rain, the moment of calm as he held the shotgun steady at the ducks' flight. Now the chill of the wind against his wet clothing. Two ducks on his saddle that they would dress and eat.

Together they defeathered and dressed the fowl, roasted them with roots that Sedova had foraged. They'd brought wine, and if Mexican wine was not the best, it was yet wine. It was a nice break from the liquor and beer.

"Eulalia would be proud of you," said Sedova.

"And Tina?"

"She's proud enough of herself, don't you think?"

"And what do you think?" he said. "Is that what you think?"

"There are too many capturing eyes. I'm uncomfortable."

"Would they harm you?" he said.

"Women are in ways that men don't," said Natalia Sedova.

"So you think I'm vulnerable."

"To youth. To a fascinating mind," she said.

"You are the most fascinating intellect, the most fascinating intellect of any woman I've known."

"But it isn't needed to make love."

He held his glass up to her and she spied it skeptically.

"I bought a gun, a pistol," Trotsky said.

"I'm stunned."

"It can only do damage in close quarters."

"You think they'll need to get close to you," said Sedova.

He brought down his glass. "It depends."

"It depends," she said.

She raised her glass now. He met it with his.

"Tomorrow fish," Trotsky said.

The next day he took the gelding back to the stream. He found a fallen tree that traversed it and observed the trout moving in the clear water. They were big and brown and moved comfortably and confidently in the current. He recalled his long days off the Prince's Islands fishing in the Sea of Marmara, thinking then that the better he fished the better he wrote, as he dashed off essays for the *Bulletin of the Opposition*. Now he watched the big brown trout in the shallows below him. One in particular held itself against the current with what looked like ease but must have taken tremendous power and skill. This was how he saw himself and so this one he would leave alone.

But before long he had enough of the fish for dinner and that night he and Sedova ate the trout fried. They even had enough food for the guards. The next day they returned to Casa Azul relaxed and tired. But waiting for them in the garden with Frida were two new guests, André Breton and his wife, Jacqueline Lamba. Breton wore a close-fitting dark suit, dark shirt and tie, and thick, round spectacles. His thick hair was combed left to right. Lamba wore an extravagant sequined dress, heels, her wiry hair

blasting out from her head. Kahlo wore her traditional Tehuana garb, her hair loose. Trotsky held two dead rabbits that he'd shot that morning, their hind feet in his left hand and their ears touching the ground. He held them out to Frida. "For your sister," he said.

Breton spread his arms. He spoke in French. "How can this moment be real!" he said.

Sedova spread her arms toward the other women. She said, "I feel underdressed."

And everyone laughed.

"Have we all been thrown out of the Communist Party?" said Lamba.

"I only attend parties," said Kahlo. "I never join them."

"Precluding your being thrown out," said Breton.

They had never met, though they knew each other by reputation, and by the time Diego reached home, the five of them were in deep conversation around the dining table, drinking whiskey and tequila, dark Mexican beer, sharing chips and fried nopales. Breton agreed with Trotsky that the Stalinists were like the Thermidorian reactionaries of the French Revolution, so paranoid and bloodthirsty that when they were done killing their enemies they killed their allies. With luck no one would be left.

"But for Stalin," said Sedova.

Frida said to Lamba and Sedova, "Men and their prisons of ideas."

Breton pounded the table. "I love her!" he said.

"Me too!" said Rivera.

Breton followed Frida Kahlo's gaze, which was now trained on Trotsky.

That night the three men hatched a plan to collaborate on an essay about art and communism, but Kahlo punctuated the evening by saying, "But not before we go tomorrow to Xochimilco!"

And so they did. At least the five of them. Diego stayed to paint.

"And your sister?" asked Trotsky.

"He's painting her," Kahlo said. She dipped her forehead demurely, then smiled, in his mind a bit too determinedly, too bravely.

They took an electric streetcar to the Tlalpan Road and at the San Fernando traffic circle caught the Xochimilco line, sitting in an open car. Frida leaned on a frail railing and lifted her face to the cool wind as cars and buses

whizzed back and forth next to them. It was astounding to Natalia, knowing of the accident that almost killed Kahlo and left her hobbled for life, that Frida Kahlo would reiterate a situation so similar. Then Kahlo lowered her head and grinned wildly at them all and Sedova understood. It was defiance and bravado, intended for her audience, most notably Breton, and Trotsky, where her gaze lingered for a subtle, extra moment.

The line ended at the gardens of Xochimilco, where women sold dozens of different local vegetables piled on long tables and others prepared them in soups and stews of poblano pepper strips; tables overflowed with tomatoes, *huauzontles*, Creole squash, beans, corn, chiles, amaranth, lettuce and onions, radishes and carrots. Nearby, waterways dissected the thick foliage and multicolored skiffs with painted figures and women's names carried parties of parties; other boats sold fresh or prepared food, buckets of beer, still others were filled with mariachi or marimba bands.

"Once, all of Tenochtitlán was surrounded by gardens like this," Kahlo said. "They fed a city of Indians, the biggest city in the world." She chose a picnic boat, a *trajinera*, named *Rosaria*. "Only five of us will fit," she said. "We'll have to leave the guards."

"They can wait on the dock," said Trotsky.

Breton put a hand on Trotsky's shoulder and shook it slightly as they prepared to board the boat. "Don't you love her?" he said.

Trotsky chose to take it in a general way, a French way, and when Breton read Trotsky's silence as just that, he said, "No, I mean really love her, love her with all the madness of love."

Trotsky crossed his body with his right hand and touched Breton's right hand, which still lingered on his shoulder. "What would be the point, comrade?" he said.

Breton laughed. The skiff pulled up. Breton jumped aboard first and put his hand out to Frida to guide her aboard, then Lamba, and then Sedova, who touched Leon's hand as she took Breton's. Trotsky turned to the bodyguards and told them to wait there on the dock, then he leapt aboard the skiff.

Frida had brought a basket of carnitas, guacamole with chipotle chiles, and pork sandwiches, though she yet flagged down boats of chalupa merchants and bought

fresh tortillas, nopal salad. From another she bought fresh, sweet maguey water, from another, tequila, and from yet another a bucket of cold beer. Surrounded by boats clunking against theirs and the shouts of merchants, they were a floating island of chaos and reverie, and Sedova, who sat across from Leon, sought out his eyes.

"Don't worry, not like this, it's too chaotic," he said to her. "It would cause a great commotion. Others would get hurt. It would be suicide."

To add to it, a mariachi band approached and blasted into string and trumpet. Frida sang along. A marimba band pulled up now, too, beating on their hollow tubes and crooning with their wooden flutes. The mariachis quieted as the marimba group played the love song "María Elena," "*Vengo a cantarte mujer, . . . eres mi fe, eres mi Dios, eres mi amor.*" Kahlo knew every word of the soft, romantic melody.

In time the vendors dropped away, then the marimbas, and only the mariachi band remained. From his end seat, Trotsky gazed out the back of the skiff where amidst all of the floating color a man launched a small rowboat. He watched as the lone boatman swung the prow of his boat toward them, rowing, his back to them, dipping the oars with increasing rhythm. When Frida thanked and paid the mariachis, Trotsky stood and said, "Please ask them to stay a bit longer." Then he stepped to the back of the skiff. Breton stepped next to him. The other picnic *trajineras* had followed the main channel while the poleman of the *Rosaria* guided their skiff to a slightly narrower bend to the left, a place where Kahlo had indicated she wanted to take them. Trotsky nodded at the rowboat.

"He seems to know what he's doing."

"Do you think?" said Breton.

"It won't hurt to be ready," Leon Trotsky said.

"We artists only commit suicide," said Breton.

Trotsky laughed. He turned to the three women who were staring at him. "When that boat draws near, have the band strike up very loud," he said to Kahlo.

"*Muy ruidoso,*" said Kahlo.

"*Y rápido,*" Trotsky said.

The rower moved determinedly now, glancing once over his shoulder to guide the rowboat toward the skiff, *Rosaria*. "Step back, comrade," Leon said to Breton and raised his hand to the women. The band struck up as the rowboat met the skiff and the rower raised his arm for

a lift aboard. Trotsky casually offered him his wrist and lifted him as the women began to sing and scream to "La Cucaracha." The boatman, now aboard, quickly reached to his belt and pulled out a knife. Trotsky pulled his .22 pistol from his belt and plunged it into the man's stomach. There were two quick reports muffled by the music, song, and the attacker's stomach, like the sound of two small firecrackers. Trotsky shoved the man back into his boat and pushed the rowboat away from the skiff with his foot. Kahlo quieted the band. "Gracias," she said to them and paid them again. Trotsky raised his palms and said, "A man taking a nap in his boat on a beautiful day," though before he could finish his sentence a bouquet of flowers fell from the air and landed in the rowboat.

Flowers falling from the sky. Then the air was filled with flowers, falling around them into the skiff. From the shore, and from some small skiffs poled by boys, girls flung armfuls of flowers and bouquets, pelting all of them. The rowboat filled with flowers, burying the assassin while Frida began gathering flowers, laughing and flinging them into the air, carnations, roses, marguerites, lilies, and more bouquets. "The Children's Battle of the Flowers!" yelled Frida Kahlo. Sedova, Lamba, and Breton joined in, flinging flowers at each other. A rose struck Trotsky. "Struck by a rose!" Frida yelled and threw another, hitting his chest. A lily floated through the air and fell on the enflowered rowboat. Sedova pointed at it. Trotsky smiled wryly. The air was filled with shouts of children and the soft cascade of flowers.

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Meaning What, 2017

Oil on canvas, 48 x 64 in



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