A SIMPLE STORY

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This is the story of a man who took part in a dance contest.

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Laborde, a town thirty miles north-west of Buenos Aires in Argentina's Córdoba province, was founded in 1903, originally under the name Las Liebres. Populated at the time by Italian immigrants, it now has six thousand inhabitants and is situated in an oasis of wheat and corn dotted with windmills. The wheat and corn brought a reasonable level of prosperity to the area, nowadays maintained by soya cultivation, and manifesting in towns that seem straight out of the mind of a very orderly, or perhaps psychotic, child: each of the compact town centres features a church, a town square, a town hall, and houses each with their own front garden and the latest gleaming Toyota 4 x 4, sometimes two, parked outside. Route 11 passes through a large number of such towns, places like Monte Maíz, Escalante, Pascanas. Laborde lies between Escalante and Pascanas – church, town square, town hall, houses with front gardens, 4 x 4, et cetera; a town like many others, in an area of agriculture like many others; one of thousands of places in the country's vast interior whose name would ring no bells for most Argentineans. But, for certain people with a very specific interest, Laborde is an important place. In fact, for these people – with this specific interest – there is no place in the world more important than Laborde.

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On Monday, 5th January 2009, the Argentinean daily *La Nación* ran an article in its arts supplement, written by one Gabriel Plaza, with the headline: 'The folk athletes line up'. Taking up two small columns on the front page and two medium-sized columns a couple of pages in, it included the following lines: "Considered an elite corps within the world of traditional folk dance, past champions, on the streets of Laborde at least, are treated with all the respect of ancient Greek sporting legends." I hung on to the article – weeks, months, and it was still in my thoughts – and then I found that years had elapsed, and still I was thinking about it. I'd never heard of Laborde before, but once I'd read this piece of red-hot information, the joining together of *elite corps* and *sporting legends* with *traditional dance* and *a town in the middle of nowhere*… I couldn't stop thinking. What about? About going and seeing, I suppose.

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Gaucho, according to the Dictionary of Argentinean Folklore, is "the word used in the Río Plata region – Argentina and Uruguay – to designate the cowboys of these prairie- or pampas-lands… Cowboys and cattle ranchers, by and large, they stood out for their physical prowess, as well as their haughty, reserved and melancholic manner. Almost all their tasks were carried out from the back of a horse, making the animal their best companion, and crucial to the wealth of the gaucho." The general, perhaps prejudiced view of the gaucho confers very particular characteristics: brave, loyal, strong, indomitable and austere, he is also reserved and arrogant, as well as being prone to the solitary, nomadic life.

As for malambo, in the words of the nineteenth-century folklorist Ventura Lynch, it consists of "a joust between men who take turns to dance to music". A dance the gauchos would challenge one another with, trying to best their opponents in feats of stamina and skill, to a guitar and percussion accompaniment. This is the dance Gabriel Plaza's article was alluding to: malambo, the dance of the gauchos.

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Malambo's origins are unclear, though people agree it probably arrived in Argentina from Peru. Sets of tap dance-like movements, each associated with a certain musical metre, combine to form the "figures". Composed of taps of the toes, soles and heels, pauses on the balls of the feet, and lifts and twists – unimaginable contortions – of the ankles, a malambo performance at the highest level will include more than twenty such figures, divided up by *repiqueteos* – toe taps at a pace of no fewer than eight per second – requiring enormous responsiveness in the muscles. Each side has to be mirrored, a right-foot figure immediately repeated, identically, with the left foot, so that a dancer of malambo needs equal precision, strength, speed and elegance on both sides. There are two styles: *sureño* – hailing from Argentina's southern and central provinces – and *norteño* – from the north. *Sureño* is the gentler style, and is accompanied by just the guitar; *norteño* is more explosive, and calls for both a guitar and a drum. Dancers of each dress differently: the southern- and central-province dancers wearing a wide-brimmed hat, a white shirt, neckerchief, waistcoat, short jacket, and the *cribo* – wide, flared trousers with tassels and embroidery – over the top of which a trimmed poncho or *chiripá* is worn; a linen cord holds the *chiripá* up, but a wide, silver-decked belt (known as a *rastra*) is also worn; on the feet, the so-called "foal shoes", thin leather bindings covering only the heels and middle section of the foot, tied on with rawhide straps that go over the ankles and up the calves – leaving the front part of the foot and toes bare as they strike the boards. The *norteño* style includes shirt, a cloth at the neck, jacket, *bombachas* – wide, pleated trousers – and knee-high leather boots.

This strictly masculine dance, which began life as a crude kind of gauntlet-throwing, had by the twentieth century been strictly choreographed into performances lasting between two and five minutes. Though best known for the versions seen in "for export" spectacles – including hopscotch between candles and the juggling of knives – some traditional festivals in the country do still cleave close to malambo's essence. But it is in Laborde, this town out in the middle of pampas flatlands, where malambo in its purest form is preserved: since 1966 a prestigious and formidable six-day competition has been held here, one that places fierce physical demands on the participants and concludes with a winner who, not unlike bulls or other thoroughbred animals, is given the title of Champion.

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In 1966, on the initiative of an association calling itself Amigos de Arte, the Laborde National Malambo Competition was first held, in the grounds of a local sports club. In 1973 the organizing committee – locals who, as they do to this day, counted among their number manicurists and speech therapists, schoolteachers and small business owners, bakers and housewives – bought a thousand square metre plot of land from the local Spanish Association, and constructed a stage there. A crowd of two thousand people came that year. Nowadays over six thousand regularly attend, and, though the emphasis remains firmly on the malambo, the competition categories now include song, such as the Best Solo Recital category; music, such as Best Instrumental Ensemble; and other traditional dances, including Twosomes and Regional Costume Making Teams. Some of the best-attended slots feature non-competitive presentations from renowned musicians and folk-singing groups like Chango Spasiuk, Peteco Carabajal and La Callejera. Each year, dancers come in from across Argentina, but also farther afield – Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay in particular – swelling the town's numbers by an extra two thousand. Many locals rent out their homes, and the municipal schools become overflowing temporary hostels. Months of planning go into deciding who will participate,

with delegations from each of Argentina's provinces pre-selecting the best from their respective federations.

The organizing committee is self-financing, and refuses to have anything to do with the country's large traditional dance festivals (those held in Cosquín and Jesús María), veritable tsunamis of malambo that get broadcast nationwide. That would mean making the festival gaudy, trashy, and neither the running time (7 p.m. to 7 a.m.), nor the content itself, are what one could call easily digestible; you won't find pomaded gauchos wearing nice suits and tap-dancing between candles, and you won't find any rhinestone boots. If Laborde calls itself "the most Argentine festival" it's because it offers up "*tradición pura y dura*" – tradition, pure and hard. The regulations prohibit anything cutting edge, and the jury, comprising former champions and folk dance specialists, wants to see tradition, as the regulations say, "without the remix": costumes and footwear that show respect for the modesty, or indeed the opulence, associated with the gauchos and their womenfolk in times past; acoustic instruments; and dance steps that correspond with the region the dancer represents. No piercings are to be seen on stage, not to mention tattoos, rings, or watches, let alone plunging necklines. As the regulations state: "The dancers' boots ought to have reinforced sections on the front part of the soles, spur shanks at the back, must not have metal tips, and must be finished in traditional colours. The 'foal shoes' ought to be authentic in design, though they needn't be made from the same materials as originally (horse or tiger hide). The use of daggers is not permitted, and neither is the presence of *boleadoras* [a lariat with stones instead of a noose], spears, spurs, or any other element not connected with the dance… The musical accompaniment must also be respectful of tradition in every regard, and must comprise no more than two instruments, one of which must be the guitar… The presentation must avoid all suggestion of sensationalism."

It is this uncompromising spirit that has probably done most to keep Laborde so under wraps. In February 2007 Laura Falcoff, a journalist who has been attending the festival for years, wrote the following in the Argentinean daily *Clarín*: "Last January was the fortieth anniversary of the Laborde National Malambo Festival in Córdoba province, a festival that is to all intents secret, judging by the column inches dedicated to it in the mainstream press. For malambistas from across the country, though, Laborde is an out-and-out Mecca, the place on the map where, once a year, all their hopes centre." Even in articles expressly focusing on the panoply of traditional dance festivals in Argentina, which are particularly numerous in austral summer, Laborde is almost never mentioned, and this in spite of the fact it falls right at the beginning of January, between a Tuesday and the early hours of the following Monday.

The Malambo category is divided into two subcategories: the Quartets, in which four men dance in perfect synchronicity, and the Soloists. Within these come age categories too: Under Nines, Teens, Advanced Teens, and Veterans, but the jewel in the crown is the Upper Soloist category for male dancers who are twenty years and older. No more than five of these competitors try out each day. In their first appearance, usually at around one o'clock in the morning, they'll dance the "strong" malambo corresponding with the area they hail from, *norteño* or *sureño*. Next, at around three o'clock in the morning, comes the "return", with those who danced *norteño* before presenting a *sureño*, and vice versa. The jury meets to deliberate at midday on the Sunday, drawing up a list of finalists which is then passed on to the regional delegates, who in turn communicate the news to the competitors. Events reach their apogee in the early hours of the Monday, between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m., when the finalists dance the strong malambo pertaining to their own region. And at around 5.30 a.m., as the sky grows light over a still-packed exhibition ground, the winners of each of the categories are announced. The champion is the last to be announced. A man who, in the moment he receives the accolade, is at the same time destroyed.

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Route 11 is a thin strip of asphalt, intersected every now and then by rusty bridges over which trains no longer pass. To travel along it in austral summer – January or February – is to see the pampas in their picture-postcard state, bursting with all the different greens of the unripe wheat. The day is Thursday, 13th January 2011, and the entrance to Laborde could hardly be more prominent: next to a painted Argentinean flag – the light blue, the white – is the legend "*Laborde Capital Nacional del Malambo*". The town's limits are also clear to see: it is seven blocks long and fourteen wide. There being nothing more to the place, people hardly know the names of the streets, getting around instead by indications such as "opposite Lopez's house", or "next to the ice cream parlour". Similarly, the grounds where the competition is held is simply 'the grounds'. This is where, at four in the afternoon, the light thin as though filtering through a scrap of plaster, the only moving things in Laborde are to be found. Everywhere else has shut down: the houses, the newspaper stands, the clothes shops, the greengrocers, the supermarkets, the restaurants, the cybercafés, the warehouses, the rotisseries, the church, the town hall, the civic centres, the police- and fire stations – as though a kind of paralysis had taken hold, a mummification even. My first thought on seeing these low houses with their cement benches outside, the unlocked bicycles leant against trees, cars with their windows left rolled down, is that I've seen hundreds of towns just like it, and what could possibly be going on here that is of any note?

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Unlike the festivals in Cosquín and La Sierra, in Laborde malambo is the only featured dance, and, also unlike other venues, where two or three minutes is the allotted time, in Laborde the dance lasts for five minutes.

Five minutes is hardly an eternity. A negligible amount of time when compared with a twelve-hour flight, a mere breath in a three-day marathon. But not so if the right comparisons are applied. The fastest one hundred-metre runners in the world aim for sub-ten second times; Usain Bolt's record stands, at the time of writing, at 9.58 seconds. A malambo dancer in full flow moves his feet just as quickly as a one hundred-metre runner, only he has to keep it up for five minutes. A malambo dancer's preparation therefore involves not only the sort of artistic instruction a ballerina would undergo, but also the physical and psychological preparations of an athlete. They don't smoke or drink, and they never go out late. Long-distance running and time in the gym are standard, and the aspiring malambista also has to work to perfect his concentration levels and develop the correct attitude: a keen sense of conviction and self-confidence is vital. Though some train alone, most employ a coach, usually a past champion – whose hourly fees and travel costs they are obliged to cover. Add to this gym membership fees, consultations with nutritionists and sports scientists, healthy food, and of course the attire – which can cost anywhere between US$600 and $800 for each outfit. A pair of the *norteño* boots alone costs $140 – and, given the punishment they receive, needs replacing every four or six months. There is also the annual trip to Laborde itself, which often means a stay of two weeks. Most of the contestants are from working-class families, with housewives, municipal workers, metal workers and police officers for parents. The more fortunate give dance classes, but there are plenty of part-time electricians, bricklayers and mechanics among them. A few will win the first time they enter, but for almost all it is a question of persistence.

As for the prize, the winner can expect neither cash nor a holiday, nor a house nor a car, but simply a rather plain trophy crafted by a local artisan. Laborde's true prize – the one on which everyone's mind is trained – cannot be seen with the eyes: the prestige and recognition, the endorsement and respect, and the glorious honour that come with being one of the best among the select few even able to dance this, this murderous dance. In the small, courtier-like circle of traditional dance devotees, a Laborde champion becomes a demigod.

And yet… In order to preserve Laborde's prestige, and affirm its elite nature, a tacit pact has been in place between Laborde champions since the festival's inception: though they may go and compete elsewhere, they may never enter the Laborde festival again, or dance the solo malambo at other festivals. Should anyone break this pact – there have been two or three exceptions – they'll suffer the utter contempt and scorn of their peers. So the malambo a man dances to win will also be one of the last of his life: the summit scaled by a Laborde champion is also the end.

In January 2011 I went to Laborde with the simple plan of telling the story of this festival, and of trying to understand why people take part in such a thing: going up when that only means coming straight back down again.

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Stalls with orange awnings line the earth-packed streets around the venue. When night falls they'll be selling handicrafts, shirts, CDs, but at this hour, while the sun is still in the sky, they shine brightly. Wire fencing rings the grounds, and just inside and to the right is a room called the Champions' Gallery, where photos of past winners are displayed. Next along are some food stalls that, later on in the day, will be selling *empanadas*, pizza, the *locro* stew, and rotisserie chicken. On the far side of the field stand the toilets and the press room, inside a wide, square building with chairs, computers and a wall covered by a long mirror. And then, beyond them, the stage.

By the time I arrive I've heard a few stories: of this stage inspiring such awe in certain contestants that they change their minds minutes before going on, forfeiting the chance to take part; that the small incline just before you reach the stage adds to its forbidding air; that the ghosts of great malambistas past are so many that, for some, it can be quite overwhelming.

What I see is a blue curtain and, above and to the sides, sponsorship boards bearing the names of local companies. Microphones are positioned at the front, intended to amplify the sounds of every footfall with devilish precision. Before the stage stand the plastic chairs for the audience, hundreds of them, white, empty. At 4.30 p.m. it's difficult to imagine that, at some point, there will be anything more than this: an empty stage and an island of plastic in the sun, heat waves shimmying upwards.

I'm looking up at the bough of a eucalyptus tree, whose branches are too sparse to block out the intense sun, when I hear it. A spaced-out gallop, or repeated gunfire. Turning around I find a man up on the stage. With a beard, one of the wide-brimmed hats, a red waistcoat beneath a blue jacket, a pair of bright white *cribo* trousers, and one of the *chiripá* ponchos in beige, he's practising the steps of the malambo that he'll dance later tonight. To begin with he moves his feet, if not slowly, then still at a human pace – a pace one might match. Then he turns it up a notch. Then another, and another, faster and faster, until finally the man stamps down with one foot, standing with his eye fixed on a point somewhere behind me, before dropping his head. At this point he also starts to breathe, or rather pant, heaving in and out like a fish gasping for air.

"Good," says his accompanist, a man with a guitar.

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What could motivate a town of immigrants who have resolved to make this place the end of their travels, a conservative group evidently given to neatness, to promote a dance associated with a class of person, the gaucho, best known for nomadism, rebelliousness and the rejection of authority? I don't know. But the Laborde National Malambo Festival is the same as any world cup in any discipline: it is a seal of unsurpassable quality, and whoever wins is the best in the world. Any dictionary will list several definitions for the word "champion" – a person

who comes first in a competition, a person who stands in defence of a cause or doctrine, a hero made famous in battle, a knight who took part in single combat in olden times – and each of these could be applied to the winner in Laborde.

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At six o'clock in the evening the scene is quite changed. The bars have opened and, throughout the town, groups gather on street corners and perform improvised dances to the plucking of guitars. They all seem very young and, though they wear baggy jeans, and though there are miniskirts and band T-shirts in evidence, certain details are out of keeping with their ages, and indeed the age: the boys have long hair and bulky beards, as the gauchos of the past would have had – or as they would in their received image, and the girls, as would their *paisana* forebears, wear their long hair in braids.

By eight o'clock, the roads leading to the grounds have been shut off. Within the grounds a large crowd mills about in the fair that's been set up, past stands selling the sweet *alfajora* biscuits, homemade cakes and pastries, shower curtains, dog coats, leather belts, *maté*, silver jewellery, knives, shirts. The food stalls serve portion after portion of the *locro*, spit-roasted meat and slices of pizza. The white plastic chairs are all taken already and, up on the stage, the first competitive dances are under way. At this moment it's the Under Nines Quartets, diminutive gauchos whose youth, when it comes to the applause, or indifference, of the crowd, wins them no concessions.

Ariel Ávalos sits in a room that serves as a sort of festival library. A Laborde champion in 2000, hailing from the province of Santa Fe, Ariel is a rarity in that he wears his hair short and has only the lightest smattering of beard.

"There's no actual rule prohibiting you from taking part in other festivals, but there's an unspoken agreement between us past champions. No other festival has the same importance as Laborde, getting ready takes years. And the way to show you value it is to not compete elsewhere. It's a way of saying that nowhere else is as prestigious or important."

Ávalos's father worked in a ceramics factory, and his mother was a housewife. He began dancing at the age of eight in dance workshops in his school and, in 1996, embarked on preparations for Laborde. The year he won, he trained under the 1987 champion, Víctor Cortez, a sports physician and nutritionist. He had to give up university, where he was studying anthropology, so he could earn a wage as a mechanic and pay Cortez.

"University was always going to be there, but the possibility of winning Laborde, no. You come here for the glory, not the money. But when you dance, your whole body boils, every single inch of you. You're on fire. The city I'm from, San Lorenzo, is on a river. I'd go down there and dance watching the river go by. The force of the river is the same as what I felt dancing. The first obstacle a malambista has to overcome is fear: am I going to finish the malambo well? Will I have enough puff? Can I take it? When I was doing my training this psychology student gave me an exercise to do: I had to stand in front of the mirror and say 'I am the champion.' And until you believe it, you have to carry on saying it. I started in the bathroom mirror – 'I'm the champion, I'm the champion' – and to begin with I made myself laugh. But the day came when I believed it. Another one was imagining the moment the announcer said my name, giving myself those goose bumps. Even now, seeing the boys up there dancing, I want it to be me. I find it hard to believe there are people who don't dance malambo. But the training is incredibly demanding. You need to be as fit as a professional footballer, except you'd never catch any footballer running as hard as they can for five minutes without a break. A footballer runs a hundred metres and has a break. A malambista keeps that up for five minutes. It's an absolute killer. A minute and a half in, your quads start to burn, and you start needing more air. And if you aren't prepared for that change in your breathing, you have to stop."

"Why?"

"Because you'll suffocate."

Ariel Ávalos was a finalist in 1998 and came runner-up (the only other award in the Upper Soloist category) in 1999. The runner-up always arrives as one of the favourites the following year, and so, after twelve months of rigorous training, he set out for Laborde on 3rd January 2000. A few days earlier, his grandfather had begun to complain of back pains. The grandfather had raised Ávalos from the age of thirteen, owing to the smallness of his parental home – Ávalos was child number three. But, following his arrival in Laborde, each time he rang home to let his family know how he was getting on, they'd say the grandfather was out, that the doctor had advised lots of walking and he was out stretching his legs. On the opening night in Laborde Ávalos kicked off proceedings, as is traditional for the previous year's runner-up, and went on to reach the final. In the early hours of the Monday, he left the stage in a state of exultation, knowing he'd danced well. He was back stage, recovering, when his trainer told him what everyone else already knew: his grandfather was in critical condition, he was in hospital; they'd decided not to tell Ávalos in case it made him want to pull out. Ávalos wasn't angry: he understood that this was how it had to be. At five o'clock in the morning on 17th January came the announcement of the champion's name, and it was him. He went out and said his thanks, danced a couple of figures – as is traditional – and after saying a few words, left the stage and sped off in his car for San Lorenzo. But his grandfather died at eight o'clock that morning, while he was still en route.

"My aunt, who was the last to speak to him before he went into a coma, told me: 'Before he passed away he asked after you, he asked how you'd got on.' It was the last thing he said."

Outside it's started to rain but, through the half-open door, I can see the audience in their seats, and none of them is budging.

"A malambista has to be ready to give up more than you can possibly imagine."

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By eleven o'clock in the evening the rain has stopped. A provincial delegation is on stage and, moving between some chairs, a group of ordinary-looking men and women not in costume – in jeans and skirts, shorts, with berets and ponchos – are dancing and waving handkerchiefs. It isn't a group of useless amateurs, but rather the concentric flower of the *zamba* dance. Laborde takes great pride in the crowds it attracts, because they hold the knowledge and power to discern what they're seeing – to judge the hits and misses. For them, Laborde isn't a museum for ossified traditions but a sublime display of that which they grew up with, and which they continue to help flourish.

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Back stage, in a space with an untiled floor and hollow brick walls, stand the changing rooms. Four of these are monastic cells with sheet metal doors and a single cement table inside, nothing else. The fifth changing room is off in one corner, with a gap between the top of its walls and the ceiling, and in this case with no table and no light of its own. There are two toilets, whose doors don't shut properly, and a long mirror lining one of the walls. The eye-watering aroma of muscle balm fills the space, a hive of comings and goings, people in various states of dress, putting make-up on, stretching muscles, applying sprays, braiding hair, trimming beards – all of them on edge, waiting. There are numerous clothes racks bearing dresses and gaucho costumes, there in men in underclothes, and women demurely manoeuvring bras off or on. In advance of their stage calls dozens of people do their warm-ups as the adrenaline pounds, blasting electricity into their inflamed hearts.

"No I *can't* get it off, idiot. This ring! I'm gonna kill myself."

A girl with impeccable braids, wearing a charming flower print dress with voluminous shoulder ruffles, is wrestling with an enormous, fuchsia pink ring. One swollen finger, and five minutes before she's due to dance. The ring would mean automatic disqualification.

"You've used soap?"

"Yes!"

"And your spit, and washing-up liquid?"

"Yes, yes, it's not coming off!"

"Ninny."

On a bench to one side, a young guy is using a plastic bag to help slide his foot into his pointed-heel boots.

"It's to make them slip in. You can't do it otherwise. We always use boots two sizes too small – it gives us better control to have them so tight."

On the floor in front of the wall mirror is a wooden plank. Four dancers, the members of a *norteño* quartet, are standing side by side on the plank, jutting out their chins and rehearsing haughty, defiant glares. Four chests rise up like the breasts of four cockerels about to fight. What follows resembles nothing so much as a section of the North Korean army on parade: astonishingly synchronized strides, and eight heels catching, stamping, and scraping the floor as though there were one single heel. An interested circle of dancers forms around them, quietly contemplating the moves. When the quartet comes to a stop, there's a sudden, frozen moment of rapture, and the circle disbands as though it had never been there, as though what has just been witnessed was a sacred, or secret, ceremony, or both.

An hour later, at midnight, the doors to the five changing rooms have shut and, on the other side of these battered metal sheets, noises can be heard, now drums, now guitars, now the most unalloyed of silences. There, standing to attention, are the men that all of Laborde is waiting for. Five of the dancers in the Upper Soloist category.

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The Upper Soloists are announced in the same way each evening. Between 12.30 and 1 a.m., the Laborde Hymn plays – *Baila el malambo / Argentina siente que su pueblo está vivo / Laborde está llamando a fiesta, al malambo nacional* (Dancing the malambo / Argentina feels the pulse of its people / Laborde calls for celebration, for our country's malambo) – and the announcer's voice rings out:

"Ladies and gentlemen! The moment you, Laborde, and all of Argentina has been waiting for!"

The announcer always make a point of including the rest of the country, for all that the rest of the country seems quite unlikely to ever find out.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Laborde, the entire nation… it's time for the Upper Soloist category!'

As the music fades, fireworks burst into the sky. And then, the moment the announcer says the name of the first dancer, so total is the silence it's as though there's been a sudden snowfall.

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The members of the jury, at a long table immediately in front of the stage, sit stock-still.

First there is the sound of a guitar being strummed, conjuring all the sadness of the final days of summer. The dancer is dressed in a black corduroy jacket and red waistcoat. The white *cribo* coats his calves like a creamy rain and, in place of a *chiripá*, he wears dark, tight-fitting trousers. Fair hair, full beard. He makes his way to the centre of the stage and stops,

before, with a movement that seems to burst from deep in his bones, using his toe to stroke the boards, then his heel, then the flanks of his foot – a trickle of precise taps, a series of perfect sounds. As in the moments before a wolf is about to strike, the tension builds as the dancer increases the pace – soon his feet themselves become two animals, tearing into the stage, grinding it, splitting it into pieces, hacking, shredding, devouring. The final foot-blow is like two trains colliding. The dancer stands still. Bathed in sweat, he stands rigidly staring out, with all the severity of a lofty, tragic chord. He bows and moves off stage. Then a woman's voice, deadpan and impenetrable:

"Time: four minutes and forty seconds."

This was the first Upper Soloist Malambo I saw in Laborde, and it shook me. I dashed back stage and caught a glimpse of the man – Ariel Pérez, the Buenos Aires candidate – diving into his changing room with the urgency of someone who has to hide that they are in love, or that they hate a person, or that they have been having murderous thoughts.

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"Ay, look at your toe!"

Irma holds her head in her hands and stares at the toe in question, which, poking out the end of the "foal shoe" bindings, is enormous, and has a gash in the tip.

"I know, Ma, it's nothing."

"What do you mean nothing? It's almost falling off! I'm getting bandage and disinfectant."

"Oh, come on."

Irma ignores her son and goes looking for the first aid box. The boy, Pablo Albornoz, is sitting in a chair, and looks at the toe as though this isn't the first time he's seen it like this. Twenty-four years old, he's representing the province of Neuquén, having been under the tutelage of Ariel Ávalos, and is far more concerned with getting his breath back – he'll be dancing for the second time in an hour – than with the toe.

"Doesn't it hurt?" I say.

"Yes, but when you're up there you're so juiced you don't even notice. It's four and a half minutes and you just go all out."

He works as a caretaker at a kindergarten, and has competed at Laborde numerous times already – so many times that he wonders whether he's really any good.

"I can't be, I think. I've been dancing since I was twelve, but there some start at four, and some come to Laborde and win on their first try. But I'd also die if I couldn't come."

Irma returns with a vial of sterilizer and a cloth. Crouching down, she considers the toe, under which blood is starting to collect.

"Ay," she says. "There's a whole piece missing."

"All right, Ma, all right. We'll look at it later. Now I have to dance."

Irma douses and bandages the toe, Pablo puts on his boots, using the plastic bag, and goes over to one side of the room to stretch off. A toe in bandages, a plastic bag, boots two sizes too small: not precisely what you could call glamorous.

"I always come with him," says Irma. "It is tough, the bus trip is really long, arriving here at eight o'clock in the morning on the Monday, and he had a rehearsal slot at eleven, so it was off the bus and straight here. Another day his rehearsal slot was 4 a.m. to 6 a.m. He puts everything into it. He has to pay his tutor, including his plane tickets, then there's our rooms, classes, and the outfits of course. But if they do win, it changes their work prospects totally, because then they can be someone else's tutor, take on students, sit on juries. Pablo's young, he's only twenty-four, but you have to win before you're thirty, or that's it."

In Laborde the concept of "ex-champion" doesn't exist – whoever wins, reigns forever – but the title means, along with eternal prestige, more work and better pay. A dance teacher, or someone with a degree in folk customs, no matter how good they are, will never be paid the $200 a champion would get for a day of classes, or for being on a jury. So, while out on the

stage others dance, and people in the audience watch, applaud, eat and take photos, in here, behind the stage, wreathed in the smell of arnica and muscle balms, they await the moment when, perhaps, their lives are going to change forever.

"People of Laborde, and Argentina!" says the announcer. "These are the sons of the nation, they uphold our traditions!… Time for a brief break now, and we'll be right back."

*

Hernán Villagra lives in a town called Los Altos, in Catamarca, is twenty-four years of age, studies criminology, and hopes one day to become a policeman – his father is a policeman – and he is constantly in pain. Today, Friday, sitting at a table in the bar on the corner of the square, he's in pain; when he gets up to go to the bathroom, he's in pain. The pain accompanies him wherever he goes because he has osteoarthritis in his toes and the solution is to operate, but first there's a rite he has to complete: to go up on stage and dance the last solo malambo he'll ever dance in Laborde. Villagra is the 2010 champion, which means he's spent the whole of the past year travelling, giving interviews and signing autographs. In the early hours of Monday he'll bid farewell to his kingdom and hand over the trophy to the new champion, who from that moment on will receive all the attention he's been receiving.

"I've been dancing since I was six. I first entered Laborde in 2007 – I was terrified. You can't be just anyone to dance on this stage. The day we got here my tutor said to me, 'Change into your outfit, we're going to rehearse on stage.' There were a few other guys up there going through their steps, and that was when the nerves started. I fell ill that same day, totally fell apart, started vomiting. But I danced anyway and it turned out pretty well. I got to the final, though I didn't win. In 2008 I came runner-up. And in 2009 I came runner-up again – being runner-up twice is embarrassing. I'd rather have lost than come runner-up again. It was awful. Being so close but not making it over the line. Plus your thoughts start turning to the year ahead, all the work you're going to have to put in if you want to come back, and over time, physically you just start to wear down. It's five minutes and you pound those boards. Your legs suffer, the tendons, all the cartilage, every inch of you is in pain. Dancing the *norteño* mean guaranteed blisters, and the *sureño* makes your toes burn when you're dragging them across the stage, plus the boards always give you splinters."

"And is it worth the pain?"

"The thing is, what you feel when you're up there is unlike anything. It's like electricity. I came back in 2010 and got to the final. And I ended up dancing the best malambo of my life. When I came off stage, I'd gone blind. I knew it was my best ever malambo. It was like I was in shock. And I won. When I went home as champion, people lined the streets, we did like a ten-mile-long procession."

"And now?"

"Now I just do anything so I don't have to think about my last malambo. I have to enjoy it, because it's my last. A lot of things must go through your head in that moment."

"What kind of things, do you think?"

"And so many emotions."

"Such as?"

"And everything that's happened this year."

"For example?"

"And the things I've been through."

I'm about to carry on asking, but I desist. I start to see there's no point.

*

“So much goes through your head.” “You feel so many different things.” “You never forget it.” “You have to go up there thinking of yourself as champion.” “To represent my province is already success for me.” “People say the most amazing things to you.”

The way the malambistas talk is somewhat similar to professional footballers, the phrases they trot out when they speak to journalists: “We’ve got a great group.” “Team spirit is amazing.” “They were the better team.” When it comes to specific questions – what do they think about while they dance, what memories do they have of the night they won – they all come out with the same set phrases: they make reference to the huge amount that goes through their heads, or to how wonderful it all was, but rarely will they go into specifics. If someone pushes them to describe at least one of the wonderful things that happened to them, they’ll tell the story of how, for example, the champion from 1996 came and gave them a hug and said, “Now you have to show you’re worthy of that trophy”, or about the little child who trembled with emotion on being given an autograph in a school in Patagonia. Maybe these things seem insignificant. For them – children from large families, raised in remote villages, in the midst of the most precarious economic situation, and with no famous forebears – such things mean everything.

*

“Look, this one’s shut too. These Laborders.”

Carlos de Santis, the delegate from the Catamarca province, is driving around in search of a place to eat. It’s 12.36, and in Laborde everything shuts at 12.30 and doesn’t open again until four or five o’clock. Even in the face of two thousand festivalgoers, Laborde will not forego its siesta. Not that this is especially surprising to de Santis – a dance teacher and tutor of the only two malambistas from Catamarca ever to win in Laborde – Diego Argañaraz in 2006 and Hernán Villagra, whom I’ve just been speaking to – hailing as he does from the small village of Graneros in Tucumán province, population 1,000.

“I lived in a house with mud walls and a roof made out of canes. We kept food cold in a well we made on the roof, covering it over with a wet rag. I collected firewood in the mountains to sell. Or I’d catch frogs and sell them. I wanted to study, so that meant leaving the house at five o’clock in the morning and walking three hours to school. I’d get there at eight, classes lasted till midday, then I’d get home at four. And at five I’d head outside to work, until the sun went down. I worked in a bar in the evenings, waiting tables, sweeping up, and they’d give me a Milanese scallop and the tips. Someone came to give a malambo demonstration in the village one day, and I went along. I wanted to learn everything, malambo, English, piano, anything just so I could get out of the village. Not because I didn’t love the village, but I didn’t want to end up ploughing the fields, spending the rest of my days stuck out there on the mountainside. This is why I think the malambo holds so much importance. We’re all from poor families, we’ve all had hard lives. And that’s how the malambo is too. That’s what the students need to learn, that they have to express this essence. To defend the tradition. But it’s a great sacrifice, three hundred and sixty-five days preparing to dance that five minutes. A whole year’s work, gone just like that. And the boys are all from very modest backgrounds, it isn’t easy for them.”

At one o’clock, by which time it’s clear that nowhere is open, Carlos de Santis pulls up in front of the Mariano Moreno school, where he and his delegation are staying.

“Come on, we’ll show you around.”

In the itchy heat of the playground, the climbing ropes dangle down and a few men sit playing cards. Inside, the school resembles a refugee camp. Fans, five of them, circulate the warm air around, the floor is covered with mattresses, and these in turn are piled with blankets, towels, hats, clothes, guitars, drums, and people. Someone has stuck posters up on the walls: “Please clean up after yourselves and keep the place tidy, for everyone’s comfort.” There are thermoses of tea strewn around, cups of *maté*, sachets of sugar, baby bottles, nappies, bottles of cheap fruit juice, jars of *dulce de leche*, tea bags, bread, biscuits. Ponchos

are hanging in front of the windows to black out the day, and a number of women are ironing the evening's outfits. The heat is so dense it seems to darken the air. De Santis gestures towards a classroom in one corner:

"That's where I sleep," he says.

In that corner lies a mattress, and nothing more.

*

The average age is twenty-four. None of them drinks, smokes, or stays out late. Many of them listen to punk, heavy metal or rock, and they all know how to tell the difference between dances like a *pericón* and a *cueca*, a *vals* and a *vidala*. They're devoted readers of gaucho staples such as *Martín Fierro*, *Don Segundo Sombra* and *Juan Moreira*. Together these epitomes of the tradition form a saga – like some kind of *Lord of the Gauchos* – as inspiring to them as *Harry Potter* or *Star Trek*. They place weight on words such as respect, tradition, nation, the flag. Each of them aspires – both on stage and off it – to the gaucho attributes: austerity, courage, pride, sincerity, forthrightness. They wish for themselves a certain ruggedness and strength, to face all that life will throw at them – which is, and always has been, a great deal.

*

Héctor Aricó is a dancer, a choreographer, a researcher, and the author of numerous articles and books on traditional Argentinean dance. He has been a member of the Laborde jury for the last fifteen years, and he has an ironclad reputation. Today, Friday, the same as every day, he's been at the jury table from eight o'clock in the evening to six in the morning. At ten he gave a talk on costumes. Just now he's smoking a cigarette beneath a parasol out in the grounds, dressed in black, and he modulates his speech with precision, gesticulating fulsomely – I'm reminded of a star of silent cinema.

"Laborde makes nowhere nearly as much money as other festivals, because that's the way the organizing committee and the delegates prefer it. But it's the bastion of malambo, and the ultimate accolade for any dancer."

"What does the jury look for in a dancer?"

"First and foremost, symmetry. It's a strictly symmetrical dance, when the structure of the human body is obviously anything but. The first training they undergo, and the hardest, is designed to bring about symmetry, for everything to be exactly the same on their left and right sides; they have to be just as skilful on both sides, just as intense – the sonority, and the way they occupy the space on either side, have to be the same. The second problem is stamina. They know three or four minutes won't cut it in Laborde, they have to last closer to five minutes. So we look at how much they're able to withstand. Next, the structure, which has to be pleasing to the eye while staying within the regulations: there are limits, for instance, to how high their foot lifts can go; this isn't a *show*," (Aricó uses the English), "it's a competition. And the musical accompaniment. It's quite common for the musicians to do too much, when all you really want is for them to back the dancers, not try and steal the show. Finally, dress: does the trim of a poncho correspond with the area the dancer is representing, do the *bombachas* have the right number of pleats? When one of these boys wins, a whole new market opens up for him, but at the same time, early retirement. They're champions at twenty-one, twenty-two, but in a dance they can never perform again. There aren't any rules expressly prohibiting it, but the thing that goes through their heads is, 'What if I enter another festival and lose? Better to hold on to the glory.'"

*

"All the feet coming down at exactly the same time, that's what I need from you guys."

In the early afternoon, as the sun beats down, a quartet is rehearsing on stage. They're in garish shirts, Bermuda shorts and bare feet.

"That's the one thing I need," the tutor says. "Together, together, together. All the feet, all at the same time."

And the four of them – together, together, together, all at the same time – bring their heels down on the boards as though intent on extracting a confession. Meanwhile, Pablo Sánchez, the Tucumán delegate, sitting in the shade of the eucalyptus trees, is addressing a group of boys and girls who listen with worried looks on their faces.

"We have to be strong. There are other festivals that are good, but Laborde is a different class. It's the heavyweight. This is the first time it's happened in fifty-five years of the dance, and you'll see soon enough: we'll get the money together for the bus. Don't worry yourselves about that – just give your all when you're up there dancing."

At a nod, the group of youngsters disperses. Sánchez, the patriarch of a family of Tucumán malambistas, tutor to six champions and two runners-up in his time, tells me that the bus they were meant to travel on, and for which they'd paid in advance, never showed up. They waited and waited, but finally had to book another bus – and pay all over again, of course.

"We're up to our ears in debt, but everything will be just fine."

"Didn't you think of calling off the trip?"

"Not for a second. Not coming to Laborde would be out of the question."

Sánchez's oldest son, Damián, was on track to become a great Laborde champion when, at the age of twenty, he died of a brain haemorrhage. Then, in 1995, the next son, Marcelo, entered and won.

"The power of the dance lies in the spirit, the heart. The external aspects – that's all just technical. The *repique* has to be perfect, you have to know how to do the lifts, how to land the instep, and go up and up in energy from start to finish – energy and attitude. But the malambo is a far more powerful expression than other dances. Which means, as well as the techniques, you have to be able to handle the wood, to feel it, to become a part of the stage. The day you lose that, you lose it all. Like the heartbeat. The message has to come through, loud and clear, to the crowd."

"What's the message?"

"The message is: 'Here I am. I'm of this land.'"

*

"I named him Fausto, after *Fausto*. I believe us creoles need to maintain the creole ways, in every way possible. Brian, Jonathan, I'm not going in for any of that. Anyway with my surname being Cortez, they wouldn't go."

Fausto, a book written in the 1900s by Argentinean writer Estanislao del Campo, is an archetypal piece of gaucho literature – as well as being Víctor Cortez's son's name. Cortez, representing Córdoba province, was champion in 1987, and was also subsequently declared *persona non grata* by the organizing committee after he brought a lawsuit against the festival having lost his job in his hometown's dance school.

"Champions have certain privileges. They don't pay the entry fee, they eat for free while they're here. I have to pay to come in, I have to buy my food, but the worst thing is not being allowed back stage with the boys I've been teaching. It's like protecting a child the whole year round, then suddenly, at the very last second, dropping them into the abyss. Because that's the crucial moment – when you're putting your boots on, the gaucho outfit – that's when you feel the malambo swelling inside you."

Nowadays Cortez works as a welder for a bus-making company. He talks about how the other workers will occasionally come across an article about him, and how they can't believe it.

"'Look at this old guy we work with,' they say. 'Look who he is.'"

He's sitting on a bench in the main square. The surrounding bars are beginning to get busy, and on a central patch of grass groups of boys and girls are playing guitars and dancing. Cortez's charge this year is Rodrigo Heredia from Córdoba, and he's entering the Upper Soloist category for this first time.

"He's a fine creature. Wholesome, clean. You can make someone into an artist, but not a good person. When I came to Laborde I thought I was the best. If someone put me up in front of God I'd have said, 'I'm better than you.' And I mean, in a way that's what you want them to think, you need to make them think like that – you can't have them lose humility, but at the same time when they're up there they need to be able to say, 'I'm number one.'"

"And what if they lose?"

"It's hard. But life does go on."

*

Tiredness kicks in at the two-minute mark. If someone has been trained to a standard level, they wouldn't be too hard pressed to dance a malambo for that amount of time. But after two minutes the only thing that sustains the body is training, along with the endorphins produced by the suffocating sensations, the contraction of the muscles, the aching joints, the expectant gaze of six thousand people – and a jury scrutinizing you until the final breath. Maybe this is why, when they leave the stage, the dancers all appear to have been through something unnameable, a cruel trance.

*

If during the day the temperature can rise above 40 ºC, it also drops at night without fail. Today, Friday 14th, at half-past midnight, it must be around thirteen degrees, but back stage, notwithstanding, it's carnival time. There are bodies in various states of undress, sweat, music, and the sound of *corridas* being sung, the ubiquitous ballad songs. The La Rioja representative, Darío Flores, descends the stage in the usual manner: his vision blurry, his body crucified, he stares around, keeping his arms outstretched to encourage air back into his starved lungs. Someone hugs him, and he, seemingly coming out of a trance, simply says: "Thank you, thank you." Watching this, I think to myself that I'm becoming accustomed to the same agitated tension when they're in the changing rooms, the same passionate uproar when they go out on stage, the same agony and, each time, the very same ecstasy when it's time for them to come down. Then I hear a guitar being strummed out on the stage. The notes contain something – something akin to an animal inching along low to the ground, about to pounce – that grabs my attention. So I hurry back out, crouching as I go, and take a seat behind the jury.

It's my first sighting of Rodolfo González Alcántara.

And what I see strikes me dumb.

*

Because, he was the same as many of the others – beige jacket, grey waistcoat, one of the wide-brimmed hats, the *chiripá* in red, and a piece of black cord for a bow tie – and because I

didn't yet know the difference between a very good dancer and a mediocre one – but there he was: Rodolfo González Alcántara, twenty-eight years old, representing La Pampa, towering over everyone – and there I was, sitting on a chair on the grass, speechless. When he finished his dance, the announcer declared in her deadpan voice:

"Time: four minutes and fifty-two seconds."

And that was the precise moment when this story became something else. A difficult story. The story of a common man.

*

That Friday evening, Rodolfo González Alcántara came on and moved to centre stage like a strong wind or a puma, like a stag or a thief of souls, standing still for two or three beats, frowning as he fixed his gaze on something behind us, something no person could see. The first movement he made with his legs ruffled his *cribo* trousers like some delicate underwater creature. Then, for the ensuing four minutes and fifty-two seconds, the night became a thing that he pounded with his fist…

He became the countryside, the dry earth, the taut pampas horizon, he was the smell of horses, the sound of the sky in summer, and the hum of solitude – fury, illness, and war – he became the opposite of peace. He was the slashing knife, the cannibal, and a command. At the end he stamped his foot with terrific force and stood, covered in stars, resplendent, staring through the peeling layers of night air. And, with a sidelong smile – like that of a prince, a vagabond, or a demon – he touched the brim of his hat. And was gone.

And that was it.