

“With all the brutal simplicity of a fairy tale, María José Ferrada lays bare the blind and violent intolerance that reigns on the precarious outskirts of an unequal society. A deceptively simple tale in a sensitive translation by Elizabeth Bryer—this book is a gift to English-speaking readers.”

—MEGAN MCDOWELL

“*How to Turn Into a Bird* takes a piercing look at how the human spirit can be nurtured, even set free, by curiosity and compassionate attention—or altogether quashed by fear and judgment. María José Ferrada and translator Elizabeth Bryer have created a vivid, poignant atmosphere, both mournful and tender.”

—ROBIN MYERS

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For information, contact Tin House, 2617 NW Thurman St., Portland, OR 97210.

Published by Tin House, Portland, Oregon
Distributed by W. W. Norton & Company

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ferrada, María José, 1977– author. | Bryer, Elizabeth, 1986– translator.

Title: How to turn into a bird / María José Ferrada ; translated by Elizabeth Bryer.

Other titles: Hombre del cartel. English

Description: Portland, Oregon : Tin House, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022026733 | ISBN 9781953534460 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781953534545 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PQ8098.416.E77 H6613 2022 | DDC 863/.7—dc23/eng/20220607

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022026733>

Printed in the USA
Interior design by Diane Chonette
www.tinhouse.com

**HOW TO
TURN
INTO
A BIRD**

MARÍA JOSÉ FERRADA

TRANSLATED BY ELIZABETH BRYER



TIN HOUSE / Portland, Oregon

For Rodrigo Marín

*Against all my better judgement,
I wanted to be happy.*

GÜNTER GRASS, *The Tin Drum*
Translated by Ralph Manheim

FIRST WEEK

MONDAY

RAMÓN CLIMBED UP the Coca-Cola billboard near the highway one Monday. That evening, as the sun was disappearing behind the hills that surround the housing complex, he decided he would stay. Even though it was late, the air was still warm. It was a heat that seemed even drier in this patch of the city, which had missed out on its share of pavement and trees because there had not been enough to spare.

“A desert,” he said. And he realized that the hulking iron structure, which reminded him of a

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mammoth's skeleton, was big enough for furniture to fit inside: a mattress beneath what five million years before had been ribs, a table and a couple of chairs where the clavicle was, and a small lamp in the eye socket. He would rig up a water system by following the lattice of what had once been an immense forest of veins and nerves.

TUESDAY

WITH THE HELP of several ropes and a pulley system he invented himself, he moved from his apartment to the billboard in record time: no more than three or four hours. When he finished, he uttered words that he alone heard, because, up there, in addition to having a panoramic vista of the city, Ramón was just the way he liked to be: alone.

Pictured on the billboard was a giant woman. The convertible she was driving was the same shade of red as the can of soda, and one of its doors had white lettering that read: OPEN HAPPINESS.

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The light in the billboard house blinked on at around ten, right in the hole of the letter *O*. I remember because it coincided with the moment when I switched off my lamp.

“Get to sleep, Miguel.”

“Yes, Mother,” I said.

But instead of obeying, I pressed my ear against the wall and listened to Ramón’s story.

THE PERSON TALKING on the phone in the apartment next to ours was my aunt Paulina, my mother's sister, who had lived with Ramón for ten years (I am twelve). Ramón, Paulina was saying, would be paid the same amount he had earned at the PVC factory, where he had worked from eight to six, Monday to Friday. As for the billboard, he could go up it whenever he felt like it.

Did they make him sleep up there? No, he slept up there because he wanted to. Was he employed by Coca-Cola? No, he was employed by a company that erected billboards beside highways all over Latin America. Were there any more job openings? In all honesty, she didn't know. Had Ramón

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finally gone mad all the way? That was a question
best put to him, not her.

THE TELEPHONE WOULDN'T stop ringing, so I fell asleep to the sound of my aunt Paulina repeating the story, and I dreamed about a man who tossed bags of cash from a helicopter. The salaries—that was what was inside the bags—fell onto billboards: Nike, Panasonic, Ford, Gillette, Nestlé, L'Oréal, which were dotted across different capitals: Santiago, Lima, Buenos Aires, Managua, Mexico City. I was seated inside the helicopter and noticed that the billboards had something in common: it didn't matter which city they had been erected in, all of them were beside highways that led to an airport. Inside the dream, I knew I was dreaming, because even though wind was coming through the helicopter window, the hat worn by the man dispensing the cash didn't move.

WEDNESDAY

RAMÓN CALLED HIS new boss to tell him that he had decided to fill his new position twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Was that a problem? The first three calls went straight to a recorded message that said the voice mail was not enabled. On the fourth attempt, his boss, one Eliseo, answered:

“Let’s see if you’ve understood, Raúl.”

“Ramón.”

“Let’s see if you’ve understood, Ramón: Your job is to take care of the billboard. To make sure

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the lamps aren't filched. If that means you need to sleep up there, swing from a cloud, or hide in the bushes, in all honesty we don't care."

"Okay, thank you," said Ramón, who considered what he had just heard a kind of municipal permit to reside in his new dwelling.

"Thank *you*, Raúl, thank you."

I was eleven years old, and I didn't need to be twelve to know the logical thing would have been to make that call before he moved to his new house, not after. That was eleven years of living in my building, in the housing complex, and in this world—long enough to realize that logic wasn't of much concern to many people around here. Least of all to Ramón.

A contract? They wouldn't sign a contract, but they would give him pay stubs. It was all the same to

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him, because in the PVC factory—as in all factories where the owner was the one ensuring compliance with labor regulations and paying the salaries—he'd had a contract that acknowledged only half the paycheck he collected. The rest? A “bit on the side.”

Lunch wouldn't be provided, so he would have to cook it himself with the help of a gas cylinder and a camp stove. But this didn't represent a major change either: As far as he knew, lunch was only ever provided in the factories that had more than a hundred workers. Or in the movies. Although, come to think of it, factory workers never appeared in movies. Police or emergency services workers were preferred.

Half a contract and lunch. He had lost more in the war, Ramón thought as he swept away the remains

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of the mosquitoes, crispy and suicidal, that acted contrary to all theories about survival instincts in the animal kingdom to launch themselves at the lamps every night like tiny kamikazes.