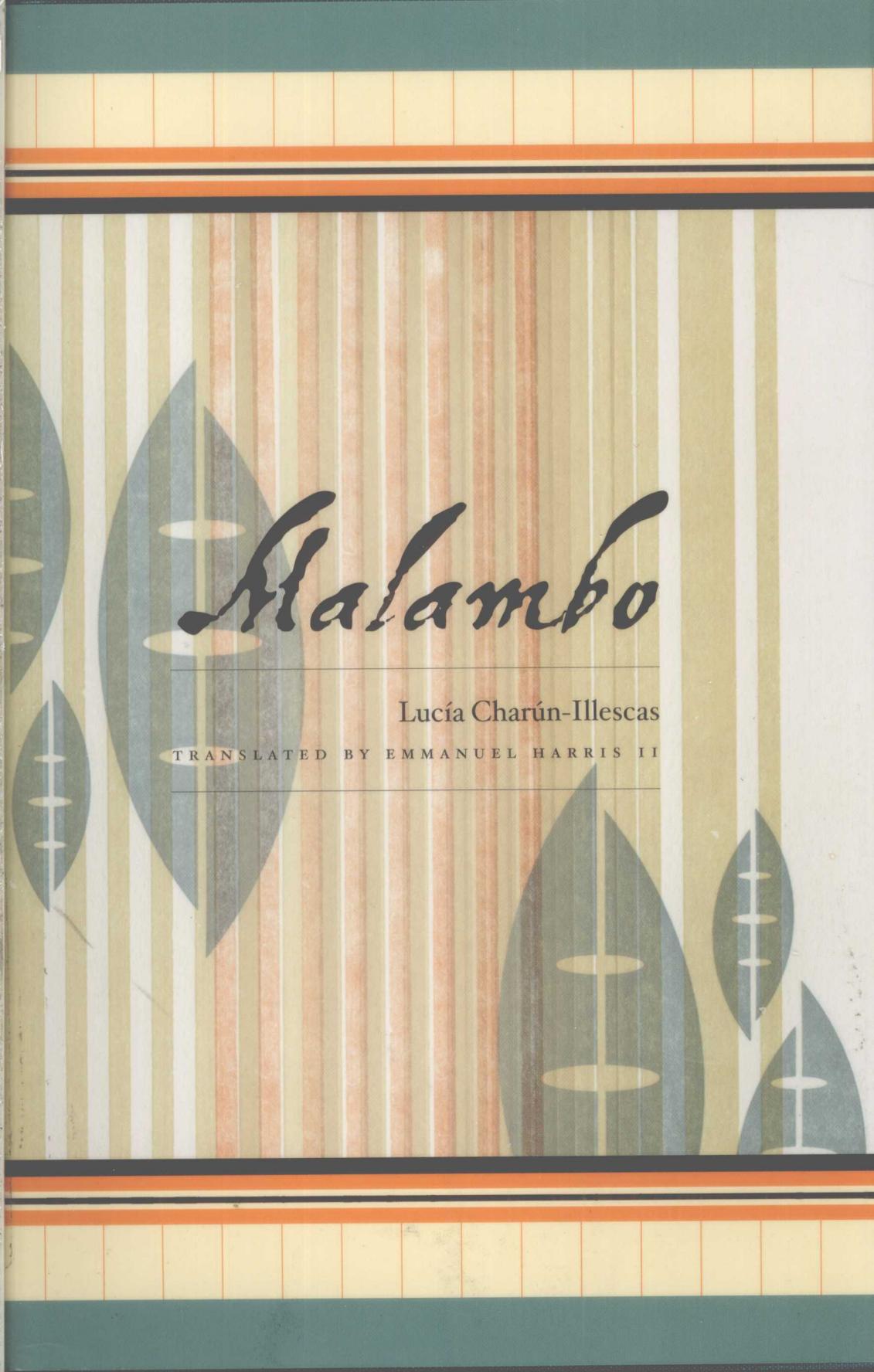
Malambo
Lucía Charún-Illescas
TRANSLATED BY EMMANUEL HARRIS II

Malambo

Lucía Guerra-Illescas

TRANSLATED BY EMMANUEL HARRIS II

SWAN ISLE PRESS
CHICAGO

Swan Isle Press, Chicago 60640-8790

Malambo was previously published in the original Spanish, ©2001 by Universidad Nacional Federico Villarreal; and published in an Italian translation by Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, ©1999 by Lucía Charún-Illescas. Chapter 1 of *Malambo*, translated by Emmanuel Harris II, previously appeared in a slightly different form in the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, 22, no. 3 (fall, 2003).

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
ISBN 0-9748881-0-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Charún-Illescas, Lucía.
[Malambo. English]
Malambo / Lucía Charún-Illescas ; translated by Emmanuel Harris II.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-9748881-0-9 (alk. paper)
1. Blacks—Peru--History--Fiction. I. Harris, Emmanuel. II. Title

PQ8498. 13.H295M3513 2004
863'.7—dc22 2004059013

Swan Isle Press is funded in part by a generous grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a State of Illinois Agency

www.swanislepress.com

Para que Nana
Malú,
Cae,
Mateo
y Ñaño
no se les olvide el rumor
que trae el Rio Hablador

So that Nana
Malú,
Cae,
Mateo
and Ñaño
don't forget the murmur
carried by the Talking River

Contents

Malambo

Chapter I

The events of this story flow from the tropic of the mangrove and the orchids that are borne in the air, to the cold, transparent blue of the Strait of Magellan. Its concentric sides meet in the Ciudad de los Reyes under the coat of arms of a blue shield with three crowns and a flaming star, planted in the dunes of the coast facing the Southern Sea.

On the wrong bank, close to the herd's stables and the cultivated lands and to the skirt of the hill of San Cristóbal, spring the shacks of the miserable outskirts of San Lázaro. The waters of the Rímac repeat to the reeds those tales of the wind that meanders through the nearby corn and cotton fields. It is a subtle murmuring that reaches the fields of *lúcumas* and that echoes between the custard apple trees and the *pacayar* palms. Though these waters have a tame appearance, they also know how to aggressively overflow. In the high tides of summer, they enter, drag-

ging mud and the rocky ground of the leper colony. They drain confused, tinged in blood, between the cadavers of the sacrificed animals of the slaughterhouse of Malambo, the corner where many of the Negroes from Lima live: seat and protection of the *taitas* Minas, the Mandiga and Angola elders and the *cofradías* of Congos and Mondongos. In Malambo, the Rímac proudly rubs elbows with the freedmen, the cimarrons, and the smuggled slaves who listen to it with suspicion but learn to understand its knack of speech. Because at times the river pretends to be slack. Lazy, it detains itself, conversing in the ditches and the puddles, in passing the dusty crevices and the tortuous and salty alleys of San Lázaro.

On the other bank, that of the Palace of the Viceroy and of the big houses with stone facades and great windows with silk curtains, the river begins to appear slimmer by orderly channels through the clay pipes. It runs united to the subterranean springs underneath Blanket Street and Weavers Lane and under Jewish Street, Silversmith's, Marketer's and Swordmaker's Lanes. It leaves behind the licentious tapping of the covered women in Blue Dust Street until encountering the fountain of the Plaza Mayor. He who stops to contemplate its bubbling cannot evade the gossiping of the Talking River.

≋≋≋

Almost in unison, the bells of the Cathedral began the six o'-clock ring in the Church of Santa Ana, in Santo Domingo, San Sebastián and Santa Clara and in the six convents and the six monasteries of the city. Tomasón Valleumbroso noted that in the church of San Lázaro time lengthened in silent tolls. They were the last to ring, as if the hours were in no hurry to arrive at the mud and reed houses of Malambo. A neighboring voice prayed the *angelus*. Tomasón cleared his throat. The voice pro-

nounced "Amen" and Tomasón "Caraaá." He always had at the tip of his tongue a lethargic *carajo*, to be drawn out or cut short when he did not have much or anything to add. This time it could well have been: "Caraaá, it's already getting dark!" or "Caraaá, I'm tired and I'm not working any more!" or simply "Caraaá, the bell tower is not in time with the others."

Rubbing the steel and flint, he lit a candle of animal fat, and illuminated by the trembling flame, he gave the last penciling to the canvas. He stood back a few steps, scratched his head of nappy, gray hair and contemplated the image. In America, artists invented variations of the religious paintings brought by European masters. Tomasón dominated these like no one else. He painted the oils without giving perspective to the figures. With few chiaroscuros, "without a bunch of nit-picking or *mariconeo* caraaá," as he would say, he would adorn them in a way that satisfied his vision and made him plenty happy. In the midst of golden strokes, the archangel Gabriel suited in steel armor carried a sword of justice in his right hand. The archangel was suspended in the clouds of a twilight pink sky. Over his reddish hair flew four hummingbirds with wings joined by a wave of garlands and a vine shoot in their beaks.

"Thank goodness I'm done," he said, used to thinking out loud. "Master can't complain about the way it turned out, because I made it with the leftovers of the paint, not to mention the tattered and hairless brushes like the tail of a mangy dog. And his eyes are from what's-his-name, and his face has I don't know what, but it turned out good. The same for the feathers of his wings that I gave just enough shadow to, like master wants. If he's not careful, haa, Don Gabriel is going to fly away."

He finished cleaning the brushes while he passed a tired look over the hut. His room ten yards deep was not a plain house like that of other people. He lived crowded by broken frames, purple dyes, dried ochre, damaged clothes, and junk covered

with a fine dark dust that, tinged with a splendor of shiny, crumbled velvet, saturated the air and followed him everywhere. One could barely walk through the room without bumping into one of the mountains of broken-down furniture and the clothesline that ran the length of the roof from which hung his pathetic jacket. The bundle of his spare pants was surrounded by pieces of sausage, two scraps of fresh meat slovenly covered in flies, half a bunch of ripe plantains, and two strings of pearl onions. And more rags. Along the wall, boards were set aside to dry to make a fire or to be painted and then set afire.

Tomasón delighted in covering the walls with the same persistence with which he colored his canvases and boards. The tight images, delineated with patience from pieces of coal, interwoven without beginning or recognizable end.

"But sometimes they fade away as if time robbed them," he thought.

And it could be true: they would disappear. When he least expected, they were no longer there. Perhaps they were protected below a stain of soot or humidity or they became part of the dark dust. God only knows!

If Tomasón had someplace to live and if this was living, it was because of Don Jacinto Mina, his *cumpa* Jaci, brother in spirit and corporal of the *cofradía* of Negroes from Angola. One week with no end, at the approach of evening, he appeared with three master builders whom Tomasón did not know and who nonetheless wanted to construct the dwelling without charging him a cent. The fame of the painter was a mysterious fountain of admiration and respect.

Don Jacinto Mina and the master builders chose a plot that was beside the slaughterhouse, situated in front of a row of trees that only bloom in Malambo. There were six of them. Since no one knew their surname, they were called by their first name: Malambo trees. When were they planted there and by whom?

For what reason? No one knew. On certain evenings, the leaves of these noble trees released a sweet aroma with hints of molasses. Jaci quickly tied the bamboo to put up the walls while Tomasón did not cease to distract him.

"Don't forget about the window, *cumpa* Mina. I want it to be big."

Intent on his task, Jacinto Mina pretended not to hear him. Tired of the deafness of his buddy, Tomasón moved to the helpers.

"And with mangrove wood of course, real big caraaá. I want to comfortably see the Rímac."

Finally the master builders gave in and the huge window opened its mangrove eye, a tremendous surprise from the flaming hovel. Before a week passed, the painter looked for Jaci.

"*Cumpa*, please make that window smaller. The wind seeps through. Between the air with its chill and the river with its chatter, they won't let me sleep, caraaá."

Jaci Mina treated him with care. He was one of the few Angolans who still lived in that group of shacks in the area of Pachacamilla, not far from the warehouses of the Ciudad de los Reyes. In spite of having to cross Stone Bridge daily to visit his friends, and having to go through a village hacienda, he preferred to settle there. People said that he was more noble than communion bread. That his look possessed powers of enchantment, that his eyes were capable of making others sleep, but that he himself never slept. At least that is what the pebbles under the water of the Talking River swear.

"It's fine, Tomasón. One of these days I'll shrink your window," Jaci promised.

And because that day never came, Tomasón had to get accustomed to the whims and the bad moods of the window. He remembered that the Indians from Cercado covered the entryways of their houses with llama skin. So in the opening of the

hut, he hung an ox hide that was given to him by the butchers; he did not know why. Temporarily—though never taking it down—he fastened it with a few half-entered nails. Whenever he wanted to check on the gossip of the Rímac, he moved his little wooden bench, lifted up the hide, and put his ear to the wind. On its hard skin that nevertheless flapped like a flag, he painted, with a few strokes, a red bull—an exorcism of the beast with light hooves and yellow horns that always charged him in his dreams ever since his first night in Malambo!

If Jaci did not come for him, it was Venancio. He quickly recognized him from a distance since Venancio arrived preceded by the dense odor of shrimp and crabs covered in his fisherman's basket.

Tomasón placed the painting to the side and began to look at him, intrigued by the skill with which Venancio lit the small stove and threaded the shrimp on the wire stick, after having soaked them in a marinade of lard, garlic, and hot pepper. He sautéed them over a coal flame and for a long enough time so that they turned out crisp on the outside and juicy inside.

Venancio Martín's was a happy voice, about seven points high.

"Your color is as bright as the monkey bird." Tomasón picked on him alluding to those thrushes with hints of blue in their feathers. He felt a great deal of pride in Venancio's black skin, but an aversion for his reddish and messy hair. "Maybe that's respectable hair? No! It's the color of a cockroach, that's what it is!"

And while shaking his head, the fisherman continued smiling as if he did not hear him.

Venancio Martín was born on the bank of the river, from the free womb of a washerwoman. As soon as she had rinsed him off, she buried the afterbirth, digging deep between the rocks so that the dogs would not find it and eat it, because if they do, the child will grow up healthy but become a thief. She laid him on a wrap made of rags and placed him at the bottom of a bassinet. She

returned to scrubbing clothes with soapbark seed, which leaves them better than new. She waited until the sheets had enough time to air out, but before the sun escaped, and she left pleased and annoyed at the cries of her new born. Venancio, without knowing it, began his memories with the lather, the mud, and the bamboo that bordered the Rímac. He grew up swimming from bank to bank. As if he were playing, he learned how to master a hook and the shrimp traps according to the instruction of the many fraternal and savvy Negro kids that populated Malambo. By twelve, without realizing it, he had already become a fisherman. When his mother died, his only known relative was called Altagracia Maravillas.

The hands of Tomasón scared away invisible flies. It was his way of asking them to let him eat in peace. Without teeth and only with a few molars, he had to chew very slowly. Like the oldest folks, he had the habit of eating with his eyes closed, squeezing his eyelids tightly to take the last flavor from the food in spite of Venancio's chatter.

"This hut needs another room. We've already made an agreement with Jaci to raise another one on this side so that you have one to paint in and one to sleep in. Huh, Tomasón?"

Tomasón wiped away the red shrimp juice with his sleeve, "Why don't you grab four sticks and build a hut for yourself. With so many wasted fields around here looking for an owner, why do you have to get into my business? You're already too old, Venancio. You've been living unmarried for so many years now. Tramp! You leave it alone the way it is. You're the one who needs more room than I do. Go find yourself a woman, so that maybe you'll look like somebody and stop dressing like a scarecrow all riffraffy, eating nothing but catfish and shrimp."

"If you want *familia*, I won't come back anymore," responded Venancio feigning discontent.

"Enough already! Caraaá. Bother me with whatever you want and just keep bringing shrimp and crab. Or would you prefer that I lock the door and not let you leave?" Tomasón responded knowing that the fisherman would not let himself be so easily intimidated.

"What's it cost you? Another room that's all, a little bigger than this one so that people admire that bed properly," insisted Venancio, pointing at the extravagance of a bed with bronze corner brackets, a canopy draped with damask that matched the flowered bedspread, and the elegant bed skirt. Not in Pachacamilla nor in Cercado and even less in San Lázaro, had Venancio ever seen anything resembling that "viceroy's barbecue" that Tomasón protected under this mess of rotten wood.

From now on, I'll sleep softly, Tomasón promised himself on the day they brought it to him. But each time that sleep overcame him, or he woke up early on his work bench, or his unstable steps led him to the same old boards, he would sleep curled up without remembering the baldachin.

When Gertrudis Melgarejo wanted to buy it from him, Tomasón cleared his throat. The miller's wife offered him twenty pesos. He looked away. Forty, then. Nothing. The offer got up to a hundred.

"What am I going to do with so much money Doña Gertrudis?"

"You can buy your freedom. You can save, pay your price and that's it."

"And who told you I have an owner? Ever since I've had this pain in my chest, I have plenty of freedom."

"Ahh, you must be a fool! What about a hundred pesos, huh?"

Tomasón stayed quiet.

"Well, then. Because of my good nature, let's say a hundred fifty. Will you sell me the bed or not?"

"Absolutely not."

"Look, I'm not going to make you another offer."

"I hope not."

"I could ask for it from your master. Think about it."

Tomasón never spoke to her again. He erased her.

Just like the rest of the furniture and the excess of plates and goods that he lived with, including the food tin that hung on the line and the tobacco leaves, the bed came from the barters he made using the virgins and saints he painted. The clients of his master, the marquis of Valle Umbroso, bought the paintings to decorate their chapels, and so they came to Tomasón bringing different prizes. They would ask him for a painting of St. James so that the saint would help them tame their wild horses. A St. Anthony in order to find something lost in the house or to find a suitor for the daughter who was heading towards being an aunt.

Poor folks know. For the most stubborn tooth ache, two prayers to St. Apolonia settles it down and just one to St. Jacob de Sales in order to stop choking. Tomasón knew every saint and miracle since he turned ten and was entrusted as an apprentice to Simón Rivero, the painter at the Jesuit monastery in the Chinca valley. Tomasón would get misty eyed remembering that southern town, forty leagues from Lima. There he learned how to write. Even in old age, Tomasón did not forget the exact traits of any letter, and he knew how to rope them better than any colt to form the names of everything that existed on the earth or suspected in heaven. Nor did he forget the vice of the monks.

"Ay caraaá! Don't talk to me about unspeakable sins. *Mariconada* that's what it was, *cumpa*!" he told Jaci Mina. "But before they could spoil me, I saved myself learning the faces of

all the Christs, the color of all the virgins and the entire collection of saints, and if they asked me, I could paint them, even a naked angel. And from then on my fortune took another face. I escaped with some cimarrons that weren't going anywhere. They came. They were more than enough: old, children, women, infants. They told me that for them the important thing was to leave as far behind as possible the place of the merciless. Trap, whip, and torture, nothing more than that. They themselves did not know if they had escaped two nights ago, twenty or maybe hundreds of years ago, but for my luck or greater disgrace I found them in that trance. The destiny of their travels carried them, without plan or thought, directly through the valley of the Rímac. Some of these folks were white, and in height they were as tall as this ceiling. Others had their eyes gouged. The majority were Negroes or copper-colored. All of them had been captured against their will since forever and taken to remote places that hadn't been reached yet. They had been robbed of their names with church water thrown in its memory. And because there were so many, how could they go unnoticed by the dogs and the tracking foremen? Truly, I don't know how. I only saw that they would put underneath their tongues three of the leaves from a lima bean, the ones that sprout on the head of I don't know which birds, and this makes invisible the person that knows the trick to using them. At first they were suspicious of me, and I'm not sure if there was a complaint or a new obstacle, because I heard grumbling in the darkness. They didn't go against the grace of a lady who appealed on my part.

"'Don't give in to fear, *misangre*,' she said. She gathered the oldest women of the caravan and they decided to take me in. None of the men dared to dispute them. Seeing that I didn't even have a little leaf of field grass, the lady taught me the Prayer of the Fair Judge, which doesn't make you invisible but it helps. I prayed it as many times as we were aware of being close to the