



The colour of loss

John Burnside applauds Daniel Alarcón's potent and polished tale of separation and relationship, *Lost City Radio*

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Lost City Radio
 by Daniel Alarcón
 336pp, Fourth Estate, £12.99

In the aftermath of a terrible civil war, in an unspecified South American country, a boy named Victor arrives in the capital, alone, penniless, bereaved, but determined to find a woman he has never met. That woman is Norma, the voice of *Lost City Radio*, a programme so simple and stark in its basic premise that it has become a runaway success. That premise, given the state of the country and its recent history, is quite extraordinary: what Norma does, in her beautiful voice, a voice that can wring hope from even the most horrifying catastrophe, is to repeat the names of those who have disappeared: men, women and children from the city and from the outlying villages and settlements, who have either been taken from, or have abandoned, their loved ones, and vanished into the jungle. Sometimes, a lost soul is found, and a reunion is engineered, with all its dramatic potential carefully extracted by Elmer, Norma's weary producer. Yet, even in the role she was born to play, Norma feels ambivalent about her work: with the war long ended and a terrible routine settled upon the oppressed city, the human drama is drying up, and she is haunted by the futility of her task, and by the fact that she, the voice of the voiceless mourners, is also one of the abandoned.

For years, this woman has lived alone. Now, because Victor has nowhere else to go, Norma allows him to stay in her humble apartment and, as she becomes intimate with his thoughts and habits and nightmares, she remembers her husband, Rey, a man who also woke in terror from strange dreams. In so many ways, Victor resembles Rey: he is a boy who seems older than his years, he is troubled by something unnameable, and he draws Norma into his world against her better judgment, forcing her to revisit the streets of the city and remember the people who live there, just as her husband had once done. Rey had been playful, perverse, mocking, deliberately mysterious, occasionally arrogant, sometimes even cruel in his ways. He had courted Norma by taking her to Bollywood movies, where she did not understand a word of what was being said - and he had shown her that this was unimportant, because what mattered was the action around the film, the constant flow of city life, where people "came and went from the theater as if it were a waiting room, as if the film were an excuse and completely beside the point". What Norma finds both disturbing and beguiling about Rey is that, even though he is from the country, he belongs to her own city as she has never done, without fear, or reservation. At the same time, however, Rey belongs even more - both by birth and by his vocation as a scientist - to the forest:

"She clutched his hand and pressed close to him as they made their way down the crowded sidewalk. 'What's the forest like?' she asked.

"He considered her question, which she had asked more than once simply because she loved to hear him speak

of it. 'It goes on forever. It's endless invention ... And color, color, color.'"

Rey is a specialist in disappearing acts: even their first meeting had been interrupted when he was arrested and taken away for over a year to a re-education facility known as "The Moon"; when he makes his final exit, however, it seems appropriate that it is into the forest, with its endless invention and colour, that he vanishes - and it is equally appropriate that it is from the forest that Victor arrives, for he will arrange for Rey a kind of resurrection, at least in Norma's heart.

It would be wrong to give away even a shred of plot here, but it must be said that the final pages are extraordinarily haunting, managing, in a way that only great writing can, to be both tragic and wonderful. The real surprise, however, is that this is a first novel, for *Lost City Radio* is a book of extraordinary power, by a writer - recently selected as one of Granta's Best Young American Novelists - whose own endless invention and sense of colour are already second to none.

· John Burnside's *The Devil's Footprints* is published by Jonathan Cape

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