

Andrés Barba's recent novels have focused on psychological traumas that escape the understanding of their victims. *Agosto, octubre* (August, October, 2010) describes the gang rape of a mentally handicapped girl in which the teenaged protagonist, Tomás, feels forced to participate. His adolescent mind lags just behind his burgeoning sexual aggression, so that no matter how much he repents later, the sequence of events is inexorable. In *Las manos pequeñas* (The Small Hands, 2008), a young girl loses both her parents in a car crash, and tries to win friends at the orphanage she moves into by inventing a transgressive game to play in the dormitory. She scarcely realizes how much she yearns for friendship and intimacy, and in the end encourages only resentment and violence. The short story "The Coming Flood" (published last year in *Granta*), in which a heroin-addicted porn actress fantasizes about an operation to graft a horn onto her forehead, is perhaps more haunting than both of these. The protagonist writes in her diary a phrase that might act as a key for much of Barba's fiction: "I am the wound

## 715 Horse attitudes

OLLIE BROCK

Andrés Barba

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and the knife".

If this bleak psychology also runs through Barba's new novel, *Muerte de un caballo* (Death of a Horse), it is in a much gentler form. An unnamed professor and Sandra, a student ten years his junior, are a few weeks into a nervous courtship and driving to his friend's country house for a weekend. En route, they fall into their usual pattern of exchanging witticisms and shielding themselves with sarcasm rather than expressing genuine sentiment. Towards the end of their journey, a narrow road through the forest is blocked by a car. The horse box it was pulling

has become unhooked and fallen down a rock-face; at the bottom, trapped inside the twisted trailer, the animal lies fatally injured. The lovers have no choice but to get out and help the car's young driver, Miguel. The three crouch helplessly around the dying animal, with a long wait for help ahead of them.

The wounded horse speeds up a traditionally slow process. Finding themselves involved in an emergency accelerates the pair through their first disagreements, towards their first truly tender moment. Mostly, though, the animal provides a screen on to which the protagonist can project his manifold insecurities. The narrative is cast from his point of view, and so his "strange sense that the animal was avoiding looking at him" in fact signals his panic at having annoyed Sandra; and when "It seemed as though Sandra had stopped paying attention to anything other than the horse", this is really an expression of his fear that she may not be interested in him after all. Miguel is another source of the professor's anxieties.

His regard for the younger man hops between jealous dislike and a sort of condescending sympathy, according to Miguel's unfirmed status as a romantic threat.

Barba has understood deeply the tender, aggressive jerkiness of feeling that often defines our romantic encounters, and his limpid prose is the right vehicle for it. Observations such as, "Happiness had given way to nervousness, and nervousness to a sort of ill-will" portray the fragile atmosphere between two people, gently mocking it even, while also introducing a note of danger. The sparring between Sandra and the professor is shown to upset them as often as it reassures: their jibes and teasing ripostes mostly miss their targets, leaving the nervousness and annoyance that lies behind them badly exposed. The danger is that the affair might thereby be revealed to be an empty exercise. "Rehearsal" might be a better term for encapsulating their relationship, though: the two are like actors who, reading lines on a stage but not yet committed to a performance, are only ever a moment away from throwing their scripts down and despairing.

In the early evening, Sandra and the professor are finally free to drive off and join their friends. By now they have accumulated wounds of their own, though, and we realize that the tension is between two possible outcomes only: the lovers will be reconciled or they won't. This might seem a slightly bloodless climax – but doesn't that reflect a very human tendency to invest our days with undue drama?

## Black arts

MADRID: V/O MACK