THE ROUTE OF
ICE & SALT

JOSÉ LUIS ZÁRATE
Translated by David Bowles
INTRODUCTION

First published in 1998 by Grupo Editorial Vid in Mexico, *The Route of Ice and Salt* (*La Ruta del Hielo y la Sal*) was an oddity for several reasons. Grupo Editorial Vid was known for publishing comic books but was attempting to launch a line of science fiction and fantasy novels by Mexican authors. Most science fiction and fantasy in Mexico at that time – and still today – was imported and translated from the English language.

José Luis Zárate was an emerging writer in a small, tight-knit circle of science fiction and fantasy authors scattered across Mexico. His choice of subject matter was unorthodox in two ways: One, he was writing an epistolary take on *Dracula*. Two, it was a queer novella.

*El Vampiro de la Colonia Roma*, which, despite the title, is not about a vampire, had been published in 1979 and
caused a sensation by focusing on the life of a young, gay man navigating the city. In 1998, gay rights had advanced and the Zona Rosa was a clubbing area for queer Mexico City youth, but finding queer characters in books, movies and TV was still a difficult task. *The Route of Ice and Salt* was a horror book but one with literary aspirations; a novel about queer desire, it was being released by an editorial imprint that had never published anything like it.

Grupo Editorial Vid’s goal of entering the book market ultimately failed. Science fiction and fantasy did not take much of a foothold in Mexican bookstores, where the only horror books available continued to be best-sellers by Stephen King and 19th century classics like, yes, *Dracula*.

Zárate went on to write more stories of the fantastic and also taught literature in his native Puebla. *The Route of Ice and Salt* became something of a cult item for Spanish science fiction and fantasy readers. It was eventually translated into French, and is now being presented in English for the very first time.

Along with this translation by David Bowles, there is a new prologue by the author and an afterword. I hope this provides readers with a full picture of a book that has occupied an important place in Latin American literature of the fantastic yet which has nonetheless remained largely unknown to English speakers.

— Silvia Moreno-Garcia, 2020
The rain wakes me up. Not because it is strong or dense – it wakes me because, without knowing, I’ve been waiting for it.

It’s a late rain. The cold has begun and winter is in the air.

I look at the clock at my side – 3 a.m. – but I twist it away because the glow of the LED doesn’t go well with the primordial murmur of the water. I get up and stretch my hand towards my clothes, but don’t complete the gesture.

I go to the patio; to the darkness.

There’s no more noise than the sound of water, and in that moment it is just my skin and the rain. I close my eyes, lift my face and wait.
The intimate warmth of the bed disappears in an instant.

I feel over me a slow caress. The water travels as if it wants to discover every centimeter of me.

The caress of a dead hand. A hungry embrace, fierce in its impatience to encompass me.

My body reacts to the contact, shivering, but at the same time, absolutely conscious of each part of me.

Here I am, practically nude.

Here I am, in the storm.

I shiver and I do not know if it is from pleasure or fright.

_Perfect_, I tell myself, returning to my bed.

I have a thread for my novel.

The story I wish to tell is a ghost walking the hallways of my mind. I can’t see it completely, but I know it’s there and I search for a way to make it discernible, concrete.

I read, without yet knowing why, stories of cursed voyages, the sad destiny of Arthur Gordon Pym, and the last lines of _Moby Dick_, where fury ends in disaster.

I take out the old VHS tapes and sit down late at night to watch the symphony in black, white and gray that is _Nosferatu_. One scene in particular: While the captain ties himself quickly to the rudder, Count Orlock approaches, full of power, hands like claws, the appearance of a human rat, surrounded by an air of disease and plague.
On the wall of my office, I stick a map torn from an atlas. I have marked with ink the trip that leads from Varna to Whitby; I look at it obsessively.

A trip from yesterday to today.

A past rabidly alive.

I mark all the countries to which the unfortunate schooner sails and I wonder what hungry yesterdays inhabit each one of them. What creatures, beings and spectres have been imagined, which come from death to feed on the living?

I sleep well, thinking of nightmares.

I sail towards them, in the midst of the storm and the furious waters.

A boat. A schooner. The *Demeter*.

I picture that name in the wood, gnawed by the salt.

And aren’t the sailors surrounded by it? What flavor do the sailors possess for the vampire? Salt, of course, of the sea, of the sweat and the skin, of the blood and every secret liquid, intimate, sheltered by the body.

And if someone else desires it?

What if someone faces the vampire in order to save, to taste, to love that salt?

And who else is most appropriate to fight for those men than the captain of the boat?

A homosexual captain.
I think about what it means to be one on a Russian schooner of the 19th century. In those days, it was easy to be lynched for the mere crime of being. While I walk through the streets of my city, I think and observe, and discover that 1996 is not that far from the 19th century.

Many stories of the sea are stories of increasing growth, of the young person who acquires, through penuries and adventures, the security that allows them to leave their adolescence behind.

But what I am writing is a voyage of the damned.

And if I make it a story about decreasing? What if I snatch away the security and tranquility of the captain?

How cruel is the phantom of my interior.

Why write horror stories, stories of fear and darkness?

Most of the time, when people have asked me this question, it’s a complaint. There are more important things than monsters, they tell me implicitly. I wish I could believe them ….

I was born in 1966 and I ignored everything. At bedtime, nobody tells children dark stories of power and repression, nor that a murderous tyranny governs us. I was busy learning how to walk, busy with my first words, happily protected and unaware.

The judicial police had the power of impunity. They could do whatever they wanted without repercussion.
They could claim that each one of their victims was guilty of political crimes.

This combination of hitmen and cops were called “madrinas” and they circulated freely through the streets. That you were innocent of everything couldn’t protect you.

Children know even if they don’t know. They may not understand the context, but the evidence is there.

I could not understand the conversation of the adults, but I understood the tone of their voices; the pauses filled with meaning and the heavy silence they forced upon themselves.

I remember, yes, the nocturnal glow of a television (black-and-white, with only two channels), and a movie where a silhouette of something shows against the window that protects the people from the night. A second before the glass breaks and the inconceivable darkness devours them, there is a pause, a silence.

The space of horror just before the bestial maw and blood.

The silence heard again and again from the adults.

*Why do you write horror and not reality?*

*Why write a vampire story?*

Back then, it seems, everyone loved vampires. Not old Lugosi, but David Bowie, modern and Gothic. The publicity for the film *The Lost Boys* proclaimed, “Sleep all day. Party all night. Never grow old. Never die. It’s fun
to be a vampire.” The game of *Masquerade* showed us
the sons of Cain, sophisticated and filled with a security
born of knowing themselves masters of the night. The last
rebels, the urban pirates, whose fury, appetite and desire
responded only to their will.

I couldn’t love them. I was upset by so much power,
so much carefree impunity ….

*Oh, come on,* they said. *Imagine yourself being a preda-
tor, carnivorous, the lion amongst the sheep.*

But I looked at my fluffy wool and told myself it was
dangerous to love assassins.

And despite this, I was fascinated by that world. I
don’t know why.

I read about vampires, of the style found in the doc-
uments gathered in 1746 by Agustin Calmet, and found
a fragment that fascinated me: the way of burying the
impure.

You filled their mouths with rocks. They were decapi-
tated. They were buried under crossroads so they remained
lost forever and, as an added precaution, they were pierced
with a stake. Not the cinematographical one, absurdly
portable. The traditional stake was a clumsy lance, heavy
and huge, which basically nailed the corpse to the ground,
like a butterfly that should never fly again.

What kind of monsters deserved such treatment, such
rage and contempt?
Vampires, yes, but also the bastard sons, the unbaptized ones, the inhabitants of other regions, the sodomites and those careless souls who allowed a black cat to jump over their dead bodies.

In short: anyone.

Anyone could be considered a monster. And monsters were assassinated with impunity.

Didn’t you know? Didn’t we all know? The grownups who hushed themselves to protect the children; the children who, without knowing how, discovered they were not safe from the darkness and death?

Perhaps that’s what fascinated me about the topic. But not from the perspective of the assassin.

How would his shadow be perceived? What do the gazelles think of tigers? What sensations exist when one falls into a winter that one knows will never leave?

What does it feel like to walk down streets that can devour you any second, where impunity and prejudice can decide to finish you off without any cares?

What does it feel like when you sail towards a shipwreck?

– José Luis Zárate, 2020

Mexico
I AM WITNESS OF THAT BLOOD.

Efraín Huerta
DEMETER

FROM VARNA TO WHITBY
At night: the smell, the weight, the feel of salt.
Much more present than the water on the other side of the wood.
Who could have fathomed?
Nights spent, not in dreaming of sirens of uncertain sex, but in the eternal, tireless caress of the grains that lurk within the liquid.
When the midday sun dries the sails, dampened by breeze or storm, they crust over with that omnipresent granular white that seeps in with the salty mist of
the night sea, finding its way into our hair, between our fingers.

No place is safe. It burrows into every crevice of the ship, into the metal bunks, into our provisions, into the treasures that we attempt to keep from rust. Its presence is a mocking smile.

And when the men strip away their clothing, they find it between their thighs, hidden where groin and testicles meet.

The sailors are Lot’s wife.

Creatures of salt.

When I go to the forecastle, redolent with the absurd heat of bodies that rest in the midst of the swelter, I can almost see it accumulating on their indolent skin.

Who has tasted it? Who has savored ocean and flesh in that hidden place?

Not I.

I cannot.

I am the Captain.

Impossible that I order one of my men to come to my cabin and ask him to undress, much less insist he stand still and permit me to clean him with my tongue, lightly biting his flesh, trembling with craving for his skin.

And if there is no flavor?

That would mean that some other has saved him from the salt.
Then I should have to demand an accounting, impose discipline, require they reserve for me alone their salt, their warm sex.

But I cannot demand an accounting.

Not when the days are so long and we drift beneath the sun upon the windless water, measuring the hours by the slow drip of sweat.

In the distance, one can see the horizon move, a useless mirage: water in the midst of water, boiling.

At such moments, it is not difficult to imagine that we burn there.

How to deny them aught if these waters deny us all?

Is it not better to know that an immemorial hunger was satisfied, that one offered himself—entirely of his own volition—to an appetite that creates us as it devours us?

Their bodies are their own.

Not mine or of some possible lover.

Theirs that sweat and the sweat of any man to whom they grant it.

The salt of life ....

It is in those moments that I yearn for the icy routes. The Gulf of Botnia. The Baltic Sea. The North Sea.

Such strictures. The crew’s rooms sealed. Men hidden in blankets and coats. Under siege, attempting to prevent the entry of the eternal, indifferent cold. We can slide over it or die upon it. It cares not.
Captains trapped in sudden ice, harkening to those deadly sounds—boats torn open by icy needles, metal giving way, crumpling under the weight of a million transparent blades—will not believe that the cold is not an enemy.

I have seen ice form on the horizon, huge landless isles drifting away from our route. The cycles of winter and snow have naught to do with the ships that cross their path.

The Northern Lights flare up and burn, though no man perceive them.

Ice is for other beings, its rhythms and reasons beyond our ken, its starkness for alien eyes.

The indifference of God, murmured by the world.

The cold suffices unto itself; the heat demands that we partake.

We can take refuge from the frost. It does not belong to us. We can cover ourselves with furs and approach the fire.

But what to do when the heat comes from within?

In the dead of night, our blood is like a sweat inside the body, warm sea nestled within our flesh, skin feverish and throbbing.

How to seek shelter from that which runs through our very veins?
Whoever dies frozen drifts away from his body, leaving in the midst of a merciful dream.

Whoever dies by fire remains trapped within that roiling flesh until the final moment, screaming until death comes like a balm.

Such notions occupy a man’s thoughts beneath the motionless sun, when the shadows of the schooner are but warm shade. Steam rises from the waters. Sweltering air pursues us.

How delightful to walk naked in such heat.

But flesh fragments under the sun. First, cracks appear, then sores scoured by salt.

So, I must forbid it, order them to wear acidic clothes, astringent shirts, pants stiff with salt.

I ask them to seal themselves up with sultriness under those fabrics.

Not even below decks can I enjoy the sight of their bodies. If I stare too hard at them, they take my frank look as another order. They stand, saluting to their own chagrin before getting dressed to mine.

Their sweat (could it be otherwise?) makes me imagine firm muscles, taut veins.

Other captains ask why I choose men from certain lands, why sailors with exotic accents work with me.
I cannot answer with the truth, that it matters not to me whence they come, nor their race, nor the words that dwell in their tongues.

I look for smooth bodies, muscles along which sweat can freely run, liquid flowing, sliding.

Therefore, am I quite strict about their clothing.

For I know that beneath, there is almost no hair, naught to hinder wet caresses, fingers sketching desire.

Or eyes that also seem to touch the path of salt.

And so, I abandoned the glacial route, the seas of ice, the dark blue.

An ill decision.

But this I knew from the beginning.

The sun dries men, overwhelming them with its weight. It makes them aware of themselves, aware that they swim in some sweltering miasma.

Their flesh barely contained. Always present, whispering its appetites.

But a prison nonetheless.

Therefore, in the few icy ports that our route touches, we leave but a meager guard on the Demeter, seeking stone houses where we can breathe the cold.

Our territory: boundary between flesh and world. Cold without, we men within our skin.

And even there, despite our memories of the broiling sun, we long for fire.
We seek, then, the heat of other flesh. The salt on other skin.

My crew invites me to partake of wine and beer at their side. Sometimes, they sacrifice part of their wages to buy me such women as they find comely.

I choose the youngest ones, small-bosomed, resembling more children than females. The whiter the better.

But such specimens are dear and I dare not buy them for myself.

For hours, I close my eyes and imagine that other lips produce those caresses. I ask them not to speak, to stop being themselves, so that my fantasy may more readily transmute their flesh and I can achieve a weak, trembling orgasm that seems to escape from me, spilling out like sand.

The harlots prowling for crews are not unaware that—during the still hours upon the water, when all that exists is the certain solitude of darkest night and the slow breathing of the other sailors—one will seek, sooner or later, the taste of salt between the thighs.

And so, those women also sell their sons.

Devastated boys, like their mothers, beautiful only to newly landed men, their vision scorched by the sun, clouded by drink.

Sailors purchase such ephebes. Why should they not? It is no secret.
On the islands, the boys are sold more cheaply. It is not uncommon to find them in the ports along our route.

Is Greece not renowned for the practice?
But I do not buy them. I remain with my men, pretending to regard women, sharing anecdotes that matter little to anyone.

I cannot buy them.
Not when I accompany my crew.

I am the Captain. I hold in my hands the lives of my men.

My men.

Along the route of salt, murder and intrigue are simpler. Muscles burn and seek to give that burning some meaning. To move, to smash against something; to act.

Against what? Against what, in the midst of such stillness?

There can be no favoritism upon my schooner.

That is why I shall not choose any man. I shall never keep watch with those whom I desire. I refuse to let them walk naked.

I dare not.

Thence the difficulty of gathering my crews: hairless men from icy countries.

I prefer that the heat make them drowsy, that it be a heavy blanket over their heads. I do not want men accustomed to heat, whose brown skin can bear the full brunt of the noonday sun.
I do not wish them to laugh at my command to clothe themselves.

I should be wholly unable to get away from such men. I should never stop looking for the hidden taste within their bodies.

The salt of their seed.

Crews come and go. On each journey a new man, another who leaves.

They do well. I am not a good captain. Many things distract me.

They are uncomfortable with me. On a schooner, there is not room enough to dissemble their exasperation.

In Varna, I thought I should lose all my crew. After serving for a long time among the Southern Sporades in the Aegean Sea, supplying the Dodecanese Islands, they must be weary of the heat, of me, of the old *Demeter*, docked so many useless days in the port of Rhodes.

The Black Sea must have reminded them that they were men of cold climes; connoisseurs more of ports like Odessa, Sevastopol, Sochi, Batumi than of islands with strange names: Schinoussa, Nisyros, Laconia, Kalymnos.

I know (how not to know?) that they ache for white-skinned women who speak their tongues, that they are plagued by memories of frigid lands, of ice creaking in storm winds.

What could the women of the Greek islands know of the howling Baba Yaga, her ramshackle home creeping
through snowy forests on looming rooster legs? Naught. Swarthy women will smile at such an image, unable to protect sailors from the fear that their mothers’ whispers instilled in them during endless winter hours.

They should have left to seek those white bodies, those shared memories of ice. But they have remained, nigh-on to a man, at my side.

We have arrived in Bulgaria. They have gone ashore without asking for extra coin to sustain them while they find another ship.

They spend their hours in dark taverns, while the owners of the Demeter prepare contracts, organize another trip, trace another route for us.

When it is time to sail, the men will return to the schooner as if it were their home, the only familiar thing in the heart of such foreign lands.

They have not remained for me, for love of this old ship.

It is simply difficult to find other jobs. All are as bad as the previous one.

I should have preferred that they leave.

With every sailor who travels with me for the first time, there is a chance.

New blood is always necessary.