

*New Books*

*Mothers and Dogs* by Fabio Morábito  
Other Press

rev. by Cara Musashi

Fabio Morábito is a Mexican author located in Mexico City. He was originally born in Egypt, but when he was fifteen his family relocated from Milan to Mexico City. He has published five short-story collections among other books of poetry, essays, and novels which have been translated into several other languages. Morábito has also been awarded several awards, the most recent being the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize for *Home Reading Service* (Other Press, 2021).

*Mothers and Dogs* is his second work to be translated and then published by Other Press, and the first story collection to be available in English. The collection of short stories, although fiction, draws from “everyday life in Mexico and abroad” which allow for a strong sense of understanding and universality from readers of all backgrounds. Across the fifteen stories, no two are exactly alike, yet there’s a subtle thread of loneliness and fear that weaves through them all. The stories themselves revolve around rather ordinary individuals but tend to deal with very extreme situations: a daughter continuing to write business letters after her mother was left unable to write comprehensively after a hemorrhagic stroke; a man returns to his childhood home that’s now listed for sale with no intention of buying it, but instead reminiscing about the tiles in the bathroom and what shapes they create; a track field becomes a war zone once the lights are turned out; a pair of brothers talk more about feeding a dog locked in an apartment over their dying mother. One of Morábito’s greatest strengths in this collection comes from that which is found in the families of these characters. Some of the most impactful stories in this collection had to do with familial bonds and the things that people would do for their family members.

My personal favorite comes in the form of “nitric cellulose.” This is the fifth story in the collection, revolving around a daughter who learns to write business correspondence after her mother has a stroke and is unable to write as effectively. Initially, her mother took on the job once her father began selling nitric cellulose, which could not be sold over the telephone, meaning they required a different

form of communication while remaining as punctual as possible. Thus, she learned to conduct the correspondence at home while he went out and delivered the cellulose by truck. Mónica, their daughter, expresses a high level of fondness and admiration for her mother's writing style.

“The high quality of the raw material and the reliability of his deliveries earned my father a good reputation, but I'm sure that his business wouldn't have prospered without Mamá's elegant and cordial letters. I was attracted to certain recurrent formulas, which I eventually learned and recited to myself, like this one: “Confident that our product will satisfy your refined requirements, we are at your service for new and fruitful accords.” I'd go to bed with these words in my ears, “fruitful accords,” thinking that it was worth living in a world where there are fruitful accords.”

However, after her incident, it takes her mother a full minute in order to compose a simple phrase. Her father later comes to tell her that the month before, he abandoned the business because it could not function without his wife's letters. She and her father both agree that if they tell her mother about the business being abandoned without her help, she'd only get worse. Mónica realizes that once the correspondence letters cease to come in, her mother will realize anyway. Thus, the idea comes about that she can begin writing fake letters for her mother to answer, allowing her to practice while still under the guise that everything is functioning as normal. Despite the worry that her mother would find out, she carries on writing the letters, and her mother appears to respond to them without suspicion.

“But Mamá didn't notice. That same afternoon she began to type her responses. It took her an hour to finish the first one. She showed it to me and I turned my back to her so she couldn't see my face while I read it. There was nothing left of her old style. But her spelling was still flawless.”

In hopes of rekindling her mother's style, Mónica visits the business of which her mother had the most joy responding to, meeting the secretary in charge of writing the letters and asking her to write

a fake letter to give to her mother. Upon giving the letter to her mother, she immediately asks who wrote it, stating that it was obviously not Mónica's writing. Mónica immediately questions why she would write it, to which her mother simply looked at her without answering. She'd known the entire time that the letters were fake. The story concludes with Mónica being offered an actual job writing correspondence after the unfortunate passing of the secretary she had asked to help her mother.

Several things about this story resonated with me. From the familial level, I could easily put myself into Mónica's shoes. From admiring your mother for numerous reasons, to never wanting to make her feel less than or unable to do what she once could, that sort of empathy truly resonated through the pages. There's also something very "motherly" about the fact she was aware they were fakes the entire time but continued to go along with it for the sake of her daughter, continuing to be supportive of her after the fact, giving Mónica the typewriter she used to draft letters. Not to mention the reason that her mother began writing the letters in the first place; to help her husband succeed. From mothers to daughters and everything in between, there's something for everyone to see aspects of themselves in.

Of course, not every story in the collection is as sweet and arguably mundane. Throughout the collection of *Mothers and Dogs*, you'll come face to face with situations that are vividly unsettling and strange. Morábito's stories truly poke at boundaries between the dark aspects of our lives but contrast it with the humor and light within every family, weaving elaborate tales that are sure to take you somewhere you never expected to be.