

An Excerpt from *Tomb Song*

After a thousand failed attempts—Google searches, e-mails, Skype, and long-distance telephone calls to nonexistent accounts and numbers one digit short—Mónica tracks down my elder brother on a mobile phone with the area code for Yokohama, Japan. Would he call me? I answer. Solemn, without greeting me, Jorge asks:

“Is everyone at her bedside . . . ? You have to be there with her in these difficult days.”

I suppose he’s lived abroad for so long he’s ended up swallowing the exotic pill of advertising via the Abuelita cocoa powder slogan: There’s-No-Greater-Love-Than-the-Love-of-the-Great-Mexican-Family. I say no. Saíd is a mess and no doubt hooked on something or other; in his state, he isn’t up to the stress of a hospital. Mónica is doing her part outside (I’d like to say “in the outside world” but, today, for me, the outside world is immeasurable: hyperspace) as Director of Communications and Logistics of My Mother’s Leukemia. Diana has two babies and can only manage a shift every other night. Adriana is lost to the world: she left home when I was seven, so I hardly even know her. I’ve seen her no more than a couple of times in my adult life. The last was in 1994.

“For the past week, I’ve been doing thirty-six-hour shifts, dozing or writing by the bed of a dying woman,” I add melodramatically.

What I don’t add is: Welcome to the Apache nation. Eat your children if you don’t want the Palefaces, those white trash, to corrupt them. The only Family that gets along in this country is a narco-trafficking clan in Michoacán that cuts off people’s heads. Jorge, Jorgito, hello: The Great Mexican Family came tumbling down like a pile of stones, Pedro Páramo dissolving under his illegitimate son Abundio’s knife before the startled eyes of Damiana, the Televisa model who goes on robotically repeating: Coming to you from Lake Celestún, this is XEW . . . Nothing: there’s nothing left but pure, shitty, cunt nothingness. In this Sweet Nation where my mother is dying, not a single sheet of *papel picado* is left. Not a shot of tequila uncorrupted by the perfume of marketing. Not even a speck of sadness or decency or an outcry that hasn’t been branded by the ghost of an AK-47.

An incandescent US debut from Mexico,
for readers of Ben Lerner and Rachel Cusk

Tomb Song

A Novel

JULIÁN HERBERT

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY

CHRISTINA MACSWEENEY

Sitting at the bedside of his mother as she is dying from leukemia in a hospital in northern Mexico, the narrator of *Tomb Song* is immersed in memories of his unstable boyhood and youth. His mother, Guadalupe, was a prostitute, and Julián spent his childhood with his half brothers and sisters, each from a different father, moving from city to city and from one tough neighborhood to the next.

Swinging from the present to the past and back again, *Tomb Song* is not only an affecting coming-of-age story but also a searching and sometimes frenetic portrait of the artist. As he wanders the hospital, from its buzzing upper floors to the haunted depths of the morgue, Julián tells fevered stories of his life as a writer, from a trip with his pregnant wife to a poetry festival in Berlin to a drug-fueled and possibly completely imagined trip to another festival in Cuba. Throughout, he portrays the margins of Mexican society as well as the attitudes, prejudices, contradictions, and occasionally absurd history of a country ravaged by corruption, violence, and dysfunction.

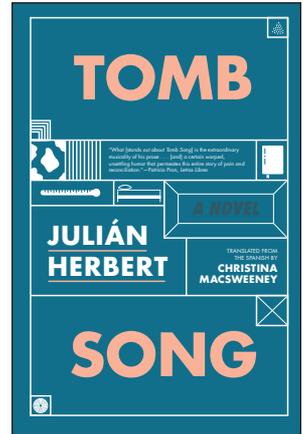
Inhabiting the fertile ground between fiction, memoir, and essay, *Tomb Song* is an electric prose performance, a kaleidoscopic, tender, and often darkly funny exploration of sex, love, and death. Julián Herbert's English-language debut establishes him as one of the most audacious voices in contemporary letters.

Praise for *Tomb Song*

"An extraordinary author in full possession of his powers who from now on should be considered indispensable." —**Patricio Pron, *Letras Libres***

"With writing that is simultaneously rough and beautiful, [*Tomb Song* is] an epic without heroes that shatters the glass ceiling of hypocrisy."

—**Ivan de la Nuez, *Babelia***



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JULIÁN HERBERT was born in Acapulco in 1971. He is a writer, musician, and teacher, and is the author of several poetry collections, a novel, a story collection, and a book of reportage. He lives in Saltillo, Mexico.