

# DENGUE BOY



# DENGUE BOY

A NOVEL

MICHEL NIEVA



First published in Great Britain in 2025 by  
Serpent's Tail,  
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd  
29 Cloth Fair  
London  
EC1A 7JQ

*www.serpentstail.com*

First published as *La Infancia del Mundo* by  
Editorial Anagrama, S.A., 2023

Published in the United States in 2025 by Astra House,  
a division of Astra House Publishing

Copyright © Michel Nieva, 2023  
Translation copyright © 2025 by Rahul Bery  
Maps and illustration copyright © Catinga (Gustavo Guevara)

Design by Alissa Theodor  
The text is set in A Garamond Pro-Regular.  
The titles are set in Bodoni MT Std.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

We make every effort to make sure our products are safe for the purpose for which they are intended. For more information check our website or contact Authorised Rep Compliance Ltd., Ground Floor, 71 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin, D02 P593, Ireland, [www.arccompliance.com](http://www.arccompliance.com)

ISBN 978 1 80522 058 9  
eISBN 978 1 80522 059 6



*To Miguel Villafañe, in memoriam*

But anything goes in this filthy world of ours.

AURORA VENTURINI

The Antarctic continent was once temperate and even tropical.

H.P. LOVECRAFT

# CONTENTS

## IN THE PAMPAS CARIBBEAN

<i>Dengue Boy</i>	5
<i>El Dulce</i>	25
<i>René</i>	43
<i>Dengue Girl</i>	63

## IN THE ANTARCTIC CARIBBEAN

<i>AIS</i>	93
<i>Mother Dengue</i>	101
<i>El Dulce</i>	117
<i>Dengue Destroyed</i>	141
<i>El Dulce</i>	161
<i>The End</i>	191

# DENGUE BOY



**IN THE PAMPAS CARIBBEAN**



## DENGUE BOY

Nobody loved Dengue Boy. I don't know if it was his long beak or the constant, unbearable buzzing sound his wings made as they rubbed together, which would distract his entire class, the fact was that when recess came and all the other kids shot out into the yard to chat, and joke, and eat their sandwiches, poor Dengue Boy would remain alone at his desk, staring into space, pretending to revise a page of his notes to avoid the embarrassment of going out into the yard, where he didn't have a single friend to talk to.

There were many rumors surrounding his origin. Some said that, because of the filthy conditions his family lived in, on a ranch littered with rusty cans and tires where stagnant rainwater accumulated, a new mutant species had been incubated, an insect of giant proportions that had

raped and impregnated his mother after brutally killing her husband; others maintained that the giant insect had raped and infected his father, who had in turn ejaculated inside his mother and engendered this sinister misfit, and that when the baby was born he had abandoned them both, never to be seen again.

There were many other theories regarding the poor boy, none of which are relevant just now. Anyway, when his classmates got bored and realized that Dengue boy had stayed alone in the classroom, pretending to work, they would come and pester him:

“Hey, Dengue Boy, is it true your mom was raped by a mosquito?”

“Yo, bug boy, how does it feel to be the offspring of an insect’s rancid jizz?”

“Hey, filthy fly, is it true your old lady’s cunt is a rotten hole full of worms and cockroaches and other bugs and that’s where you came from?”

Immediately, Dengue Boy’s little antennae would begin to tremble with rage and indignation, and his young tormentors would run away giggling, leaving the dejected Dengue Boy alone once more, sniffing to himself.

Dengue Boy's life wasn't much nicer at home. As he saw it, his mother considered him a burden, a freak of nature who had ruined her life. Being a single mother is never easy, but in most cases, once the early years have passed, the child will provide plenty of reasons for joy and more than justify her initial efforts; eventually, the child will become a young adult and then a grown-up who will be able to support and care for their mother, who, as an old lady, will look back fondly on their beautiful shared past and swell with pride at the achievements of her firstborn. But this mutant child, this Dengue Boy? He was nothing more than a monster to be fed and endured all the way to the grave. He was a genetic mistake, a grotesque hybrid of human and insect, which, in the disgusted eyes of acquaintances and strangers alike, would only ever provoke embarrassment and never, not in a million years, ever give its mother the slightest sense of achievement or satisfaction.

This (as he saw it) was why his mother was so full of hatred and resentment toward him.

Nevertheless, she worked all day to support her son. Every day of the week, with no time for rest or vacation, she would undertake the arduous ninety-three-mile journey to Santa Rosa on a packed waterbus. During the week, she worked as a cleaner in a building in the financial district,

while on Saturdays and Sundays she was a nanny for rich people in the residential zone of that same city. When she returned to her own home in the evening, she would be so tired and so overwhelmed by the violence she endured at the hands of her employers, that she had no patience for anything. Sometimes, upon opening the door, she would be confronted with the pigsty that Dengue Boy, who had no hands, had unintentionally made of the table and floor, and shout:

“You hairy bug! Look at the damn mess you’ve made!”

His mother’s anger boiling over, she would follow him with the broom while he buzzed clumsily around the kitchen, knocking pans and plates from the shelves and onto the floor, only adding to the destruction and chaos, until she got tired and resigned herself to clearing up, all the while (as he saw it), glancing over at him with cold, undisguised hatred.

Dengue Boy’s mother was still very young and beautiful, and since she had no time to go out and meet people, she would have virtual dates in her bedroom when she thought her son was asleep. Dengue Boy would lie in his bed, listening to her chatting happily away, sometimes even laughing.

Yes, laughing!

It was such a wondrous display of joy, one she would never show in his company. Out of curiosity, Dengue Boy (making an immense effort to control the noise of his buzzing) would fly stealthily from the kitchen to his mother's door and bring some of the ommatidia of which his eye was formed to the keyhole. As he had suspected, his mother looked happy, laughing and joking in her luminous flower-patterned dress, at once transformed into a woman who was entirely unfamiliar to Dengue Boy, almost a completely new person, as in their shared daily life she was always worried, tired, or miserable.

As he spied through the keyhole, Dengue Boy suddenly grew sad imagining how much better his mother's life would have been had she not had the misfortune of being raped by a monstrous mosquito and giving birth to an infected, mutant son.

Sinister horror of the bitter truth!

He was a monster and had ruined his mother's life forever!

It was in the dim light of dawn that Dengue Boy returned to his bedroom, where he looked into the mirror and immediately shrank away in terror.

Where his mother would have liked to see cute little ears, Dengue Boy had thick, hairy antennae.

Where his mother would have liked to see a dinky nose, Dengue Boy had a long, black beak, that resembled a gnarled, charred stick.

Where his mother would have liked to see a dainty mouth, Dengue Boy had deformed flesh covered in maxillary palps.

Where his mother would have liked to see pretty little eyes, the same color as hers, Dengue Boy had two grotesque, brown spheres made of hundreds of ommatidia which moved independently and out of sync with one another, to the abomination of all who beheld them.

Where his mother would have liked to see chubby little feet with adorable twinkle toes, Dengue Boy had four bi-colored legs that were painfully thin, like needles.

Where his mother would have liked to see a round tummy, Dengue Boy had a coarse, tough, translucent abdomen, through which you could make out a bundle of greenish, stinking guts.

Where his mother would have liked to see pudgy arms, his wings sprouted out, their nerve endings like the varicose veins of a disgusting old man, and where his mother would have liked to hear chuckles and adorable yelps, there was only a constant, maddening buzz that would drive even the most tranquil soul to despair.



His reflection, in short, confirmed to him what he had always known: that his body was a repulsive thing.

Contemplating this terrible certainty head on, Dengue Boy wondered if, as well as being a repugnant monster, he might not also become a mortal threat one day.

Indeed, he knew that his mother's greatest worry, one that plagued her night and day, was that, when Dengue Boy became Dengue Man, he would no longer be able to control his instincts, and begin to bite and infect everyone with dengue fever, including her or one of his classmates. Not content with carrying the virus, her mutant son would become its deliberate transmitter, its gleeful homicidal vehicle, condemning her to even greater misery. Because of this, when Dengue Boy left for school each morning his mother would hand him a small Tupperware box containing his packed lunch, and whisper mournfully into his ear:

"Remember, my little bug, if at any moment you start to feel a new, strange, and uncontrollable urge, you can suck on this."

Poor, dismayed Dengue Boy looked down at the floor and nodded, making a futile effort to contain the tears which fell from his ommatidia to his maxillary palp. Embarrassed, he lifted the box onto his back and flew off to school, burdened with the shame of knowing that his

mother considered him a potential criminal, and a highly dangerous one at that, a contagious vector of incurable diseases.

Dengue Boy was so furious that, once he was at a safe distance from the house, he would toss the Tupperware box into some gutter where it would burst open as he flew off without even looking down, his face still clouded with tears. Dengue Boy did not look down because there was no need to check, no need to verify what he already knew was inside the shameful container: a throbbing, greasy blood sausage, still warm, crumbling into the cracks of the gutter.

Cooked blood, coagulated blood, black blood, thick blood.

A blood sausage!

That was the substance his mother believed might calm his savage insect instincts.

And so, between school and home, Dengue Boy got through as best he could until, at last, summer vacation arrived. Because his mother worked all day and had no time to look after the creature, she sent him to a boys' summer camp with other children from working-class families.

For Dengue Boy, the camp was even more of an ordeal than school. Sure, school was a nightmare of torment and cruelty, the kids there vicious in a way that knew no limits,

but at least they were always the same children. Dengue Boy knew his classmates and could predict their behavior; he knew all their insults and meanest tricks by heart. Bloodsucker. Bug boy. Filthy fly. He even knew which day of the week they would put mosquito spray on his chair. But summer camp was a whole new universe, with dozens of unfamiliar boys who might well be even more sadistic and aggressive, or at the very least, more unpredictable in their malevolence.

The camp was situated on one of the filthiest and most decrepit public beaches in Victorica. For those unfamiliar with this austral region of South America, let's recall how, in 2197, the Antarctic ice underwent a massive thawing, and when the sea subsequently rose to shockingly high levels, Patagonia—a region once famous for its forests, lakes, and glaciers—was transformed into a disjointed trail of small, scorching-hot islands. What no one could have foreseen, however, was that this long-predicted climate and humanitarian catastrophe would miraculously give the Argentinian province of La Pampa sea access that would fundamentally alter its geography.

From one day to the next, La Pampa ceased to be an arid, moribund desert at the edge of the Earth, dried out by centuries of sunflower and soy monoculture, and

became, together with the Panama Canal, the continent's only route for interoceanic navigation. This unexpected metamorphosis inflated the regional economy with constant, juicy streams of income collected from port taxes and created new and idyllic beaches which attracted vacationers from across the globe.

However, the best resorts, the ones closest to Santa Rosa, were the exclusive property of private hotels and mansion blocks built for foreign tourists. Common folk, like Dengue Boy, only had access to the public beaches, the ones near the Victorica Interoceanic Canal, which was where all the port's dregs accumulated: a wretched dumping ground for plastic and other trash, where all kinds of aberrations could incubate.

The camp ticked all the boxes for parents who worked all day long, as was the case with Dengue Boy's mother. Basically, the bus picked up the boys bright and early, and then returned them punctually, at eight o'clock at night. Because this was the most important service provided by the camp, it was the sweetest part of the deal, and everything else took a back seat. So, for breakfast, the boys would only receive a miserable piece of hard bread with stewed maté; for lunch, polenta with butter and a cup of instant juice. As for the recreational activities promised by

the camp, they amounted to little more than a pot-bellied, retired gym teacher standing in the sand, chain-smoking and blowing his whistle whenever he saw that one of the little squirts had swum out too deep or was venturing into a trash heap of jagged, sharp objects.

And so, the boys, with no gods or masters to obey, did whatever they liked, running about and playing football, or swimming and sunbathing on the stinking beach. There was one boy in particular who, in lieu of a responsible adult to take charge, had become the leader of the pack: a chubby, hyperactive twelve-year-old boy everyone called El Dulce. His father worked in a chicken processing plant and El Dulce, who sometimes visited him there, had won the group's admiration for his intricately detailed descriptions of the birds being gutted and beheaded.

"My dad," El Dulce bragged, "is in charge of the plant's Eviscerator 3000, a remote-controlled super-robot which, at the push of a button, shoves a hook into the chickens' assholes and tears their guts out." At that moment, a reverential and respectful silence settled around El Dulce. "The craziest thing is the chickens are still alive when this happens. To ensure the meat comes out nice and tender, they pluck them first using boiling steam, then pull out their guts through their assholes. It's only at the very end,

just before they're cut to bits, that their heads are chopped off. So," El Dulce continued, touching his ears, "it's important to wear earplugs, so that the agonizing screams of the dying birds don't mess with your head while the Eviscerator destroys their buttholes."

Once the story was over, the other kids remained silent, imagining the chickens' frenzied cries. Then El Dulce, who had already become a sort of master of ceremonies for the gang, led them to a concealed corner of the resort and, without further ado, lowered his swim trunks down to his ankles.

"Speaking of chickens," he continued.

Everyone watched as El Dulce began furiously rubbing his wiener between his thumb and index finger. After a few minutes, the enthralled group stared as El Dulce's prick let forth a thin, transparent, snakelike trail which fell onto the sand like a flying booger.

"What about the rest of you? Aren't you going to choke the chicken?"

In their confusion and terror, the other boys, suddenly feeling plucked and gutted like the chickens in the factory themselves, proceeded to imitate El Dulce. Haltingly, they lowered their swim trunks down to their ankles and, standing in a circle, brought their thumbs and index

fingers down to their genitals and rubbed vigorously. Naturally, this was an especially embarrassing moment for many of them, since the boys were at that transitional age where some had already begun puberty and others had not, a time when their bodies had begun to change against their own will and a disjointed awkwardness was the order of the day. But, one way or another, they were all human boys and their bodies, despite their differences and specificities, were all ultimately alike. Except, of course, for Dengue Boy. It's common knowledge that the male mosquito lacks a penis, instead possessing internal testicles in his abdomen, accompanied by an ejaculatory tract resembling a small sewer pipe. For this reason, Dengue Boy, horrified at the thought of having to exhibit his anomalous bits, was the only one who did not carry out El Dulce's order. This act of disobedience did not go unnoticed by the little dictator, who, with his trunks still down at his ankles and his clenched fists resting on his hips, watched with satisfaction as the boys carried out his orders. But when his gaze landed on Dengue Boy (mortified, he was frozen to the spot, looking down at the sand), he confronted him:

“What's up, Dengue Boy? Afraid to show your dick?”

Dengue Boy did not answer, instead hunching over on his four thin legs and using his beak to play with a few

grains of sand in front of him to conceal how awkward he felt, which only made El Dulce turn up the pressure. That was when things got out of control.

“Look, look!” El Dulce pointed and shouted, calling the attention of the others, absorbed until that moment in their onanistic task. “The insect is a eunuch!”

Everyone, El Dulce included, suddenly became aware that they did not know the meaning of the word “eunuch”, and that precisely because of this it worked even better.

“The insect is a eunuch!”

“The insect is a eunuch!”

“A eunuch is the insect!” they chanted gleefully, forward and backward, the expression gradually gaining a magical, mysterious significance. Unknowingly, they began to discover the wonders of the language some call poetry, and as they hunched in a circle, their arms around each other’s shoulders and their trunks still down at their ankles, led by El Dulce as if he were Virgil leading them into purgatory, they placed Dengue Boy in the middle of the crowd and began shouting in unison, unleashing glittering gems of word combinations that they would never have suspected they harbored, but which nevertheless surged forth from their hearts, like divine inspiration from a bard.

“Emasculated grub!”



“Neutered arthropod!”

“Castrated horsefly!”

“Sexless invertebrate!”

And then, in chorus, like a soccer chant led by El Dulce, who was shaking his fist like a hooligan:

“Eu-nuch bug!”

“Eu-nuch bug!”

“Eu-nuch bug!”

And again, in chorus!

“Eu-nuch bug!”

“Eu-nuch bug!”

“Eu-nuch bug!”

Ah, how difficult it was for Dengue Boy to put the exact, fleeting instant of an initiation into words!

Of course, thousands of coming-of-age novels have attempted such a thing, with varying levels of skill. But is it possible to recreate with words the moment, frozen in time, when a creature commits, however clumsily or furiously, the decisive act that will thread together their past and future life into a single braid, that seal made of fire and blood which some call destiny?

What’s certain is that Dengue Boy did not react the same way he usually did when faced with insults flung at him for his mutant condition; he felt neither torment nor a

deep longing to be dead, and his hairy little antennae did not quiver in rage or pain. The cruel song (which, it must be admitted, did possess some poetic merit) sung by the circle of boys and led by El Dulce did not shake him one bit. This time, something unprecedented happened: adrenaline pulsed through each of the nerves on his wings. This time, when Dengue Boy placed El Dulce in sight of his ommatidia and watched as he pointed and jeered at him, his trunks still lowered, he no longer saw an antagonist, or a peer, or even a human. Before Dengue Boy's fearsome needle stood a delicious meat sorbet, nothing more and nothing less than a throbbing chunk of succulent blood sausage. Carried along by the vertigo of this new and unrestrainable urge, a sudden revelation crossed Dengue Boy's hairy antennae, clearer and more lucid than ever, despite the cacophony all around him: I'm a girl, not a boy, he reasoned, somewhat incongruently. Dengue Girl. Indeed, in the species *Aedes aegypti*, of which he (or she) was the only specimen, only the females bite, suck and transmit diseases, while the males devote themselves to the mechanical processes of copulation and siring. With relief, with childlike awe, she understood that her entire life had been determined by a grammatical error, and that if she was not a boy but rather a girl, she could never rape her mother, nor

repeat the crime her classmates accused her father of having committed. And so, her passions inflamed like one who discovered a humbling secret, Dengue Girl pounced on El Dulce's body, naked down to the ankles, and knocked him onto the sand, immobilizing him with surgical precision. Dengue Girl drew her beak close and, as if tearing open a blood sausage to eat only its insides, disemboweled him. Heedless to the frenzied screaming of the other boys as they stampeded away in search of help (as well as they could given their shorts were all still down at their ankles), their joyous singing now a sinister trance as Dengue Girl placed her beak inside El Dulce's ruptured belly and lifted up a bloody bunch of insides. The terrified gym teacher, who was in such a state of shock that he was barely able to give a moronic toot of his whistle, looked on as Dengue Girl, like someone offering up a sacrifice to their deity, used her beak to raise El Dulce's clean, blue viscera toward the sun. Then, as if starting a spinning top, she yanked off a piece. A jet of blood and excrement and foul-smelling bile specked and muddied the gym teacher's inert face, changing first the color of the sand and then the waves, which slowly swept into and then out from the shore.

Dengue Girl sucked from the delicious concoction which flowed uncontrollably from the guts of El Dulce,

who was trembling in a strange epileptic fit, surely the result of the sinister disease he had just contracted. Let's not forget that mosquito saliva contains a powerful anticoagulant and vasodilator substance which encourages hemorrhaging. This caused the blood to flow without rest, like some grand fountain.

Once she had drunk the very last drop from what was now the boy's corpse, she finished things off with a bad joke:

"El Dulce? More like El Delicious!"

She then gave a defiant look to the gym teacher who, frozen with terror, had stopped blowing his whistle, and continued:

"Not like the miserable morsel of bread and stewed maté we get in the mornings!"

With a sudden vehemence, the girl took advantage of the gym teacher's bewilderment and used her beak to open up his forehead, which split apart like a watermelon, and, in just a few slurps, she sucked the brains out of his skull.

There wasn't much left to be done at this filthy resort.

Out of pity, or perhaps revenge, she reasoned that it made no sense to kill the other boys, who had by now pulled up their shorts but were still running around and sobbing. She simply bit them. They barely felt the pinch

before falling to the ground and entering a sinister epileptic state.

She reasoned, as well, that it made no sense to say goodbye to her mother now—she'd find out about the transformation in the newspapers, or from the other boys' mothers. All that remained was to escape to the beaches of Santa Rosa in search of revenge, to assassinate and infect the rich people and foreign tourists who had caused her mother and, by proxy, her, so much woe.

She took flight and, shaking the blood from her wings, set off, her trademark annoying buzz loud and clear, until she was an imaginary dot on the splendid horizon of the Pampas Caribbean.

All hail, Dengue Girl!

## EL DULCE

El Dulce picked up one of the eggs. It was viscous and slippery to the touch. It pulsed. Opaque miasmas swirled around inside it. Once he had a firm grip on it in the palm of his hand, he carefully examined the curious veins running across it, which trembled and swelled and constantly changed brightness and color. He looked at his big brother and asked:

“What the hell is this? Do you fuck it? Or does it fuck you up?”

If El Dulce, RIP, had not died after being disemboweled by Dengue Girl’s ruthless beak, he might have told his fellow camp goers, once he had gained their confidence (the collective masturbation ritual would doubtless have hastened this), as they splashed in the filthy waves or

messed around in the coastline's diseased sand, this story, or else a similar one regarding his weekend job, which involved helping his brother move crates of contraband through the La Pampa Interoceanic Canal. It went like this: because said navigation route between the Atlantic and the Pacific charged extremely high port fees, many businesses, generally ones which trafficked illicit substances, unloaded their ships in the Canal in a clandestine manner, where they were awaited by ferrymen, groups of smugglers who transported the containers across the border, first in boats and then in trucks. The ferrymen relabeled the merchandise as "Produce of Argentina" and finally moved it to the port of Victorica, where another boat belonging to the same company exported the product without paying any taxes.

It was, in short, a thriving business, injecting tidy sums into Victorica's illicit economy, and El Dulce's big brother had not gone without a slice of the pie. This little hoodlum led his own gang, and had done it with relative success; having started with just one little dinghy, he had, thanks to the steady flow of clients, expanded to two boats and a truck. Because weekends were the busiest times, he had needed an extra hand and, seeing his little brother pissing around, smoking and just generally making a mess, hired him with the promise that, if he did a good job, he would

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Rahul Bery translates from Spanish and Portuguese to English, and is based in Cardiff, Wales. He has translated and cotranslated books by David Trueba, Afonso Cruz, Simone Campos, Vicente Luis Mora, Ana Pessoa, and José Henrique Bortoluci. His translations have appeared in *Granta* magazine, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Sting- ing Fly*, *Words Without Borders*, *Freeman's*, *The White Review*, and elsewhere.