

José Garcia is stuck. The Bartleby-esque first-person narrator of *The Empty Book* spends night after night in his office, working on a book that he knows he will never write, and nevertheless he remains unable to terminate his efforts. Even worse than that: he is well aware that his recurring daydreams of freeing himself from his self-imposed suffering – one vision involves the act of setting his notebook on fire – would purely result in staging an event that he would feel utterly unable to resist the temptation of writing about. And so, José Garcia's novel becomes a maze, containing neither entry points, nor fire escapes; a meta-literary work, inventively choreographed by Vicens, which consists wholly of a narration through José Garcia's empty words: his musings on his family life, his job and colleagues, his mistress, and, of course, mostly, his endless despair related to the impossible performance that is the act of writing.

For the purposes of the latter, José Garcia owns two notebooks. One is supposedly reserved for the chosen words of the novel that José Garcia longs to envision. The other is the book we are actually reading, in which page after page has been blackened with anguished considerations of the failing attempts to write something worthy of the initial notebook. While the first one remains vacant, determinedly so, the other is full of words, although empty ones. Or, as José Garcia puts it, 'All of this and everything I'll be writing here is just to say nothing, and the end result will be a heap of full pages and an empty book.' A line that, as is the case with so many of Vicens' sentences, works in several ways at once: matter of fact, yet abstract; transparent, yet opaque; ironic and bitter, yet never insincere. And, indeed, we *are* told two stories at once: both José Garcia's empty book and Vicens' intolerable making of it. Because, as in the vein of

Gustave Flaubert's alleged confession, 'Madame Bovary c'est moi,' it is no secret that José Garcia's endless struggles with writing are intrinsically linked to Vicens' own.

*The Empty Book* is, at heart, a novel about emptiness, though it would be a mistake to conclude that this is all it is. Aimless with his brush, José Garcia resorts instead to paint a picture of his life, ordinary as it is: his joyless relationship to his wife; his distanced eldest son, who has developed a troublesome relationship to a waitress; the resurfacing faded dreams of his youth; and his low-paid job as an accounting assistant. And so, like José Garcia himself, we become a silent and passive observer of his life as it flows by. When his writings failures put him in a deadlock, he longs to explain his problems to his only friend, Pepe Varela, but he never does, and Pepe Varela merely proceeds to introduce him to the woman who becomes José Garcia's mistress. An act of infidelity he then again years to confess, this time to his wife, but he never says anything, and neither does she, resulting in an even more intolerable situation. And, finally, when Reyes, his colleague, steals 5.000 pesos and is caught, he is sympathetic of the deed, even arguing that the crime is impossible to understand without also understanding Reyes' reality: 'If things were different, they would have been able to understand Luis Fernando Reyes, a human being just like themselves, and wouldn't have persecuted him so mercilessly.' Yet, needless to say, José Garcia never reaches out and only expresses these feelings in the secrecy of his notebook.

What Vicens thus manages to achieve is an incredibly difficult feat in fiction writing: making the subtext become the text without the text itself ever becomes the subtext. As

a consequence, the novels read like invitations to the reader: the Mexican author is welcoming us into the shadowy engine room of her prose. And with her experimental, meta-literary style, Vicens manages to do something that José Garcia never does: she constructs a stunning and thought-provoking book; a novel on emptiness, the psychology of the modern man, the nature of truth and experience, as well as, naturally, the impossibility of writing.